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'The moonlight that shines from my open mouth': communication in the English classroom, explored through *I talk like a river* by Jordan Scott.

Clare Lawrence

As an English teacher and English teacher educator, and as someone whose primary research interest is in autism, I have always been pretty focussed on communication. Autism is positioned as a 'social communication deficit', but we all know that communication is a shared experience: what is to be communicated needs to be expressed in some way, and then it needs to be received. I am doing it now – communicating with you although I am not with you. I have written the words, but the communication does not occur (like the tree falling in the forest and not making a sound) until you read them.

Given how important communication is, I am puzzled when autistic behaviours by pupils in schools are still discouraged, even when they are clear communication. Flapping, rocking, humming, ear-covering and shut-down are not behaviours that autistic people undertake on a pointless whim. They mean something – something negative or something positive – and teachers would do well to receive that communication rather than seeking to close it down.

Of course, a more nuanced form of communication is through words, and as English specialists these are our particular forte. We do so love words; written or spoken, heard or read, we believe in their fundamental nature to convey meaning. But we should also accept that for some pupils words are not their most accessible communication, and fluency with words is not a 'given' for all people all of the time. There is a recognised experience of 'losing your words' in times of overload or extreme stress. As teachers this is important for us to understand. And, as English teachers, where better to turn to explore this subject than to a book?

The subject of verbal dysfluency is explored in the picture book *I talk like a river* by Jordan Scott, illustrated by Sydney Smith. The book describes the frustrations of the first-person protagonist whose stutter means that he struggles with speech. His class at school has been set the task of each giving a talk about their 'favourite place in the world'... and, on the day of the book, it is the protagonist's turn. For some people like the boy in the book (and for Jordan Scott himself), talking is not the most fluent form of communication. The protagonist

in the book describes his difficulty in speaking the words he sees in his head, describing the experience as having ‘word-sounds stuck in my mouth’, with letters that grow ‘roots inside my mouth’, that stick ‘in the back of my throat’ or that dust his lips ‘with magic that makes me only mumble’.

There is, of course, an irony in the eloquent and articulate ways that the book describes the child’s verbal dysfluency. The words written down give us as readers insight into the boy’s inner fluency. This may seem to some like a ‘cheat’ but is not in fact unusual. The use of writing and typing as an alternative form of communication by people who also use speech is under-researched (Zisk & Dalton, 2019), but it has been suggested that many users of Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) can and do sometimes talk (Niemeijer, 2015). AAC includes many forms including using computer or speech-generating devices (such as those made familiar to us all by Stephen Hawking) and using typing or writing.

Some years ago now I explored this in a short piece – *Broken* – created with the help of an autistic student who, like so many, struggled with verbal communication at school. Like the child protagonist in *I talk like a river*, ‘Fauxparl’ (a pseudonym) had to find ways to share what it is like when speech does not flow freely. In this case we worked with academic and visual artist Dr John Rimmer to produce a short film, with Fauxparl sending John typed comments, extracts from films, quotations, visual images and snippets from computer games as ways of sharing his remembered frustration. The film is now used in our secondary teacher education programmes to explore the subject of effective teaching of verbally less fluent pupils, and an article describing the process of creating it – together with a link to the film – can be found in the *Journal Disability and Society* (Fauxparl et al., 2020).



Still from the film *Broken*, created by John Rimmer.

Jordan Scott is in addition to being the writer of *I talk like a river* an acclaimed poet whose control of words in written form challenges the reader with profound questions about the nature of communication. The anthology *Typed Words, Loud Voices* (Sequenzia and Grace, 2015) further explores this subject. The 'voices' in this book are those of people who use typing as their primary means of communication and the book reminds us that speech and communication are not synonymous. As Alyssa Zisk, a verbal autistic researcher who uses AAC to supplement her communication suggests, it is 'overall communication – rather than speech – [that] should be prioritized' (Zisk and Dalton, 2019 p. 93).

As English teachers, we 'teach writing', but in too many classrooms that I visit this is mere recording, often utilising a prescribed format, rather than a creative act in its own right. In Scott's book the river becomes a metaphor for freedom and self-acceptance and the reader gains insight through this into the protagonist's experience. This creative use of expression is, of course, a powerful tool and one that merits exploration in particular for those who are finding communication challenging. My recently published co-authored book, *Creativity in Autism*, includes report of an autism-led creative writing project, and the group *Writing East Midlands* has recently announced further funding to expand their project *Beyond the Spectrum* into a UK-wide supported creative writing programme. This programme is led by professional autistic writers and supports autistic young people to articulate their experiences and to increase their sense of agency. As 'teachers of writing', how often are we able to do anything similar in the standard mainstream English classroom?

The words, and the metaphors and similes they create, in *I talk like a river* are eloquent and lucid and are fully supported by pictures that are vivid and often very beautiful. As lovers of words we may, I believe, be guilty sometimes of foregrounding imagery over image. *I talk like a river* is a picture book, and the pictures share at least an equal part in the communicative power of the book. I argue repeatedly with my secondary PGCE students for the power of images, and the potency of 'reading' the visual, but for most pupils pictures remain something that they 'leave behind' as their reading fluency increases. For any of us who work with people for whom words are a challenge, or for any of us who experience this for ourselves at various points in our lives, the understanding that other creative approaches may support communication can be a powerful and reassuring. The film that John Rimmer created for the *Broken* project included images, movement, colours, shapes and sounds as

well as typed words. We know that the use of art-based methods in the collection of research data is widely recognised as supporting participants' communication, especially when working with those who otherwise 'lack a voice' (see, for example, Eldén, 2011). In these cases, the responsibility to interpret the communication lies with the researcher who must 'read into' drawings, images, poems or sounds and use interpretation of these to support understanding.

Which brings us back to being the receivers of communication. According to the social model of disability (see, for example, Constantino et al., 2022), it is not the lack of fluent words that may be a disabling barrier to communication, but the disabling inability of the rest of society to adapt to a person's communicative style. For some, words can be spoken but not written; for others, writing brings articulacy that speaking does not, and some people will 'read' an image more powerfully than a series of words. As English teachers, we believe in reading, writing and the spoken word but we also believe in something more than mere 'decoding' of these. We are the most fortunate of teachers in that we do not have to try to communicate of the facts of Wave Particle Duality nor the calculation of pi to fifteen decimal places. Nor, I hope, do we merely communicate the rules that structure a sonnet nor the definition of onomatopoeia. We deal with the communication of human experience – life, love and loss and all the other parts in between – and for us it is the communication itself that is the point.

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