

A Mouthful of Air by Anthony Burgess. Vintage £7.99 1993 ISBN 780099224013

The book that inspired me over 20 years ago was called *Language Made Plain*. But about 10 years ago Burgess revised, rewrote and expanded and renamed his book *A Mouthful of Air*. Its subtitle is *Language and Languages, Especially English*.

In his introduction, Burgess states that this book is about 'the behaviour of language.' and that 'it is intended to be an easy approach to the elimination of linguistic ignorance.' He certainly provides a wide ranging introduction to language and linguistics for the lay person. [Or aspiring and developing EAL teacher!] Burgess's approach is highly eclectic and at times very idiosyncratic. Some of the book may now seem dated; his beliefs about how English should be taught are based on his own experiences as a teacher in the colonies, the army and a grammar school; so not quite the multilingual context that we teach in these days. But this is a book by a man who loves language and writes most elegantly. It is possible to cut through the contentious and revel in his passion for phonetics and comparative linguistics.

The book is more or less a language awareness course. Ideally, it should be on the reading list of every teacher training course. It has a bit of everything - sign and signifier, langue and parole, Chomsky's deep structure, morphemes and phonemes. All those words that people drop into conversations at conferences and you think, 'I must look up what that means later' and never do. It's all in here and far more fun than a Literacy Strategy training session.

Part one of the book introduces the Science of linguistics and lots of phonetics. Burgess loves phonetics and looking back now I rather think that this explains why I have always been rather keener on pronunciation and phonics than your average secondary EAL teacher. Burgess believes, rather radically, that we should teach **all** the available speech sounds of human languages from Zulu clicks to French rounded vowels. I am not sure that I could manage that, though I certainly agree with Burgess that it is important to help students hear and discriminate all the sounds of English.

There is a wide-ranging section about alphabets and writing systems and also some comparative linguistics in which the polyglot

Burgess is able to draw on his own multilingual experiences. [Including Russian, Malay and Arabic.] Eventually, we get to the sentences, but grammar never really dominates the book.

Part two of the book is about the English Language in particular, with a more detailed section on the history of the language. Burgess is at his scatological best when describing low life language, and tackles the origins of a wide range of taboo words.

There are also chapters on other Englishes, dialects, Shakespeare and the Bible and Dictionaries amongst others. In this part we are introduced to some of the obsessive personalities of the dictionary making world, rather than dry descriptions of the process of collecting words.

A Mouthful of Air is not an academic book, but it is very learned. Occasionally Burgess is just too clever and the obscure facts begin to pall. I think I prefer the first part of the book, with its illuminating introduction to our voice organs and how they work. In other authors this might be very dry, but here it is clear and readable. There is so much packed into the book that it would be hard to read through in a linear way. Its best kept in a bag to dip into when stuck on a bus or train. It's a bridge between parole and langue, and if you can't remember which is which, you'll have to read it to find out!

Catharine Driver