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"Perhaps I am not thinking clearly.
I am very sad and torn today."

- Arthur Sammler, central character in
"Mr Sammler's Planet", by Saul Bellow

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Thinking clearly: yes, that's what it's about, isn't it? If only we could express our thoughts so that with their clarity, laser-like, they would cut through all obstacles, hindrances, interruptions and interferences and be understood instantly. If only we didn't stumble, didn't repeat ourselves, didn't have to search for words! Well, we'd feel much better in ourselves, wouldn't we? Wouldn't we feel somehow more capable, more confident, more interesting to other people? Wouldn't life be easier and more satisfying? We'd always be ready with a quick reply; we'd know that what we said was what we really meant to say; we'd know that our messages had qualities which would ensure that their intended purposes (to excite, to reassure, to illuminate, to relax, to persuade, to be ambiguous, to convince, to charm, to teach, to describe, to report, to speculate, to generalise, etc.) would be fulfilled. In short, if we could only think clearly we'd feel more complete.

Human beings are fragile creatures; we need a lot of reassurance. If our lives are to be bearable, we need to feel that our presence here is desired, that other people do care about us and our thoughts. If our messages are misunderstood, ignored, flatly contradicted, dismissed as unnecessary, laughed at as childish, we feel a sense of loss. If this frustrating and painful state of affairs continues day after day; if those we want to impress are never impressed by us; if just as we think we have grasped the crystal it is smashed into myriad fragments before our eyes by some superior being over whom we have no control; if any of these things happens then our sense of our own worth is lowered.

Our thoughts and our language are inextricably intertwined. We use our supply of words to establish our presence: we want other people to know we are here, to know who we are, what we think, what makes us laugh, how we see the world. As we speak or write, as we tell the story of our everyday lives, we re-define our ideas in the light of our experiences. Often, as we express ourselves, we realise (literally: make real) what it is we are thinking. We have the capacity to edit, to change our utterances, to reshuffle our communications in an instant. This power comes from our innermost being; from our desire to reach out and tell the world what we think. We don't want to feel isolated, or neglected by others, so we hope they will cherish our thoughts and return them with interest; with love even.

What about school then? What about English lessons? Surely we can't just let it all happen naturally? Of course not. English teaching, though, is concerned with a natural phenomenon: the desire to communicate. We are concerned to find ways which will help pupils to become clearer, more effective communicators. We are concerned with the creation of situations in which children's responses, both written and oral, will be valued. We do our meagre best to make the situation right for growth. It almost always feels like failure. The results are invisible, hard to detect, harder still to measure.

Still, we must not stop trying: like Mr Sammler, children cannot think clearly if they feel sad and torn.