Vocal interpretation of literature in high schools

Bertha Forbes Herring

To cite this article: Bertha Forbes Herring (1920) Vocal interpretation of literature in high schools, *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 6:4, 52-58, DOI: [10.1080/00335632009379304](https://doi.org/10.1080/00335632009379304)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00335632009379304>

Published online: 05 Jun 2009.

Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)

Article views: 4

View related articles [↗](#)

VOCAL INTERPRETATION OF LITERATURE IN HIGH SCHOOLS¹

BERTHA FORBES HERRING
Senn High School, Chicago

FOR several years there has been exerted a great deal of pressure to encourage the teaching of the oral interpretation of literature in high schools. If we are to make a general response to this demand, we must re-state it and distinguish between what is ideal and what is practicable. The public schools of a democracy have no concern with the exceptional pupil who is a genius, except to do him as little harm as possible while laying the foundation for his further progress at the hands of other influences and institutions. The public school of a democracy *are concerned*, however, with the education of the average citizen and with the gradual improvement of the type. This means that it is no part of our function as educators to try to train pupils adequately to interpret classical literature orally, but that it should be our business to produce pupils who can read intelligently and intelligibly from the printed pages with which they are certain to come in contact in the ordinary routine of life. This re-statement of our problem is essential, if we are to know where to begin and how to proceed. We are to meet this demand, then, by training pupils to be intelligent oral readers, not necessarily artistic oral interpreters of classical literature.

As in all other arts intelligent craftsmanship precedes adequate artistic expression, so in oral reading the practical ability to read intelligently and intelligibly must precede any legitimate effort to interpret the classics. *Effective oral reading* now means to the average pupil something closely associated with his study of literature only. He does not understand that it is equally essential for the proper reading of his text books, of newspapers, of business letters and documents, of trade journals, of the set

¹ Paper read before the thirty-first educational conference of the Academies and high schools in relations with the University of Chicago, May 9, 1919.

of rules on the walls of the factory where he may soon be at work, of the directions for using a filing cabinet or a fire-extinguisher. Yet these are the things that will come within his daily experience in *any* event; whereas the oral interpretation of literature may or may not affect his future happiness and success in life.

Reading for the purpose of artistically interpreting literature to another involves, first of all, a vocal technique which it is certain that the average citizen will neither need nor use and which it is equally certain that the average pupil will have neither the desire nor the patience to develop. The real need, then, is for an ability to interpret the printed page for practical purposes, and this is what the public demands. This ability is closely connected with the business of earning a living, of discharging acceptably the duties of the average citizen, and of making effective and agreeable all those personal contacts which constitute our social, political, and industrial life. None can escape these demands if he would. All must meet them in some manner. To train the average pupil to meet them in some degree is the legitimate function of the public high school teacher, whatever her subject; but it is especially the function of the special teacher of reading, as well as her clear duty, because without the ability to read intelligently and intelligibly there are closed to her pupils many of the avenues of both information and preferment.

There seems to be an idea deeply rooted in the minds of some teachers of English that the special teacher of reading teaches it without teaching literature. They seem to think that she does not know literature and that she should not presume to try to do so, but should be satisfied to teach the more technical phases of the subject—the technique of speech and voice development. The teacher of reading *must* teach literature far more intensively than any teacher of English can take the time to teach it under present conditions. While the teacher of English teaches facts to a class, the special teacher of reading does this and also helps each pupil to express *himself* through the literature he presents. While the teacher of English explains what literature means to her, the special teacher of reading is doing this and is also permitting the pupil to express what it means to *him*. While the teacher of English necessarily emphasizes facts, matter, and con-

tent, the special teacher of reading, in addition to doing this, is awakening and developing the idea of responsibility to an audience. Her pupil is alternately performer and audience. He must learn to consider oral reading from the standpoint of the listener quite as seriously as he considers it from the standpoint of the reader. The idea of modifying his reading for the benefit of the audience is quite new to the average pupil. At first he reads as if reading aloud to himself, although he stands before a class. His desire to "get it over" to his friends in the class furnishes a definite motive for practising the rather tedious technical exercises which will enable him to read effectively. Once the novelty of these exercises has worn off, we may be sure that he will practice only those which experience has shown him will make his reading effective. While this limits the technique to the fewest and simplest possible exercises, there frequently results, nevertheless, a complete change in motive, and a change in the habits of thinking, breathing, and speech that ranges from partial to complete, according to the capacity of the individual for sustained effort. The change in *motive*, whereby the pupil becomes *audience-conscious*, in the true sense, is one of the most effective means of enabling him to forget himself and to overcome his own self-consciousness.

The course in reading for the first semester, which is elective, is essentially as follows, as I give it. At the first meeting of a class of approximately twenty, I begin with a half-humorous discussion of the various motives with which they have registered for the course. I uncover at once their varying degrees of earnestness and good intention—that is, their various little schemes (which each one thinks that he alone has discovered) to get a long rest and an easy credit. Some are amused, and some are appalled, at this ruthless exposure of their innermost thoughts. After a brief explanation to the effect that, first of all, I must diagnose their maladies as readers, and to that end they must prepare at once a short selection to read to me, they draw a deep breath, cheerfully certain that the class in reading is not only going to be pretty "soft," but great fun as well. In this they are about half right, for they do enjoy it. I then outline the work for the semester, which is divided into two parts of ten weeks each. During the first ten weeks we read together one or more

representative selections of each of four types: a story, a description, a poem, and a piece of forceful prose or verse. Each pupil has before him a copy of these selections. We study them intensively, developing gradually the principles upon which depend both the getting and the giving of the idea. I prefer to use no text book in this beginning class, which meets but twice a week. I give orally such instructions as are necessary. During this ten weeks we study what *I* prescribe.

During the second ten weeks each pupil presents four three-minute readings of *his own choosing*, which he has prepared, to the best of his own ability, in accordance with the principles developed during the first ten weeks. He has searched for these selections during the first ten weeks, and has found material which he thinks will most satisfactorily express his own taste. By the time I have heard each member of this class read one three-minute selection, I have given many criticisms and suggestions for the correction of specific faults. I have given exercises for breath control, for the placing of the voice, for clearer enunciation, and some easily acquired and applied rules for phrasing. Much of my criticism has been general, but it becomes evident by this time that some of the members of the class are earnestly practicing at home. Some have made up their minds to ride, and be entertained; but, soon, under the spur of pride and envy, they fall in line with the more ambitious members of the class and try to keep step, because they are lonesome.

A fifth three-minute selection is committed to memory, and recited as a final examination. This examination is a test of efficiency. The spirit of it is not—what do you know? but—what can you do? At the end of the tenth week I announce that, at the time of reciting for examination, each pupil must give me a short paper, stating what he has learned that he can consciously apply in preparing a selection for oral reading.

A pupil has not learned to read unless he has learned specific things to do in rehearsing a reading, and is to some extent independent of the teacher for his interpretation of the selection. The pupil has lived but little, has submitted much to higher authority, and wants a pattern to follow. This the old-fashioned elocution gave him. He is more or less terrified when told that he must indicate by his reading what the selection means to him. He is

accustomed to adopting without question the ideas and tastes of the teacher he likes, and to rejecting those of the teacher he does not like. To be obliged to defend his own interpretation made in the light of his own understanding is a healthy exercise, and is the only way to kill insincerity and artificiality. With plenty of latitude to choose for his reading what he thinks he understands and can express adequately, his growth in understanding and in appreciative reading is rapid and lasting. As a result of this freedom to express all that he is capable of expressing, the pupil at once feels an honest and wholesome dissatisfaction with his powers of expression, and there is now, for the first time, a rational basis for instruction in technique, with reason to hope for ultimate permanent improvement in speech habits.

Every class contains pupils with exceptional talent, whose progress is a constant stimulus to the less gifted, if rightly used by the teacher. The first ten weeks of laboratory work is intensive, and more or less interesting to the class. While it includes specific instruction in voice development and placing, in enunciation, deportment, etc., their importance is not fully sensed until the work in the second ten weeks of miscellaneous readings discloses the differences between the performances of the various pupils. This second ten weeks is always enjoyed, and it must be an exceptional class that does not eventually become a friendly and sympathetic unit.

After each reading, volunteer criticisms are called for. These are brought to a head by the teacher, who suggests specific remedies for such faults as have not already been covered by the pupils offering the criticisms. No performance is ever allowed to go uncriticised. Criticisms are always followed by encouraging and constructive suggestions. No ridicule is permitted. The inclination to ridicule or tease a pupil is, without exception, turned into the desire to help. By this time, every pupil in the class has developed, to some degree, the ability to criticise intelligently, and to offer helpful suggestions for improvement. The enthusiasm at this point becomes so great that they all want to talk at once—and frequently do. Spontaneity is now attained, and we begin to get results that justify the patient effort, which seemed more or less futile during the first ten weeks.

On a special card form I keep a record of each pupil's faults and progress. Entries are made on the back of this card after each recitation. They often include special data as to temperament, health, physical defects, etc., for guidance in the treatment of the individual, where the indicated remedies are out of the ordinary. The face of the card contains the pupil's record of scholarship and attendance. This tangible record of progress is of the greatest interest to pupils. It is a graphic chart of what they are accomplishing. Again and again, they come to me to see how they are getting along.

Recitations are always voluntary. This is a great shock at first. Each pupil fixes, in advance, the four dates on which he agrees to be ready to read. If, without good excuse, he does not read on any date he has chosen, he has failed for that recitation, and is marked accordingly.

Marks are given on the following points:

Voice

Carrying power and quality. Does the pupil make himself heard easily and pleasantly?

Enunciation

Is the pupil easily understood by the audience?

Phrasing

Does the pupil group his words so as to make his meaning easily grasped? Does he himself understand what he is reading?

Poise

Is the pupil free from fear of his audience? Is he able consciously to control his audience?

Sincerity

Does the manner of reading indicate indifference or sincerity?

Deportment

Is the pupil's manner easy, unaffected and dignified?

The pupil is graded more on the progress he has made from *his* starting point than upon any arbitrary standard of excellence established for the course. So many elements enter into an adequate and pleasing oral reading that the degree of progress in each case is the most satisfactory and equitable standard of measurement. Knowing this in advance, the backward pupil,

who might otherwise become hopelessly indifferent, sees a chance to get results that will be recognized, and puts forth an effort which he might otherwise feel was useless.

In every class there is at first an astonishing degree of spiritual weakness. The pupil wants to be called upon rather than to volunteer for recitations. The consciousness of being prepared soon gives him the spiritual courage to overcome this. Once the reluctance to say, "I am ready" is overcome, the teacher's problem is not to induce the pupils to recite, but to keep them from slipping in extra recitations, thus crowding out other members of the class. Success strengthens faith and develops courage. Spontaneity, simplicity, sincerity, earnestness, and genuine effectiveness follow as a matter of course. There is no doubt that the oral interpretation of literature is an aid in developing an appreciation of, and establishing a taste for, good literature. The most rational way to develop taste is to let the pupil begin with what he likes best. There is enough latitude allowed in the general assignment given to permit this.

The variety of selections brought in by the average class of twenty boys and girls is astonishing. The tendency at first is to bring selections from books known to be approved by the English teachers. These are frequently far beyond their capacity to express adequately, and a little insistence that they bring what they understand and like enlivens the programs and improves the reading. If the literary tone of the program falls to an alarming degree, we may know just how far we older people unconsciously impose our taste upon the pupil, and how greatly we usually over-estimate his understanding.

At the end of the ten weeks of varied programs and instruction, the boy who has chosen for his first selection "The Face on the Barr-Room Floor" is likely to present something superior for his last effort. This boy and the refined little girl who has read "The Vampire" are both reaching out after the same thing—an understanding of life. "Casey at the Bat" may not be the best literature, and "The Cremation of Sam McGee" may not satisfy the aesthetic taste, but the pupils who select readings such as these at first and show a steady growth in taste and appreciation by the character of selections presented later are on the right road.