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TRAINING IN THE TECHNIQUE OF SPEECH IN THE HIGH SCHOOL¹

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OUR ambition is to make over the speech of an indifferent nation, for the most part cheerfully content to be crude. The dream of the reformer is sweet, but his way is hard. He must first win the confidence, then the sympathy, and finally the coöperation of those whom he hopes to reform.

To reform the speech of grown people is practically impossible. To reform the speech of adolescents is possible. To assure success in reforming the speech of any people we should begin with the babies learning to talk, and provide them with the constant companionship of persons who habitually speak correctly, and with intelligent instruction in technique. Since we are not teachers either of adults or of little children, our problem is limited to what may be done with adolescents, and the psychological conditions characteristic of adolescence are our first consideration. To say to a boy or girl of fifteen, "You must study the technique of speech and learn to speak more acceptably," does not make it certain that the youth will, upon leaving school, continue to *practise* what has been taught. We know that most of the *facts* taught in other subjects are forgotten because they are not used. If every teacher were to demand that her pupils stand to recite, that they stand quietly on both feet, with knees straight, heads up, and hands hanging at the sides; if every teacher were to demand that her pupils fill their lungs before they begin to talk, and that they keep their chests high by keeping their lungs filled, we should be far on the way towards securing habitually intelligible speech from the average pupil. It has not been considered practicable for teachers of other subjects to make even these simple demands. It becomes, then, the duty of the special teacher of the technique of speech so to present the subject that the pupil will voluntarily use, in all his classes and every-

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where he talks, the speech which he has been taught is the most generally acceptable because it is the most effective.

While our ambition to reform the speech of the average American is a worthy one, our legitimate expectations of success must fall far short of this ambition. If we can arouse in our pupils a sympathy with our cause strong enough to make them stand up straight when they talk, to stand quietly without fingering their clothes, trinkets, etc., to control their breathing, to open their mouths, to pronounce their consonants, to think to the point, to have convictions and the courage of their convictions, and to express effectively, because for an honest purpose, what they think and feel—if we can arouse in our pupils an interest powerful enough to make them do these things habitually, we shall have done all that we may legitimately hope to do.

To win the pupil's willing coöperation we may appeal to his appreciation of the practical as it applies to himself—to his business sense and desire to succeed, to his pride of personal accomplishment, to his ambition for social poise. The subjects most interesting to every youth, as well as to every adult, are himself and his personal problems. To consider this matter of learning to speak effectively as one of the personal problems to be solved by each pupil for his own advancement in life, dignifies the subject in his eyes beyond any possible conception of the thing he has known as elocution. It becomes to him then what it really is—a problem of practical self-expression.

Now the first handicap to successful self-expression is self-consciousness. Physiologists tell us that in general the action of the glands is temporarily suspended by intense emotion. It is equally true that normal self-expression is inhibited by self-consciousness, which is largely responsible for irregular and superficial breathing, for thick tongues, for stiff lips and rigid jaws. Once the peculiar fear which has caused the self-consciousness is identified and its source discovered, both the fear and its consequent inhibitions disappear.

The pupil should be taught that his fear can be conquered by right thinking. The teacher who would help his pupil to conquer fear and free his spirit for rational self-expression must renounce forever the luxury of sarcasm and give up the habit of *all* criticism which is not followed by constructive suggestion. This

means that no teacher whose talent is purely academic can hope to succeed as a teacher of the technique of speech with high school pupils. The successful teacher must be really sympathetic, earnest, and sincere in his efforts to free the pupil from the imaginary monster which paralyzes his diaphragm, weakens his knees, clutches at his throat, and sets his jaws when he faces a harmless, good natured audience, which is more eager to hear than to criticize, more interested in the anticipated message than in the speaker's spiritual struggle.

The average teacher who fails to get satisfactory results usually fails because he does not appreciate the prime importance of this spiritual problem. Pupils of high school age, naturally sensitive, extremely susceptible to suggestion, many of them dangerously introspective, and repressed in their emotional expression almost to the point of explosion, must not be laughed at, or pitied, or have too much sympathy spent upon them. Their vagaries must be picked to pieces with absolute honesty. The intelligent teacher will then find a way to direct their thoughts into wholesome channels, without offending those to whom their emotional and spiritual uncertainties are the most appalling realities of these unstable years. Until the pupil is free from the fear of ridicule, until he *dares* to express himself simply, freely, and honestly, and until he learns that his efforts to express anything other than himself are certain to prove futile, it is useless to give him technical information or drills, because up to this time these have no significance to him.

The amount of technique of speech that can be given profitably to high school pupils depends not upon how much the teacher knows nor upon how much the pupil needs, but upon how much the pupil can be induced to want and to use. Where a teacher is equipped to give any technique at all it is usually given too soon, and the student drops the practise of the principles taught when he finishes the subject and is awarded his credit. The technique given should be so definitely related in the student's mind to clearly defined results to be achieved that he will continue to apply it whenever he speaks, whether in school or out.

It must be understood that there is no short cut to the acquisition of a pleasing and effective technique of speech. The determined efforts of both teachers and pupils to find such a short cut

are the greatest stumbling blocks in the path of real progress in national speech improvement. What is worth while is never easy to attain. Speech habits are formed early in childhood, largely by unconscious imitation. To change these habits requires persistent self-discipline which will be followed only by those who are determined to acquire correct and effective speech.

What is the correct and effective speech which we would have the average American acquire? A state representative of The National Association for Speech Improvement recently stated in a public meeting that it was not at all improbable that the speech of the middle western states would ultimately become the accepted standard for the United States. Heaven forbid that the mumbling, grunting, half-articulate speech which we are forced to endure on all sides should become the accepted standard of speech for Americans of this or any other day. The standard which we, as a national organization, should adopt, should not be that of any section of this or of any other English speaking country. Persistent efforts have been made for many years to convince us that the speech of the cultivated Englishman should be adopted as the American standard. We are urged to *imitate* the speech of a limited class of English speaking people whose speech habits are largely the result of generations of unconscious imitation in childhood. The class conditions that make this possible in England do not exist in this country and we hope they never will, for they do not accord with the ideals upon which our republic was founded and which we are fighting to uphold. All these efforts to graft upon American speech the speech standards of cultivated Englishmen are doomed to failure, because of the absence in this country of permanent social classes. Let us first establish habits of precision in speech, and in so far as these habits result in speech comparable to that of the cultivated Englishman we shall produce a real American standard without slavishly imitating the product of conditions which are likely never to prevail in this country.

Our high schools at present have to do primarily with the teaching of *intelligible* English—a subject so elementary as to involve no possible discussion of sectional differences. We must teach our pupils to open their mouths when they talk, to speak distinctly, to speak loud enough to be understood. These elemen-

tary practises we *do not* teach effectively. Until we do teach these things and get satisfactory results, it is folly to talk of teaching the further refinements of cultivated speech. Until the average American stops mumbling his words and has learned to speak intelligibly as a rule and not as the exception, it is farcical for us as teachers in the public schools to attempt to teach the masses the artistic oral interpretation of classic literature.

With self-consciousness overcome it is not hard to interest the pupil in a more technical analysis of his remaining defects of speech, and this leads easily to a discussion of the ways and means of cultivating the further niceties of speech. To further stimulate the pupil's interest in the correction of his defects and to arouse in him a still greater desire to overcome them, I have prepared a printed list of the commonest defects and a specific remedy for each, the defects and their remedies arranged in parallel columns. I have each pupil prepare, to the best of his ability and without help from me, a three minute selection, either prose or verse, of his own choosing. He is allowed from two to three weeks for this work. The selection must be one that he likes and that he thinks will interest the class. A powerful motive for effective work is now awakened for the first time. The pupil prepares this selection not only because he expects to enjoy reading it, but principally because he hopes that it will interest the class. This shifting of his attention from himself to his audience is a potent factor in containing the cure of his self-consciousness.

While the pupil is reading this three minute selection I rapidly check upon the printed list his most conspicuous faults and the remedies which he should apply. This record is then handed to him for use at home in taking the indicated exercises. When conditions permit each pupil is assigned a consultation period, sometimes more than one period, at which time I hear his report of progress and give him further individual instruction. The list of remedies includes all of the technique previously demonstrated to the class as a whole. This diagnosis of the pupil's faults serves to impress him with their gravity and at the same time to fire him with the hope of their cure.

It is impracticable to formulate a set exercises in technique which shall be infallible in all cases. There are certain common faults for which there are numerous specific remedies,

all equally good in the hands of an efficient teacher. The remedy to be applied depends upon the cause of the defect. Actual causes are not always easy to discover. The teacher of the technique of speech in high schools has to do with the normal, the sub-normal, and the abnormal, and as a rule there is no adequate provision for separating these into groups. The teacher of the technique of speech must have a sharp eye, a quick, sympathetic perception of mental and emotional states, and an intuitive understanding of temperamental peculiarities. She must have enough knowledge of psychology to make her judgment sound and her advice safe. She must have a sensitive, carefully trained ear, and a thorough-going knowledge of exercises that have been used successfully by other teachers. She should be ingenious in inventing specific remedies for individual cases as they appear. Less than any other subject in the curriculum, can this subject profitably be standardized. Information can be standardized; demonstrations can be made before classes, but only very general exercises in technique can be given to classes with satisfactory results. Pupils must be taught individually how to breathe, how to control their breath, and how to place their tones properly, etc.

For general relaxation, for deep breathing, and for stiff jaws, there is no better exercise than the self-induced yawn. I tell my pupils to yawn forty times a day, yawning at convenient times only, and dividing the yawns into groups of five.

Another breathing exercise should disclose to the pupil the proper use of diaphragm and waist muscles in deep breathing. Breath control cannot be acquired with superficial breathing. This exercise is taken lying flat upon the floor, all tight clothing removed, arms stretched over the head, so that the ribs and chest are raised and rigid. In this position the pupil should recite in a whisper, so that each word can be heard distinctly, some familiar rhyme or jingle, noticing the muscles used in breathing, and paying especial attention to the crisp enunciation of the consonants. He should then stand with his arms raised over his head, feet together, and repeat the exercise. Finally he should drop his arms to his sides and repeat the exercise, seeing to it that the diaphragm and waist muscles are used in breathing as before.

Pupils must be taught individually how to breathe, how to control the breath, and how to place the tones. They must be taught how to open their mouths, so that the tones may escape and so that the words shall not be mumbled. They must be taught to vocalize the resonant consonants—b, d, g, l, m, n, and z, and to pronounce initial and final consonants. To accomplish this I use certain exercises which cannot be adequately described here and which must be demonstrated to be understood.

To teach pupils to open their mouths when they speak I use a modification of Bell's Vowel Table. E as in eel, i as in ill, a as in ale, and e as in ell are grouped together with directions to pronounce the vowel with smiling mouth and with the teeth apart the width of one finger. A as in fat, e as in her, and a as in ask are grouped together with directions to pronounce with the teeth apart the width of two fingers. A as in arm and u as in up are grouped together with directions to pronounce with the teeth apart the width of three fingers. In actual speech these positions are modified by preceding or following consonants, but for practise these directions are excellent. The novelty and definiteness of the directions make them interesting to the pupil.

Specific directions for lips, tongue, and palate positions in the formation of consonant sounds should be given to the pupil. An elaborate analysis of these positions may be found in Bell's Dictionary of Sounds. The exercises for developing control of the organs involved are too numerous and technical to be given at this time. Once the pupil's interest in technique is fully aroused, they are not too technical for his use, and once mastered, their effect in making the speech clear and precise is most conspicuous.

We must be honest in judging the results of our instruction. Our task is a tedious one, and results are certain to be only partially satisfactory until the public has been aroused to the point of demanding effective speech from the average American.