Preparing Teachers for Effective Teaching of Oral Language

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The advocacy of the preparation of teachers to teach anything necessarily must be defended on the ground that the "anything" is important in our culture. When the "anything" is oral language, the advocate's task appears easy indeed. A paramount aim of the American educational system is the social development of the individual so that he may contribute maximally to his society. The importance of oral language to the social development of an individual is obvious. Equally manifest is the assertion that any handicap or constraint in communicating orally in our verbal world hinders the social relating of an individual and contributes to his isolation.

One can anticipate the whispered aside, "Who would deny the importance of oral language? But you don't have to teach it!" In refuting this argument it is pleasant to agree that fortunately it is quite true that most of our pupils can speak without perceptible physiological or psychological speech handicaps. But successful oral language, as construed here, involves the establishment in the mind of the listener, or in the minds of any number of listeners, ideas, concepts, understandings, and emotions which the speaker is motivated to create.

Is it necessary to teach the knowledges and skills which make oral language successful? The answer to this question is a resounding "Yes!" The demanding infant in the playpen, the ebullient leader of playground strategies, the youngster learning by imperceptible degrees to give and take in the verbal world of the school, the adult in the marketplace of business, industry, and the professions: all use speech in attempts to get what they want. They experience various degrees of success.

The sad and inescapable fact is that only a few fortunate individuals learn to use oral communication well. How rare is the experience of participating in conversation that is not filled with the trivial, the banal, the superficial. How seldom is the discussion of public affairs not flawed by ubiquitous logical fallacies, unreasoning prejudices, and excessive emotionality. How infrequently does one encounter good taste in the advertising of commerce and industry. Conversely, how constant are the pleas of leaders in business, industry, and the professions for personnel who can communicate effectively. The pervasion of the need in our society for individuals who can communicate sensitively is readily appreciated when one realizes that "In no area of our maturing...is arrested development more common than in the area of communication."1

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For this reason the development of oral communication abilities—in speaking and reciprocally in listening—must be a preeminent goal in the language arts program in the elementary school and in the high school. Chiefly it is through speaking and listening that the young child initially explores his environment, which, by and large, is a verbal environment. It is by means of these oral communicatory activities that the child asserts his individuality and, on the other hand, that he learns to become a social being, that he learns to weave endless webs of human relationships which form the structure of social living.

The motivated student in high school today is intent on learning as much as possible in science, art, literature, history, and human behavior as a foundation for the richest kind of social and vocational fulfillment. The importance of oral communication for him must be recognized in the high school curriculum. For in the final analysis, the ability to communicate knowledge sentiently will determine the parameters of success of an adult's social and vocational career. It is difficult to find a vocational area wherein the creators, the policy-developers, the decision-makers, and the executive leaders do not use oral communication constantly.

In our rapidly expanding urban centers throughout the nation the number of culturally disadvantaged students in our schools is spiralling upwards. It has been estimated that by 1970 one in every two pupils in our schools will come from the subculture called "the culturally disadvantaged." Many characteristics of the subgroups forming this vast social stratum are not uniformly distributed, but it is sound to generalize that the people of this stratum are on a lower economic, social, and educational level than the dominant middle-class majority. The critical importance of oral language, together with related aspects of communication—listening, reading, and writing—for this body of youth is readily apparent. The gate to cultural assimilation with its social and vocational rewards swings open to those with proficiency in the language of the dominant social group. In actuality, the pupil who uses a subcultural dialect of English or a dialect heavily influenced by a foreign language, with its divergencies in articulation, intonation, and structure, must attempt to learn a second language, one of the English dialects of the great middle class of this country.

It has been estimated that within his lifespan an American speaks one hundred words for each word that he may write. Time spent in communicating has been computed to be distributed as follows: 45 percent listening, 30 percent speaking, 16 percent reading, 9 percent writing. Basically communication is oral. Reading and writing are secondary developments in the linguistic growth of the individual and are dependent upon the development of oracy. Yet despite the preeminent importance of training in communication for youth, and despite the obvious importance of oral communication, teachers of the language arts in the elementary school and teachers of English in the high school have tended to accord it a secondary emphasis or, worse yet, to ignore it.

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Why is this so? Certainly teachers of English and the language arts share with teachers of speech obvious responsibilities for educating our youth in the art of oral communication. However, until recent years this art was a neglected aspect of the preparation of teachers of English and the language arts. At present professional organizations, state departments of education, and training institutions recognize in their guidelines for the preparation of these teachers the need for training to teach oral communication. But in the classroom situation teachers of English and the language arts are hesitant to become deeply involved in teaching oral communication and in relating its processes to those of composition and reading. A chief reason for hesitating is that they have not received adequate training in its methodologies. Many training institutions, despite their statements of curricular goals which often include the goal of preparing the English and the language arts teachers to teach oral communication, view the teaching of literature and composition as their central concerns. The study of language theory in this trivium is rarely used as a foundation for specialized training in methodology for teaching oral communication.

Many teachers of English in the secondary school and of language arts in the elementary school, absorbed in the vital concern of teaching reading and writing skills and our cultural heritage as embodied in literary forms, seek to shift the major responsibilities for oral communication to teachers of speech. The realities of the situation render the transfer of this major responsibility unfeasible. Firstly, the need for education in oral communication is so extensive that the numerically modest professional body of speech arts teachers, while committed completely to the area of oral communication, could not begin to essay the task in isolation. Secondly, the speech arts teachers need to devote a sizeable portion of their professional time and energies to the speech arts activities which are usually elected in the high school by students with some oral skill who desire specialized experiences in the speech and dramatic arts. Thirdly, the specialists in speech therapy must focus their total attention on the needs of our school population with speech and hearing handicaps.

If the teachers of English and the language arts are to assume meaningfully their rightful responsibilities, what preprofessional preparation for them should be demanded of the training institutions? The crowded state of curricula for preparing teachers of English and the language arts is well known, but if these teachers are to teach oral communication there are bodies of knowledge which should underpin their teaching methodology. The purpose here is not to consider the curricular strategies which might be used to weave this preparation into the tissue of the major sequence in specialization for the teacher trainee, although it can be asserted incidentally that the strategic problems are not as formidable as they might appear. The purpose here is to identify requisite areas of content of the forms and uses of oral communication about which the teacher should be knowledgeable. Moreover, these areas of content are not to be construed as exhaustive but as suggestive of the parameters of the preparation.

For effective teaching of oral communication teachers of language arts in the elementary school should have some knowledge about the following pertinent bodies of information:
1. Nature and history of the English language
   a. The phonology of American English
2. Development of speech in the child
3. Development of language in the child
4. Oral interpretative arts
   a. Oral reading
   b. Storytelling
   c. Choral speaking
   d. Creative dramatics
5. Listening as a language art

In teaching oral communication teachers of English in the secondary school should be knowledgeable about the following highly relevant bodies of information:

1. Nature and history of the English language
   a. The phonology of American English
2. Oral interpretative arts
   a. Oral reading
3. Public address
   a. Public speaking
   b. Parliamentary procedure
   c. Group discussion
   d. Debate
4. Listening as a language art

Over the last twenty-five years the enthusiasm of curriculum designers for interrelating the various language arts has steadily increased. The segregation of learning experiences in reading literature from learning experiences in written expression has given way perceptibly to the integration of these activities into learning experiences that have relevance to the learner's life. In the same fashion the oral communication arts—speaking and listening—should and can be tightly interwoven with the strands of the reading and writing arts into a fabric of learning experiences that has strength and richness. The beginning teacher of the language arts or English should be prepared to create these integrated learning experiences on entering the classroom; the veteran teacher often needs specialized inservice training experiences.

The possibilities for this interrelating are numerous and obvious. Our rhetorical tradition provides the common foundations, principles, and substance for designing the interpenetration of speaking and writing experiences for students. An integrated approach to the teaching of writing and public speaking can afford opportunities for the students to choose topics worth thinking, writing, and speaking about, to think about these topics critically, and to arrive at convictions and solutions through processes of reasoned thought. Techniques of constructing planning outlines can be related both to public speaking and to writing essays. Patterns of discourse, problems of argumentation, and rhetorical analyses of
style can be related both to public speaking and to written composition. On the other hand, in an integrated curriculum students can learn to appreciate the differences in the potentialities of the spoken and written word. Related to this discrimination on the part of the student is the development of sensitivity in the choice of language for a specific purpose for a particular audience of readers or listeners.

The relating of writing activities as responses to reading experiences is a type of integration of two language arts skills that has been widely implemented. However, the potentialities afforded by oral activities to assist readers to interpret the substance of literature or to appreciate literature as an art form all too often remain unexploited in the classroom. It must be admitted that this failure to use oral work in helping readers to win the rewards of deeply satisfying experiences with the various forms of literature occurs more frequently as the grade-level ladder is ascended.

The process of the reader's personal response to a work of literature serves as a foundation for the process of group exploration of the literature in the classroom. Frequently the group process takes the form of conversation or informal group discussion that centers on pivotal questions concerning the literary work and the reader's reactions. Often neglected in this cumulative development of critical thinking are the possibilities of utilizing public speaking and forms of group discussion such as panel forums and symposia which, in turn, can lead to writing assignments related to the literary experience.

Dramatic literature and poetry must be heard to be fully appreciated. The perceptive oral interpretation of poetry can illumine the beauties of alliteration, assonance, and onomatopoeia for the listener. When a student hears the lines of a play read with artistic integrity, the style of the work can be apprehended far more readily and completely than when his exploration is restricted to silent reading. Only oral reading of the dialogue can expose the artistry of the rhythm of the work. Only oral reading of the dialogue can create the meaningful intonations, pauses, and stress patterns upon which the dramatic effect of the lines depend. Oral interpretative efforts in poetry and drama can be made by the teacher or by the students, or they may collaborate in oral reading activities. Choral speaking is especially valuable in creating group enthusiasm and in harnessing that enthusiasm for the chief purpose of appreciating the literary work aesthetically. The playing of recordings and tapes and the showing of films are valuable techniques in bringing the printed word alive as an oral art form.

Because of its receptive nature the teacher must be prepared to integrate listening as a communicative skill with the oral communicative arts. In order to realize this integration, the teacher must be sensitive to the need to motivate the listener to listen purposefully. The purpose of the student in listening determines the kind of listening he should attempt. Is the student to listen in order to augment his store of information for it to be utilized later in a specific way? Is the student to listen for the purpose of appreciating the substance or the beauty of literature? The teacher must be knowledgeable about the purposes and the types of listening in order to assist the students in their development of skill in interpreting the spoken symbols of the increasingly oral world in which
they live. Is it not strange that the preparation of teachers to teach this communicative art is oftentimes ignored when research studies unanimously agree on the somewhat obvious finding that an individual spends more of his lifetime listening than reading, writing, or speaking?

In concluding this necessarily brief discussion of preparing teachers to teach oral language effectively, it is well to reiterate the initial argument made for the importance of oral communication. The goals of the American educational system and, within a more restricted focus, the goals of the curriculum in the language arts set the purposes and the parameters of the preparation of teachers of the language arts. The nuclear goal of our schools is to nourish and support the growth of the individual so that he may realize the endowments of his personal potentialities to their limits and contribute wholesomely to his society. The ability to communicate orally in effective fashion is essential if the individual is to participate in group action for the common good. This fundamental reason makes study in oral communication an important portion of the preparation of the teacher of the language arts in the elementary school and of the teacher of English in the secondary school.