



**The Work of the American Speech Committee of the Chicago Woman's Club, and
Notes upon Its School Survey**

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THE WORK OF THE AMERICAN SPEECH COMMITTEE
OF THE CHICAGO WOMAN'S CLUB, AND NOTES
UPON ITS SCHOOL SURVEY

The American Speech Committee of the Chicago Woman's Club held its first meeting early in the spring of 1917, called together in response to a suggestion by Mr. John Mantle Clapp, then secretary of the American Speech Committee of the National Council of Teachers of English. In a very general way we have interested ourselves to find out what was the attitude of different sections of the Chicago public with regard to the standard of speech in daily life. First of all a survey of the most informal nature was begun to see what was being done in the schools, public and private, to raise the standard of American speech.

In the twenty-five grammar schools we visited in beginning our survey in Chicago we were impressed with the fact that whatever work is being done for the betterment of the speech of the pupils is dependent upon the attitude of the principal of the school or the individual teacher. There is nothing in the school system at the present time that requires specific work of this kind.

Naturally more time is devoted to the improvement of articulation and enunciation in the lower grades than in the higher, but what is accomplished in the early years is often lost later because pressure of other work seems to make the teacher less keen about the speech conditions. The question of voice is almost wholly neglected. (There are striking exceptions to any general statement of this kind, for we found schools where, because of the efforts of an inspiring teacher or principal, many of the pupils are acquiring a clear and effective speech.) We feel that there will never be any great improvement until the teachers themselves are required to take some training that is fundamental, nor will there be any real progress until there is an aroused public opinion. The public must demand that pupils shall come out of our schools with improved voices and better articulation and enunciation. May we not hope

that some action will be taken in boards of education to better the present conditions?

About five years ago the study of oral expression was introduced in the high schools of Chicago; at the present time it is being offered as an optional course in fourteen of the twenty-four high schools, and it will be introduced into many of the other high schools whenever the principals find teachers who are willing to undertake it. This course may extend over two years. There are usually two periods a week and credits are given as for the regular studies that require home work. The courses differ very widely according to the idea of the teacher. In only one of the high schools did the principal tell us that it was his plan and his great desire to have every lesson given in his school a lesson in oral English. Much must be done before the study of oral expression is taken as seriously as it should be by the pupils. Unfortunately, it is generally regarded as a "snap" course or "cinch," but there is progress to be noted among many of those who follow the course even though they do only a small part of the work outlined. In one of the high schools where oral expression has not yet been introduced, the principal has found a marked improvement in the pupils' reading, lasting sometimes over a period of several months as a result of having a good reader appear before the assembly meeting to read to the whole school for an hour or more.

In some of the night schools large classes are being taught public speaking by a teacher trained for this kind of work. In this case a special ruling obviates the necessity of the regular teacher's certificate.

In the two-year course at the Chicago Normal College, which is in the hands of a very able and gifted teacher, a lesson once a week in the study of voice and speech is compulsory for two semesters. (After this any such study is optional.) All the classes are overcrowded, which gives little opportunity for individual development. One half-year's work in oral expression is required for entrance to the Normal College. A much longer and more thorough course and a determined effort to bring the application of this study into *all* the normal-school work will probably be necessary before much effect can be produced upon those who are to teach in our public schools.

It should be said, though, that the effect of the normal-school training on some of the students, and through them on the pupils, is very good. Excellent results are being obtained by the eleven young teachers who go each day to the elementary schools to teach groups of children who have defective speech.

GRAMMAR SCHOOLS

There is a general prevalence of what may be called the "public-school voice," hard and high, or rough and loud, and occasionally the artificially sweet voice.

Different opinions about the same school: The first visitor found the principal and teachers working very conscientiously and doing specific things for improvement of speech and voice in the pupils. The second visitor to the same school was so impressed with the strident voices of the teachers that she made very little comment on anything else. Her report was confined principally to remarks upon the futility of any effort for improvement while the children had such bad models constantly before them.

One teacher of wide experience says the influences that affect the voice and speech of children are to be placed in this order: (1) home, (2) companions, (3) books, (4) school. One cannot be dogmatic in this kind of thing, but we are rather inclined to say that the influence of the school and companions is equal to and perhaps greater than that of the home, for our observation is that the lovely voice and speech of little children are often spoiled in the first few years in school.

The harm is probably begun when the little tots are told to "speak louder" and forced to use a high, shrill tone instead of being taught the right way of making themselves heard. The shouts of the playground, the exuberant and vital tones we hear when the children are at games, need not hurt the voice in the least; on the contrary they may improve it if the child is in the habit of using his voice correctly.

In one very large school the principal, impressed by the necessity of improvement in the children's speech, requires that before every reading lesson five minutes' practice be given to exercises for articulation and voice placing. This drill is cleverly varied from day to

day. In another school, much talked of for its finely given plays, pageants, and the like, the children are trained very early in the reading of different kinds of poetry carefully chosen to fit their degree of advancement. Their feeling for the sound and meaning of words is developed, and a great nicety of articulation is obtained, which is noticeable through all the eight grades.

One principal, whose own voice was inadequate for her work, studied several years with a well-known singing teacher. The teaching of music and reading has been entirely changed in her school in consequence, her teachers' voices have improved, and it has been possible to cure the "monotones." Many of the children in the school (the district is entirely a Jewish one) had seemed to be tone deaf. In the one school that is in the center of the downtown district where all the pupils are of foreign-born parents, the principal (who, by the way, is getting very remarkable results in his teaching) thinks he obtains the greatest improvement in speech through the teaching of singing and giving of plays. These temperamental children respond best to such training.

One teacher, explaining the poor pronunciation and enunciation of the eighth-grade pupils, says that those in the sixth often read and speak better than those in the seventh and eighth because in the sixth they are still having some of the training in the phonetics of the language begun in the early grades. She often hesitates to correct mistakes because the children are being trained to read at sight for the meaning, and corrections confuse them. Here again one sees that the importance of correct speech is disregarded. This is what we hear most frequently: "There is not enough time for it."

In contrast to this we have a report from a member of our Committee who visited one of the practice schools where, under the direction of Mr. James F. Hosic of the Chicago Normal College, the teachers began a study of the habits of speech of the pupils in that school, a school where there are few foreigners. A committee was appointed to secure data on "type errors" in speech to classify them according to grades and to standardize methods for their correction. We note the following: "jist" for "just"; "in" for "ing"; dropping of h's—"she has 'er book," "b'ind" for "behind"; and "uz" for "as", and so on through a well-compiled list of kindred errors

familiar to us all. The effort to standardize methods for the correction of these ever-present mistakes is interesting, and the carefully graduated system of exercises, drills, games, etc., that is being evolved will be of great help to all those who are trying to solve the same problems.

PRIVATE SCHOOLS

There is always some kind of training for voice and speech generally, though not always, participated in by all the pupils. Taken as a whole the teachers are more interested in this phase of education than those in the public schools. We have not observed that the results obtained were any more lasting. The teachers say again and again that what we most need is an awakened public opinion on this subject. The principal of one of these schools says, "In the upper grades the pupils should be given individual instruction for speech and voice," and "In teaching young people to read aloud an opportunity should be given them to read long passages at a time. It is only in this way that they can acquire some abandon and facility of expression."

A great deal is usually said in the prospectus of a private school about the "well-modulated voice in conversation and reading." The following is also indicative of the effort that is being made for better speech. "Special attention is given to distinct enunciation and to the placing of the tone to avoid harshness or fatigue."

We quote from an unpublished article by a member of our Committee, Mrs. Howard S. Willett:

The need for better American speech is not confined to any class or locality. I have heard teachers in ghetto schools lament that the surroundings of poverty and ignorance produce poor speech in the children. Yet I know of a certain group of children in the most fashionable part of Chicago where the so-called *old* families of Chicago live. These children, fifty or sixty in number, never have had their speech affected by foreign-born children. They play in a private playground. They attend the best private schools in Chicago, where the teachers speak a most cultivated English. Most of the children have English or French governesses with excellent voices. Yet these children when they are together almost without exception try to talk as badly as they can. They try deliberately to mispronounce every word. They talk through their teeth—particularly the boys. Maybe they are imitating pirates. Their voices are not only loud but raucous. Their "smarty" attitude of mind squeezes the voice so that it is high and tight.

Last spring I attended a dance given by an exclusive social organization of our largest western university. I was amazed at the amount of slang these charming young women considered it—not permissible—but necessary—to use.

HIGH SCHOOLS

There is a growing popularity among pupils of classes in oral expression. This includes, besides elementary work on voice and pronunciation, public speaking, the construction of a speech, oral reading of prose and poetry, story-telling, reading and giving of plays, preparing for contests, etc. There are often not enough classes for all the pupils who apply. The object is usually to teach the pupil to express himself easily and effectively upon any occasion that may present itself.

Oral expression is usually studied in the third or fourth year, sometimes with a textbook, sometimes without. In one high school it is taught in the last half of the fourth year only and then daily as "Senior dramatics." One other school has a daily lesson for one semester in addition to the other courses of two lessons a week. (Senior dramatics are always popular.)

One teacher compiles a list of the pupil's habitual faults at the beginning of his study with some advice as to the exercises he should practice. She also gives much time out of school to consultation with individual pupils.

One class in oral expression was asked to bring sentences expressing different emotions in a natural way. Here is one of the results: Joy, "Gee, that's swell!"

One of the teachers says that the disappointing thing in her experience is that even the pupils who respond quickly to the training and improve in every way in this study often become so careless after dropping it that almost all traces of their improvement disappear and their speech becomes as slovenly as before. She deplores the influence upon the pupils of the poor manners and speech of some of the public men who are invited to address the assembly meetings.

In a high school in a suburb of Chicago the pupils were asked to prepare a recitation in one of their other studies, history or civics, for example, to be given for the lesson in oral expression, applying as far as possible the instructions they had received. To one pupil

who made a very good recitation the teacher said, "I call that successful in every way. I should give you 100. What do you think your other teacher would consider that recitation worth?" Rather shamefaced the boy replied, "Oh, I dunno—I never recite like that in my other classes."

In two of the high schools near Chicago the study of oral expression is compulsory. In one of these, the township high school of Cicero, the pupil is required before graduating to make sixteen short speeches for the assembly which convenes every morning for fifteen minutes. From four to six pupils are expected to appear each day, and if a pupil postpones this duty, he is often put to it in the last few months of his school course to get in his sixteen appearances in order that he may graduate. Those having a free hour may go to the teacher of oral expression for help in choosing and preparing a passage in modern prose, often something of current interest, perhaps a paragraph from a speech that has been given in Congress or in the House of Commons, a description of a scene in a foreign country, a short chapter from a new book, or a bit of dialogue from one of the masterpieces of fiction. This teacher considers that prose is usually the best medium for the development of the natural voice. One of the boys from Camp Grant, Rockford, a graduate from this school, said last month that the voice training he had received at school has been one of his greatest assets in camp life.

CLASSES FOR BUSINESS AND PROFESSIONAL MEN AND WOMEN

Many schools are to be found in the downtown district in Chicago where men and women who are in business are taking training to improve their spoken English. In one or two instances such classes are held in connection with a course in some business college.

In one of the large department stores where the heads of departments often discuss with the other employees the necessity of refined speech, pleasant voice and manner, many of the young people are urged to go to certain classes that are held after business hours at a school of expression in the loop district where, by a special arrangement, the price, which is usually \$15 for twenty lessons, is reduced

to \$6. We are told that there is great improvement in the voice and bearing of those who follow out this course of study.

Large classes are held for the study of English in a school of languages where the pupils are given a systematic drill in many grammatical points and also in the pronunciation of words and their meanings—all for a very moderate fee. There will soon be a class in public speaking in this same school.

In a club made up of salesmen, the Salesmanship Club, one of the professors of the Public Speaking Department of the University of Chicago has held classes for several years. The men are given instruction in the preparing of their "talks," in pronunciation and articulation, and in the proper use of the voice. The enthusiasm of the group of men in this club grows greater each year, and they often ask for more time than the teacher can give them.

Public-speaking classes are held in the Y.M.C.A. buildings, not only downtown, but also in the outer districts. Numberless other cases might be cited to show the growth of the interest among business men and women in the cultivation of speech and voice.

Singing teachers have brought a generous support to our effort toward improving American speech. One of these tells us that many of the Americans with beautiful voices, who were studying in Berlin when she was there, were unable to sing well until they had corrected their faulty pronunciation of English. Another says that our miserable western "r" which fills up the mouth and tightens the throat must be eliminated from the speech of a singer before a good tone can be produced.

The fact that so many military men have been pronounced defective in voice is another convincing proof of the great need for a more general training in speech.

OPEN MEETINGS OF THE COMMITTEE

At our regular open meetings, which are held in the large parlors of the Club, there is an opportunity for a free and open discussion of the different phases of the better-speech movement. In December Mr. John Mantle Clapp of New York and Miss Claudia Crumpton of Alabama were our speakers. Many of the professors from our university have talked for us, as have the teachers in the

schools. Several voice specialists, two from other cities, have given us informing addresses, sometimes accompanied by charts. There is generally a teacher of singing or of the drama present who has something valuable to contribute. Several well-known lawyers are actively at work with us. We talk over the reports of our members who have visited different schools. Actors have dropped in; their point of view is always most interesting; the problems of the business men have been presented; the doctors have helped by their interest; mothers tell us of the great hope they have in the results of the efforts of the Committee. At the annual convention of the Illinois Congress of Mothers and Parent-Teachers' Associations held at Bloomington, Illinois, last May this movement was presented and heartily indorsed. Our Committee is having requests from these organizations and many others for speakers for their programs. We hope that many readers of the *English Journal* will be able to meet with us and give us valuable council. With their help and that of all those interested we shall be able to make our gatherings a clearing house for all new ideas and reforms in the movement for better speech and voice.

PRESENTATION OF THE SUBJECT TO OTHER CLUBS

In our effort to arouse an interest in the better-speech movement among the other women's clubs in Chicago and the state we have first of all made the patriotic appeal and we have found a quick response to the idea that the love of language, our own language, may be a wonderful factor in effecting a greater solidarity among the American people. Our thinking public does not need to be convinced that our own speech and that of our children should be improved; they are eager to help and are glad to hear with what interest and sympathy our visits to the schools have been received. We have presented the following resolution on many different occasions, and it has always received the heartiest indorsement, notably that of the Illinois Federation of Women's Clubs:

WHEREAS, for greater efficiency in all walks of life better speaking voices, better articulation and enunciation, are much to be desired; therefore be it

Resolved, That we [insert name of organization]
indorse the effort of the American Speech Committee of the Chicago Woman's Club to raise the standard of American speech.

We find women's and men's organizations anxious to discuss the question from the standpoint of efficiency, and they agree that as citizens and taxpayers we should see to it that our children receive instruction in voice and utterance that will give them an effective speech instrument rather than a spoiled one, as is often the case when they leave the grammar school.

The circular and letter given below have proved very useful in interesting other clubs in the movement. The circular has been widely used in answering inquiries, etc.

The American Speech Committee of the Chicago Woman's Club is not an exclusive but an inclusive committee, that solicits the co-operation of every member of the organized women's clubs of the state. The regular monthly meetings the first Saturday of each month are open to all those who are interested.

The movement for better speech, one phase of National Service, is rousing an interest among thinking men and women throughout the country. They are realizing that the speech of our people (that of the young people and the grown-ups) is not the efficient and splendid instrument that it should be.

A love and respect for language, *our own language*, can be made one of the great forces working toward the solidarity of the American people. The mixture of many nationalities has produced a splendid race. Its language as well as its institutions must be safeguarded.

At the meetings there is always a short practical talk by a speaker fitted to present some phase of the subject, several three-minute reports, and a general discussion. We are glad to send speakers to other clubs.

By coming in touch with what is actually being accomplished we shall be able to recommend to boards of education in Cook County and elsewhere in the state of Illinois that certain things be emphasized, that attention be given to voice and utterance from the beginning to the end of the school course, and that pupils be marked for accomplishment in this study just as they are in others.

We find that teachers are grateful for this influence coming from the outside. The question has too long been left wholly in the hands of the educators.

We might begin by forming a "League for the Preservation of the Long o and the Long and Short i." Perhaps then we should not hear quite so often "wind uh," "pota tuh," "pu pul," "La tun," and "uh gottuh do ut." Even in the conversation of educated and charming people we hear most of the beautiful vowel sounds of our language being turned into short u, "uh," the grunt of the primitive man. We are offering a prize of \$5.00 to be given through the English Study Class of the Club for the best short article on the work of our Committee. The chairman is to give a report of our "School

Survey" before the "National Council of Teachers of English" which meets in Chicago this year, November 30.

If in the public school we can persuade the singing teachers to watch not only the singing voice but the speaking voice as well, we shall have accomplished much. To speak the words of a song with good articulation and pleasing tone is one of the best possible exercises. If parents would ask their children to read aloud to them regularly at home, they would be more impressed than ever with the need for just this kind of training.

But from the business world we are receiving the greatest encouragement. The practical man of everyday affairs is asking for greater efficiency in this as in everything else. One phase of our activity has been the preparation on the part of some of our members in order that they may be fitted to co-operate with the owners of factories and large industrial plants in teaching English to foreign-born workers. We shall work through every avenue to interest the whole public in this movement. We are looking to the club women of Chicago and the state for their splendid help.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Committee will make to boards of education certain recommendations, as, for instance, that:

1. Specific work for articulation and enunciation and general work for good tone begin in the lower (primary) grades and continue all through the grades as part of reading and spelling lessons and in connection with the study of English.

2. Teachers be marked by those competent to judge as to qualifications in speech and voice both at time of their examinations and in their work in classes.

3. The system of credits given to teachers for study be changed—now these credits are on the same basis as those for sewing and cooking instead of being like those given for the academic studies, mathematics, etc.

4. Work in oral expression be made compulsory in high schools, to include a few principles (very few, it is probably safest to say) of voice production and instruction in the elements of articulation and enunciation and to be an integral part of the English work throughout the course.

5. Co-operation with other classes be suggested—a teacher of history would perhaps confer with an oral-expression teacher about a case of "mumbling" and later would be able to report improvement to the teacher of oral expression and pupil's grade would be

higher because of this; a system of this kind with many simple ramifications has been successful in one high school, arousing interest in the families among parents and younger children.

6. There be some effort on the part of the teacher of singing toward an improvement of the speaking voice; that pupils be marked perhaps upon their ability to speak the words of a song with a tolerably good tone; that any instruction in tone be given so that it apply to speech as well as to song.

To other clubs in the state we have sent the letter which follows:

THE AMERICAN SPEECH COMMITTEE

DEAR FRIEND: We shall very soon have printed matter to send to you to tell you a little more about our undertaking. The inclosed circular, a reprint from the club bulletin, tells you of our regular monthly meetings which have proved a fine inspiration and helped all those who have come from different clubs in Chicago and in other parts of the state. You will find, I am sure, that there is always in your locality someone who is interested in this subject and who can speak to you upon some phase of it: a teacher or principal in the grammar or high school, a business man, a newspaper man, a teacher of singing or dramatic art, a worker on some committee for Americanization of foreigners, a doctor, a minister, a lawyer, an actor or actress, a military man. You will find these men and women and also people in many other walks of life able to discuss with you the *desirability and necessity for improvement in the American speech and voice*.

Any meetings of this kind which you may have would be reported in the local newspaper and reprints made of any articles which might be written either before or after your meeting. We have found that the most important thing to do is to get in touch with teachers in the schools. This can be done by inviting them to take part in the meetings of the American Speech Committee or of the Better-Speech Committee of your Woman's Club or of the Parent-Teachers' Association or in any meetings that might be held for the better-speech movement. If the friends of the movement (this includes, of course, the parents of the children) will confer with the teachers and principal of the school to find out how best the enthusiasm and patriotism of the children may be aroused, they (the children) will be brought to understand that they, with us, have been made the trustees of our language. Games, contests of different kinds, pronunciation downs, and an infinite variety of ways may be invented to arouse and hold their interest. I am inclosing for you a copy of two pledges, one for grown-ups and one for young people and children which might be printed with any variations you choose. Reprints may be made and signatures may be obtained and kept on file.

Business men are often eager to organize classes for different kinds of work of this kind for all that are associated with them in their business. Dramatic clubs are a great help and always arouse much interest. Our object is to spread this movement so that all the people may become participants in it.

You should try to have someone speak before every organization, club, league, farmers' institute, committee of every kind, etc., and get their indorsement of this movement. These indorsements will be helpful in presenting our plea to state and local boards of education for more specific training for voice and speech in the schools and for more teachers fitted for this work; they also have their effect in the homes in giving support to the efforts of the teachers for improvement in the daily speech of the children. Let us know what you are doing—this will help other clubs in other places. We shall be glad to write you further if you wish. If you are able to invite a speaker and organizer to come to you, we can no doubt help you.

KATHARINE KNOWLES ROBBINS,
Chairman of Chicago Woman's Club

The following *pledge for children*, written by one of our members, presents the subject in a form which may be used in the home:

AMERICAN SPEECH COMMITTEE OF THE CHICAGO WOMAN'S CLUB
PLEDGE FOR CHILDREN

I love the United States of America. I love my country's flag. I love my country's language. I promise:

1. That I will not dishonor my country's speech by leaving off the last syllables of words.
2. That I will say a good American "yes" and "no" in place of an Indian grunt "um-hum" and "nup-um" or a foreign "ya" or "yeh" and "nope."
3. That I will do my best to improve American speech by avoiding loud, rough tones, by enunciating distinctly, and by speaking pleasantly, clearly, and sincerely.
4. That I will learn to articulate correctly as many words as possible during the year.

In connection with this pledge it has been suggested that a list be prepared of 365 words commonly mispronounced.

Interest in the better-speech movement is definitely increasing among the clubs of the state. Many of them in different sections of the state are asking for an outline of study for self-improvement in addition to the work we propose for the arousing of public sentiment. We are planning to send a few suggestions that may be helpful to these smaller groups, naming several books that treat

of the subject, advising those interested to meet together and read aloud both prose and poetry, perhaps making a list of words that are often badly pronounced because vowels and consonants are slighted. We hope to be able to develop something more definite and specific in the near future.

INTEREST OF THE BUSINESS WORLD IN BETTER SPEECH

The business world will have an even greater influence than the schools in securing our hoped-for reform, and we have plans for reaching the personnel of the large business houses, first with our printed matter and then by talking to groups of the men and women. Business men are realizing how terribly inefficient is our present use of voice and speech, what a great waste of energy there is in our present way of speaking, and how often an individual fails of success simply because there is a lack of conviction in his tone or lack of clearness in his utterance. At the school for telephone operators, where only those girls are taken who have had at least a grammar-school education, very seldom is anyone found who can speak English well enough or clearly enough to do acceptable work at the telephone. Those who are accepted are given a daily lesson for a month before they can begin at the switchboard.

The work that is to be done in teaching English to the foreign-born workers in our factories and elsewhere is growing in a most encouraging way. In October the Board of Education of Chicago took over some of this teaching, but the social workers under whom it was begun are still doing a large share of it. The numberless settlements of foreigners, both in this city and throughout the state, where English is scarcely spoken, testify to the urgent need there is for this instruction.

Americans are just beginning to realize the great work it may be their privilege to perform in giving their language to the foreign-born worker, leading him to love and revere it. Our Committee feels that we have our part in this stirring movement for Americanization, which in its many phases is sweeping over the country, and we are thankful indeed to be able to take advantage of this great opportunity for national service.

KATHARINE KNOWLES ROBBINS, *Chairman*