

# Biologist—Why Neglect Speech?

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“A pleasing voice makes listening easy, and whatever tends to make it pleasant for the listener in trying to comprehend what the speaker means is much gained; whatever makes it difficult is so much lost. Consequently, purity of tone and smoothness of voice are fundamental necessities if a speaker desires to carry his thoughts to others on the safest terms.”<sup>1</sup>

Every teacher of biology and every prospective teacher should give thought to the preceding quotation. There is nothing more annoying or nerve-wracking when one is trying to comprehend what is being said than to have to strain constantly to understand the speaker because he talks between his teeth with his jaws tight, doesn't move his lips, “swallows” his words at the end of sentences, or his tones are down in his throat. Teachers, otherwise well equipped, but who have high-pitched, shrill, squeaky, thin, flat, monotonous, or inadequate voices are doing violence to the nervous sensibilities of the children who have to listen to them. In this rushing, screaming, screeching age in which we are now living, it is essential to the nervous system to eliminate all unnecessary disagreeable and discordant sounds.

Knowledge of subject matter is not enough to make one an effective teacher. I teach in a Los Angeles city high school that is a training school for future teachers. There are semesters when there are more student teachers than there are faculty members. It is appalling how many of these young people there are

<sup>1</sup> Woolbert, C. H., *The Fundamentals of Speech*, p. 139.

who expect to enter the teaching profession that are handicapped in their practice teaching because of inadequacy to make effective use of speech skills and the lack of training in personality development. Many times have the training teachers on the faculty come to me for suggestions for their student teachers whom they were about to fail because of their inability to “put over” their material to their classes. One student teacher in biology took private lessons from me for a semester in order that her training teacher could give her a passing mark. She had never been taught how to project her voice, or to pronounce her words clearly and distinctly, so that she could be heard and understood. She had never been made to realize that without enthusiasm her personality was colorless. She had never had any training that gave her self-assurance and poise. After she had been working with me for a couple of months her training teacher said that she had completely changed from a decidedly negative person to a positive one.

This semester an English teacher, a domestic science teacher, and a biology teacher came to me for suggestions for their student teachers who needed help in presenting their content-material. In many instances the difficulty is merely a personality problem arising from giving wrong impressions by lack of confidence, self-assurance, poise, and the ability to meet people easily and graciously.

Every prospective teacher should be required to have some voice and speech training. In these classes negative personality traits are made positive. Mannerisms that seem a trifling thing are

observed and corrected before they become fixed annoying habits. I think of speech training as including four elements—Body (visual appeal—general effectiveness, which includes personal appearance, posture—walking, sitting, standing, control of body, free from mannerisms, effective use of body, physical and mental poise), Voice, Language, and Thought. Each element of course has many sub-divisions, all of which are necessary for that elusive thing called personality, which is so valuable to a teacher.

One of the very first things that a teacher has to do to establish himself is to inspire confidence in his pupils. When he makes his first appearance before his class, they “look him over” and it is very important to his success that he be at ease. If he has had practice in appearing before groups, he will have an air of self-assurance that will gain respect for him from his pupils.

Teacher training institutions place their stress upon so-called content courses, but fail pitifully to equip their graduates with the necessary skills with which to convey their knowledge to others. “It is fatal to the highest success to have command of a noble language and to have nothing to say; it is equally fatal to have noble thoughts and to lack the power of giving them expression. . . .”<sup>2</sup> Hundreds of future teachers are graduated who lack the power, influence, and personality that a pleasing voice and distinct speech affords. Everyone should be interested in the care and correct use of the vocal instrument, most delicate and precious of all instruments. Proper use of the voice means conservation of energy, greater power and effectiveness in practically all human relationships. Speech specialists at Columbia Univer-

<sup>2</sup> Mabie, Hamilton Wright, *Essays in Work and Culture*.

sity say that personality and character traits can be changed by changing voice habits.

Those in charge of teacher training schools should not ignore the facts that speech is a medium through which personality is developed; that speech is an aid to intelligence; that speech is a “social integrator”; that through speech leadership is developed. Every candidate for the teaching profession should be equipped not only with knowledge, but also with the tools with which to make use of that knowledge and to make satisfactory physical, mental, and social adjustments. “Whatsoever may be done toward the improvement of the speech of the prospective teacher is done for the childhood of America that his teacher may not be a pedagogue but in reality the interpreter of life and of literature, for interpretation is the main spring of all instruction whatever the nature of the subject matter.”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> McCarthy, Margaret M., *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, April, 1929.

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