

Oral Practice--Its Purpose, Means and Difficulties

Author(s): Wm. Addison Hervey

Source: *The Modern Language Journal*, Dec., 1916, Vol. 1, No. 3 (Dec., 1916), pp. 79-91

Published by: Wiley on behalf of the National Federation of Modern Language Teachers Associations

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/313580>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

National Federation of Modern Language Teachers Associations and Wiley are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Modern Language Journal*

THE Modern Language Journal

Volume I

DECEMBER, 1916

No. 3

ORAL PRACTICE—ITS PURPOSE, MEANS AND DIFFICULTIES¹

In a gathering like this Oral Practice no longer needs defense. It may still be profitable to define its purpose and scope, to discuss ways and means of using it, to consider the obstacles which impede its progress. It is even sometimes necessary to protect it from the excessive advocacy of its friends. Oral practice is not a royal road, it will not enable the pupil to converse in the foreign language with correctness and fluency within the period of the ordinary secondary course, but it will advance him materially and surely toward that end and make possible its ultimate attainment, which can otherwise never be reached. It will, moreover, under proper conditions, enable him to understand the spoken language with reasonable proficiency and it will give him an accurate and intelligent reading knowledge which will make the foreign language an acquisition of real value, whether it is to be used as a key to the enjoyment of literary treasures or as a tool in the prosecution of other studies. Whether the pupil is being prepared for the enjoyment of his future leisure or for a definite utilitarian purpose—and the aims are equally legitimate—the Modern Language teacher should give him something which in after years he will be glad to possess. This will not be his experience if his instruction has been confined to the technique of declensions and subjunctives and their application in the tricks of translation. Let me not be misunderstood as condemning the teaching of formal grammar and the use of translation. They are indispensable means to an end, but they are not the end, as little as are scales and five-finger exercises in the elementary study of the piano. The essence of language, as of music, is feeling and its expression.

What, then, is the purpose of oral practice? It is to train the ear and the tongue coincidentally with the eye, to make the foreign language a thing of life, not a record of "lifeless letters imprinted

¹ A paper read before the Modern Language Conference at the meeting of the National Education Association, held at New York, July, 1916.

on our brain,"² unheard, unspoken, forgotten, like the covered characters of an ancient palimpsest. It is not merely because it makes modern language study more enjoyable in the beginning, although that would be a recommendation, but because it produces better and more lasting results in the end, that oral practice is now regarded as indispensable to good modern language teaching. An important seal of approval has been placed on this doctrine by the recent action of Princeton, Cornell, Columbia and Hamilton in announcing that after one or two years from date all candidates for admission will be subjected to a specific test of ability to understand and pronounce the foreign language. The postponement of the inauguration of this test will give the schools whose pupils may now be deficient in these respects, opportunity to meet the new requirement; and by that time other colleges now considering the matter will have taken similar action.

I have said that oral practice is not a royal road. In the olden days of strong-arm pedagogy, when paradigms were imprinted on the pupil's skin as well as on his brain, a certain new Latin grammar was heralded as a "Rückenschoner," being guaranteed to save the user's back from the penalty of deficiency. Oral practice will not save either teacher or pupil. On the contrary, there is nothing that is harder to teach well, nothing that tests more severely the pupil's preparation. Translation into English, excellent as it is for testing along certain lines, is not infallible. A printed "pony" or an obliging fellow-pupil may be substituted for honest study, and for the time being without detection. These aids fail to save the pupil subjected to one or another form of oral test. But every teacher, and every pupil worth considering, will agree that the question is not of how *much* labor, but of how *productive* labor. Furthermore, it is not necessarily a question of quantity but of kind. It is conceivable that a certain amount of time spent upon one page of text in one way, may be more productive than the same amount spent upon three pages in another way.

Oral practice is not to be confounded with conversation, or what passes for conversation in some classrooms. It is of course proper to ascertain conformably to the rules of French or German grammar whether the teacher is a man or a woman; to establish the fact that said teacher has one nose, ten fingers, two arms—if a

² Lessing's *Nathan der Weise*, I. 3535

man, also two legs—; that seven boys and eight girls make fifteen pupils; that the schoolroom has three windows, four walls and one ceiling. This is good oral drill, as far as it goes, but it is not conversation, nor is anything else that ordinarily is done, or can be done, in the schoolroom. The material of such drill is, however, colloquial and will contribute to the ultimate equipment for actual conversation. It is well to stress the name and the definition somewhat, because high-sounding announcements and extravagant claims have excited ridicule on the part of those who know and have made them hostile to a serious and vital phase of our work.

Let us assume, therefore, that the scope of oral practice should be restricted to simple, everyday question, answer and communication. This will include the use of stories and plays suitable for oral reproduction of narrative, description or dialogue; it will exclude critical analysis and appreciation of literary masterpieces. Before discussing means and materials in some detail, let me state that I speak from experience only as a college teacher and from observation of secondary teaching and its results. In particular, I am indebted for some of the ideas as to means and methods to a number of teachers of French, German and Spanish in the secondary schools of New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland and the District of Columbia who answered a questionnaire sent out in connection with an investigation conducted by a committee of the Association of Modern Language Teachers of the Middle States and Maryland. The total number of teachers from whom answers were received was 260, representing more than 60,000 students of the three languages. The school has a great advantage over the college in the use of oral practice and I have wished more than once that I might have such an opportunity for the trial of pet theories as the secondary teacher enjoys. The boy or girl in the early teens responds to means which are not usable with the self-conscious college student and still less with the more mature beginners in Summer Session or Extension classes.

I believe that a brief review of the exercises embraced in oral practice may be serviceable as a basis of discussion, to which the papers which follow will further contribute. Some of the exercises and methods will be generally familiar; others may be novel to some of you as they were to me. Most of them are intended to train both mouth and ear, that is, they are both *oral* and *aural*.

First comes correct pronunciation, which all teachers emphasize in principle, but which is so hard to maintain consistently in practice. Here, if anywhere, "well begun is half done," but it is *only* half done. It is much easier to correct mistakes in the beginning than later, when the reading has become fairly glib and the translation fluent, and when the minutes count. It will help if pupils are made responsible for detecting one another's errors. In general, anything which makes the pupils constant participants is sound pedagogy. Another exercise which all can participate in correcting is dictation and it will be far more profitable than for the teacher to do it alone, a piece of drudgery that is justly a ground of complaint. The proper way is to let one pupil write on the board while others write at their desks; then send a second pupil to the board to correct while the teacher "shuffles" the books and hands them out for correction, colored chalk and pencils being used. Finally the teacher corrects the board copy and the books are exchanged right and left for revision from the board. For corrections a left-hand margin is used, for revision a right-hand margin. Corrector and reviser each counts the errors noted and signs his name. The collected books give the teacher a complete record which requires only a rapid survey. The pupil gets his book back the next recitation for examination or re-writing of the exercise. This method is simpler and quicker to use than to describe. Like all such devices it requires promptness and precision of action, which cannot be stressed too much in the classroom.

Oral reading involves more than mere pronunciation of the single vocables. There is perhaps nothing in which students of a foreign language are so careless as in sentence-stress. For learning this the reading and speaking of dramatic prose serve best. Oral reading provides excellent training for the ear. There are few things more dreary than for twenty-four pupils to follow with both eye and ear while the twenty-fifth reads a prepared text with which they are familiar, or are expected to be. If the twenty-four must follow with the ear only, and be ready to correct errors and answer questions at any moment, there will be no lack of attention. Incidentally, the pupils who have not yet been called on will not be making belated preparation from the open book. The pupil should, of course, hear the teacher read in the same way. And

above all, when translation into English is required, the reading aloud of the original must not be neglected. Pupils should be directed to read aloud in making their preparation. If they did more of this they would not be so helpless when deprived of recourse to the printed page.

The most familiar type of oral practice is that of question and answer on a printed text and the various forms of free reproduction connected with it. The kind of text and the many devices available need not be noted in this paper. One thing only I would repeat, that the material must be in the language of everyday life, as found in easy stories and plays. Short narrative poems are not unsuitable if they lend themselves to prose paraphrase. To use a genuine lyric for this purpose is blasphemy. The recitation of poems is good for memory training as well as to provide material for oral practice, but there is danger that it become merely an exercise in speaking pieces. I should prefer that some of the material memorized and recited be short prose passages or anecdotes, as affording better opportunity for the kind of practice which the pupil should have, and I would emphasize the value of memorizing in this way. Words and phrases learned thus become and remain a part of the pupil's active vocabulary. The memory is trained too little nowadays. In abandoning the rightly condemned memorization of isolated dates and columns of vocables we have sacrificed a principle because of its mistaken application. We have "thrown out the child along with the bath," as the German proverb has it. All honor to the reasoning faculty and to the acquisition of power! Fine words and noble concepts! But the first premise of reasoning and the source of power is knowledge; and the *sine qua non* of linguistic knowledge is vocabulary.

From a Pennsylvania teacher, and from one in Brooklyn, too, comes a good suggestion for the use of dramatic texts. A scene or part of a scene, perhaps a single page, is assigned to two or more pupils to be memorized and spoken; another page to a second group and so on, the whole class preparing the entire assignment without memorization. This work trains in proper oral expression without theatrical effects and the element of competition stimulates interest and effort. This kind of exercise, it seems to me, is more useful than the annual public performance, which, like interscholastic football, benefits only the few and these of necessity the best,

indeed, as far as possible the children to the foreign manner born get the leading rôles, lest their parents come to scoff at the atrocious pronunciation of the pupils of American parentage. As an amusement, perhaps as a reward for the best performance in the weekly class exercise, the annual play may be defended. As an isolated educational exhibit it is of very little account. A New Jersey teacher reports the successful use, in the third year, of French or German newspapers, humorous journals and the like, which the pupils in turn take home and select something on which to report orally to the class. This may be a news item, a picture, a joke, an advertisement. Have you ever considered the possibilities of a typical department store ad' as a vocabulary maker? Such material is readily accessible outside the large cities by means of Sunday or weekly editions of foreign language newspapers published in this country. Some German teachers use "Aus Nah' und Fern" for this purpose. Another New Jersey teacher uses in the 2d and 3d year a book of selections especially intended for oral practice and appoints a pupil each day to tell a three- or four-minute story to the class the next day.

For acquiring the vocabulary of everyday life and some information about the people, the geography, and history of the foreign country, one of the specially prepared books is indispensable; and, indeed, this material is on the whole better suited for oral practice than the literary text not written with the elementary or intermediate entrance requirement in view. Picture post-cards are a most useful adjunct, both for the study of land and people and for oral practice along very practical lines, particularly if a lantern or projector is available. A large map of the foreign country and adjacent territory is as necessary as the text-book. Modern Language teachers may safely assume almost total ignorance of relative location, direction and distance; in short, of European geography in toto. This sort of material will bring the class nearer to actual talk in French, German or Spanish than the most charming story available. Nevertheless, I insist that the charming story and the lively comedy must not be eliminated. The pupil restricted to French or German texts made and graded in America would be as badly cheated as the infant fed exclusively on substitutes for milk or the adult who must be content with postum.

The use of oral practice for acquiring idioms suggests additional ways and means of interest on which there is not time to dwell. Here again there must be memory work. Too often a pupil knows an idiom only in the context where he has translated it. If required to frame original sentences and translate them, he will make the idiom his permanent property. On the question of making formal grammatical instruction a part of the oral exercise, teachers differ, with a majority against it. The opponents argue, and I believe correctly, that the pupil grasps and applies the rules better if taught in English, even if they are deduced from illustrations in the foreign language. The grammatical vocabulary is not large, to be sure, but it is useless as a permanent asset. At the stage when he is learning the elements of grammar the pupil does his reasoning in English and anything which impedes the process wastes time. At this stage, moreover, it is essential to keep the pupil's interest excited and the tedious element must be disposed of as quickly as is consistent with thoroughness. It is just as bad pedagogy to make the dose needlessly unpalatable as it is to substitute sugar for medicine. It is vital in the first year to give the pupil just as much pleasurable surprise and joy of acquisition as possible. This joy depends more upon the thing acquired than upon the fact of acquisition. Now he can experience no thrill in learning the difference between "Hauptwort" and "Zeitwort." They are to him merely German equivalents of noun and verb, two words that have no pleasurable connotation such as attaches to railroad and automobile and consequently to "Eisenbahn" and "Kraftwagen". There is no harm in using foreign grammatical nomenclature after the thing designated is familiar, when only *one* quantity is unknown. But don't begin with problems involving both x and y .

The extra-curricular "means of grace" are numerous. Foremost, perhaps, is the club conducted wholly or partly in the foreign language. In this activity again the school can do much which is impossible for the college. In the college Cercle Français or Deutscher Verein it is a big problem to occupy the members profitably without their knowing it; to strike a mean between the over-trivial and the over-serious, between the child's playroom and the lecture room. Singing is the most welcome and most wholesome of the diversions offered. The schoolboy and girl can still

take naive pleasure in speaking pieces, in reading easy plays at sight, in games of authors, history, geography, etc., which are reported by several teachers as productive of highly gratifying results. One in Pennsylvania even uses these games in the classroom. Singing, of course, will be as much enjoyed as by the older students. Excursions, visits to museums, galleries, to a French or German theater in the few instances possible—all these recreations, though only occasional, have their value. From a New York City teacher comes the practical idea of visiting biological, and particularly domestic science or manual arts laboratories, with the class, to use the splendid opportunity afforded for object teaching. Suitable short talks by outsiders are excellent, either in the club or the classroom, to accustom the pupils to pronunciation other than that of the teacher and of one another. Some teachers say that they encourage pupils to talk with them in the foreign language outside of school. An excellent habit, particularly in the more advanced stages of study and quite feasible if the teacher is a native of the foreign country. For two native Americans, in America, to talk a foreign language outside the class or club seems artificial, but practice may make it natural enough to be worth while.

In oral work variety is essential. The semblance of daily routine must be avoided without sacrificing its benefits. The thing must be done with a vim and a zest, and the teacher must lead if the pupils are to follow. Some may agree with a New Jersey teacher who says he "knows many fine stunts, but has to be wary of following too many trails lest he get lost in the woods." Careful planning is undoubtedly necessary, and not all classes can be handled alike. Some things are indispensable. Such are pronunciation drill, dictation, reading aloud and listening to it, oral question and answer, at least some oral reproduction,—literal memorizing in the earlier stages, later free. For training the ear, the earliest reproduction should be in English, because a much larger amount can be done and quantity counts. The sooner the pupil can understand, the sooner he will begin to speak with some readiness. For the rest—the classroom play, the daily three-minute speech, the post-card, the newspaper and magazine, the club, the games, selection may be made as opportunity appears or they may all be rejected as "fads and frills." The class will get along without them

and will pass the dreaded examination, but it will have missed some things worth while, and so will the teacher.

One thing deserves to be emphasized, the immense general value of such oral training, quite apart from its place in the foreign language program. The drill in pronunciation, in sentence-stress, in ready answer, in dramatic dialogue, in free reproduction cannot fail to improve the pupil's pronunciation and reading of English, to give him readiness and confidence in speaking, in formulating and expressing his ideas. In the questionnaire mentioned before teachers who favored oral practice were asked for reasons in support of their advocacy of it, and a large number gave this as the foremost,—the improvement of the average high school pupil's slovenly speech-habits and woeful deficiency in oral English. This involves *per se* no indictment of prevailing methods of teaching English. The simple fact is, that command of the mother-tongue is greatly furthered by oral command of a foreign language. Goethe once said that no one knew his own language aright who did not know a foreign language. Hence this is one of the few absolute prescriptions in the Pedagogical Province of "Wilhelm Meister" and to it may be attributed no small part of the grace of speech which the boys in that community are represented as displaying. Did it ever occur to you that this may be the reason why the Jewish or Italian boy who gets all his schooling in a language of which in the beginning he does not know the alphabet, not seldom becomes a most effective public speaker and carries off the prize in competition with native American boys from high-brow homes?

I have heard more than one of my auditors ask himself or his neighbor how it would be possible to carry out such a program as has been outlined under conditions as they exist or can be made. Difficulties were included in my title and they shall not be ignored. Let me refer again, if I may, to the questionnaire sent to the secondary teachers of French, German and Spanish in the Middle States and Maryland. The 260 teachers cast 292 votes, some representing two of the three languages, a very few all three of them. On the question of whether oral tests should be included in the college entrance requirement in Elementary French, German and Spanish 270 voted yes, 22 no; for Intermediate French and German 248 voted yes, 28 no. On the question whether they believed that their pupils could be satisfactorily

prepared for such tests, there were 277 affirmative answers and 15 negative. Four chief difficulties were noted by those who thought their pupils could not be prepared for the oral test and by some others who recognized them, but believed they were not insuperable. These four difficulties were lack of time in the program, large classes, excessive demands upon the teacher, the teacher's incompetence to give the required instruction. These four points cover, I think, most or all of the objections that can be raised if the initial premise, that oral practice is a necessary part of Modern Language instruction, be granted.

The plea that oral practice takes too much time is the one most often heard. It is the most plausible and at the same time the least valid of all. Oral practice *will* reduce the time allotted to formal grammar and composition, and it ought to if it has the cardinal merit claimed by its advocates, namely that it teaches the same things by the use of additional means, and because of the additional means teaches them better. It should not be hard to understand that the exercises of three faculties will effect a quicker and more lasting mental impression than the exercise of one faculty. There can be no oral practice without constant application of the rules involved in written exercises and the frequency of application will be at least fourfold greater; I say fourfold as a minimum, because it is so easy to compute that with a reduction of one-half in the old-line composition work and substitution of oral practice there will be one hundred per cent. gain in the amount of drill received by the pupil.

The question of reading is the one most often raised in this matter of finding time for oral practice, and it is not as easily disposed of as the preceding. As far as preparation for college entrance examinations is concerned, yes; there need be no fear that a pupil who has prepared and read 150 pages in connection with thorough oral drill will not be ready at the end of his second year. If, however, a certain number of pages is prescribed by a state syllabus or a college to which the pupil must be certified, the teacher may hesitate to reduce the quantity, notwithstanding the improvement in quality. As has been remarked before, it is not a question how much has been *read*, but how much is *retained*. One hundred and fifty pages will provide a total vocabulary of about 1800 words, of which the proficient pupil will have about one-half

as active vocabulary. In the place of a teacher in this dilemma, I should regard the requirement as met if the remaining pages had been read at sight; and even if there were no such requirement I should want to cover at least half as many pages at sight as with preparation, the material read thus to be always considerably easier than the assigned work and accordingly well adapted to impromptu oral practice.

The objection on the ground of large classes is a very real one. Classes of more than twenty-five make effective oral practice difficult and overtax the teacher's energy and resourcefulness. Here the remedy lies in bringing school superintendents and boards to see the waste of this species of economy; and this is a major office of a teachers' association representing both secondary and collegiate interests and of a Journal as its organ. Eliminate the deficient teacher and the defective system with equal thoroughness. No less serious a handicap to the good teacher than crowded classes is a crowded schedule, the necessity of preparing himself in several different subjects. One high-school teacher in New York State, for instance, reports that she instructs in five subjects. This is an extreme case, but there are many teaching three unrelated subjects. This might be done by the stronger, better equipped teacher but that is seldom the one of whom it is required. Reckoning with conditions as they are, two subjects should be the norm, with the requirement of a special license to teach them and a consequent bar to teaching any others. Another necessity to educate the educators! As far as oral practice is concerned, the initial demand upon a teacher who has not used it will be large, but in the long run it will not exceed that involved in the conscientious correction of the larger amount of written work which his present method probably entails.

Lastly there is the difficulty of the incompetent teacher, able to conduct a recitation along the beaten track and to get his pupils through the present examination, but utterly unfit to give instruction in pronunciation and oral use of the foreign language. In the first place such teachers must somehow acquire a reasonably correct pronunciation and the ability to read French, German or Spanish so that the native will be able to listen without acute suffering. A short period of intensive work will accomplish this and there are very, very few who can not make this possible

if they must. It is not necessary to specify ways and means; summer schools are only one of them. From one such teacher comes the suggestion that the State send inspectors who shall not merely inspect, but shall remain a week or two, if necessary, to aid the teacher deficient in preparation or in method. If the salary and traveling expenses of such an inspector were \$3000 and he made annually thirty teachers efficient, it would be a good investment. Certain state commissions of dubious achievement cost much more.

The time for the Modern Language teacher to prepare is, of course, before he begins to teach. That he does not more often do so, as the statements of many teachers prove, is partly his own fault, partly, once more, that of the system; better of the systems, for two are responsible, that which prepares him to teach and that which lets him teach. It is his own fault, for not deciding earlier on the subject or subjects he will teach and planning accordingly. Not only in the choice of courses, I mean, but in other directions as well. Practically every college student can find a German family (less easily a French family) in which he can live and get there what his courses do not give him but what he well knows he will require. This is what the German does who expects to teach English. He finds an English or American family and cheerfully puts up with rare roast beef and "unplumaged" beds. Or at least he seeks a fellow-student with whom he carries on a real exchange and makes him a daily companion, although he would enjoy another's company better. And he reads the English newspaper, whether he likes its editorials or not, goes to the English church, the English theater if there is one. The American college student will seldom make what he regards as a great sacrifice and makes it so grudgingly that the benefit is lacking. That it can be done with signal success I know from the experience of a young woman who fitted herself for oral teaching by living with a German family throughout her undergraduate course at Barnard College. She has since become one of the ablest teachers of German in this city. Some of these things the teacher who finds himself unequal to the demands of oral practice can still do. Where there is a will there is a way.

And the systems are to blame, more to blame than the individual, who can not be expected to know more than the educational experts who train him to teach *something* and the educational

board which allows him to teach *anything*. In the answers which came to my committee, as to how candidates for Modern Language teaching might be better prepared the following were so frequent as to be almost stereotyped: *First*, make the student decide two years before graduation (from a 4-year course) what two subjects (at most) he wishes to teach, so that henceforth his curricular and extra-curricular plans will be shaped accordingly. *Second*, make the college adapt the student's program to his choice and provide the necessary training in principles and practice of teaching Modern Languages (which must include pronunciation and oral command, whether required of ordinary students or not), the successful completion of such a program to be certified in his credentials of graduation. *Third*, let the state education department license the teacher permanently in two specific subjects on the basis of examination only, to which the foregoing college certificate is prerequisite. To provide for the cases where the high-school is so small that a teacher must cover three subjects, issue a temporary license based on less rigid requirements in the third subject, no such high school, however, to be rated Grade A. There would be no obstacle to the teacher's obtaining a permanent license in the third subject. This would operate to remove the school's disability.

You noted, perhaps, that I said "*make* the student decide" and "*make* the college adapt," but "*let* the State license." The sequence of student, college, State is the natural order with the scheme in operation; for purposes of inaugurating it, the order will be reversed,—State, college, student. Once the hortatory "*let*" is heeded by the first, the mandatory "*make*" will take effect automatically upon the second and the third.

The general establishment of the conditions in Modern Language teaching at which we aim will take a generation and many of us will no longer be in the service which we are laboring to improve. It will come, as surely as the marvelous advance of the generation now ending has come. We do not essay the impossible in demanding that the improvement of conditions shall at least *begin* everywhere that it is needed and begin at once. There is nothing in Modern Language teaching which more widely needs improvement, or has a better prospect of support in getting it, than oral practice and oral proficiency.

WM. ADDISON HERVEY.

Columbia University.