

The Value of Choral Speaking in Developing Language Skills and Creativity

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If a teacher wants the class to produce creative writing, she must provide the pupils with the language with which to do it. It all depends on the personal enthusiasm of the teacher herself and the motivation she is able to provide. From my years of teaching in the classroom I have learnt that language patterns are learnt more readily through the ear than the eye. As the pupils are exposed to oral language in all its forms and as they become aware of all the language variations and subtler uses, language growth inevitably begins to occur, whether it comes in drops or in downpours.

I have personally had experience of classes where the English Language competence was low and the pupils' first language was either Chinese or Malay. In such classes the pupils have been exposed to hardly any kind of creative language experience. But the skill with which the enthusiastic teacher exposes her class to creative writing in one oral form or another has often resulted in an active, interested audience with a high degree of motivation. The language class becomes alive. The linguistically competent pupil is bubbling forth with creative ideas which she wants to express in writing, while the not-so-competent child is caught up in the excitement of this novel classroom situation and (even if she is struggling to put her thoughts down on paper) numerous ideas are beginning to take shape in her mind. She is in the process of building up a rich storehouse of language experiences on which, with the help of the teacher, she will at some later date be able to draw.

The important thing is that children should "hear" this use of language and this means that the teacher, must have a generous supply of stories, ballads, poems, folk songs etc. that she can use throughout her English Language lessons to add variety to a potentially boring situation. We are often hampered by the time factor – we may often have to "steal" a period now and again; but I strongly believe that some time spent on listening to a good story told in truly creative English achieves far more than instructing a class to write a "free" composition.

Closely allied to listening is oral repetition. By joining in the repetitive phrases of a story and the choruses of a ballad or a folk song, the pupils are presented with a continuous stream of new experiences. Once the class knows the words well, there is repetition without effort and all kinds of variations can be added by playing with the speed of different lines, making the responses loud and soft, having solo voices here and there, backing the words with a tambourine or other percussion rhythms, breaking into a home-made melody for a particular phrase etc.

This leads us to the consideration of choral reading and the value of choral speaking in improving speech and promoting English Language proficiency. We have found umpteen uses for choral reading. Firstly, valuable training is received in enunciation, inflection, and timing. Other less tangible skills may be developed, such as agility in change of pitch, beautiful tone qualities expressing various shades of feeling, and the ability to place emphasis effectively. When individuals are supported by others in a group, they may develop diction of beauty and high quality, together with a naturalness impossible for many when speaking alone.

Secondly, I have found that faulty pronunciation can often be improved by letting several pupils read or repeat a selection together. Timid and slow pupils will put much more expression into both prose and poetry when reading with someone else who reads well rather than painfully working through scores of speech training exercises of a remedial nature.

This is a specially significant point to take note of in the second language situation, when frequently we teachers are guilty of branding the second language learner as a foreordained failure. The backward child who seems to be dull is often actually not as dull as he appears but rather a bashful, self-conscious individual. It is such timid learners who benefit most from choral reading. I shall illustrate my point by drawing an example from the Malay Medium Remove class pupils in my school, who were hampered by feelings of inadequacy and self-consciousness. Thus it was most rewarding when, after three years of concerted effort on the part of both pupils and teachers, this particular class presented the humorous **Adventure of Isabel** by Ogden Nash, much to the delight of a packed audience at a Speech Day Concert. They received a tremendous ovation. This in itself was proof of the value of choral speaking in the whole language learning process.

In conclusion, choral speaking gives a social experience in which the shy child participates freely without embarrassment and the aggressive child subdues his voice to achieve melodious effects. Choral reading and speaking greatly enhance children's appreciation of literature. After reading many poems with someone who has a keen sense of rhythm, the children begin to be imbued with feeling and it is a joy to see their eyes shine when they discover the music in beautiful poetry!

Steps to remember when embarking on a choral speaking programme

Firstly, the teacher must select a poem that meets with the approval of the entire class, for a half-hearted response will never bring forth the best from the speech choir. From experience I have found poems with a sense of humour or those which express the longings of girlish hearts to be most popular; though at times, poems that offered opportunities for much variation of tones and voices had great appeal.

Once the poem has been chosen, the choir has to be divided according to the strength of their voices. Each member of the choir has to read a short verse and then the light, clear voices can be grouped apart from the deeper, richer voices or the medium voices. Once this has been done, we are ready for the presentation. There are broadly four different ways in which a choral poem can be presented:

- (i) **Solo and chorus:** the leader recites the bulk of the poem, the rest of the class join in the refrain only.
- (ii) **Line-per-child or Line-per-group Technique:** used with poems that consist of lines or couplets. Each of these lines or couplets may be spoken by a specified pupil or a small group. The teacher reads the poem several times to ensure understanding and good expression. Then, each pupil or group says its line.
- (iii) **Antiphonal:** two groups of pupils take turns to speak in either (1) a question – answer pattern (2) a conversational exchange (3) a contrasting type of situation. Antiphonal speaking can be used in solos, duets and whole groups to give variety to the verse choir.
- (iv) **Unison:** all the voices speak together. This may seem a simple choral arrangement but actually it is the hardest, as it is not easy to keep voices together.

An Example of material for Choral Speaking

The passage given below contains simple ideas and is well within the linguistic experience of the second language learner.

The Rumba Band

While parts of the poem were said in unison, contrast can be added to the delivery by adopting an antiphonal method of mixing the strong, forceful voices with the medium ones. As the whole theme of the poem is to get "the rumba banned" the delivery must have a mounting air of purposefulness.

Many parts of the poem lend themselves to working up to a crescendo which is followed by a diminuendo. Be sure you have a sense of urgency and mounting speed as you say lines like:

"And a chatter and a natter
Let it clatter
Let it shatter
Let it spatter
Doesn't matter
Getting flatter."

The Rum Ba Band by J.B. Boothroyd

The entire class loud and clear

It's a rum —
Ba band another rum —
Ba band

Let your voices rise for the first
half and fall for the second

Shicker — shicker — shicker (3 times)
Turn on the radio,
Mammoth set or midget
All you'll ever get
Is the everlasting fidget

Be sure to get the rhythm and
the beat

Of a rum —
Ba band another rum —
Ba band a pluck and strum —
Ba band

Repeat as before

Shicker — shicker — shicker (3 times)

Build up the atmosphere by
gradually allowing the voices
to rise to a pitch and then to
softness and then back again
to a pitch of mounting loudness

Tee ticker — ticker and a
Boom and a wobble and a clang
And a bang
And a chatter and a natter
Let it clatter
Let it shatter
Let it spatter
Doesn't matter
Getting flatter

Continue in the same pattern
as the first half of the poem.
Be sure to bring out the
cadence of the voices as
vividly as possible to resemble
an orchestra.

Turn on the radio,
Mammoth set or midget,
All you seem to get
Is the orchestrated fidget
Of a rum —
Ba band another rum —
Ba band
Shicker — Shicker — Schicker (3 times)

A solo voice brings the recitation to an effective conclusion by posing the all important question loud and clear.

Can't someone have the rumba banned?

A Brief assessment of this activity

As I come to the end of this discussion on choral speaking and how it helps English Language proficiency, there are a number of points worth taking note of.

There are two important benefits to be derived from using verse speaking as an aid to oral training. As most verse is written to be read aloud – verse largely follows the rhythm and natural inflections of the voice – a teacher who makes a class read verse aloud is helping the pupils to get both syllable stress and sentence stress correct. Secondly, verse once learnt sticks in the memory.

A final word of warning: in a choral speaking programme never ask for critical opinions from the class as regards a piece of poetry. The past generation of Literature teachers did much harm by dissecting Shakespeare's "Seven Ages of Man" line by line, word by word, trying to explain the minutest detail of Shakespearean blank verse to an utterly bored class. Teachers should allow students to form tastes of their own and this must happen spontaneously. What the teacher must insist on is a good standard of pronunciation and expression. The earlier a pupil begins to speak English verse, the deeper will be his appreciation of the sounds and rhythms of English poetry.