

CHORAL READING AS AN INFLUENTIAL FACTOR IN THE
DEVELOPMENT OF READING ABILITY IN THE FIRST GRADE

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DEVELOPMENT OF READING ABILITY IN THE FIRST GRADE

By

AILEEN JOHNSON

Bachelor of Arts

Southeastern State Teachers College

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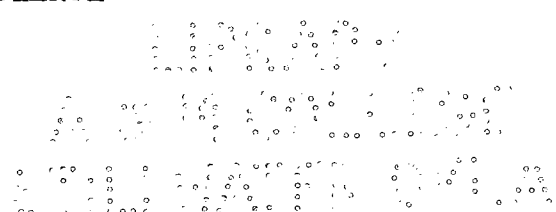
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Head, Department of Elementary Education

D. C. McIntosh
Dean of Graduate School

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BACKGROUND OF EXPERIMENTATION

History of Choral Reading. Through the ages choric speech has been a folk form of expression. There is reason to believe that our primitive ancestors achieved perfect unison utterance of symbolic language forms. They identified themselves with nature and caught her deep rhythmic tones and beats, just as the primitive American Indian chanted, swayed, and beat his tom-tom in a primitive form of choric speech. Such speaking may have been with them as much of an art as singing. They may, indeed, not have recognized any difference between the two arts, one merging into the other. During the Middle Ages, in dramatic performance and narrative recitals (by both traveling and private entertainers) and in later eras, in public celebrations and racial demonstrations, choral speaking continued to be used as an artistic form of expression.¹

Choral verse speaking, however, dates from early Greek drama of about 500 B. C.² These dramas had majestic choruses that chanted dramatically the parts of the story that the author did not wish to depict on the stage and thus made of the play a unified whole. Many famous odes

¹ A. W. Mills, "Choral Speaking," School and Society, Vol. 45, June 5, 1937, pp. 779-81.

² E. B. Meader, "Choral Speaking and Its Values," Quarterly Journal of Speech, Vol. 22, April, 1936, pp. 235-45.

were recited in this manner. But in time, the Greek chorus, welding together the play, the audience, and the Fates, in all its grandeur, degenerated into a mere interlude. And in later times group utterance in the theater came to be used, for the most part, in representing mob emotion, very often emphasizing, in inharmonious tones, jarring conflict between warring human elements. So that before the twentieth century, this social art of choral speaking had almost disappeared, even where it had been a vital expression of the art of the people.¹

In 1922, Miss Marjorie Gullan trained a group of speakers in Greek drama choruses for a poetry speaking contest at the Glasgow Musical Festival. She soon found that materials such as old Scottish ballads and passages from the Bible gave needed inspiration for these choric speakers. So enthusiastic was the Glasgow Musical Festival Committee over the results of Miss Gullan's work, that they placed poetry speaking side by side with music in their syllabus. Writing in 1927, Miss Gullan says:

Whereas before we could hardly find a listener for good poetry, today in Glasgow after five years of Festival activities, we can fill one of the largest theaters with an audience who will listen eagerly, for two hours on end, to the poetry of the Bible, Milton, Shakespeare, Professor Murray's translation of Greek drama, and old ballands.²

¹
Mills, Op. Cit.

²
Meader, Op. Cit.

News of the success with which this new activity was meeting soon spread to our own country. As early as 1929, we read of verse choir recitals on the Pacific coast. But some four years later people in the Eastern part of the nation did not seem to have heard much of this new form of poetic recitation used in the schools and colleges of the West and in European countries. And then in 1933 the lady from London arrived on our shores. The name Marjorie Gullan proved to be the "open sesame" for the entrance of this old-new art form into the educational curriculum of the East and its spreading thence throughout the nation.¹

Since that time, according to Young,² there have been many experiments in the American schools, such as those demonstrated at the March, 1934, meeting of the New England Association of Teachers of English. And Miss Gullan's books have come to be accepted as the scripture of the movement.

Fortunately, choral speaking is not limited to a particular race, nation, age, or period. There is an excellent choir of pupils from a kindergarten in Albany, New York, and also one of finished actors and actresses in London. Dr. Virginia Sanderson, of Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, Miss Elizabeth E. Keppie of Pasadena,

¹ A. W. Mills, "Choral Speaking," School and Society, Vol. 45, June 5, 1937, pp. 779-81.

² H. H. Young, "Why Choral Speaking," Progressive Education, Vol. 12, October, 1935, pp. 396-98.

California Junior College, and Marguerite E. DeWitt, Visiting Lecturer, Vassar College, have been a great inspiration to many workers in this field. So that today we find an increasing number of verse speaking choirs in this country.¹

And even more recently, many teachers have incorporated choral reading into their regular program of classroom activities. This procedure, although believed to be amply justified, is still somewhat of an experiment and there is much uncertainty as to the extent of its values.

Purported Values of Choral Reading. Miss Rasmussen² lists ten definite results noted in verse speaking; namely:

1. A loss of self-consciousness.
2. Unrealized freedom in individual expression.
3. Improved enunciation.
4. Increased range and flexibility (control of voice).
5. Increased coordination of body and voice.
6. Increased breath control.
7. Greater power of imagination.
8. Rhythmic appreciation.
9. More bodily expression.
10. General development that carries over into other work.

³Miss Hicks lists only five values:

1. Improved speech.
2. Group cooperation or social adjustment.
3. Greater appreciation of poetry.
4. Extended imaginations and sympathies.
5. Social understanding.

¹E. B. Meader, "Choral Speaking and Its Values," Quarterly Journal of Speech, Vol. 22, April, 1936, pp. 235-45.

²C. Rasmussen, "Choral Speaking in the Grades," Quarterly Journal of Speech, Vol. 19, February, 1933, pp. 43-51.

³Helen Gertrude Hicks, The Reading Chorus.

Miss Rasmussen¹ says that perhaps the most important of the activities involved in group interpretation is the individual creative impulse aroused. The group doing the speaking must so analyze and interpret the poems which they speak that what they do is, after all, the result of their own inner realization. They must reexperience the ideas and emotions of the poet. Gullan and Gurrey² say:

The fundamental purpose underlying this method of taking spoken poetry in the school is not to teach children to utter aloud mere words, but to train them to give, in the speaking of the words, all the thought and spirit and character that it is the purpose of the words to bring to life, and, in addition, to say their verse and prose with the clearness of tone and beauty of enunciation that delights the ear with its music. After speaking with a group, the individual child pronounces words correctly and enunciates properly without conscious effort because he has unconsciously, from much practice, formed the habit of doing so. For the same reason, he finds no difficulty in expressing himself in simple, concise, and complete sentences. He has learned to think, and therefore to speak, in thought units.

Memorization is a corporate part, though not the central purpose, of choral reading; and it is not parrot-like repetition but meaningful memorization. The speaker does not remember words as words, but rather as the natural "clothing for ideas." And the speaking of verses is constant practice in remembering a series of ideas in

¹ Rasmussen, Op. Cit., pp. 43-51.

² Marjorie Gullan and Percival Gurrey, Poetry Speaking for Children.

their proper sequence. Young¹ says: "They (the children) become used to holding in their minds sustained grammatical wholes, as they pitch their voices to give the cue to their hearers."

Choral reading influences the social-emotional development of the child, also, according to authorities. It requires interdependence and independence at the same time. A certain freedom, which children have not known before, accompanies cooperative speaking, and when children realize this, their sense of embarrassment is lost, and this enables them to give more free expression to their thoughts and feelings. It is interesting to note the free expression of voice and body when a timid member of a group expresses himself in company with ten or twelve others. They are his protection and so he "lets himself go." Something has happened to him; something has been released, which will perhaps never be bound again, and the child has a new realization of his powers. Moreover, his initiative has been developed by learning to do his part freely but without display.²

According to Pennell and Cusack's book on reading,³ choral reading is an aid in the creation and fostering of

¹
H. H. Young, "Why Choral Speaking," Progressive Education, October, 1935.

²
Rasmussen, Op. Cit., pp. 43-51.

³
Mary E. Pennell and Alice M. Cusack, How to Teach Reading.

a desire to read. They list six methods of creating and fostering an interest in reading:

1. Enlarging the children's experiences so that they will be interested in and able to understand the content of children's books.
2. Telling stories, Mother Goose rhymes, and poems to children.
3. Having the children dramatize some of the Mother Goose rhymes.
4. Having the children retell a few of the simpler stories.
5. Surrounding the children with pictures and books with or without simple sentences attached.
6. Having the children memorize a few short poems and nursery rhymes.

All of these methods are more or less related to the teaching of choral reading, if we can trust the opinion of authorities.

Choral reading, authorities agree, is a means of developing an appreciation of good literature. According to Downs,¹ such chorus work affords unusual opportunity for making the child aware of the beauties of poetry, its rhythm, speech melody, the variation in tone of the vowels, the melodic qualities of consonants, alliteration, assonance, and dynamics. Appreciation of these qualities is most effectually aroused in the child by self-activity, and expression, much as in the case of music. Group action dispels self-consciousness and develops greater ease and freedom of expression.

¹

S. W. Downs, "Speech Chorus Work in the Elementary Schools of Germany," Quarterly Journal of Speech, December, 1936.

These purported values are related to the six types of experience and training recommended by the National Committee on Reading in 1925¹ as essential to rapid progress in reading and to the characteristics of the child who learns to read with ease listed by Miss O'Donnell² in her summary of the results of recent investigations in the field of beginning reading, as well as those set up by some individual writers. In the light of these facts, the writer agrees with Dr. Bottomly³ when he says of choric speech: "As a method of teaching it has proved itself worthy of investigation" and attempts to determine whether or not these opinions regarding the relation of training in choral reading to the development of reading ability, hold true on the First Grade level.

¹
W. S. Gray, Summary of Investigations Relating to Reading.

²
Mabel O'Donnell, A Suggested Program for Reading Readiness Groups, Bulletin, Row Peterson and Company, 1937.

³
E. B. Meader, "Choral Speaking and Its Values," Quarterly Journal of Speech, April, 1936.

ACCOUNT OF THE INVESTIGATION

Purpose of the Investigation. The purpose of this investigation is to attempt to discover whether or not the teaching of choral reading has any effect on the rate of development of reading ability in the first grade; and, if it does, whether it is an aid or a detriment to the development of that ability. It aims also to attempt to determine, in the event it is proved beneficial, whether or not it is of sufficient value in this respect to deserve a place in the first grade curriculum on this merit alone. It makes an effort, moreover, from the test results, to ascertain whether its value increases or decreases as the pupils progress through the school year; thereby estimating whether it is of more or less value in the initial stages of reading than it is in the later stages, when the building of reading readiness is a less prominent factor.

Materials Used in Investigation. Thirty beginning first grade pupils, ranging in ages, at the opening of the school term, from five years and nine months to eight years and one month, divided into two groups of fifteen each, of as nearly equal chronological age, mental age, intelligence quotient, and reading readiness score as possible, were used in this investigation.

The Pintner-Cunningham Intelligence Scale and the Lee-Clark Reading Readiness Test were used as criteria in

this grouping. At the close of each of the four nine-week periods in the school term the word recognition test, the sentence reading test, and the paragraph reading test composing one of the forms, which were used consecutively, of the March, 1939, revision of the Gates Primary Reading Tests were administered to each of the thirty pupils. The same instructor taught both groups all subjects throughout the entire period of experimentation, disregarding the experimental grouping entirely except for the special period each day.

Method Used in Investigation. The instructor taught the experimental group for the first nine-week period twenty minutes each day when the control group was not present. This time was employed as a choral reading period and at no other time during the day was this subject introduced. The first five minutes of each period were spent in drills on speech difficulties and the remaining fifteen minutes in actual choral reading, including dramatization, solo, and unison, and two-part reading. At the end of each nine-week period the groups exchanged places, the experimental group becoming the control group and the control group becoming the experimental group for the next nine-week period. This process was continued throughout the nine months school term (four nine-week periods); so that each group was taught choral reading for one semester of the year.

At the close of each experimental period, the pupils of both groups were tested for all three types of reading ability and the scores and percentage of increase in ability in the two groups compared.

Results of Investigation. The test scores on the basis of which the pupils were grouped, their chronological ages, the attendance, and the scores on each of the three types of reading tests for each of the four experimental periods are given for each individual pupil in tabular form on the following pages.

PUPIL	C. A.	M. A.	I. Q.	R. R. SCORE
GROUP TWO				
A	7:3	7:2	98	41
B	6:3	7:2	114	30
C	6:3	7:1	113	41
D	5:11	6:9	114	34
E	6:11	6:7	95	26
F	5:10	6:6	111	33
G	6:3	6:3	100	31
H	7:7	6:2	81	20
I	7:0	6:1	86	31
J	6:7	5:10	88	8
K	7:1	5:8	80	24
L	6:9	5:7	82	7
M	7:2	5:5	75	20
N	6:1	4:10	79	21
O	5:10	4:5	75	8
AVERAGE	6:7	6:1	92.6	24.1
MEDIAN	6:7	6:2	88	26
Q.3	7:1	6:9	111	33
Q.1	6:1	5:7	80	20
HIGH	7:7	7:2	114	41
LOW	5:10	4:5	75	7

PERIOD ONE				PERIOD TWO			
ATT.	W. R.	S. R.	P. R.	ATT.	W. R.	S. R.	P. R.
43	7	8	4	38	15	26	12
45	3	3	1	44	20	22	11
45	4	4	2	45	19	20	10
45	5	4	2	45	15	14	8
45	3	4	1	36	10	18	6
45	4	7	4	45	22	26	10
44	2	4	2	45	9	18	5
45	3	2	0	45	12	16	9
35	5	4	3	42	8	18	10
45	3	2	0	34	11	13	7
45	3	4	2	43	18	17	7
41	2	2	2	29	4	10	3
42	3	1	0	23	5	8	3
37	1	2	1	37	11	6	5
44	1	0	0	41	3	2	0
41.7	3.2	3.4	1.6	39.4	12.1	15.6	7
45	3	4	2	42	11	17	7
45	4	4	2	45	18	20	10
42	2	2	0	36	8	10	5
45	7	8	4	45	22	26	12
35	1	0	0	23	3	2	0

PERIOD THREE				PERIOD FOUR			
ATT.	W. R.	S. R.	P. R.	ATT.	W. R.	S. R.	P. R.
41	19	27	15	43	26	34	19
40	20	23	13	40	32	27	18
45	35	26	18	45	37	35	21
42	17	29	18	43	24	34	21
42	11	15	13	45	17	23	14
43	31	37	21	45	37	41	24
39	14	20	10	37	35	27	19
40	21	24	15	44	35	35	21
44	10	18	10	41	17	29	16
38	16	27	15	42	22	33	17
41	21	24	12	45	32	28	18
25	5	18	7	38	9	21	12
26	5	8	6	44	11	17	11
37	10	13	10	45	20	22	14
45	5	11	8	44	9	15	10
39.2	16	21.7	12.6	42.7	24.2	28.0	17.0
41	16	24	13	44	24	28	18
43	21	27	15	45	35	34	21
38	10	15	8	41	17	22	14
45	35	37	21	45	37	41	24
25	5	8	6	37	9	15	10

On the word-recognition tests the median scores of the experimental group for each period of nine weeks are .3, 1.5, 1.1, and 1.1, respectively, of the median scores of the control group. On the sentence-reading tests the median scores of the experimental group are 1.2, 1.5, 1.1, and 1 times the median scores of the control group. And on the paragraph-reading tests the median scores of the experimental group are 1.5, 1.1, 1.3, and 1 times the scores of the control group. This is despite the fact that the experimental group, then the control group, had scored lower on the majority of these tests at the end of the preceding period.

The upper quartiles of the experimental group in word-recognition are .75, 1.6, 1.3, and 1.2 of the upper quartiles of the control group. In sentence-reading the upper quartiles of the experimental group are 1.6, 1.4, 1.2, and 1.1 of the upper quartiles of the control group. In paragraph-reading the upper quartiles of the experimental group are 2, 1.1, 1.4, and 1 times the upper quartiles of the control group. The lower quartiles of the experimental group in word-recognition are -.2, 2.6, .7, and 1.1 of the lower quartiles of the control group. In sentence-reading the lower quartiles of the experimental group are .5, 2.5, .6, and 1.2 of those of the control group. In paragraph-reading the lower quartiles of the experimental group are 2.0, 2.5, 1.4, and 1.2 of those of the control group.

The ranges of the experimental group are 5, 20, 37, and 28 on the word-recognition tests and 7, 27, 31, and 36 for the control group. In sentence-reading the ranges for the experimental group are 10, 25, 35, and 29; for the control group 9, 28, 30, and 33. In paragraph-reading the ranges for the experimental group are 9, 13, 16, and 15 and for the control group 5, 14, 16, and 17. For the most part the ranges of the control group are greater than those of the experimental group.

The graphs on the following page picture the rate of development of the reading ability of each group during the periods in which they were taught choral reading in contrast to the periods in which they were not taught choral reading. From these graphs it is apparent that the rate of increase of the experimental groups is consistently higher than the rate of increase in reading ability of the control groups. This increase of ability on the part of the experimental group is often twice or more the amount of increase on the part of the control group within a single experimental period. Furthermore, the medians for each group at each of the periods of testing exceed the norms set up by the test for that stage of the grade. There is very little difference in the reading ability of the two groups indicated at the end of the nine-month term.

The rates of increase in the experimental groups grow steadily larger as the term progresses with the exception of the last experimental period, when there is a decided drop in the rate of increase of ability in reading as indicated by the test scores. The attendance of the two groups is so near the same for each period that it would be a negligible factor in their accomplishment.

Conclusions. These results seem to indicate that the teaching of choral reading has a marked influence on the development of reading ability in the first grade. This influence is positive and markedly beneficial. Its effects seem to increase as the pupils progress through the grade with the exception of the last nine-week period, when there is a marked decline. Therefore, its influence is not of prime value in the development of reading readiness, or at least not exclusively so. It appears to be of almost equal value for the inferior, the average, and the superior pupils. Its effects are not so marked in the development of ability in word recognition as it is in the development of ability in sentence reading and paragraph reading, which seems to indicate that its value lies largely in the development of thought-getting or comprehension. On the basis of these test scores and their indications it might safely be concluded that the teaching of choral reading in the first grade is of sufficient value in the development of reading ability to justify amply its being given a place in the curriculum of that grade.

GRAPH OF READING TEST SCORES

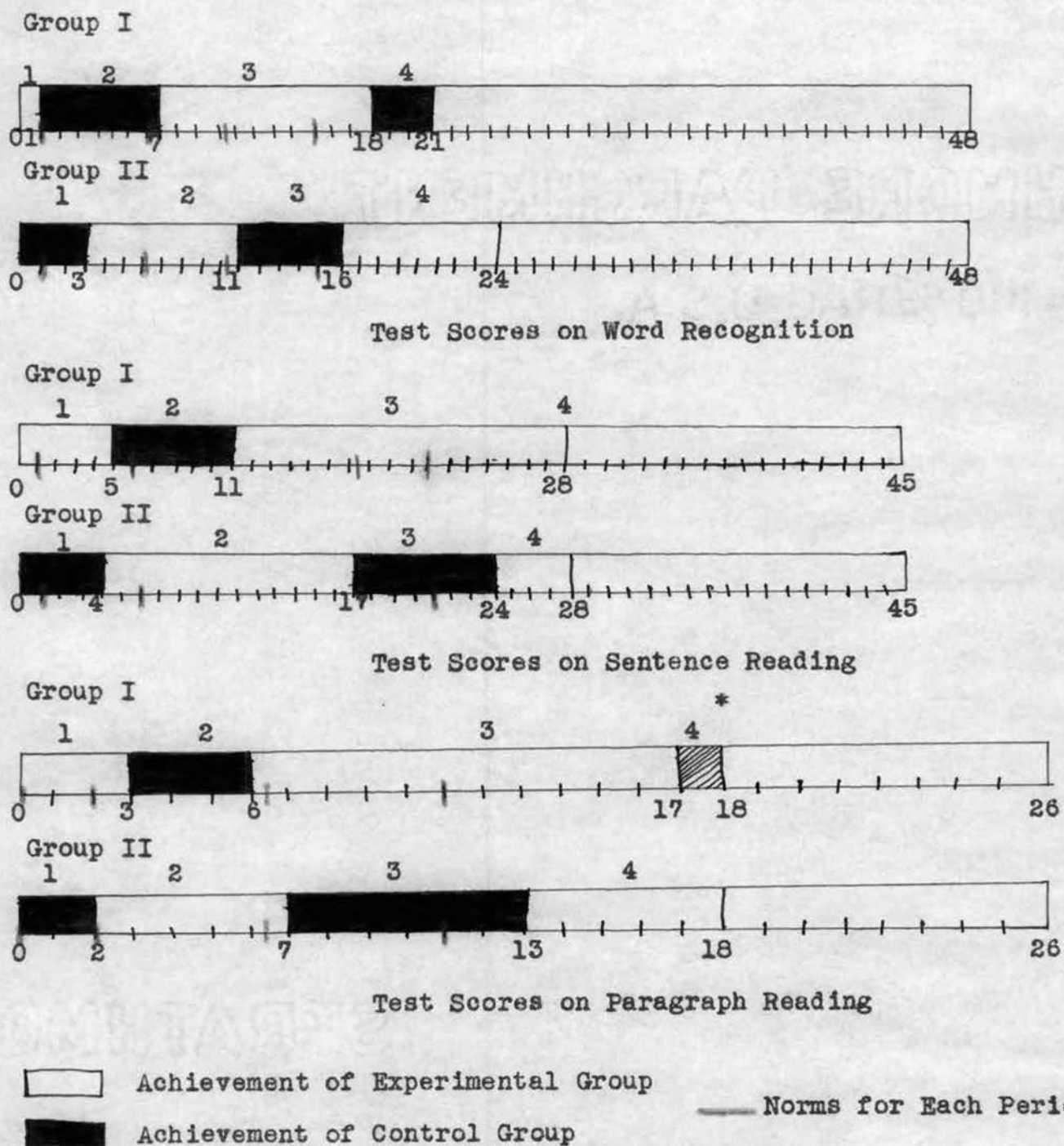


Figure 1. READING ACHIEVEMENT OF THE EXPERIMENTAL AND CONTROL GROUPS FOR THE FOUR NINE-WEEK PERIODS OF STUDY.

*Control group decreased in ability.

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Typist:

Florence Lackey