

**LANGUAGE  
TEACHING IN  
THE GRADES**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649424535

Language Teaching in the Grades by Alice Woodworth Cooley

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**ALICE WOODWORTH COOLEY**

**LANGUAGE  
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THE GRADES**



**Riverside Educational Monographs**

EDITED BY HENRY SUZZALLO  
PROFESSOR OF THE PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION  
TEACHERS COLLEGE, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

**LANGUAGE TEACHING  
IN THE GRADES**

BY

**ALICE WOODWORTH COOLEY**  
LATE ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF EDUCATION  
UNIVERSITY OF NORTH DAKOTA



**HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY**  
BOSTON, NEW YORK AND CHICAGO  
*The Riverside Press Cambridge*

NO. 1000  
ANNALS

LB 1576  
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EDUCATION DEPT.

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## EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

THE common schools are becoming interested in literary expression for the first time. On first reading, such a statement seems absurdly untrue to the history of elementary instruction. Yet an analysis of our pedagogical development confirms the claim. It is true that the earliest activities of our older schools were exclusively associated with language and literature; and that for centuries the materials of education remained dominantly linguistic. Nevertheless the traditional school was not interested in literary expression, or anything closely approximating it. The study of language was formal rather than literary; it was devised to teach children to understand in an abstract way the formalities of spelling, grammar, and rhetoric, rather than to lead them into a sincere expression of their own lives through the medium of the art-forms of speech and written language.

Two and a half centuries of American schools did not rectify the narrowness and the false emphasis of our traditions in language teaching. To be sure there was, here and there, some tinkering with the course of study and methods of teach-

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ing; but it was not a reform of the spirit of the schoolmaster, only a slight modification in his manners. It took a quarter-century of pedagogical rebellion to break the monopoly of formal-mindedness in language instruction. Now a few teachers at least have a sane theory of the relation of language and literature to life in school or out. Even among the rank and file it is no longer fashionable to speak of the language studies as formal subjects. They are vital rather than formal, because they are based on the child's own experiences and terminate in the expression and solution of his own problems. Reading, penmanship, spelling, grammar, and rhetoric are not regarded as disciplines pursuing independent ends. Their kinship is recognized through their common contribution to oral and written expression and to literature. Reading and literature have become one study, the function of which is to appreciate life beyond immediate sense contact. And spelling, grammar, and rhetoric have been reduced to the position of occasional aids to writing. Surely these changes are symptomatic of an altered conception of schoolteaching.

It is not at all strange that the oldest of the school subjects, language study, should be the last to catch the spirit of modern teaching. It has had more centuries of fixation to undo than manual training, nature study, and the graphic arts.

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Its sins were old enough to be antiques, and therefore likely to command that traditional reverence which prevents their correction through rational standards of criticism. But the time has come when the lateral influence of the newer school subjects, which emphasizes self-expression in terms of use and beauty, is great enough to overcome the downward pressure of the tradition of formalism. It begins to be apparent to us that an understanding of language is given to children for the purpose of aiding expression, just as their knowledge of woods, tools, plants, and soils is intended as a guide to useful action in industry and agriculture. The expressive function of language teaching is its dominant one. To the extent that literature widens the horizons of human experience and gives it significant interpretation, it modifies the substance of the child's thought and feeling; to the extent that it suggests an effective and congenial manner of voicing the needs of life, it will give command over the forms of effective and winsome expression. Thus language study becomes, what it normally is with people out of school, a virile, broadening, and useful pursuit.

The difficulty with most teachers is that they cannot see how their newer ideals of language teaching are to be worked out in detailed methods. They are impatient enough with the scholastic