

Why Pictures in Reading Instruction Are Harmful

By Samuel L. Blumenfeld

There is much puzzlement these days over why so many children can't seem to become proficient in reading. A letter in the New York Times from one Lee W. Anderson on Oct. 8, 2007 summed up the general public frustration. He wrote: "The goal of universal math and reading proficiency by 2014 may be harder to reach than the moon, which simply means that we have to get more serious about providing schools, teachers and students with the tools they need."

Curiously enough, the needed tools were available well before the Progressives took control of public education in the 1930s. These educational reformers decided to change the way reading is taught in the schools. They got rid of the traditional phonetic method and adopted a new picture method known as look-say. The switch from sound to image meant that children would be taught to read by looking at each printed word as a little picture, sometimes alongside of an actual picture, instead of a group of letters standing for speech sounds. The result has been massive reading failure among American children. Indeed, by 1955 the situation was so bad that Rudolf Flesch was compelled to write his famous best-seller, *Why Johnny Can't Read*.

In that book, Flesch wrote: "the teaching of reading--all over the United States, in all the schools, in all the textbooks--is totally wrong and flies in the face of all logic and common sense." He then explained how imposing an image methodology on a phonetic writing system would lead to reading failure, generally known today as dyslexia or functional illiteracy.

Back in 1973, I wrote *The New Illiterates*, in which I researched the origin of the look-say method and discovered that it had been invented in 1837 by the Rev. Thomas H. Gallaudet, teacher of the deaf and dumb in Hartford, Connecticut. He juxtaposed printed words with their pictorial equivalents which the deaf were able to memorize to some extent. He thought that this method could be adapted for use by normal children. And so his method was adopted by Boston's primary schools, and it produced a literacy disaster. It proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that a phonetic writing system must be taught phonetically if the learner is to become a fluent, proficient reader.

Today, primary reading instruction still relies heavily on pictures as the means of training children to look at printed words. Children are still required to memorize a "sight vocabulary." And that is why we still have large numbers of children unable to achieve proficiency in reading. They are given more phonetic information than in previous years, but they are not sufficiently drilled in the letter-sound combinations so that they can acquire the needed phonetic reflex--the automatic ability to see the phonetic structure of the written word so that they can sound it out. In other words, the pictures produce a holistic or image reflex, which becomes an obstruction to seeing the word in its phonetic structure.

That is why pictures in reading instruction are harmful. Indeed, in 1983, I produced *Alpha-Phonics*, a reading program without pictures, which has been used by thousands of homeschoolers very successfully. The learners acquire the needed phonetic reflex, and thus become proficient, fluent readers. I proved that pictures are not necessary in learning to read.

There is another important reason why reading should be taught without pictures. Every child learns to speak his or her native language without pictures. The left side of the brain--the verbal side--contains the language learning faculty. When children learn to read without pictures, the left side of the brain expands its language learning power. However, picture reading is a faculty of the right side of the brain which deals with images and space. You cannot train the right brain to do the left brain's job. In fact, you create internal cognitive conflict by imposing an image methodology on a phonetic system. Thus, picture reading retards the growth of the language faculty.

The importance of the spoken word over the image cannot be exaggerated. For example, if you watch television and click on mute, you cannot understand what is going on. People are talking but you can't hear them. On the other hand, if you listen to a radio talk-show without any images, you are easily engaged in what is being said. And that is why talk-radio has become so successful. The message is conveyed in spoken language, not image.

Spoken language appeals to the innate logic of the human mind. The image appeals to the emotion. That is why the average listener learns more from talk-radio than from watching the TV news where the appeal of the image is to the emotions and language is used to enhance the emotional impact of the image. Of course, the spoken language can be used to influence the emotions and also to convey falsehoods. But a good reader will be better equipped to discern truth from falsehood than a non-reader dependent mostly on the image.

Black children, in particular, need to be taught to read without pictures. Picture reading has largely destroyed high literacy among blacks. That is why they have such high rates of academic failure and are inclined to drop out. We don't know why sight reading is so harmful to black children, all we know is that it is. Unless we change the way reading is taught in our schools, the cognitive skills of black children will continue to be greatly damaged, with tragic consequences.

For more information about Blumenfeld's *Alpha-Phonics* reading program, just email Sam at sblu123@verizon.com. Sam's website is: www.samblumenfeld.net

Note from Internet Publisher: Donald L. Potter

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Our friend, Sam Blumenfeld, sent me this article on February 4, 2008, with the following comment, "I thought you might want to add this article to your educational website." I am delighted to add another eye-opening article from Sam's pen. I will not add much here except to say that I have personally used Sam's *Blumenfeld's Alpha-Phonics Reading Program* in beginning reading classes, remedial classes, and bilingual classes for Spanish speaking children. There are no pictures whatsoever in Sam's method, yet my students learned to read all 3,500 words and 600 sentences. An email to Sam can get you started with a copy of his proven method.

I should like to add that I have taken the opportunity to teach Rudolf Flesch's little phonics program in his 1955 *Why Johnny Can't Read and what you can do about it*. The last half of the title is much more than a promise; and I have reams of test scores to prove its amazing effectiveness. Blumenfeld and Flesch did far more than just complain about defective teaching methods, they took up arms against the darkness and gave us reading systems that have proven themselves over and over with every type of student.

For some reason, teachers tend to be impressed with beautiful artistic productions in books, especially beginning readers. In fact there seems to be a direct relationship between the number and centrality of the pictures and the perceived desirability of the method. I can not count the times I have seen children carrying their little predictable (picture rich) story books down the hall, smiling under the delusion that they can actually read. This probably explains why they remain so popular in beginning reading methods in spite of their notorious failure. Since we can not expect any commercial publishers to produce the needed picture free beginning reading method, it will remain for independent authors like Mr. Blumenfeld to provide the desideratum.

Someday I should like to write a historic report, "Bill Gates Meets Samuel Blumenfeld: The story of how Mr. Blumenfeld showed Bill Gates the real cause of massive illiteracy in America and demonstrated a simple prevention - so inexpensive - that a infinitesimal small percentage of Mr. Gates considerable resources were able to easily apply it to every first grader in America. The target is first-grade; the method is *Alpha-Phonics*. If Gates comes up with the money, I bet Sam can come up with the books.

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