

The Whole-Word and Word-Guessing Fallacy

Helen R. Lowe

ARTHUR YOUNG, a painter and carpenter, is now twenty-eight years old. He came to me first when he was twenty-four, bringing with him a New York State high-school diploma which certified in impressive Old English type that Arthur Andrew Young had “satisfactorily completed the curriculum requirements prescribed by the Board of Education for the High School and is entitled to this Diploma.” He also brought his final report card, certifying that he had received the highest mark — H — for Honor—in English throughout his senior year.

Arthur could not read, even at a primer level. He could not drive a car, because he could not pass the test for a driver’s license; he could not read the street signs or traffic directions. He was unable to order from the menu in a restaurant. He could not read letters from his family and he could not write to them. He could not read the mixing directions on a can of paint or the label on a shipment of sheet rock. He had been cheated and swindled in various ways as a consequence of his inability to read. Arthur told me somberly, “I don’t exactly blame the school for not teaching me to read. But they had no right to give me a diploma that said I had learned. I really thought I had a high-school education —till I tried to get a job.”

We went to work. For more than two years he worked with me two or three times a week. It was a slow business, because he needed to learn to spell and write too. It was more than a year before we read a fifth-grade story, a real book, about John Paul Jones. Finally, he began to buy *Life* and *Coronet* magazines and struggle through articles, which attracted his interest. We read the newspaper, he studied to pass the examination for his driver’s license, and he discovered that he loved poetry. He began to read letters from his family to me. Final he read his first adult short story, a not very remarkable piece called “Santa Claus and the Tenth Avenue Kid” which I had selected very specially for him because it was just beyond the range of his experience and understanding, full of implications and allusions strange to him. When we finished it, he said, “I want to read that again. I want to see what it feels like to get all those things as I go along.” Arthur had learned to read.

To realize what Arthur is a symbol of, one has only to look at his diminished life, and then at the misrepresentative report card and diploma. That Arthur was not taught to read is a failure on the part of his school and an indictment of many of the accepted purposes, standards, and methods of our system of public education.

A group of United States school superintendents who recently visited Russia reported to a convention of school administrators here that Soviet schools cling to teaching methods our schools discarded years ago. They explained that under the antiquated Soviet system students learn the alphabet and phonics before being taught to read, instead of being taught to read by the word-recognition method, with the alphabet not taught until later.

We have here an unstated assumption that discarding the alphabetic approach has resulted in increased literacy in the United States, while the Russians, who have clung to the alphabet, have fallen behind us in education.

I propose to show how hundreds of children taught by the word-recognition method have misread to me; to relate these misreadings to the principles of learning which produced them; and to dissect from the controlling mass of theory and practice the fundamental fallacy of defining and treating the printed word as a symbol of meaning instead of as a symbol of sound.

The essential point to hold in mind when considering this evidence—and this requires a firm hold—is that it is evidence. It is not a prediction or guess about the consequences of look-and-say. It is objective records of performance that show how hundreds of students have read and do read today. These bright boys and girls have been taught and they have learned, and when they read like this, they are doing precisely what they have been taught to do and precisely what common sense would expect them to do. That this is not reading, in any real sense of the word, would seem indisputable, but it is disputed.

Reading is no longer presented to the beginning reader as a matter of learning how to get from the printed page as exactly as possible the ideas committed to the text by the writer. It has become a process in which the reader projects his imagination, his preferences, his conjectures, his limitations, his inexperience, and his ignorance, using the words he chances to recognize—or to mistake—as points of departure for his improvisations and substitutions. This travesty of the achievement that gave man access to the wisdom of the past, that enabled him to enlarge and extend his own experience to levels he could never reach alone in an uncommunicating world—this is not reading.

Man achieved speech long before he invented writing. As he began to try to record and to communicate, he developed two main systems of writing. One was picture writing. This sometimes became ideographic; that is, it developed to become a form of writing in symbols, which had lost their explicit pictorial character. These symbols conveyed ideas but not sounds. The other kind of writing, which began to evolve was sound or phonetic writing. The invention of an alphabet, from which there is evidence that all alphabets derived, took place about three thousand years ago. An alphabet is a set of characters each representing a simple or unit sound, with no meaning in itself. From that time on, we have record of the growth of the alphabetic languages and the impetus given to civilization and to the mind of man by this infinitely precise and flexible means of recording language.

No one knowing the history of language or the definition of an ideogram could mistake English for an ideographic language. Ideograms convey ideas but not sounds. We use many ideographic symbols—the arrow, the skull and crossbones, plus and minus signs, 3 or 5 or 9, the dollar sign, the red cross, all clearly conveying meaning and understood by persons who do not even understand each other's spoken language. These are not words, any more than comprehensible gestures are words. Nor are the printed words of the English or any other modern alphabetical language ideograms; that is, symbols of meaning unrelated to sound. The very words *literate*, *literacy*, *literature* bears testimony to the relation of the letter—*litera*—to reading and writing.

Civilization took a great leap forward when the alphabet was invented. Look-and-say was a reversion to a primitive stage beyond which English and the other modern alphabetic languages advanced hundreds of years ago. It is difficult for an open mind to believe that those who devised and defended this primitive parody of the invention by which man achieved the ultimate flexibility and effectiveness in communication were entirely innocent in their folly.

I have made a careful study and classification of over a hundred thousand accurately recorded misreadings, which show more than twenty-five distinguishable types of errors characterizing the reading of hundreds of bright normal students of all ages. To simplify this material for presentation these misreadings have been grouped under four main types: (1) misreadings deriving directly from the fundamental fallacy of regarding the printed word as a symbol not of sound but of meaning; (2) those clearly but more remotely related to this concept; (3) those resulting logically from the elaborate teaching techniques developed to overcome or to conceal

the shortcomings of the look-and-say method; and (4) finally, most extravagant of all, the random readings, without common denominator or common sense, evidence of something graver than a lack of reading skill.

The almost standardized errors presented here show clearly the nature and something of the extent of the damage done to the learning mind by the imposition upon an alphabetic language of a theory of ideographic communication.

The first group of recorded errors consists of misreadings which proceed directly from the concept of a word as a visual symbol of an idea, to be recognized by its configuration or total appearance, without awareness of its parts, their sequence, or their function. This includes several easily differentiated types of errors, all clearly the product of whole-word reading, which does not treat letters as symbols of sound. Here are characteristic examples of the simplest type of configuration misreading, where one word is read as another because the two words look alike.

squirrel	<i>read as</i>	special
mystery		majesty
equatorial		equilateral
bouquet		banquet
cottage		college
peninsula		penicillin

Here nothing but Look has determined the Say. Such uncomplicated whole-word readings as *futility* for *futurity*, or *feet* for *feel*, must be clearly understood to be not mispronunciations, but ideographic readings, which did not come off. The reader often gets the idea, which he has been taught; what he does not get is the word. When this happens the reader has made an association between a visual form and *what it does not mean*.

Now a printed word is exact, in one important sense. It ties the reader to the writer's choice of a certain word. Words stabilize communication, which even the educationists do not explicitly deny to be the purpose of speech and writing. The unrealistic assumption that a word is a visual image conveying an idea belittles both ideas and words. Indeed, Dr. Albert J. Harris tells us that if a word occurs rarely or is not a key word, it does not matter very much whether the reader develops a really accurate comprehension of it or not! To the thoughtful mind, there is more than irony in the fact that this opinion is voiced in a chapter of a book entitled *How to Increase Reading Ability*.

A plain illustration of the effect of the ideographic fallacy is the very frequent reading-by-association, where the printed word communicates an idea, expressed in words of the reader's choice arising spontaneously in his mind in response to his perception of the visual pattern.

For example:

diphtheria	<i>read as</i>	Seppula*
snow		cold
fire		stove
milk		bottle
regiment		army
turkey		Thanksgiving
Christmas		Santa Claus

*The driver of a dog-sled which carried diphtheria serum to Nome.

In this kind of reading a word like *field* triggers a visual image and the reader, sometimes at a high-school level, says *meadow*, or *pasture*, *lawn*, or even *park*. Or when he sees the word *milk* he visualizes it as he most often sees it, and without hesitation says *bottle*. If he has grown up on an unmodernized farm, he may even say *bucket*, or *pail*, and while I have never had this happen, it would not be at all surprising if he said *cow*. Rhetorically speaking, this is metonymy, the use of the name of one thing for another to which it has some logical relation, the sign for the thing signified, the container for the thing contained. It is not reading. A frequent variant of this ideographic phenomenon is reading by synonym. Thus we have:

stillness	<i>read as</i>	silence
lazybones		sleepyhead
puppy		little dog
fiddle		violin
afraid		frightened

A more complex and at first sight inexplicable variant is the reading by opposites, where we find:

asleep	<i>read as</i>	awake
down		up
mongrel		pedigreed
attendance		absence
north		south

This occurs when the idea established by former contacts with a word is retained in a diffuse, unfocused fashion, and only a hint of the general implication swims into the would-be reader's consciousness. The reader hazards *light* for *dark*, *winter* for *summer*, *started* for *stopped*, or *before* for *after*, with deluded consistency. A grotesque variation of this occurs repeatedly when the idea so vaguely recalled is that of some part of the human body. *Arm* is read as *leg*, *ankles* as *knees*, *hand* as *head*, *knee* as *neck*, *eyebrows* as *elbows*, completely regardless of the utter impossibility of the contortions involved.

Words thus read are often indelibly remembered to mean their exact opposites, and crop up in writing even at a college level. The dislocation of sound and sense which makes it possible for an intelligent eighteen-year-old to write *dark* when he thinks *light* cannot be dismissed by blandly citing the circulation statistics of the American Library Association.

Still another current phenomenon closely related to the fundamental fallacy of seeking meaning without regard for the particular word is the habitual paraphrase of the clever, inventive reader. This kind of reading sometimes distorts, sometimes reverses the meaning, and, occasionally, is astonishingly competent—as a paraphrase. Any sort of paraphrase is, at first thought, astonishing, since it must necessarily be based on at least partial comprehension of the passage, *which is then discarded for the reader's version!*

Actually there is little cause for astonishment. This is the transfer of the principle of ideographic reading from the word to the phrase and the sentence. Typical examples of this follow where the idea has sometimes been caught, sometimes distorted, diluted, or missed completely. We have:

What was the cost of the house? Stop! Stop, Spot! into a sizzling frying pan	<i>reads as</i>	What did he pay for it? Complete riot! into a skillet
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I'll get you another ticket (for a ride) within hauling distance (cougars prey upon) anything that can't defend itself	<i>read as</i>	I'll take you again anywhere anything they can get
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Burdened to bewilderment by the multiplicity of new and often similar visual patterns, memory produces a flood of random errors where proper names are involved. Proper names are merely designating and identifying sounds. *Dick* designates, and identifies, and may summon a boy, but as a word it conveys no meaning. Proper names suffer so significantly and so spectacularly from whole-word reading that the bizarre items, which follow are merely a small selection from crowded files.

Massachusetts	<i>read as</i>	Switzerland
Tom		Betty
Washington		Grant
China		Corinth
Africa		America
Mary		Bert
Bethlehem		Baltimore
Asia		Amsterdam

Here is something quite different from the reading from configuration, or from association, synonym, or opposites. This is whole-word reading where the double play — Look to Say to Sense — fails to come off, because memory cannot trigger meaning when there is none.

One of the earliest and most influential of the answers to the inability of look-and-say to produce proficient readers was the restricted vocabulary. Dr. Arthur I. Gates, Professor of Education at Teachers College, Columbia University, urged that all reading texts for the first three grades be based largely on a vocabulary of 1811 selected words, and that words used in other subjects and in announcements be confined—Dr. Gates's word — as far as possible to the same vocabulary, he also recommended that to develop *language ability* the same words should be used in writing and spelling as well as in reading. It is difficult to see how the concept of reading could be further degraded, or how skill in reading could be made to seem less worth acquiring. Only the very gullible could believe that the limitation of the child's vocabulary could enlarge and stimulate his reading ability.

I have assembled some curious evidence as to how this restricted vocabulary really works and what affect it has upon reading. Careful recording of thousands of reading errors, made by students at all levels and from many different localities, has revealed an odd fact. Certain words were misread with conspicuous frequency by many students, and they were usually misread in exactly the same way. As these words established themselves as practically standardized errors,

they were put on a list, which, surprisingly, ceased suddenly to grow longer after it had come to contain 98 words and became known to my students as *The Ninety-eight*. It was at once evident that these particular mistakes were extremely difficult to eradicate, that they persisted and recurred even at high school and college level. Reference to Dr. Gates's vocabulary list revealed the extraordinary fact that 73 of these 98 words were among those assigned to be taught in Grade One. That is to say, approximately 75 per cent of these stubborn, ingrained errors, misread almost as standard practice by disabled readers, were among the first words taught, as wholes, with innumerable repetitions, in accordance with the accepted method of teaching beginning reading. Further, 18 more were among those assigned to be taught in the second grade, by that rote recognition which arbitrarily relates a sterile visual image to a taught meaning—or, as with *The Ninety-eight*—fails wholesale to do so. Thus we have, striking evidence that 91 of the 98 words the record shows to have been consistently misread at all levels, including the high school, are among those which were first and most often presented to the beginning reader for recognition by the whole-word method. Some of these words are *with, when, then, they, how, we, did, of, hand, head, for, said, the, and, from!*

This device of decreasing the child's command of language by restricting his contacts with it had disastrous side effects. Not only was the content of elementary reading texts reduced to an inanity unparalleled in print, but any resort at home to well and normally written children's books was stringently disapproved by the school.

Dr. Gates at one point discusses the extent to which a child may be *entrusted* with miscellaneous children's material at school or at home!³ The meeting with a new word is now considered a peril to be prevented. One reading expert actually debates whether certain words are "safe" to introduce in the fourth grade.⁴ The age of discovery must seem very remote to today's children.

Among the practical solutions devised to solve the problem of teaching children to read by the look-and-say method was the idea of deducing the meaning of words from contextual clues. That the reader has no right to *decide* but must *discover* the meanings of words seemed not to occur to the whole-worders. Certainly, it did not deter them from seizing upon this ingenious way to get an idea of sorts from the printed page—and not the idea as expressed by the writer, but one developed by the reader. Children were encouraged to think-what-would-make-sense, and Scott Foresman, the principal publisher confused little girl remarked indignantly, and, I think, pertinently, "They ask you what you think, but they don't want to know. They want you to guess what they think."

It should be pointed out that substantial parts of many of the standardized reading tests are presented in this predicting-the-probable-outcome form, and obviously the best predictors are rated the best readers — provided they are canny enough to stick to the preformulated predictions and do not free-think too imaginatively. Tests of this sort do not tell simply how well a child can read but illustrate his ability to guess within limits. Furthermore, tests favored by many schools are skillfully constructed not to discover whether the student can read but to demonstrate that he can.* Scrutinize carefully the test material supplied with and keyed to the reading texts from which your child is being taught. For an authentic test, give your child some good book by Stevenson or Kipling — or literary work proper for his age — and listen with pencil in hand while he reads to you.

After the whole-word-guessing from context, undoubtedly the most damaging bit in the look-and-say approach has been the attempt to wrench pictures out of their use full role of contributing vividness and interest to the printed text, and to enlist them to supply specific words

that the reader cannot read. Pictures, not words, tell the story in modern beginning reading texts, and it is to the pictures that the child's attention is directed, and there it is rewarded.

How can the educationists believe that giving the beginning reader dull and uninformative printed words will spark in him a passionate desire to read and read and read? How can he learn to read words when he is taught to look at and think about pictures? In this connection must be noted the spelling books which present page after page of small pictures with the direction: "Spell these words to yourself." This is confusion confounded, a fallacy, which has lost its way, its identity, its destination. One bright little seven-year-old, dizzy from trying to spell pictures and read ideas, looked at a lively red silhouette of a rat and asked, "I can read that word animal, too, can't I, as well as mouse?" Other theories evolved to explain why a child had difficulty in learning to read. One, more directly damaging than most, was the assumption that a substantial percentage—estimated variously from 10 per cent to 35 per cent—of the children entering school suffered from a congenital inability to deal satisfactorily with words, and, specifically, from a congenital inability to learn to read.

Conservative and careful statements of men like Orton and Gallagher, who believed they had evidence that the primary cause of what they called specific reading disability is to be found in some variation of the central mechanism from the norm, were seized upon by educational psychologists and perverted and diluted to mean that if a child reads *was* for *saw* or *bolt* as *blot* he is the victim of an obscure but grave neurological anomaly. Elementary schoolteachers of inadequate education diagnosed with spurious authority but enormous effect a condition which, if it exists to the extent Dr. Gallagher, for example, believes, demands for its recognition a training, skill and experience far beyond the level of the classroom teacher.

Well before 1948 I had become convinced that so called specific reading disability, as indicated conspicuously by reversals and bizarre misreadings, was largely made and not born. Moreover, for many students referred by school psychologists, psychiatrists, and teachers as severe cases of mixed cerebral dominance, a simpler explanation was easily found, which led to a simple remedy. A failure to develop that was due to hereditary causes would not yield to the simple procedures, which I find effective with students from kindergarten to college level. They are told, "Oh, you read backwards? Well, don't. It doesn't work. I'll show you how to read forward." This is not psychotherapy, nor yet remedial reading. It is, perhaps, nothing more remarkable than horse sense.

The eager and indiscriminate extension of the blight of mixed cerebral dominance to any child who, because his introduction to reading consisted of looking at and enumerating in any order he pleased the objects in a picture, looked at words in the same way and read *on* as *no* and *was* as *saw*, is a striking instance of the increasingly urgent effort to find some kind, any kind of explanation for the nonreading children crowding the remedial classes.

Remedial reading is a misnomer for these frustrated groups, since there is little remedy and less reading involved. What is usually offered is little more than the repetition of the practices and procedures, which were responsible for the failure, and the boredom and the inescapable stigma of inferiority do not enhance the charm of learning to read.

*California, beset by angry parents and mounting criticism of her ultra-progressive schools, has devised a reading test on which the children of the state score a *year* or *more* better than they do on the standard national tests.

From the educationist effort to establish at any cost that the whole-word method is working and to divert attention from its disastrous failure—rather than improve the teaching of reading—there emerges another damaging program. This is the emphasis upon speed, which has had the most powerful impact upon public opinion of any of the so-called remedial procedures. The stigmata of speeded reading are unmistakable. Equally clear is the correlation between the injunctions to the reader and the resulting misreadings. One best-selling work⁷ explaining how to read better and faster brightly enjoins us to guess all we like. It goes on to explain that the efficient reader does not bother to look at every word or every part of a word, and refers cozily to that excellent habit of word and phrase surmise. The writer further points out that when the reader glimpses the first three or four letters of a word, without pausing to examine the remaining letters, he can surmise. Indeed, he can. Let's watch him at it.

paralyzed	was surmised	paralleled
detachment		detective
persuaded		perspired
twenty		twelve
company		comfortable
furnace		furniture
substance		submarine
traveling companion		train coming
reconsider		recognize
abstract		absent

Then we are told that it is most necessary to look only at the beginnings and ends of words. This produced, among thousands of others: *ambiguous* for *ambitious*, *irresponsible* for *irresistible*, *servants* for *sergeants*, *similarity* for *simplicity*, *acquainted* for *acquitted*, and *under panties* for *utter panic*!

Another precept of the reading-speeders is that an efficient reader learns to leave out all the little unimportant words, judiciously skipping unimportant prepositions, articles, pronouns, conjunctions, and so on. One small boy's question in regard to that injunction is very pertinent. "How," he asked anxiously, "do I know which are the unimportant ones if I skip them?" Speed phenomena produced by students of a variety of ages, from about the third grade to a college level, show strikingly how this judicious-skipping-of-the-unimportant works.

They reflect a radio wave as a mirror in your home can reflect *the light from a flashlight*. Read—"They reflect the light from a flashlight"

from a length of bamboo and an umbrella handle.
Read—"from a bamboo umbrella."

Find two consecutive numbers *such that the smaller increased by 3 times the larger equals 39*.
Read repeatedly and insistently—"such that the smaller increased by 3 equals 39."

This kind of reading, if it must be called that, has no concern with the skillful and sensitive use of words, the sparkling wit, the delicate, sly implication, the illuminating simile, the vivid description, and certainly it has no time to admire close reasoning, vigorous sentence and paragraph structure, or the noble yet subtle beauties of our matchless English language. No unhurried savoring of a fine phrase, an animating idea, something never encompassed by the mind before —not at so many words a minute or else. Speed for a beginning reader is as inappropriate and about as damaging as a fire hose for watering seedlings.

There is cogent objective evidence that in only a small percentage of academic failures at any level is there involved any real inability to learn. Two principles of importance can be established from the intensive study of retrieved casualties of the whole-word and word-guessing fallacy. The first is that as a preliminary to any possibility of uninhibited learning there must be established a logical and realistic concept of reading, not simply as a prerequisite to reading in the ordinary sense of the word, but as essential to the whole learning process. The student must recognize that ideas are expressed in and are to be recovered from the words on the printed page. The reader discovers; he may not invent. The second, closely related to the first and carrying profound neurological implications, is that a subjective concept of reading, in which the reader's experience, his conjectures, his expectation and his preferences take precedence over the printed text, not only produces the disabled reader with whom we are so unhappily familiar, but carries over disastrously into other areas, notably those of mathematics and foreign languages, and, further, induces emotional tensions, conflicts, and a disastrous conviction of inferiority. This damage is not merely a limitation of learning in certain specific academic areas, although it is indeed that. It is an alienation of the learning powers.

Students of excellent abilities are being thrust into the discard of second and third tracks largely on the basis of mediocre marks in tests they could not read accurately. These misshapen and misguided young minds, bewildered, thwarted, disturbed, and inarticulate, are misunderstood by the very nature of their handicap, which cuts them off from communicating with us.

There is still another kind of damage, however, usually complete and irreversible, where not merely the right to learn but the right to live has been abridged. Students who read “the travel worn paper bag” as twelve onions, and “masses of reddish-gold clouds” as molasses and radishes will almost certainly get odd and unfounded ideas about the functioning of the U.N., the properties of liquid helium, and the provisions of their life insurance policies. Students who never learn to read at all — and the record of illiterates discovered among young men drafted during World War II underlines how many of them there are — these discarded young men and women are struggling to make a living, to pursue happiness, with nearly all doors closed to them. For many these doors are closed by the fallacy, the folly, and the fraud, which are the subject of this chapter. Few of these doors ever open again. Arthur Young's did, only because of his passionate desire, his determination, his patience and pertinacity, and his uncorroded courage.

This essay was published in Dr. Charles Walcutt's book of essays, *Tomorrow's Illiterates*, published by the Council for Basic Education in 1961.

Note from Internet Publisher: Donald L. Potter

December 17, 2011

I originally scanned this article from the original back on 8/11/03 and corrected the rough OCR to the original. On January 25, 2004, I published the article on my website, www.donpotter.net. I made further corrections on 4/20/05.

A number of years have passed since I originally published Helen Lowe's article. A few years back her granddaughter contacted me to tell me she appreciated that I had published her grandmother's materials. She said that she was the formal heir to her grandmother's materials and that it was fine for me to republish the articles on my website. Here is a note from her website concerning her grandmother:

My grandmother made a career of teaching students who were victims of the word recognition/whole-word method of teaching reading. My grandmother was a determined and very well educated woman from Massachusetts, who had done social and missionary work in Boston, New York, and Appalachia between 1915 and 1920. She found that our schools' methods of teaching reading leave many normally intelligent students unable to read - and that kids who can't read become juvenile delinquents. She was successful, and highly regarded, by all but the officials of the Glens Falls school system who she often tangled with over their decisions to channel various children out of an education. She left a legacy of children and grandchildren who have often continued her efforts by teaching basic literacy to adults.

My grandmother published several articles on her work and on the issue of how to teach reading. Don Potter obtained most of them in pdf format and put them on his web site, as below. (Of course, all of my grandmother's descendants have hard copies of the articles.)

The essay that follows by Howard Whitmore is included because it mentions Helen Lowe's work. It also has the distinction of being, as far as I can determine, the first reference to phonics-first. He wrote a year before Rudolf Flesch's best-selling *Why Johnny Can't Read and what you can do about it*.

Why Don't They Teach My Child to Read?

by Howard Whitman
Colliers November 26, 1954

Many of today's youngsters, taught reading by modern methods, can't handle the written word. The problem disturbs parents and teachers – and they've decided to do something about it.

The man next to me in the airport bus entering Pasco, Washington, said, "My six-year-old reads words at school and can't read the same words when I point them out at home in the newspaper. In school today the children aren't taught to read – they're taught to memorize."

A man in the seat ahead chimed in. "Everything is pictures. My youngster is in the sixth grade. He'll still come across a word like *pasture* and he remembers a picture in his early reader and calls it *meadow*."

Neither passenger knew I was making a national study of modern education; they volunteered their remarks, sharing something they were concerned – and troubled – about. Like them, thousands of other American parents with first-grade children who are not catching on to reading as taught by the modernists, and those with upper-grade children handicapped by lack of a solid reading foundation, are concerned and troubled.

But most of all they are puzzled. Why is reading taught this way? A thousand times one hears the question, "Why don't they teach my child to read?" How can schools tolerate a method which turns out many children of eight, nine and older who stare helplessly at a word (not on their memory list) and cannot make a stab at reading it? What has happened to the method of teaching reading sound-by-sound, syllable-by-syllable, so that a child can at least make a reasonable attempt at reading any word?

Two basic teaching methods are in conflict here. One is the phonetic approach (known as phonics), the old-fashioned way in the view of modern educators. They are likely to call it the "split and spatter" or "grunt and groan" methods, satirizing the way youngsters try to sound out letters and syllables.

The other method, which the modernists have put into vogue, is the word-memory plan – also known as "sight reading", "total word configuration" or "word recognition". It has the more friendly nickname of "look and say", since the youngster is supposed simply to look at a word and say it right out. He memorizes the "shape" of the word, the configuration, and identifies it with pictures in his workbook. Often he is taught to recognize phrases or whole sentences in his picture book, or on flash (poster) cards, before he can independently sound out and pronounce such simple words as *cat* or *ball*.

The fundamental difference in approach in the two methods reaches deep into philosophy and scientific theory. Thinkers have wrangled for centuries over which comes first, the whole or its parts (an argument perhaps as endless as that over the priority of the "chicken or the egg"). The phonics advocates say we start with the parts and the whole fall into place in due course.

Overworking a Psychological Method

The modernists in education were given a push toward the word-memory method by the popularity in the 1920's and the '30's of Gestalt psychology (from the German word *Gestalt*, meaning a total organization or configuration). This approach stressed the wholeness of perceptions (we perceive a whole melody rather than the notes which make it up). Although it was a valuable contribution to psychology, the Gestalt idea attracted enthusiasts who made a fad of it; they applied it indiscriminately to nearly every field of living. If someone wanted to paint, he was to go ahead and paint a whole picture; never mind learning about line, form, composition and color. If one wanted to try carpentry, he was to "build things"; never mind learning how to square a board. And in reading, the Gestalt enthusiasts hoped children would learn to take in whole sentences and paragraphs at a gulp without first having learned to cope with words.

There was reason for the big swing to new-style reading. In the early 1900's, our schools had gone far overboard in the other direction. They had made a fetish of phonics, and children were laboriously sounding out a simple word like "room" as *roo-oom*. They were battling their way through polysyllables such as *or-gan-i-za-tion*, and pronouncing them piece by piece without having the slightest idea what they meant. It was a revolt against fanatical phonics which paved the way for the introduction of word-memory (and the Gestalt approach) in the 1920's.

Word-memory then became almost sacred to most professional educators. Teachers were admonished never to let phonics enter their classrooms. In the 1920's and '30's the enthusiastic anti-phonics forces held that only comprehension was important. What difference did it make if a child couldn't figure out individual words as long as he got the sense of the paragraph? And if he didn't know a certain word, why not get a "clue from the context" and just guess – or put in some other word that fits just as well?

By 1940 the moans and groans of parents who found themselves with great little comprehenders who couldn't read finally penetrated the enthusiasm of the educators. High schools and colleges also sent out alarms. Their students were at sea in the new vocabularies of geology or economics; they couldn't read their texts. Or suddenly students broke down; they had memorized as many words as their brains could contain, and without the tools of reading, which enable one to attack any new word, they just couldn't go on. The situation was bad and might have been worse but for the stubborn dedication of thousands of classroom teachers throughout the land who, in spite of admonitions and at the risk of penalties, bootlegged phonics to their boys and girls.

Since 1940 much patching up has been done. There has been a great hustle and bustle in "remedial reading" – catching poor readers in the upper grades and trying to jack them up. In my visits to schools throughout the country, I have noted how frequently superintendents extolled their reading programs by citing the great number of remedial classes they had. Only one, superintendent, Ernest C. Ball, of Memphis, Tennessee, boasted that he had *no* remedial reading. He added, "We teach it right in the first place."

Phonics has been brought back to some extent, but reluctantly and under a new name – "word analysis". It is usually taught in the second and third grades. The child starts in grade one with word-memory and only later is introduced to the sounds of consonants, blends and word endings. Vowels often are left for grade three. Hereon turns a major debate. Are we still using the wrong foundation and simply doing a patch-up job later on? Should we teach phonics *first*?

John Dewey, philosophic father of modern education, favored the pragmatic judgment: a thing is good or bad depending upon how it works out in practice. Let's take a pragmatic look at modern reading instruction. How is it working out?

In January, 1952, Dr. Guy Bond of the College of Education, University of Minnesota, told a citizens' study committee in Minneapolis that, in general, schools were doing a better job in reading instruction than ever before, that they were doing a better job of preventing reading disabilities and that they were turning out much better readers. In June, when the study committee made its report, it correspondingly stated: "Reading is being taught a good deal better today than it was yesterday. And as a result our children today are learning to read so well that they will be better readers than we are at present."

Literature put out by the modernists in education understandably abounds in praise of the modernists' methods. Many a mother who comes to school to complain that her third-grade Johnny still isn't reading is sent home laden with literature telling her that children are reading better than ever. If she continues to complain she may be put down as "disgruntled" or (by those who have learned a smattering of psychiatric jargon and use it as a weapon) as "compulsive", "emotionally disturbed", or "neurotic".

Some parents are cranks, surely. And some reading difficulties are, indeed, emotional, perhaps stemming from troubled conditions in the home. But the amount of discontent with the teaching of reading which I found from coast to coast among levelheaded parents – average, normal Americans – was too great to be laid at this door and forgotten.

A mother in California complained, “My son sees the word *warm* and is just as likely to read it as *cold* because he associates it with a picture of people at a fireplace. He doesn’t know his small words at all and to him ‘*on* the fire is quite the same as *in* the fire.’ When he comes to new words I simply have to tell him what they mean.”

A father in Texas related, “My boy started having trouble with spelling in the fifth grade. I took out a word list to help him and – I was amazed – he couldn’t even spell *cat* and *dog*. But he had been getting ‘satisfactory’ marks all along. I found he didn’t know what ‘vowel’ meant, or ‘consonant’. He didn’t know the sounds of letters. I sat down and started teaching him phonics then and there.”

In Oregon a father said he had complained to school authorities that some children were going through school without even learning the alphabet – and was told, “We feel they will learn it incidentally; that’s the sort of thing children learn anyway.” This man later remarked, “That idea gets me – ‘They’re going to learn it anyway.’ If they’re going to learn it anyway, why school?”

Boy “Frustrated” by Failure to Read

One of the goals of modernists in education has been to avoid “frustrating” children. Pupils aren’t to be pushed too hard. They are to learn at their own rate of speed; they are to learn when they feel like learning, and when they are “ready” to learn. “But,” complained a Michigan father, ‘they’re frustrating the kids right now. My boy of nine is awfully frustrated. He can’t read – and he wonders why. He feels like a total flop.’”

Many a teacher has told me that a feeling of failure, caused by a neglect of fundamental groundwork, mainly in reading, lies behind delinquency problems later on. In April, 1953, a delegation from the Affiliated Teacher Organizations of Los Angeles went before the board of education to complain that one of the teachers’ biggest discipline problems was among nonreaders in the high schools.

One high-school teacher explained to me, “I teach math. It’s not that some of these teenagers can’t do the math. Some have pretty good mathematical minds. The trouble is that they can’t read the problems in the book.” A board of education member added, “Naturally such students become problems in frustration and give vent to it in antisocial behavior.”

The situation is not special to Los Angeles. The National Society for the Study of Education in its 1948 report, published by the University of Chicago, stated: “...a surprisingly large number of high-school and college students are seriously deficient in many of the basic aspects of reading. As a result they are unable to prepare assignments effectively and are, therefore, frustrated in their efforts to do high-school and college work.”

Glenn McCracken, principal of the Arthur McGill and Highland Elementary Schools in New Castle, Pennsylvania, reached a similar conclusion. Risking the wrath of the dyed-in-the-wool modernists, he wrote in the May, 1952, issue of *Elementary English*, official journal of the National Council of Teachers of English: “Too many children are passing through our present-day schools without learning to read adequately. In one city the director of curriculum reported recently that, ‘on the basis of standardized tests given to all students from grade one through grade twelve, we will have to say that 72 percent of our pupils are inadequate readers.’”

“In a western Pennsylvania college last year, 20 per cent of the freshman class were required to take remedial reading courses, without credit, so that in the judgment of school authorities they would be able to read well enough to compete successfully their college program. Think of that! In a college class where most of the students came from the upper 50 per cent of their high-school classes, 20 per cent needed remedial reading. An indictment of our reading programs? Rather conclusive evidence, isn’t it?”

Far from asserting that we are “teaching reading better than ever”, principal McCracken asked, “As twentieth-century progress moves ahead at such a startling rate in so many other fields, why are we faced with the fact that our schools are clogged with poor readers? Why does reading inadequacy continue to be one of the principal causes of school drop-outs?”

Principal Flays Modernist Fad

I asked McCracken if he could answer his own questions. He promptly aimed a blow at one of the most widespread educational fads of our day – readiness. The modernists tell our teachers not to teach a child to read until he is “ready”; he must first be taken along a playful and casual road known as “reading readiness”.

“It’s our program that is not ready, not the children”, McCracken declared. “‘Reading readiness’ has become one of the most overworked terms of the day....We use it to defend our inability to teach more children to read. So many children have failed to profit from reading instruction at the beginning level that we have come to the conclusion that they were not ready to read.”

A vicious circle forms here. Using a faulty teaching method, we find that children do not learn to read as they should. Since they do not learn to read as they should, we say they are not ready. This process still further delays their learning to read.

In one school, which the modernists would consider old-fashioned, a supervisor said to me, “I’ll tell you frankly, we really don’t know whether our children are ready or not. We just go ahead and teach them to read!”

Another modernist vogue is remedial reading. Even where some sincere modernists have admitted that reading instruction isn’t “better than ever”, they shy from admitting that their method may be faulty. Instead they call for more and more remedial courses in the upper grades. To some observers this procedure amounts to locking the barn after the horse is out.

Arthur F. Gardner, a member of the Los Angeles Board of Education, said to me, “We don’t need so much remedial reading; what we do need is more prevention of reading difficulties. The primary-grade program is the critical one. Our job is to repair the weaknesses brought on by the over-swing to Progressive Education methods.”

I asked him to explain. He continued, “One of our elementary supervisors wanted to put off the teaching of reading to the third grade. That’s the Progressive idea – let them learn when they’re ‘ready’, just run a play school in the meantime. Another of our supervisors actually came out and said, ‘What’s all the fuss about spelling? There’s always the dictionary. And why all the fuss about writing? The businessman today has a typewriter to do his writing.’”

Gardner shrugged. “Yet these people are conducting institutes, teaching other teachers how to teach!”

He added, “I think it is significant that when they finally get the poor readers into the remedial reading classes they use phonics and plenty of it. If the phonetic method is the way to remedy reading difficulties, then it ought to be a pretty good way to teach reading in the first place.”

I have visited numerous remedial reading classes. Other efforts besides phonetic first aid were being made. There was, first, a diagnostic attempt to discover whether emotional factors were causing a reading “block”, in which case counseling or psychiatric aid might be recommended. Second, there were tests of vision and eye-brain coordination. Here special neuromuscular disabilities could be discovered and referred for medical attention.

Such services are always valuable to help the emotionally or physically handicapped. But the bulk of the work in remedial reading classes I visited was not with such students at all. Ninety percent or more was with students who simply didn’t get a solid groundwork in reading in their primary grades.

A surprising number of parents are sending their children to private teachers for tutoring. In nearly every community I visited, some sort of reading clinic has sprung up. I talked to the director of one of them, Mrs. Helen R. Lowe, who operates the William Street Workshop in Glens Falls, New York.

Mrs. Lowe believes much of the trouble in modern reading instruction stems from innovations made by professional educators while they were seeking doctor's degrees. Feeling they had to make some "new contribution" to education, she asserted, they dashed pell-mell into newness for newness' sake, abandoning methods whose very virtue was their proven effectiveness.

"I started with the alphabet, what it is, and where it came from – even if it doesn't get me a doctor's degree because no one saw it before." Mrs. Lowe remarked. "I tell how symbols were adopted for sounds. And then I start in teaching the logical, phonetic approach to reading."

"But," I interjected, "many experts have said that English is not a phonetic language. There are so many, words which do not follow "phonetic logic", such as *bough* and *tough*."

In Defense of Phonetic System

"The word-memorizers have been harping on that for years", Mrs. Lowe replied. "The fact is that of the one-syllable words, the ones which children learn to read, only thirty-eight per thousand are not absolutely phonetic. The rest of the language is governed by workable rules and the exceptions are soon learned in day-to-day usage." It must be borne in mind, too, she pointed out, that children learned reading phonetically in American public schools for 275 years before word-memory became the vogue.

The major troubles Mrs. Lowe has encountered in rescuing hundreds of children from the schools of poor reading have been:

– A tendency to guess at words instead of logically attacking them. Having been taught to look for context clues, they sometimes come up with *milk* for *bottle* and *snow* for *cold*. – A lack of exactness. This fault some times carries over to hamper children in other studies, notably arithmetic. Mrs. Lowe observed, "If you can look at *milk* and say *bottle*, you can look at 5 and say *seven*."

– A habit of reading words backward. Neurologists have called this fault "mixed cerebral dominance", but Mrs. Lowe has traced numerous cases to learning to read from pictures. "They never have been taught to read from left to right," she explained. "When you look at a picture your eyes can wander anywhere. You can look from right to left if you want to. Do this with words and *was* becomes *saw*."

It is quite possible that the most logical-minded youngsters suffer most under word-memory teaching. Their minds reach for the precision of logical word-attack but become bogged in the guesswork of contextual clues and the illogic of picture association. Youngsters with photographic minds, on the other hand, do quite well.

A Neurologist Makes a Report

Extensive reading-method studies were made in Iowa in 1926-27 by the late neurologist, Dr. Samuel Orton, under a Rockefeller foundation grant. At that time children who couldn't read were said to have "congenital word blindness" – but Orton wanted proof. What he found was quite different. He reported his findings in a scientific paper entitled, "The 'Sight Reading' Method of Teaching Reading is a Source of Reading Disability".

Dr. Orton barnstormed Iowa from school to school with a mobile mental-hygiene unit. One of his first observations was: "In my original group of reading disability cases I was surprised at the large proportion of these children encountered." He later compared two towns, one of which had twice as many retarded readers as the other. "In the community with the lesser number of cases," he said, "sight-reading methods were employed but when children did not progress by this method they were also given help by the phonetic method. In the town with the larger number, no child was given any other type of reading training until he or she had learned 90 words by sight... this strongly suggests that the sight method not only will not eradicate reading disability of this type but may actually produce a number of cases."

It would be a mistake to think that, faced with the predicament of modern reading instruction; our schools are doing nothing about it. Most have tried hard to improve the situation.

A typical example is the Beaumont Elementary School in Portland, Oregon. In Miss Edith Olson's third-grade class I watched intensive work on reading with ample word-analysis and phonics. "If any have come this far and can't read, I'm making sure they learn before they go any farther," Miss Olson declared.

St. Louis last year launched a remedial program in the third grade at five schools, spread it after one term to 39 schools, and planned to have it eventually in all of the city's 109 elementary schools. Drury High School in North Adams, Massachusetts, opened a voluntary corrective reading program last January; 26 per cent of the school's students enrolled. Lima, Ohio, inaugurated a "refresher unit" this fall for high-school seniors who are rusty on reading or other of the three R's; it enrolled 23 per cent of the town's twelfth graders.

One of the most conscientious experiments has been conducted by principal McCracken, of New Castle, Pennsylvania, whose appraisal of modern methods I have already cited. "Modern" isn't modern enough for him. Six years ago, he became convinced of the merits of visual education and started reading from filmstrips. This year first-grade classes at the Arthur McGill Elementary School are learning reading from pages of their primers projected onto a three-by-four foot screen.

Spending no time on "readiness", McCracken goes right into reading. "We have measured our results. Everybody learns to read and most of the children come out of the first grade with second- and third-grade reading ability," he declared. "We give them plenty of phonics. Some of our youngsters are better accomplished in phonics than the average high-school class."

Spottily throughout the country some schools are going further still. They are sinking their teeth into the main bone of contention: which comes first, sight reading or phonics?

In Louisville, Kentucky, the Frayser Elementary School started an experiment with its first-graders in 1952, adopting a reading method, which clearly put phonics first. Children were taught vowel and consonant sounds from the very beginning. They learned to recognize and pronounce syllables, to build words as they would build a house of blocks.

The school's five first-grade classes finished their year with an average reading proficiency four months ahead of national norms, and a third of the pupils were a full year ahead. The same pupils continued the phonics-first method in second-grade work last year and are carrying it into the third grade this year to complete the experiment.

In visiting their classes I noted the ability of these children to attack any word you showed them. They were never completely stumped, and there were no wild guesses. "We have more independent readers than ever before", said Miss Cethrine Walling, one of the teachers. Another, Miss Velma Hall, said, "I've never had children do so well before."

Ruse didn't Fool First-Grader

Frayser School parents shared the teachers' enthusiasm. One mother said, "I never dreamed they could learn so fast. Last year I was telling my husband we were going to give our first-grader a R-O-B-E for Christmas. The youngster heard me spell it and said, 'I know -- E on the end, so the O is long -- that's robe!'"

Macon, Georgia, is another city where the phonics-first approach has been tried. Four first-grade teachers at the Charles H. Bruce School reported in the Georgia Education Journal: "...We have done several things which many authorities in reading have said you shouldn't do, or couldn't be done... We have been told that first-grade pupils could not learn the fundamentals of phonetics. We have had no more trouble than in (other) teaching, and have learned that the pupil can do lots more than we give him credit for.... Our teaching has been a joy this year because our pupils have been happy and pleased with their achievement. We have challenged their ability, and they like it."

These are still random experiments. The debate over sight-reading versus phonics – which comes first? – is certainly not ended. But from one fact every parent can take heart: more independent thinking and more earnest effort are being addressed to the reading problem than ever before. From this, better reading instruction is bound to come.

Note by Internet Publisher: Donald L. Potter

September 18, 2005

I first read this marvelous essay on June 26, 2005. It contains the first published reference I have been able to locate for the precise term “phonics-first.” I found this article on Helen Lowe’s granddaughter’s web site. It was a HTML document obviously created from a scanned copy of the essay. I copied the HTML document into Word and made some necessary corrections. This PDF document is the result.

For the best information on phonics-first instruction, visit the Education Page of my web site: www.donpotter.net. There are several very valuable articles by Helen Lowe on my website that are “must reading” for anyone interested in why we have so much illiteracy in America despite the billions of dollars that have been spent on education.

It is simply astounding to realize that I see the exact same instructional methods creating the exact same problems in the schools today.

I pray that the publication of these articles will cause curriculum writers, administrators, teacher to see that it is **absolutely essential to teach phonics-first to all students** so that no students will develop reading problems because of exposure to poorly designed teaching materials.

The Howard Whitman article was last edited 12/17/11.

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