

Abstracts from Two Phonics Stalwarts: Professor Charles C. Walcutt and Dr. Rudolf Flesch



Abstract 1

Concerning Context Clues and Meaning Emphasis

Professor Charles. C. Walcutt Graduate Professor of English,
City University of New York

(Regarding Context Clues): coming upon a new word in print, the good adult reader makes a stab at sounding it out, and a millisecond later he tries to deduce its meaning from the context. In this second phase he may discover that it's a word he knows by ear, although at first he did not recognize it in print. The child who has been properly trained will respond in exactly the same way. He will, of course be doing this much more frequently than the adult because he is coming upon "new" words much more often in his reading. He know hundreds and hundreds of words that he has not seen in print...The child repeatedly has the pleasure of decoding a new word and, after a millisecond of puzzlement, discovering that, yes it's a word he knows by ear. This process does **not** involve looking at a picture or guessing the sound **from** the meaning, but the decoding skill is richly assisted by attention to meaning...

(Regarding meaning emphasis): The whole-word child may be exclusively concerned with meaning. He will be obsessively engaged in meaning because he is using it for two purposes: (1) to get at the word itself (the sound) and (2) to get the meaning of the passage.

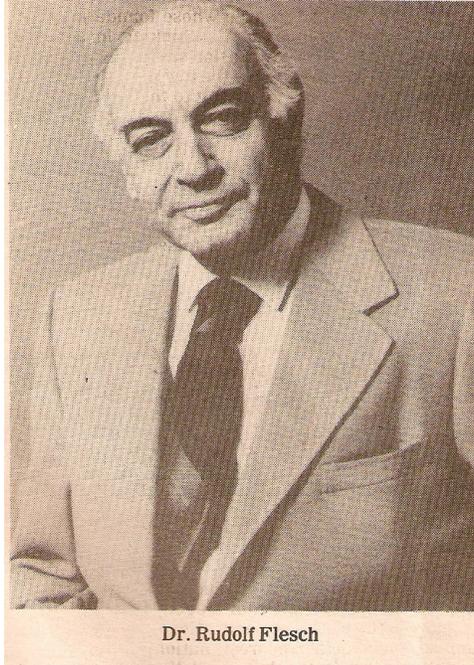
Let us consider how this happens. Our child has this sentence, in which the new word is **cane**: “Jane’s father has a new cane.” The child thinks about the sentence, looks at the picture, and reads it as, “Jane’s father has a new stick.” Or he might say “walking stick.” He has thought about the sentence, looked at the picture, as he has been taught to do, and comes up with a reasonable **guess** – which is what he has been programmed to do; that is, **think** about the sentence, the picture, and the situation. He says “walking stick,” and certainly gets the meaning, but he has not got the actual word on the page, and is not using the techniques of word-attack that he should be developing at this stage in his education. Rather, he is absorbing some false notions and some bad habits.

The false notion that a printed word stands for meaning – that is, an object, action or idea – whereas in fact, what is “means” is a sound (which in turn means its referent). This false notion creates a bad habit of guessing the new word from context and/or picture, rather than looking at the printed word and first get its sound.

Readers who continue to do this are retarded or crippled readers. They are the poor readers who constantly make the “miscues” upon which Kenneth Goodman has built an empire of misinformation. Goodman insists that it is proper and natural for a good reader to guess ahead of the word on the page, thereby regularly coming up with “readings” that may be thoughtful but are, in fact, inaccurate. This is no way to read, and we should not pretend that it is, for such pretension is merely a way of defending the system of reading instruction that made us a nation with more illiterates than any other advanced country in the modern world.

Reading specialists such as Goodman and the whole amazing new school of psycholinguistics are prisoners inside the tower of research whose foundation blocks are “reading for meaning,” thinking in a reading situation” and “comprehension skills.” What rests on this foundation to complete the tower, is a structure of verbal extrapolations referring to the mythic foundations.

Mastery of our alphabetic system can be achieved only with constant attention to meaning. But if we use meaning to **guess** the sound, we are not really learning to read and we shall be word-guessers for the rest of our lives – rioting in miscues, missing crucial words in a passage, and jumping to false conclusion halfway through an easy sentence.



Abstract 2

Three Basic Principles for a Successful National Literacy Campaign

Dr. Rudolf Flesch, author of
The Art of Clear Thinking, and Why Johnny Can't Read

The steady and seemingly inexorable decline of our literacy is a great national tragedy. We, the richest country in the world, are educationally dropping down among the world's poorest nations. Soon we'll be unable to carry on the daily work that needs to be done by educated people, or even find jobs that call for simple ability to read and write. I foresee an influx of thousands of Japanese engineers overseeing the work of thousands of robots on assembly lines.

What we need at this critical point in our national life is a gigantic national literacy campaign.

Of course, many Third World countries, and others, have had their literacy campaigns, such as the famous Cuban campaign of 1960-61, which raised the national literacy rate from 75 to 94 percent within nine months.

We can do even better than that – **if** we put our minds to it and use our tremendous resources for the job. After all, we are the nation that got to the moon, and wiped out polio and measles.

However, if we carry out a literacy campaign, we can't expect to do the job in nine months like the Cubans. Why? Because the Cubans were faced with the relatively easy job of teaching reading and writing to their illiterate peasants, who had never gone to school. We, on the other hand, have to teach millions of people who can't read because their schools tried to teach them the wrong way. They have been infected with the highly potent virus of look-and-say and have become addicts to the pernicious habit of word-guessing. To become literate, they must kick the habit. The job of teaching them to read must be combined with a program of thorough detoxification, which gets harder and harder the more years of look-and-say teaching they've been exposed to. Therefore, what took Cubans nine months will take us at least two years.

Aside from that unfortunate time lag, what we'll be able to do is prodigious. As a nation, we are born for this kind of job. There is no limit to what can be done. It will be an even more glorious adventure than going to the moon.

However, our national literacy campaign will be successful only if it sticks to three basic principles.

First, the American people must realize that we have an enormous national problem on our hands. We desperately need a national literacy campaign, and we need it now.

Second, people must understand that in the United States illiteracy is caused by the virus of look-and-say teaching. Our prevailing teaching methods and materials must be seen as what they are – national enemies like the viruses of measles and polio.

Third, our literacy campaign must be fought strictly with the weapons of intensive phonics. Any materials or methods that lead to addictive word-guessing must be banned from our classrooms and libraries.

As long as we stick to these three basic principles, we'll make our coming literacy campaign a glorious success and we will become the best-educated nation on earth.

Note from Internet Publisher: Donald L. Potter

July 10, 2010

These “abstracts” were taken from the January 1983 edition of *The Reading Informer*, published by the *Reading Reform Foundation*. I am not sure who prepared the “abstracts.” I assume it was most likely the editor, G. K. Hodenfield.

I have greatly benefited from the work of Professor Walcutt and Dr. Flesch over the years. Both published simple yet powerful little phonics programs. Walcutt’s *Through the Phonics Barrier* is available for free on my website. Walcutt and Glen McCracken were the authors of the Lippincott 1963 *Basic Reading* program, which enabled many of that generation to learn to read well without guessing. You can find Flesch’s 72 Exercises in the back of his 1955 *Why Johnny Can’t Read and what you can do about it*. These “Abstracts” were taken from the January 1982 issue of *The Reading Informer* published by the Reading Reform Foundation.

Anyone who started teaching in the mid 1980’s or early 1990’s will recall that we received extensive training in Ken Goodman’s “Miscue Analysis.” This was tied in with “The Three Cueing Systems” chart, which we received at many of our workshops. We were taught that phonetic (grapho-phonemic) clues were the least used and should be deemphasized in teaching. We were warned that phonics was dangers because it would produce mere word-callers who would inevitably struggle to get the meaning of a passage. As it turned out, Walcutt was correct in calling it an “Empire of Misinformation.”

Flesch talks about a “detoxification program” to help people kick the pernicious habit of word-guessing. I suggest that we go back and carefully read Flesch’s *Why Johnny Can’t Read*, where he recommend something that at first sounds very radical: “Remove students from their word guessing environment and do nothing but phonics until they are cured of their guessing habit.” Flesch wasn’t kidding! He said that student should stop doing any outside reading and do nothing but phonics exercises until they were cured; then when they started reading stories and books again, they should be watched like a hawk and corrected every time they made a mistake. As radical as that sounds, I have actually done just that with my older tutoring students and found that Flesch’s advice works. It actually works faster and better than many of the expensive, complicated, and time consuming (slow) dyslexia programs on the market.

www.donpotter.net

www.blendphonics.org

Corrections made on 1/19/11 and April 14, 2019.