

Spelling Progress Bulletin

Dedicated to finding the causes of difficulties in learning reading and spelling.

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Meeting notice

International Reading Association - Phonemic Spelling Council

Anaheim, Calif. Thursday, May, 13, 1976.

General Theme: *Sight Words and/or Phonics?*

Chairperson: Dr. Katherine P. Betts

Speaker: Dr. Emmett A. Betts,

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Dr. Milton Jacobson, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia.

Anaheim, Calif. Tuesday, May 11, 1976, there will be a debate on: "Spelling and Phonics," by Dr. Emmett A. Betts, University of Miami, Coral Gables, Florida, and Dr. Edgar Dale, Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, and Dr. Donald D. Durrell, Boston University, Boston, Mass. Dr. Betts is a protagonist of spelling reform (consistent spelling), especially for beginners in reading, as a way to legitimize phonics instruction.

[Spelling Progress Bulletin Winter 1975 pp2,3]

The Bullock Report Says: Take Another Look at i. t. a., by John Downing*

In February, 1975 a very important Government report on education in England was published. It is the first such report to be devoted to the teaching of reading and related language arts. The actual title is *A Language for Life*, [1] but its popular name will be "The Bullock Report" after the Chairman of the Commission, Sir Allan Bullock, F.B.A. a Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University. His Committee contains also many "stars" of the world of experts in reading and the teaching of English: Prof. J. N. Britton, W. K. Gardner, D. Mackay, Prof. J. E. Merritt, Vera Southgate, Prof. J. Wrigley, and others.

The report is very wide ranging and covers the whole field of reading education and instruction in English from the pre-school stage to the college level. Because many teachers in British Columbia use i.t.a. for teaching the beginning of reading and writing, this aspect has been singled out for discussion in this article.

The Complexity of English

Early in their report the Bullock Committee establish that English orthography is very complex and that this complexity causes serious difficulties for beginning readers:

"Of much greater importance in this matter of establishing relationships between letters and sounds is the fact that there is no simple correspondence between the 26 letters and the 44 phonemes. If one were intent on constructing from scratch the obvious course would be to aim at a one-to-one correspondence between phonemes and graphemes, the grapheme being any letter or combination of letters which represents a single phoneme. Some idea of the ways in which written English falls short of this ideal may be seen in the following examples:

(i) *one, home, comes, women, of, or, to, do*

(ii) *aisle, height, eye, I, phial, ice, high, island, buy, sty, guide, rhyme*

In the first example a single letter is seen to take on eight different values in different contexts. In the second a single phoneme is spelled in 12 different ways, and indeed other spellings could be added if less common words were included, e.g. *indict*" (pp. 85-86).

The Bullock Report goes on to cite other evidence of the special difficulties of learning to read in English. For example the study by Berdianski, Cronnel, and Koehler (1969) which "examined the 6,092 two-syllable words among the 9,000 words in the comprehension vocabularies of a group of six to nine year old children. They recorded 211 different spellings for the phonemes in these words, and these required 166 rules to govern their use. Over 10% of the words still had to be left aside as 'exceptions.' Sixty of these rules applied to consonants, which are usually thought to be 'regular.'" (p. 86)

What is the effect of all this complexity? The Bullock Committee's conclusion from the research evidence is that "we must emphasize that this level of decoding is of particular importance in the early stages of learning to read, and the complexity of English spelling patterns does appear to retard progress." (p. 87) How can this special difficulty in learning to read English be overcome? "THE BEST WAY . . . IS . . . i.t.a."

The subtitle for this section of this article is an accurate abbreviation of the Bullock Committee's reply to the question at the end of the previous paragraph. These are the details:

"we have already noted the bewildering complexities of the English spelling system, and it is self-

evident that a simplification of the relationship between sound and spellings must make it much easier for a child to make progress in the early stages. If there are fewer items to be learned this alone must reduce the time required, and if there are fewer ambiguities there will be less confusion. All this is amply confirmed by research. Following a careful review of the evidence the authors of the Schools Council Report on i.t.a. came to this conclusion:

There is no evidence whatsoever for the belief that the best way to learn to read in traditional orthography is to learn to read in traditional orthography. It would appear that *the best way to learn to read in traditional orthography is to learn to read in the initial teaching alphabet*" (p. 110, italics added).

This conclusion may seem rather long winded to someone who is not familiar with the chief feature of education in England - the local autonomy of each individual state school. Each school is free to choose the instructional methods and materials which its principal and teachers believe are best for the boys and girls in their school. Hence a school using books printed in t.o. (traditional orthography) must be doing so because its teaching staff believes that t.o. is best. But the research evidence proves them wrong. On the other hand the belief that i.t.a. is best is supported by the evidence of research.

The Bullock Committee accepts the evidence from the Schools Council survey of the research. All the many scientific investigations conducted have shown conclusively that t.o. is an important cause of difficulty and disability in reading. Therefore, teaching reading with books printed in t.o. is hazardous to children. On the other hand, Sir James Pitman's Initial Teaching Alphabet has been found to raise standards of reading and writing and to cut down the incidence of reading failure by a substantial proportion. For example, the Bullock Report states:

"Children tend to learn quickly how to spell in i.t.a. and they then have ready access to almost every word in their spoken vocabulary. The value of this for language experience activities is obvious. When groups of t.o. and i.t.a. children were matched in the British experiments, the writing produced by the latter was of consistently higher quality." (pp. 111-112).

Anxieties over the transition from i.t.a. to t. o. in reading, writing and spelling have proved unfounded in research and actual practice. For example, the Bullock Report states that "there is no evidence of adverse side effects at a later stage." (p. 112)

Negative Attitudes Toward i.t.a.

Despite the wealth of evidence demonstrating that "the best way" to protect children against the hazardous complexities of t.o. is to use i.t.a. for initial instruction, some negative anti-i.t.a. attitudes persist in the teaching profession. The Bullock Report recognizes this fact: "The general reaction of many teachers to i.t.a. (the initial teaching alphabet) has been rather negative, and only 10 per cent of our sample schools containing infants were using the medium." (p. 110) There was even disagreement among the members of the Bullock Committee itself. Thus they say: "As a Committee we are not unanimous on the value of i.t.a." (p. 112) Nevertheless, all members of the Bullock Committee put their signatures to the whole Report which includes all the quotations given in this article.

Conclusion - Take Another Look at i.t.a.

The Schools Council Report made the very interesting observation that there was a correlation between attitudes toward i.t.a. and actual experience with i.t.a. in the class-room. The most positive attitudes were held by teachers who had tried i.t.a. The most negative attitudes were held by "experts" who had never seen i.t.a. in use.

The Bullock Committee, in keeping with the British tradition of local autonomy in education, and on the basis of all the research evidence favouring i.t.a. recommends that "schools which choose to adopt it should be given every support." (p. 112) But of even greater importance is the Bullock Report's call for professional fair-mindedness in this matter:

"We also feel that teachers should examine the question of i.t.a. on its merits. We hope they will make their own objective assessment of the various arguments for and against, and not accept the tendentious statements that are still made by some of its advocates and opponents!" (p. 112)

These two conclusions seem appropriate for i.t.a. in British Columbia too. Are the B.C. schools which have chosen to adopt i.t.a. being "*given every support*"? For example, when will the B.C. Dept. of Education place i.t.a. materials on the officially approved list? Will more B.C. university professors of education and elementary school principals look beyond tendentious pro & con statements and examine the research evidence more objectively?

* Reprinted by permission from *The B.C. Teacher*, Dec. 1975.

[1] Dept. of Education and Science, *A Language for Life* (The Bullock Report). London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1975, 609 pages, price £5 .

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[Spelling Progress Bulletin Winter 1975 pp3-10]

The Causes of Illiteracy & Recommendations for Action, by Valerie Yule*

(Draft notes used to stimulate teachers' discussion groups)

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Summary

- I. *The Causes of Literacy*, which may be a better approach to looking for ways of reducing illiteracy.
- II. *Factors in the culture*: The possible influences of television, instant cultures, peer cultures.
 Alien school, alien books, alien work.
- III. *Factors in the child*:
 - a. Intelligence
 - b. Happiness
 - c. Specific learning difficulties
 - d. Motivation
- IV. *Problems we set the child*.
 - a. English spelling
 - b. Primer print
 - c. Teachers
- V. *Money and Facilities*
 - a. Fifth and last in importance
- VI. *Is reading necessary?*
 - a. Reasons for reading
- VII. *Principles of learning*
 - a. The ways people learn
 - b. Aspects of learning

The following notes are put forward as a basis for discussion and emendation and consideration of positive action - and should be taken as drafts only. Readers' comments, criticisms and further contributions are welcomed.

I. The Causes of Literacy

Since most people in the world are illiterate, it is reasonable to ask: how did the minority become literate rather than why the rest cannot read.

A child is more likely to learn to read if

1. He lives in a developed country like ours, with its economic, social and educational advantages.
2. The child is not mentally or physically handicapped, is happy, wants to learn, and expects to be able to learn.
3. His family is not disturbed. They value and read books and enjoy showing books and reading to him from his early infancy; they love and have faith in him, give him opportunity to study, and have good relations with his school.
4. Friends and schoolmates are also keen to learn, like books, admire excellence, and encourage each other.
5. Teaching is rational and straightforward, and the teacher is also keen and interested.
6. Results of learning to read are seen to be rewarding, e.g., Available books are enjoyable/helpful/stimulating. Readers find that through reading they have more opportunities to do what they want to do, e.g. re: interests, school progress, future career. Readers find life is made easier and more interesting because they can read.

The following pages describe what happens -

- i. If these factors are not present.
- ii. If there are stumbling blocks instead.

Each section will conclude with *positive recommendations* about what may be done. Add your own to them.

II. Factors in our Culture Affecting Literacy

People are what their culture makes them, more than they care to think. They want what their culture makes them want. The culture can make people want money, sex, religion, fighting, peace, color television, ingestion of noxious substances, continual change, no change, to walk on live coals or 7" clogs, stick spikes through their noses, love children, hate children - almost anything.

Some cultures have valued literacy so highly that the average working-man could be well-read and respected, as in 19th century Scotland. Even in the twenties, and in classes of seventy, the healthy child who did not learn to read was practically unheard of in Scotland.

Until 1956, middle-class Australia was not aware of a reading problem, and nobody bothered much about the illiterates who left primary school in the industrial areas.

Today we bother because:

- i. More middle-class children are non-readers.
- ii. 'Working-class' non-readers are a liability in an increasingly technological society.
- iii. Increasing recognition of democratic rights of equality of opportunity, which is impossible without literacy.

However, the culture is increasingly against learning.

- i. *Television* is an easier amusement. It is also possible that evidence is accumulating that infantile T.V. watching may discourage the acquisition of skills needed for reading and writing-listening, language, memory, concentration, sequencing, etc.

- ii. *'Instant' culture*, with emphasis on instant satisfactions and living in the present. Reading requires some effort to learn; it is not a passive process. And enjoying reading involves individualism and imagination.
- iii. Some *prevailing sub-cultures* in inner and western suburbs are actively hostile to school-learning. It is hard to be a reader if none of your playmates are, and they laugh at you. Or if the home has no books, and parents do not read. Parents may even punish children who 'act smart,' and their mates may also bash them up if they 'think they're clever' or 'suck up to teacher.' In eastern suburbs the school-failure may still be scorned; in other places the majority 'failures' may bash up the sissies, so to be safe you play dumb.

The alien school: 'We' vs. 'they,' teachers vs. parents. 'Mums keep out.' 'Migrants keep out,' and mutual suspicion. Parents discouraged from any involvement in education.

Alien readers: The first reading material given to children is often alien to their interests, mediocre in style, trivial in content, and 'written down' in a way many children recognize. Consumer research would find that children's interests are not limited to the immediate world around them - the answer is not 'giving slum children slum stories.' It is the emotional experience and needs which are the determinates. (And sometimes their emotional experience needs widening, so that they can be more open to a wider range of interests.) Inner urban boys are particularly contemptuous of twee fiction; their interests are in the adult world of action and reality.

Alien work: If parents have jobs which they openly hate, work attitudes tend to be transmitted to children's school work.

Alien culture: Schools today are often equated with 'middle-class culture' and seen as an imposition on other classes which have 'their own culture.' In Australia, however, it is more likely we all have a common T.V. culture. Moreover, we need to be very careful in spotting what actually is an alien and objectionable imposition (e.g. 'middle-class' cut-throat competitive and acquisitive values, consumerism and conspicuous waste) and what is required for coping behaviour in any society from the beginning of history, whether capitalist, communist, anarchist or whatever. Some sentimentalists tend to equate 'non-coping' improvident and unthinking behaviour with working-class culture, and this should be resented.

Conclusion: 'The Culture' is one of the basic factors in illiteracy, and this area is also one of the most difficult to tackle.

Recommendations:

1. Care for pre-school children that will ensure the positive emotional development and language development that can enable them to love learning and comprehend the world of books.
2. Open education for all ages, with education credits.
3. Campaigns to encourage adult reading-with reading to solve the leisure problem, develop wider interests, and to be an alternative to drugs and alcohol - both consolation and therapy.

III. Factors in the Child

A) 'Intelligence'

1. 'Intelligence' tests tend to measure the intellectual abilities involved in reading well, hence the high correlation between 'intelligence' and ability to read.

'Intelligence' tests measure:-

- a. Linguistic ability-fluency with words, word analysis, concept formation, etc.
- b. Memory
- c. Visual analysis and synthesis
- d. Concentration, perseverance, attention span in paper and pencil work

e. Motivation in scholastic areas.

Most non-readers score a retarded to low average I.Q., although more public fuss is made of the intelligent non-readers because their parents tend to be middle-class activists.

2. However, with help, even quite moderately retarded children can sometimes learn to read well although they may not understand all they read. In the long run, *motivation* is more important than *intelligence* in mastering the mechanics of reading.

3. 'Intelligence' is not completely determined by heredity. Environment can help or hinder a child to reach his full potential.

i. Children deprived of love or environmental stimulation are more likely to be stunted.

Happiness in the family is important.

ii. Children's intellectual development is fostered by reading, so those who can read have a further advantage over those who fail to learn.

Recommendations:

1. Campaign to ensure that everyone realizes *children's needs-to* be born wanted and loved to healthy, happy mothers, to have secure relationships in early years, to be cared for psychologically as well as physically, with the company and interests of adults who will talk, play, read with them, and enjoy them.

2. *Prevent* factors that might depress intellectual development, e.g.

i. Children left in unsuitable conditions because both parents are forced to work at unpleasant, tiring, poorly paid jobs. (?parent-pay for one parent, ?child-development centres that are not primarily left-luggage centres.)

ii. Reliance on T.V. as the universal baby-minder, preventing children's active learning.

iii. Unwanted conceptions; non-coping, irresponsible, parents who see children as possessions, not as people.

B). *Happiness and literacy*

Sometimes an unhappy child may try to compensate for unhappiness by escaping into school-work. More often, he cannot concentrate on learning because of his anxieties.

He may:

a. withdraw into passivity, apathy, daydreams, quiet despair, or

b. be extremely distractible, hyperactive, disrupting, unable to sit still, unable to concentrate sufficiently to learn, unable to do one day what he could do the day before, variable in mood, and often perplexing in behaviour. He may seem determined to fail, trying to fail, and if he does do good work, he may tear it up.

The symptoms may be very like that of children with organic 'minimal multiple handicaps' - and there are also children who seem by nature much more vulnerable to emotional stress than others.

Many children are already convinced they will fail in school before they even arrive there. They have learnt to see themselves as bad, naughty, stupid, always causing trouble, and do not know how to do anything except to live up to this.

When a teacher has children like these in her class, the chances for high literacy are also reduced for the other children too, because the learning situation deteriorates through the disturbance they cause. Their behaviour also tends to affect the others, so that they start 'mucking around' too. 'When an idealistic teacher gives the children freedom to learn, many motivated children can leap ahead-

but the disturbed child may become even more disruptive because he cannot control himself without external structures.

The numbers of such unhappy and disturbed children are rapidly increasing, as many teachers know.

Recommendations:

1. *The usual recommendations* are to employ dozens more psychologists, social workers, etc. with more clinics, therapy, etc. Medication is increasingly used. This is all very expensive, and is like bandages for ulcers without removing the sources of infection and trauma.
2. *Special Schools.* At present Special Schools for retarded children tend to become balding centres for disturbed children, to get them out of the regular schools. If special schools are necessary, they should be designed and staffed according to the problem needs of the children.
3. *Causes of unhappiness and disturbances.* Some are in the child himself, and no family is guaranteed immunity from having a disturbed child. But far too much childhood disturbance at present is from the environment adults provide when adults themselves are disturbed, insecure, rejecting, angry, irresponsible. Adults as well as children need to know the Facts of Living as well as the Facts of Life. The mind may boggle at pre-conception courses, procreation licenses, in-service parental training, a better use of T.V.-but we should boggle more at what kind of child-rearing goes on in too many Australian homes just now.

C) *Specific learning difficulties and illiteracy*

Children with even quite marked sensory deficits can often compensate for them in learning to read, and the organic 'word-blind' is really very rare indeed.

There are patterns of behaviour often found in children who fail to learn to read, but these are not necessarily *causes*, only correlates, and one does not teach a child to read by teaching him to crawl first. (See my paper: 'I was a Dyslexic Bookworm'). Most children with similar difficulties do in fact seem to learn to read (e.g. with clumsiness, poor spatial orientation, mixed laterality, weak auditory memory, etc.)

However, many children show characteristics which could make them more at risk to failure in reading and writing, and teachers should be aware of these in designing their class-teaching practices.

1. *Poor listening skills.* Many children have learnt to tune out what they hear, rather than to listen to it.
2. *Poor visual memory.* The development of this ability could possibly be handicapped by too much watching of transitory visual stimuli. Children need more training in sequential meaningful memory, preferably from the real world and books, rather than through inconsequential word games.
3. *Poor pencil skills.* Little practice in manipulating things in play and drawing at home. Tracing and copying help here, even though art teachers may deplore it.
4. *Poor figure-ground discrimination:* (Unable to sort out what is significant from what is unimportant in what they see or hear):
 - i. *Nearing.* Many children cannot distinguish what is said if there is background noise of even a mild degree, although their hearing may be normal when tested by the usual methods. They fail to learn in open or informal classrooms if teachers do not realize their problems.
 - ii. *Visual.* They fail to learn letters and words because they cannot sort out how to remember them. Flashcards are hopeless. Rooms full of visual stimulation confuse them. Teachers

need to give them specific teaching on how to remember, and how to link memories to each other to make them easier to remember.

5. *Distractibility*. Teachers like to give children a 'rich environment,' and even 'bombard them with stimuli,' but many of these children cannot concentrate in a rich environment at all-it is too distracting, and do better in a simple, attractive, orderly, predictable setting with minimum interference.
6. *Short attention span*. They are bored very quickly, and want constant novelty. It is an art for the teacher to train them gradually, through interesting activities, to lengthen their attention span, keeping them motivated, while still giving other children maximum opportunity to keep going on activities of longer duration.
7. *Easily over-stimulated*. They over-react to any excitement, and again it is a task for the teacher to keep the temperature down at a safe level, except on special occasions, and to be alert for signs that dampening down is needed to prevent trouble.
8. '*Learning blocks*' from previous failure become a serious emotional problem, and often need charismatic teaching to remove. The more you fail, the more you fail.
9. *Poor or variable* memory can be helped if the basic steps that children must learn in reading, math, etc. are retained in the workbooks the children are using - and are not continually torn out and thrown away after the day's (or week's) work.
10. *Bad learning habits*: Watch out for bad habits such as:
 - wrong grasp of a pencil, so that writing can never improve.
 - wrong formation of letters, so that writing cannot improve.
 - 'burnt child' reading, in which children cannot bear to look at print carefully (like a girl who thinks herself ugly cannot look in the mirror to try to improve her appearance).

Teacher's pressure cannot discourage this habit - the criticism can only increase the aversive conditioning. The fear of failure has to be taken off the child, e.g. letting the child direct his reading, not you. Instead of forcing him to gag away, let him point with a pencil at any words he wants you to read for him, and let him determine himself which words bother him.

- 'jumping eyes' which roam all over a page and get lost, instead of going left to right along a page of print. Some children do need a card or finger under the line to help correct their bad habit.
- mechanical reading, with no idea of using context for clues, or getting meaning from what is read. If children are interested in what they get to read, then there, is less risk of this.
- Pottering. This fine art is developed in childhood, and skill in resisting a teacher's pressure to work develops quickly in this challenging game. Sometimes the problem is worsened because the children feel they just have to go on and on at unending tasks, one after the other, but a clock in the front of the room, and knowledge of the program and helping to decide it, can often help. Children can often settle down to a task if they know it is only for five minutes, especially if they know the teacher cares enough to check what they do.

11. *Missed stages*. Here I am not talking of some supposed hiatus in neurological development in the brain, but the fact that often children cannot read because they have missed out or forgotten some vital step of the reading process - and usually imagine they have missed out more than they have. Children changing schools or chronically sick are particularly at risk.

It can be a good idea to take the whole class rapidly through the ten basic steps in learning to read at the beginning of the year, to ensure no-one has been left out, or forgotten over the holidays: i.e.

The alphabet, sounds of the alphabet, vowel symbols, digraphs, consonant blends, syllables, the most common 200 sight words, the difference between sensible spelling and 'silly spelling,' how to use context, and the recognition of spelling patterns.

12. *Medication* can occasionally affect children's ability to concentrate or pay attention. Check with parents, to ensure classroom management is appropriate. (Other children may be failing to learn because they need medical attention, or because medication needs modification from time to time. Often when both parents are working, the teacher is the only adult to notice this.)

Recommendations - in addition to the specific comments above:

Campaign for better School Medical Services, with more personnel so that there can be adequate screening for sensory defects in pre-school, infant school, and regularly thereafter.

Refer parents to National Acoustic Laboratories if children's hearing is at all suspect. (Attention is free)

Psychologists can sometimes help if children seem to defy diagnosis.

Talk with parents. Find out if something is bothering the child.

D) *Motivation and Illiteracy*

1. Most of the great debate about illiteracy tends to assume that if you apply the right learning powder to a child, he will learn. He is passive, like a non-functioning machine.

But watch how often a child - or any human - will resist things done to him 'for his own good,' and resist learning either passively or actively - often consciously, often unconsciously - for all sorts of reasons, many not even associated with school at all.

Smaller classes may in fact not be the only way of coping with illiteracy for such children. We forget how often what teachers see as 'giving a child individual attention' is seen by the child as 'having pressure put on him' - and like any individual defending his liberty, he resists such direct attack.

In the past, many children learnt to read because:-

- i. Their parents saw education as the child's opportunity to rise in the world, and encouraged and supported the child and the school, or
- ii. It was the cut and a clip on the ear for the child if he did not learn. Many were also motivated by fear of punishments such as public shame in 'reading round the class.'

We don't use those negative reinforcements now - others might - but what *positive motivation* for school learning can be given to a child who has never developed generalized curiosity, who does not want to please teacher, or possibly likes the challenge of resisting - or whose parents reckon they were never any good at school anyway, and whose attitude to school teachers easily flares into hostility.

How do you motivate children who think books are sissy, who don't care two hoots for gold stars or other such rewards, who never imagine a future and what hopes or insecurity it might hold, and who live only in the present?

Recommendation. Change the conditions that produce such children - behavioural scientists and advertisers know enough about attitude change.

- a. Read to them in beginning infant school so as to instill a liking for books and a desire to be able to read.

2. *What is there to read - to motivate children to read?*

- i. The answer is not to fill books with pictures or try to put in print what is better and easier on T.V.
- ii. Because of our difficult spelling, it is at least three years before most children can read at the level of their mental age what interests them. By that time, too many are turned off. Teachers should investigate means whereby children *can* read at their mental-age level very early, despite present spelling (e.g., initial teaching spellings, 'cribs' for harder words, double-decker spellings, color methods, etc. I like the MacDonald non-fiction books, too.

- iii. Teachers must 'be aware of children in our schools today who have such language handicaps, including limitation of vocabulary, that often they cannot comprehend books written for children of the same age even ten or twenty years ago, including some of the so-called 'children's classics'.
- iv. Today many books try to start 'where the children are,' just as Victorian books tried to end 'where the children ought to be,' but the children still elude them. Too often books written supposedly for 'disadvantaged children' feed into their difficulties and problems, rather than realizing their strengths and possibilities.
- v. Teaching children the mechanics of reading is not enough for a literate, civilized society. What are they to read as adults? The paperbacks on the bookstalls? The newspapers and petty journals? 'Where is that enlargement of the mind, those widened horizons? It is said that the barely literate are the most gullible people there can be for the demagogue, the advertiser, and the con man.

IV. The Problems that We Set the Child

Why not make it easier for children to learn to read by trying to change the *task* instead of the *children*? 'Why not?

A) English Spelling

The people who tend to become educated tend to be those who found learning to read an easy task. The experts on reading problems today are educated people who found learning to read easy, and cannot understand why spelling reform is necessary for those who find it hard - like athletes who say crutches are unnecessary for the crippled.

For those who find reading hard in any case, English spelling is the barbed-wire barricade that crowns their problems and booby-traps all their attempts. Those handicapped by English spelling are:

- i. Children who are immigrants, socially disadvantaged, dull or retarded, sensorily handicapped, emotionally disturbed, and labelled 'dyslexic.'
- ii. Adults who are immigrants, drop-outs, or generally not coping, or labelling themselves 'dyslexic.'
- iii. Students overseas in countries where English is used as a medium of education (e.g. many developing African and Asian countries). What sort of non-aid are we giving them there?
- iv. Countries and peoples who need English as a second language, the common language in a linguistically diverse state, or in international affairs.

It is very difficult to learn to speak English unless you live in an English-speaking home, because English spelling prevents you learning from reading, as you can in many other languages once you have the basic sound-symbol correspondences.

There is a great deal of research evidence to show that English spelling is complicated, unreliable and misleading, and anyone who doubts that it is, or who quotes Chomsky or some other highly literate and theoretical pundit, can apply to this author for bibliographies.

Spelling also handicaps:-

- i. Bright children in primary school, who cannot read at their mental age level.
- ii. Primary teachers, who have to waste so much of their lives teaching English spelling-with so little obvious success - at the expense of what education should really be all about.
- iii. Teaching children to think-since if you encourage children to think, they refuse to learn silly spelling. You are asking them to submit to an irrational imposition of a stupid adult world. One reason why more boys than girls remain illiterate is that boys, even in Prep.

school, tend to be more independent and logical, and jib at what is obviously erratic or stupid.

The sociology of English spelling is a fascinating study, and includes aspects such as the Mandarin elite, spelling used as a mark of caste, as an initiation rite, as a sacred symbol, as a shibboleth, as an addictive habit, and as a symptom of resistance to social change.

There is also the radical swing to the opposite extreme - let's have no spelling rules, however sensible, and every-one spells as he likes. This would bedevil communication even further.

Precedents: Other countries have reformed their spelling, some radically, like Korea, Turkey and Russia; others simply moderated abuses, like Holland and Malaysia. China plans a phonetic spelling. They have not lost their culture or heritage or law and order, through spelling reform. (The letter killeth, the spirit giveth life.)

How can spelling be reformed? Even if this is a difficult, controversial question, it should be tackled. Change is inevitable, and the sooner the better. Change, or decay,

Recommendations:

1. Encourage and sponsor *experiment and research* in reformed spelling, including the use of sensible spellings as initial teaching media; paragraphs with 'double-decker' (dubl-dekr) spelling to familiarise the public, in the press; experiments with dubl-dekr spelling in public documents; etc. to aid poor readers (the good readers need not read what is strange to them). There is a precedent in the way notices, etc. are often printed in several languages. Add another spelling. (Cutting out unnecessary letters, replacing misleading ones, making vowels as sensible as is possible before a consistent vowel system is established)
2. Teachers of reading must make sure children do not think they are silly because they find spelling hard. Make clear from the start that some spelling is sensible, but some is silly. Children then often cheer up greatly and tackle the subject with more efficiency and hope.

B) Primer print

1. The fault is in the letters.

Children's reversal problems currently arouse tremendous fuss and efforts at remediation. All children face them at the beginning, and some continue failing into adulthood.

Why not change the problem instead of the children, by changing the letters? ,

Primer print, used to teach children to read, is designed to make the letters *all look as much alike as possible!* The idea is they will be easier to write, and look near - but it does make them harder to distinguish. I learnt to read in spite of reversal problems because I used the clue of the serifs on ordinary print like this - but primer print does not even have 'that. For too many letters, the only distinction is in direction, and that is a distinction most five year olds find hard to understand. Why not change'? - seeking individuality, not uniformity:

y g b d p q f i j l t h m n u o c e k r v w x z s - change to serif print with distinctiveness in every letter:

y g b d p q f i j l t h m n u o c e k r v w x z s - or even more so

C) See-and-say

Try learning even ten flash-cards with squiggles on yourself, and see how you forget one as you learn another, unless you have some clues about how to analyse and comprehend these squiggles. Children do need to learn some hopeless spellings as sight words, and some have difficulty with a purely phonic approach, but children at risk to failure usually find learning more than a few flash-

cards very hard, and if they are the first steps in reading, without guidance about how to memorise them, they may give up trying.

D) *Teaching and illiteracy*

No system of teaching reading is foolproof, because anything that can be done at all can be done badly.

However, there are some rather neglected psychological facts about learning that should be remembered.

1. Starting children before they are ready. Many children are ready to read by three, but some others do not seem 'developmentally ready' in spite of intelligence, until seven or even eight - and by that time they have built up such tremendous failure complexes that they seem permanently 'dyslexic.' Other children may be ready to read, but not to write, and suffer if they have to learn through writing.

Some 'solutions' sometimes make the problem worse, e.g., if you just 'wait until the child shows he is ready to learn' you may wait forever, if he is not given appropriate encouragement. (This problem needs more discussion.)

2. Until a skill is *overlearnt*, it is easily forgotten without continuing practice, well beyond first learning. Children often learn to read, and then forget again, without practice.

3. But going through the motions of practice and drill passively is not enough. Unless the children are excited and interested, and things go with a swing, you may even be setting up aversive conditioning by making them slog away.

4. Motivated children can learn *very very quickly* (like little boys discriminating makes of cars). Teachers usually under-estimate this, and then the children live down to their expectations. Once you have established that a child is ready to learn, get him learning as quickly as he can. If a child has developed emotional blocks, teachers must often use the running-jump technique to get him over his block before it has a chance to trap him.

5. The *best way to learn to read is by reading*, not by gimmicks, and reading what the child chooses, even if someone has to supply all the hard words. 'Word-games, etc. only add variety to the over-learning. When teachers read to children, let some look over your shoulder at the words and let some who would like it, see what they can make of any words in the book after you have read it aloud.

6. The mechanics of reading make a *skill like swimming*, and teachers can learn from sports coaches who teach beginners with system, efficiency and enthusiasm. They do not rely on discovery learning, any more than piano-teachers, for only a few children can make the necessary 'discoveries.' Too many children do not 'intuitively realise' like the textbooks say they do. The teacher must make sure that both she and the children know what the steps of reading are - rather than pottering round in a disorganized way hopefully saying you are being 'eclectic.' You aren't.

The skill of walking must be learnt the hard way before children are free to discover the world.

The skill of reading must be learnt the hard way before children are free to discover more worlds.

7. *Going at their own pace*. Without stimulus or encouragement, most people go slower than their own pace. Too many children underestimate themselves. We all can do more than we think we can.

V. Money and Facilities

a. *Fifth and last - in importance.*

1 While school buildings and equipment are needed, large sums do not ensure better teaching nor better learning.

2. Lincoln learned in a one-room log cabin - because he was motivated.

3. Money *is* needed to try out new ideas in teaching - to test these ideas in classroom experiments, and to *evaluate* the new methods (mediums) used in reaching.

VI. Is Reading Really Necessary?

You may read - yes, *read* - in the '*Harvard Educational Review*' and other journals, that it is not really necessary for everyone today to learn to read. Only a few need to, to keep society going. And you will hear many people, including teachers of reading, echoing this, and saying it does not matter if pupils do not learn to read, as long as they are happy and can communicate orally. (They say this because of their own inability to teach everybody to read.)

Reasons for needing reading:

1. It is impossible for a person to remember everything he needs to know today-and it is not always possible to find out things from non-written sources. Even when we simply have to push buttons on computer banks or T.V. storage, we will have to have some information-processing using symbols that is quicker than listening to the human voice and clearer than pictures.
2. So many ideas and feelings can be conveyed through the written word that cannot be communicated easily through other media. The reader can proceed at his own pace, pondering as he will, meeting the writer half way, so to speak. Ideas can be more logically set out, linear thinking is facilitated (and must always have a place to avoid an incoherent society), greater subtlety and precision is possible. The written word gives the individual a better chance of not being misunderstood.
3. Records of the past, records for present living, for teaching and learning, for further understanding, for technology, for making and doing.
4. Reading for leisure and pleasure and consolation. The book is so often, if it is a great book, more satisfying than a film because you can use it to make your own world.
5. Dimensions of living - more depth and breadth through poetry, philosophy, history, novels, religious writings, reading about the world around us. Certainly the other media also extend our dimensions of living - but why at the cost of this? Why give the senses their rightful place at the cost of more cerebral modes?
6. Getting around and surviving in the community requires ability to read signs, notices, instructions, documents. If you can't, you are relatively helpless, feel out of society, and if you are out of society, you are more likely to find yourself afoot of it. There is a *high correlation between illiteracy and delinquency*.
7. Oral communication is not an adequate substitute - and in any case, is improved if one can read.
8. The medium is the message. Consider the limitations of television or electrodes straight to the brain.

VII. Using Principles of Learning to Prevent Reading Failure in the Classroom

-Practical suggestions

Avoid teaching practices which may confuse or provoke children at risk to learning difficulties. M. D. Vernon, the doyenne of reading research, long ago concluded, 'The fundamental and basic characteristic of reading disability appears to be cognitive confusion and lack of system.' (*Backwardness in Reading*, C.U.P., 1957).

To the teacher:

If you cannot think of a good Learning-Principle reason for one of your present teaching practices, drop it, since you may be keeping the children quiet, but you won't be turning them on to reading. (e.g. why *should* children copy 'Nancy had nine pins' from the board?)

Try instead taking up one Learning Principle each week, and putting it into practice every way you can, to make sure you integrate it into your normal teaching-and evaluate the result. Write your own recipes for action - you know your own situation.

A) The Ways People Learn

1. *Intelligent learning*: deliberately trying to understand and learn. Motivation is essential, and children learn because:

- a. they fear consequences if they don't, or
- b. they enjoy rewards if they do, or
- c. they have learnt to enjoy learning as much as eating jollies.

They learn to enjoy learning because:

- a. natural curiosity has been encouraged, not squashed or distorted;
- b. they see adults, teachers, classmates, enjoying learning
- c. nothing succeeds like success, and they are succeeding. They have pleasant associations with learning.

2. *Conditioning*. (Reaction or dumb learning). Almost any animal without thinking learns to repeat behaviour that is rewarded *within seconds* in a particular situation, and to avoid behaviour that is punished *within seconds* in a particular situation.

Because of English spelling, a good deal of children's learning to read is through conditioning, and children with appropriate aptitudes learn to read quickly because they are quickly rewarded with success and approval-but the more children make mistakes under usual conditions, the more correction and pressure they receive. They tend to associate the correction with punishment and nervously continue to make mistakes and be confused through aversion conditioning.

B) Aspects of learning

1. *Chain-learning and structure*. 'Education is making connections.' You can learn far more if it is linked together than if it is in little bits. (e.g. a song can often be learnt in one go - but how long would it take to learn the words and notes all mixed up?)

Links for making learning easier can be:

Rhythm (a swinging beat for class recitation can be fun.)

Logic (it must be meaningful)

Revision ('overlearning' and linking past with present work)

Visual charts (each piece of work is related to the chart)

Wall displays of the curriculum that stay up all year.

The children's own books kept with each stage intact, instead of all thrown out or taken home and thrown out each day.

2. *Small children's learning*. Teachers usually under-estimate how much young children can learn because:

- a. Children learn very slowly what does not interest them, and very fast what does.
- b. Teachers concentrate too much on drill and repetition, without using chain-learning and advance-organizers. Children forget what they have learnt before if they do not have the books still with them.
- c. Children need to learn something in one stable structure as a 'core'. Presenting everything always in different and isolated forms and order is confusing for them.
- d. Many children switch off early because what they are given in learning to read is so far below their mental age.

- e. Teachers talk at small children, forgetting that many can only remember 3 'bits' at a time.
Cut up and link instructions, etc. e.g. final reading of a sentence to copy from the board:
you-can-make-a-cake
with-flour-eggs-butter
milk-and-sugar

Emphasise the rhythm for easier auditory memory and recital while copying.

- f. Incidental learning: Give children every opportunity to practise reading sentences even if you think they are too young - e.g. all handout work-pages should have sentences on them, whatever drawings, etc. there are also. Read the sentences slowly from the board, so children can hear you sound-blending, slowly the first time ('Any-one know what I said?') then faster and faster until everyone recognizes it, then perhaps slowly again.

When you read stories, always have two children looking over your shoulder to follow the words - and let children try to see what they can recognize from the book immediately afterwards.

Don't give children 'useless sentences' e.g. 'Mary has a red ball,' but something useful to know or stimulating to think: 'The sun is a ball of fire.'

Words are best learnt and used in context rather than in flash-cards or games that do not use chain-learning.

3. Characteristics of poor learners:

1) Poor listening skills

- a) Short-term memory. Many prep. children can remember only one statement at a time. Two statements and they forget both. Upper grades may be a little better. When teaching important lessons, remember this: chaining associations and structured learning are better than giving bits and pieces. These children do not learn language 'by being bathed in it,' they tune out under the verbiage. They learn by being talked with, not at.
- b) Figure-ground discrimination. Many children require a quiet background to bear the lesson, because they cannot discriminate significant sound in the presence of other noise, although no hearing defect is found by the usual screening. Many classrooms today give them little chance.

2) *Poor visual skills.* Again figure-ground discrimination is often a major problem, as well as learning to blank out too much transitory visual stimuli. These children can't work out how to remember letters and words; they have to be given specific teaching on how to observe cues to help them, i.e. meaning is more important than drill for memory. More than a few flashcards are hope- less, and rooms full of visual stimulation like Victorian drawing-rooms are confusing, particularly when often changed.

3) *Rapid forgetting.* Teachers assume that once something is learnt, it is not forgotten - as if adults too remembered all they learnt. These children become unnerved as well as punished because they seem to learn one day, forget the next. Variability of capacity is only one factor - there is also:

- a) Poor attention in the first place. They don't expect to remember, and many are so 'pushed' by adults they tend to expect the adult to make the effort for them completely. The skilled teacher teaches how to learn. She knows how to vary her teaching to suit the learnability of the child. Drill and repetition are just tedious parroting otherwise.
- b) Overstimulation. Multimodality and multi-gimmick experiences can confuse these children. The best way to learn a skill is to practice using it enjoyably and with meaning, e.g. reading and re-reading a favourite book, rather than playing games or reading and re- reading a tedious reader.
- c) Need for explicit structure. Don't expect him to intuitively extract what is meaningful from the 'bombardment of stimuli' and 'enrichment' indiscriminately provided 'throwing books and children together.' He can remember structured, clear material in a stable

context better - e.g. let him get used to letters in one sequence, to learn them by association, before jumbling them up. Keep key charts of previous work on the wall.

d) Long-term memory. End each day with a two-minute revision of 'what we learnt today,' begin with a two-minute review of 'what we learnt yesterday,' do the same at the beginning of the week, the term, and the year. Make it a snappy game, not a tedious over-haul.

Do not let children destroy what they do each day. Encourage a record of work that continues from year to year even, so they can see their own progress. Poor work only points up how much better they can do tomorrow, rather than shame for today.

- 4) *Unlikely to 'transfer training.'* It is better to teach him directly what he needs to learn, than something else hoping he will transfer the principles. Much 'pre-reading' teaching practice assumes transfer of training too easily.
 - 5) *Rigidity.* Can't unlearn bad habits once learnt. Prevent these children from learning in the first place to form letters awkwardly, hold a pencil clumsily, look at words as unanalysable wholes, spend lessons pottering or winning battles with the teacher.
 - 6) *Distractibility.* Another reason to have uncluttered, unchaotic classrooms.
 - 7) *Short attention-span.* It is an art to train these children to gradually extend their attention span through interesting fast-moving activities at first, while still giving maximum opportunities to those able to keep going longer.
 - 8) *Poor powers of generalisation.* They find it hard to develop 'band-width' in matching, so they need help in categorising not-quite similar sounds or letters.
 - 9) *Poor pencil skills.* Tracing and copying help here, even though dogmatic art teachers may deplore it. Children are often better doctors than the teachers in deciding what size paper, what size writing, whether lines or no lines, help them best, and should be allowed their choice, even though it may vary from time to time.
 - 10) *Poor organizing ability.* Their books are soon a mess. Teachers can often mark 'beginning points' in books, to prevent chaos.
 - 11) *Scanning difficulties.* They lose their place in a book easily. Let them have 'scanning cards,' and have scanning games finding words and letters in books they must scan properly.
 - 12) *Unrealistic ambition.* Particularly in a competitive atmosphere, these children will give up and fail outstandingly. Progress, trying, 'sportsmanship' when they are not succeeding, and willingness to be mediocre rather than a failure, are qualities to be encouraged in the class ethos.
 - 13) *Readily giving up.* This is encouraged not only by parents' and teachers' conscious or unconscious messages that the child is hopeless, but also by teaching practices that
 - a) Encourage confusion (unsequenced lessons, cluttered or disorderly classrooms, pottering, no revision or revision done in a tedious way that children tune out).
 - b) Give the message that the task is endless. Children can be overwhelmed rather than stimulated by 'thousands and thousands of books,' by the prospects of dozens of dull little reading books to read through one after the other, by the tremendous array of audio-visual equipment assembled to teach him reading. 'It must be a terrible task,' he thinks. Such a child would be better off learning to read under a gumtree with a stick in the dust.
- (Note: Many primary teachers too, are currently overwhelmed by notions of how complicated and technical a task it is to teach reading and they dare not try. They can't follow all the learned literature and are far too impressed by it. They need modelling experience of how to teach reading in their own classroom rather than a lot of theory they bewail they cannot put into practice.)
- 14) *Invidious comparisons.* The child with learning difficulties looks at the child who has no problems, and gives up, particularly if he is put into a lower group. Yet the 'brighter' children can be used as encouraging pace-makers and helpful colleagues when a classroom is the model of a mutual-help community. It often helps a child with difficulties when he is set to teach a younger child, and learns by teaching.

15) *Anxiety*. It is extremely anxiety-arousing to be failing at school. Help children to understand their limitations and be willing to fight against them, e.g. if children are recognised to be variable from day to day, there can be less hassle on the 'bad days' because you and they have an understanding that on 'good days' they will work like blazes.

Children should also know that you know that as they grow older, they will be able to do what they cannot do now; they are not hopeless.

4. *Prevention is better than Remediation.*

a. *Preventing confusion from the start.*

1. 'Children can learn to read by any method' does not mean they will learn without any method or that all will learn by the same method. A systematic, flexible program is necessary.
2. Try for 'open-ended' programs, which ensure that every child understands the first very simple step, while challenging others to use their initiative.
3. Ensure that children have techniques about how to do things, e.g. *how* to remember letters, what cues to look for, how to form letters, how to hold a pencil, etc.
4. Tell the children what it's all about. Explain and keep a chart on the wall showing learning plans for the year.
5. Put up a large attractive clear alphabet, spelling and number charts on the wall, and relate all basic skill work to the appropriate part of the chart, so children realise there is some structure and get the idea of it.
6. Relate one day's work to the next, one term's work to the next, and co-operate with the other grades, so there is proper revision and continuity.
7. Take each child quickly through the basic steps of the basic skills, to fill any gaps. (Change of schools wrecks many children).

b. *Preventing habits and attitudes of failure.*

1. juggle groups, if any, so that in a week everyone has been in the top and the bottom, so mobility remains possible and no one feels permanently bottomed. Use mixed-ability groups often, with children helping each other.
2. Give all children practice in reading books they like that are not too hard for them, in which *they* run the show, pencil-pointing to all words they want read for them, rather than adults pushing them along, demanding they try and criticising their mistakes.
3. Keep records of what they do, so they can keep improving on it.
4. Rewards for progress, rather than for competitive achievement, and for trying, even if mistakes are made.
5. Many children have personalities that prefer to fail outstandingly if they can't shine at the top. Help them to be prepared to be mediocre at the start. Role-plays can help.

5. *Motivation.*

a. *The first lesson-learning to want to read.*

1. Ensure all children have experience of being read stories they like in an affectionate, individual situation, looking on the book. (With the help of teachers' aides, other children, parents, etc.)
2. Let children choose books to learn to read from, even from hard books and help them with the hard words. Let them help buy library and class books.
3. Many 'SLD' children are overwhelmed by 'so much to read, too much.' A few really good, popular books in the classroom are better than piles of trivia.
4. Try to ensure that every child finds a favourite book to read and re-read, and possibly be given at the end of the year.
5. Encourage parents to read and talk about books with children, e.g. at bed-time, picture books for babies from one year on.
6. Let the school encourage parents to read, as examples to their children.

6. Conclusion. Putting ideas into practice.

Teachers can be overwhelmed as well as pupils. Practise one untried recommendation each day, or week, to fix it securely in your teaching in the most appropriate way for you, rather than attempting the lot at once and within a term finding yourself back to square one, 'disillusioned' and 'browned-off' saying, 'It's asking too much of a poor classroom teacher.'

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Text of policy statement on spelling reform of the Victorian Action Committee Against illiteracy, VACAI, an organization originating from the concern of parent and teacher organizations about illiteracy problems. The statement was prepared after 3 months' active study and discussion, at the request of the Victorian technical teachers' union seeking guidelines for its own attitude. (Aug. 1975).

"The difficulties of English spelling are a major handicap for many learners, particularly those already facing other handicaps. On consideration of the evidence so far before it, VACAI emphatically points out that we consider the basic cause of illiteracy to lie in the injustices of our economic system, and that spelling reform in our society could become a diversion in the fight against illiteracy.

However, we have arrived at the following conclusions:

- a) Modification of the irregularities of English spelling is both desirable and possible.
- b) The modification proposed (Spelling Reform 1) is in line with the way spelling has changed in the past, and if given a trial, could either point the way to further reforms, or demonstrate its impracticability.
- c) As the meeting-place of English and American spelling, Australia is in a unique position to pioneer.
- d) In the current climate of change, a unilateral modification such as SR-1 is likely to be taken up, once the way has been led.
- e) There is some evidence that the opposition to reform by some of the more literate and vocal sections of the community is not shared by the public, particularly the less literate.

However, caution is still required. There are still questions to ask and problems to be overcome

.....

"While favourable to spelling reform and open-minded in its encouragement of research -and experimentation, VACAI does not at present regard the promotion of reform as part of our mandate in our fight against illiteracy.

VACAI therefore recommends that for a two-year period:

1. Research, experimentation and investigation in spelling and spelling reform should be actively encouraged by all concerned with illiteracy.
2. Teachers and the public generally should become familiar with the issues.
3. Students, teachers and members of the public generally who choose to try SR-1 (spelling the short 'e' sound with 'e.' as in 'bet') should not be penalised; i.e. that dual spellings be permitted, as they are in many words already in dictionaries.

A review of the situation and of the conclusions of research and investigation is then called for in 1977."

Comments by Harry Lindgren in *Spelling Action*, Oct. 1975

Conclusions a to e are entirely to our taste, and so are the last two recommendations. As for the first, we've already had research, experimentation and investigation by the shipload, getting us

nowhere. We don't need it to find out *how* to carry out spelling reform. What we do need is to find a means of putting it across.

As for conclusion *e*, I'm happy to find others who share my opinion in this matter, undeterred by the avalanche of opposition to the ATF resolution released by the Press. What of it? At present a society opposed to metrication is collecting signatures by the thousands, all to no avail. It would be the same if they got signatures by the hundred thousand, for metrication is right, the authorities know it, and aren't going to be put off. Spelling reform deserves the same attitude by the Government.

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[Spelling Reform Anthology §13.8 pp191,192,196]
[Spelling Progress Bulletin Winter 1975 pp11,12,16]

Illiteracy. Is English Spelling a Significant Factor? by Marjorie Chaplin.

[See [web page](#)]

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[Spelling Reform Anthology §7.7 pp119-122]
[Spelling Progress Bulletin Winter 1975 pp13-16]

Spelling and Parliament, by William J. Reed.

[See [web page](#)]

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[Spelling Progress Bulletin Winter 1975 pp17,18]

The Study of Speech Sounds, by Emmett Albert Betts, Ph.D., LL.D.*

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One major problem confronted by teachers, especially in beginning reading, is inconsistency in spellings to represent speech sounds. This inconsistency vitiates the teaching of both phonic and spelling rules.

The prediction of pronunciations from spellings is made more hazardous by these idiosyncracies:

- 1 Redundant letters, as *b* in *lamb*,
2. Ligatured symbols in printing, as *fi* in *find*, often used in beginning reading materials,
3. Significant differences in letter shapes, as the capital and lower case letters in printing and in manuscript and cursive writing,
4. Contractions, as the one-syllable *he's* and the two-syllable *isn't*,
5. Homographs, as *read* /red/, /rEd/,
6. Logographs - also called ideographs and word-signs - as the ampersand (&, £, &, \$, ¢,)
7. Vagaries of digraphs, representing both vowel and consonant sounds, as in *th(ou)ght*, *ab(ou)t*, *r(ou)gh* and *sc* in *scent* and *scale*,
8. Syllable and phrase stress, as the unstressed /'n/ or /nd/ for *and*, and other function words,

The above abridged list can be extended *ad nauseam*, but it serves to spotlight the dilemma of teachers and reformers of orthography - and the frustration of learners, especially beginners in reading. It also validates the need to legitimize phonics via some type of spelling reform - an initial teaching medium or all-out spelling reform.

The chief purpose of this discussion is to suggest devices for testing sounds of speech in *isolated* words, i.e., side-stepping the issue of *phrase* stress. For this discussion an assumption is made: the vowel sound is the crucial element in a syllable, bounded by consonant sounds, as in *at* and *look*. One of the hazards in testing speech sounds is the tyro's attempt to say consonant sounds in isolation from the preceding (e.g., *i(t)*) or succeeding (e.g., *(s)ay*) vowel sound.

Sounds in Isolation

All speech sounds can be produced in isolation by competent phoneticians. But speech sounds produced in isolation tend to be distorted, especially in length and/or stress. The first consonant sound in *fit*, for example, may be produced in isolation, but it is usually prolonged, or lengthened, by the unsophisticated. The vowel sound in *fit* may be said in isolation, but it tends to be made longer than in conversational speech. On the other hand, the uninitiated tend to add a neutral sound to plosive consonants - the first sounds of *pit-bit*, *lip-dip*, *cat-go*; hence the sound represented by *p* in the word *pat* is given the distorted pronunciation *puh/'pa/*.

Beginners, however, can get the feel of certain speech sounds by prolonging them:

1. Vowels may be prolonged, as the /a/ of *cat*, /e/ of *get*, /i/ of *sit*, /ā/ of *not*, and the /ə/ of *but*. Of course, diphthongs cannot be prolonged; instead a succession of two sounds is said as /o/-/i/ for /oi/ of *boil*.
2. Consonants may be prolonged, as the /f/ of *fife*, /th/ of *thin*, /th/ of *them*, /s/ of *bus*, /z/ of *buzz*, /sh/ of *fish*, and the /zh/ of *vision*. Of course, plosives, e.g., /p/ of *pop*, /b/ of *bob*, /t/ of *hat*, /d/ of *bud*, cannot be prolonged; attempts to do so usually produce a consonant plus a neutral vowel, as /pə/ for /p/.

Minimal Pairs (Contrastive)

One of the best devices for the study of speech sounds is the contrast of minimal pairs, as *pit* and *bit*. These pairs differ only in one sound, as the /p/ of *pit* and the /b/ of *bit*.

Pronounce these pairs of words to contrast the different sounds in each one:

| Consonants | Consonants | Vowels | Vowels |
|---------------------|-------------------|-------------------|------------------|
| <i>vat-fat</i> | <i>zip-sip</i> | <i>set-seat</i> | <i>took-tuck</i> |
| <i>bat-bad</i> | <i>gave-cave</i> | <i>fit-feat</i> | <i>know-gnaw</i> |
| <i>dip-tip</i> | <i>back-batch</i> | <i>fail-feel</i> | <i>hock-hawk</i> |
| <i>junk-chunk</i> | <i>catch-cash</i> | <i>food-feud</i> | <i>tie-toy</i> |
| <i>teeth-teethe</i> | <i>kin-king</i> | <i>boost-bust</i> | <i>come-gum</i> |
| <i>wail-whale</i> | <i>face-phase</i> | <i>fool-full</i> | |

In each sentence below one word is italicized. What other would make a minimal pair with it?

Modern music covers a multitude of *dins*.

One's brain is no stronger than its weakest *think*.

Do you remember when Mother's meals were carefully *thought-out* instead of thawed-out?

A glutton's idea of living is *whining* and dining.

A wolf is a guy who whistles while he *lurks*.

Dissent at the cheese factory is a parting of the *wheys*.

Inspiration is the birth of a *notion*.

A holiday rush to Florida is a *clime* wave.

Diets are for people who are *thick* and tired of it.
 A bathing beauty is a girl worth *wading for*.
 A bonehead is one who is *marrow* minded.
 A dog rescued from a city pound gets a new *leash* on life.

Pronounce each of the following types of minimal pairs to contrast the articulations and sounds of distinctive phonemes.

1. Minimal pairs:- different first sounds:

| | | | |
|-------------|-------------|-----------|------------|
| bet-pet | sit-pit | dip-tip | then-pen |
| first-burst | thin-tin | go-no | ten-den |
| how-cow | vine-fine | love-dove | we-me |
| man-pan | witch-pitch | not-got | whole-pole |
| red-said | yet-get | show-so | zoo-Sue |

2. Minimal pairs:- different vowel (and diphthong) sounds:

| | | | |
|-----------|------------|----------|-----------|
| all-ill | sit-suit | at-it | swim-swam |
| it-ate | not-note | pat-put | putt-put |
| bend-band | cut-coat | get-gate | cull-cool |
| pull-pall | third-thud | seat-sit | alms-aims |

3. Minimal pairs:- different last sounds:

| | | | |
|-----------|-----------|------------|--------------|
| cab-catch | rub-rut | cat-cap | hug-hull |
| ash-at | sing-sin | cat-cash | leaf-leave |
| had-has | five-fife | pat-patch | clothe-close |
| pile-pipe | done-dumb | buzz-bus | ache-ate |
| lick-lip | big-bill | mend-meant | had-hat |
| ham-had | | cut-cup | |

In this presentation of speech sounds, use is made of *minimal* pairs of words to contrast sounds and their articulations. In the pair *pat*/'pat/- *bat*/'bat/, the contrast between the initial sounds /p/ and /b/ makes the difference between the two words. In the pair *bat*/'bat/ and *bet*/'bet/, the contrast between the sounds /a/ and /e/ makes the difference between the two pairs significant, or distinctive. In the pair *cap*/'kap/ and *cat*/'kat/, the contrast between the final sounds differentiates between the two words. In short, a minimal pair is made of two words differing in only one speech sound.

Say each pair of words to decide which sounds are in contrast:

| | | |
|-------------|-----------|---------------|
| at-ate | bat-boat | wrote-rot |
| fence-pence | knew-know | breed-breathe |

Find a word in the right-hand column to make a minimal pair with each word in the left-hand column:

| | |
|------|-------|
| dame | rice |
| lice | lair |
| met | young |
| rare | mat |
| rid | name |
| rung | lid |

| | |
|-------|-------|
| seal | rob |
| job | cool |
| sack | sight |
| tool | sag |
| view | few |
| white | zeal |

What other word can be contrasted with each word below to make a minimal pair?

| | |
|-------|-------|
| go | race |
| taste | too |
| rail | veil |
| rung | sight |

Phonic Countdown

Another device for the study of speech sounds, especially the relationship between letters and sounds, is the phonic countdown. The following countdown is achieved by saying only the part of the word which is underlined:

| | | |
|------|-------|------|
| v at | t ook | t op |
| vat | too k | top |
| vat | took | top |
| vat | took | top |
| vat | took | top |

The above countdown has these advantages:

First, the whole word is pronounced and heard, both before and after the identification of the vowel sound.

Second, the vowel-consonant, or rhyming part, is identified first because rhymes are more easily heard than other parts of the word.

Third, saying the vowel-consonant (e.g., va of v at) part of the word in isolation provides a perceptual "set" for saying and hearing the vowel sound.

Fourth, the consonant is always tied to the vowel of the word, minimizing or eliminating the distortion of consonant sounds - as in *hot*, *what* and *tap*, where the articulation of the vowel is anticipated by the articulation of the initial consonant.

The chief disadvantage of this technique is that the vowel sound tends to be distorted by lengthening when it is pronounced in isolation. Speech is not the production of a succession of consonant and vowel sounds, operating independently. Instead, speech is a rhythmical flow of sound - with an over-all intonation, or melody, pattern - with relationships between them in a continuous state of flux. But, in general, charts of vowel sounds are based on isolated, prolonged production of them.

Nonsense Syllables

Another device is the use of nonsense syllables to study consonant and vowel sounds, as /ki/, /kī/, /ko/ and *kip*, *kipe*, *kau*. Since these are nonsense syllables, the attention is focused on the sounds rather than the meanings.

To study consonant sounds, a given consonant may be combined with a number of vowels, e.g., /ba/, /bā/, /bo/, /bi/, /bī/, /be/, /bē/, or /ab/, /ob/, /ib/, /īb/.

To study vowels, combine them with different consonants, e.g., /bē/, /dē/, /fē/, /gē/, /jē/ or /ēb/, /ēd/, /ēf/, /eg/, /ēj/.

Tests of Nasalization

In English, there are three nasal sounds:

| Sound | Key Word |
|-------|----------|
| /m/ | mum |
| /n/ | none |
| /ng/ | sing |

Most sounds of English are oral; that is, the soft palate (velum) is raised to prevent the breath from passing through the nose. This fact may be tested by saying /a/ or /o/ and using a mirror to observe the raising of the soft palate.

The nasals /m/, /n/, /ng/, however, are made by *partial* closing of the velum so that some of the breath escapes through the nose.

1. Prolong the sound /m/ to note:
 - a. The partial raising of the soft palate,
 - b. The closing of the lips.
2. Prolong the sound /n/ to note:
 - a. The partial raising of the soft palate,
 - b. Pressing the tongue against the gums.
3. Prolong the sound of /ng/ to note:
 - a. The partial raising of the tongue,
 - b. The humping of the back of the tongue against the palate.

Another test of nasalization of /m/, /n/, /ng/ may be made by using (1) a small card (about 2x3 inches) and (2) a cold piece of glass or small mirror:

1. Hold the card horizontally against the upper lip.
2. Against the opposite side of the card, hold the cold piece of glass so that one-half is below the card and one-half is above the card.
3. Prolong the sounds /m/, /n/, and /ng/. For each of these sounds, the breath moisture will appear on the upper part of the card - in front of the nose.
4. Prolong the sounds /a/ and /o/. For each of the sounds, the moisture will appear on the lower part of the card - in front of the mouth.

In Summary

Four tests of speech sounds are suggested:

1. Minimal pairs of words to *contrast* the different sounds of a whole word.
2. Phonics countdown to study the relationships between sounds and letters.
3. Nonsense syllables to focus attention on *sounds* of words rather than their meanings - a most revealing test of skill in applying phonic skills to regularly spelled syllables.
4. Production of nasal sounds, using a mirror to observe effects.

Our Readers Write Us

Who shall start spelling reform?

Dear Mr. Tune:

C. P. Moore

It is obvious to me now that if English spelling is to be reformed, the job will have to be done by one of the two main English-speaking nations. Britain or the USA. Small English speaking nations such as New Zealand, Australia, Canada and South Africa feel that even if they introduced an excellent type of reformed spelling, it is most likely that they would simply be ignored by the rest of the world. As for foreigners, they would never think of asking strangers to reform the spelling of their language and they would regard it as an impertinence if others offered to do the job for them. Therefore such a suggestion that they should do the job for English from a person like myself is received with some wonderment and reserve, and goes no further,

The Afrikaans section in South Africa has just celebrated the centenary of the birth of their language as a written language, and 40,000 people visited the small town of Paarl (Pearl) in the Cape Province to do this. People who love their language as much as this simply cannot understand the deadly apathy which prevails in the USA and Britain regarding spelling reform, and they feel that if the Americans or the British cannot bestir themselves to reform their own messy spelling, then what hope has an outsider of doing it? No. we have to wake up the people living in either Britain or the USA if we hope to get anywhere with spelling reform!

Your issue of Summer, 1975 of SPB was excellent for the way it explained the manner in which spelling reform should be tackled, and the pitfalls. We can be thankful that we have someone as persistent and pertinacious as you are, and (I do believe that in the end we will win through.

Last month a small item appeared in our local paper about an experiment now being conducted in Britain, in which about a dozen systems of English spelling reform will be competing in selected schools. Only one system was mentioned, which was Torskript. The paper did not go into details, but no doubt this will be reported in your SPB in due course, from which I will then be able to get details.

For years our local paper has spelled Jail as Gaol, and only too often has misspelled it as goal. It was only when I drew their attention several times to this fact and pointed out that it is spelled jail in the USA, which has a population of over 200 million people as compared with only 50 million in Britain, that they finally decided to adopt the simpler spelling of Jail.

I feel that the main reason that spelling reform will come about is the fact that the modern school child has so much to cope with in keeping up with the enormous accumulation of knowledge in our technological societies of today, that he (or she) simply does not have the time to study every English word as though it were a Chinese hieroglyph. There are also the distractions of such things as television, which leave little time for reading, from which one learns to spell, and the only satisfactory way that I know of to learn it. The result is that the modern generation are very poor spellers, even when they have passed out of university. These people will not be satisfied to put up with our chaotic spelling indefinitely, and will demand something better - that is what I feel, but they need a publication like yours to show them it can be done.

There is also the great number of newly manufactured words like DACRON, for instance. Is it Dak-ron, or Day-cron, or Dak-rin or Day-crin? One cannot get the pronunciation of such words from the dictionary, so it is just so much guesswork.

Today it is not only our employees that are frustrated by our chaotic spelling, but the employers as well. It is very difficult to find a typist who can spell or in need, consult a dictionary. When I was young, we were promptly sacked if we did not come up to scratch, but now it is no use sacking an employee - the replacement is no better. Taking all these facts together, it means that our system of orthodox spelling no longer works, and we will be forced to reform our spelling to suit modern needs, or retrogress and let others surpass us.

Despite sanctions, Rhodesia continues to prosper, and we have little to complain about. Tourists are surprised to find that life here is just as normal as anywhere else, and that the people are happy here, and that the situation is not at all as pictured by the lying propaganda in overseas newspapers. It would not help me to try to put you in the picture-it suffices to say that the grass is no greener elsewhere than in Rhodesia and people who leave, generally return. We merely have to look at the chaos in Angola to realise how well off we are.

Yours sincerely, C. R. M.

-o0o-

The two sides of the coin:

Mrs. Raymond Rubicam, Pres.,
Reading Reform Foundation,

Harvie Barnard

I believe we have a mutual friend in Mrs. Marian Hinds of Rochester, N.Y., who several years ago taut in the same school system as I, prior to my retirement.

Marian has sent me copies of the Reading Reform Informer, which I enjoyed reading, especially the articles by Jenken L. Jones and Samual L. Blumenfeld. Not only do I thoroely agree with all they have sed, but also with their basic filosofies which at essentially lojical and consistent.

At this point my curiosity is deeply aroused! I have often wondered, and still do, if the proponents of progress and reform in the teaching of reading have given thaut and lojical consideration to the matter of speling as a fundamental factor in the teaching of reading, - or perhaps I should say, in the teaching of *literacy*, for as I understand it, while reading is basic, it is "one side of the coin" of the two fundamental "R's."

Perhaps you may be familiar with George Riemer's highly thautful book, *How They Murdered the Second R*, which is mainly an expose of why most people ar illiterate as far as writing is conserved? He feels pretty much toward the IRA as does Blumenfeld, except that he goes a step further and recommends that writing be given the same emfasis as reading.

You at also, I would presume, acquainted with the speling reform movement in Australia which is being successfully advanced by Harry Lindgren under the initials, SR-1, which is used in this letter, along with some innovations of mine.

Do you happen to be acquainted with Newell W. Tune, Editor of SPB? Tune, Lindgren, Riemer and meny others have recognized traditional speling (T.O.) as a major road-block to literacy. Also, as you undoubtedly know, for at least 75 years most - if not all - of the progressive leaders in linguistics have advocated a new fonetic alfabet, or a revision of speling, using the present Roman alfabet with a few modifications.

Perhaps, Mrs. Rubicam, you are shocked by my frequent reversion from traditional spelling to certain simplifications? The idea in this is that spelling is primarily for the purpose of communication, and to implement the conveyance or transfer of concepts and ideas from one to another, not to display a subservient memory for spelling.

In any case, I look forward to hearing from you and to know you look upon literacy with respect to its dual nature.

Also I am extremely interested in knowing what your feelings would be toward the teaching of phonics if our spelling was permitted to be: 1) more nearly phonetic, or 2) truly and completely phonetic.
Yours most sincerely, H. B.

-o0o-

Discussion on Teaching Techniques

Mr. Harvie Barnard:

Mrs. Raymond Rubicam

Your interesting letter regarding simplified spelling came yesterday and I hasten to send a brief reply.

The damage which the sight-memorization techniques have done to our children is colossal. Our tutors find that English is so much simpler to learn than our first graders have been allowed to know. One small child who was a first grade failure, copping out in January of grade one, looked up to our tutor after only a few lessons in intensive phonics, and as the skills became apparent to him he said joyfully, "Is THIS all there is to it?" and proceeded to learn to read with speed and accuracy. Another said to his mother (letter enclosed), "It makes more sense this way!" Children make such lovely replies.

I like best the definition of reading by a four and a half year old. She was the daughter of Dorothy Taft Watson, author of *Listen and Learn with Phonics*. She had wandered in and out of her grandmother's nursery school and kindergarten, and was reading before anyone noticed she was taking it all in. When, asked how such a young person could read so WELL, she answered the neighbor, "The words just SAY themselves to me, and *I couldn't stop them if I wanted to.*"

We believe that teaching out language has been almost destructively perverted by the current basal reading techniques. You may note that in California the Fallbrook School System was TOPS on the Calif. State Testing Program - attaining a 99% rating at third grade level. (And with Dick and Jane type readers, a school was lucky to be at fifth stanine norm!)

We don't hold that English has NO problems, but so does many a language which is rich in borrowed vocabulary. Everyone always mentions *rough* and *tough* as examples of horrors. But the child LOVES to learn that William couldn't pronounce Anglo-Saxon gutturals, but kept the spelling and changed the pronunciation. Simple enough to teach! And it encourages such interest in language.

Yes, we know Mr. Tune. He was on a panel at one of our San Francisco Conferences, and has printed some research by Mary Johnson, and a research program at Arizona State U. which was very revealing about children's spelling habits. (Sight vs. phonics caught - even though formal spelling was removed from the phonics reading class, they came out 17½ to 1, out of 26 word testing.)

However, the task is almost impossible to totally remake a language so advanced as ours. I would not want all the orthographical changes suggested, as they offend the eye and mind as much as the

borrowed "demons" offend the spelling reformers. I prefer personally the attitudes expressed in the book by Dr. Links *On Writing, Reading, and Dyslexia*. The article in the last Conference Report by Claire Thomas is getting much attention. The Massachusetts Teachers Assoc. has asked permission to reprint it.

Teachers do not know much about our language. We are delighted that the MTA will present some of these facts to their teachers.

Marian is having quite a battle in the Rochester area to bring some sense to the teaching of reading and the teaching of teachers. Over ten years ago a phonetic system was installed in Nathaniel Rochester School #3, a black school, and their testing went above the norm for the first time in history. Unfortunately, Dr. Sheldon visited the school, insulted the principal, (according to the handwritten account I have sent to me by the first grade teacher), told the teacher she was doing it all wrong, and persuaded the reading supervisor to have the phonetic system taken out! AFTER TWO YEARS of proving these black children could read as well as their white counterparts, they destroyed the opportunity. The principal retired, and his blast is enclosed. NOW THEY ARE ASKING HIM TO COME BEFORE THE BOARD AND TELL THEM WHAT IS WRONG WITH THEIR READING PROGRAM. TEN YEARS TOO LATE. The same thing happened in Boston - which fortunately went back to phonics again, due to their drastically failing scores after they took out phonics, and let each teacher teach in any way she was "comfortable."

We will have to stick with the teaching of pupils through phonics. The important and ONLY real block is the *teaching of teachers at colleges of education*. I do not blame the publishers as much as the professors. Publishers will publish what will SELL, and *who trains the teachers to demand Dick and Jane, or Houghton Mifflin, or Harper & Row, rather than Open Court and Lippincott as basals, or strong supplementary phonics with what they must teach?* The vested interest and royalty checks have a powerful sway!

Hastily, but NOT brief, sincerely, Mrs. R. Rubicam.

-o0o-

Continuing the Discussion

Dear Mrs. Rubicam:

Newell Tune

Will you agree that phonics would be easier to teach if used in conjunction with a phonetic spelling such as Pitman's i.t.a. or World English or some sort of a simplification of the 500 commonest words-which must be taught to beginners? Of course, we agree that phonics is a more desirable means of instruction than Look-n-say, but phonics is largely useful when used with regular or phonetically spelt words. Sooner or later, the teacher of reading must introduce irregularly spelt words. Surely you realize that this slows down the pupil's learning and burdens him with an intolerable load of variations to learn. Wouldn't it be a lot easier for him if every word he encounters can be sounded out once he learns the sound associated with each symbol.

While it is true now that we must eventually introduce the pupil to irregular spellings so long as we have to learn T.O., isn't it desirable that we eventually adopt a system of simplified spelling so that future pupils do not have to go thru the trouble of learning all the irregularities of English spelling? Out present adults would not have to relearn how to read - for the time it would take them to be accustomed to the new spelling, duplicate books could be printed in T.O. so long as there was a demand for them. Experience with parents of i.t.a.-taught children has shown that parents can assimilate this system readily and easily without formal education.

I do not think that it is the basal readers that is the culprit in the failure to teach reading. It is the spelling system! If these same basal readers were printed in a consistent, reliable spelling, the pupils would learn phonics from the consistent spelling. Every time a child saw a certain symbol (letter or digraf), the pupil would soon come to realize that symbol meant that sound. Dr. Downing used this technique in his experiment in London and got very gratifying results, besides a wealth of confirming data. He, along with the Bullock Committee, came to the unequivocal conclusion: that our irregular spelling is one of the most important causes of difficulties in learning to read. Don't you agree? Or are you going to insist that all future generations continue to learn your spelling simply because of the blood, sweat and tears you put into learning it? And continue to think that the harder it is to acquire knowledge the more it is appreciated.

On one thing we do agree.- that the Teachers' Colleges are the seat of the trouble - they are reluctant to change from Look-n-say. But now they call it by another name: the Global or experience method, indirect or intrinsic phonics - anything to get away from the discredited name - Look-n-say.

-o0o-

Letter to the Editor. *The Tasmanian Journal of Education.*

Dear Sir: You no doubt have heard much of spelling reform. The guiding principle is phonetic spelling.

There are always critics of reform. In this case some have conveniently overlooked facts. There are only two definite principles in SR 1. The immediate goal is the use of 'e' as in 'bet' for all such short 'e' vowel sounds. This is relatively simple.

The other principle is that reforms are to be assimilated one step at a time. Each reform will be thoroughly examined beforehand and its effects examined afterwards.

There are more difficult reforms such as those complicated by divergence of pronunciation from country to country or by divergence of related words (signature and sign). These problems may take some time to resolve. The various supporters of reform are not in agreement. Where they disagree reform will be postponed.

The proposers of reform are reaching out for support in all English-speaking countries, not Australia alone. Nor will Australia try to go it alone. Australia is not the leader but is serious.

There are some 'brilliant' criticisms of spelling reform. Some of them attack the proposers on no more basis than supposition or ignorance of previous articles and books. Maybe critics are trying to score.

I certainly give credit to Mr. Thomas for putting his ideas forward. It is a pity the critics can't use their intellect to give ideas on the reform instead of spending hours writing brilliant attacks asking questions already answered elsewhere.

This is considerably emphasised when critics write such as, 'I would like to make clear that I would not object to the *idea of* reformed spelling, but...'

If these people can show wizardry in posing questions, let them use their intellect to find the answers.

Trevor Johnstone, Devonport, T.

*Condensed from *Spelling Action*, Oct. 1975, p. 2.