Arguments are different, but

NEW ANTI-PHONICS IS SAME OLD LOOK-SAY

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The old anti-phonics movement, which prevailed as the leading authority over reading instruction at least into the 1960's, believed that the teaching of phonics should be delayed and taught in an incidental and indirect manner. It was recommended that phonics be taught only when the teacher sensed that a child had some demonstrated need for it in word recognition.

It is obvious that this older form of opposition to the intensive teaching of phonics is significantly different from that held by the leaders of the new anti-phonics crusade. These present-day detractors of phonics teaching call such instruction "a potential and powerful method of interfering in the process of learning to read" (1:184). Through phonics teaching, they maintain, "the child will be hindered from learning to read" (2:446). Any kind of phonics teaching at any grade level "is at best a peripheral concern" for the reading teacher, they conclude (3:627).

If phonics instruction is to be abandoned, how do today's opponents to such teaching suggest that teachers go about to develop children's reading skills? From their answers to this question, it becomes quite clear that the method that they would substitute for intensive phonics teaching is nothing more than the old-fashioned and now discredited look-say or whole-word approach. A careful examination of the method of teaching reading they recommend makes this apparent.

The method of teaching reading prescribed by Frank Smith, who contends that to "ensure that phonics skills are learned and used" is one of the "12 easy ways to make learning to read difficult" (1:183-84), obviously is the approach that has long been used by look-say reading teachers. Although Smith offers a lengthy, complex and intricate theory as to how children recognize words, which he calls the "feature-analytic alternative" to both the whole-word view of teaching reading and to phonics instruction, the teaching method he recommends is purely look-say. To teach reading, Smith maintains, "all the teacher can do is provide the raw material, the written word, and its 'name'" (4:225). This is a precise and accurate description of what has traditionally been called the look-say method. In traditional look-say methodology, the child is shown a word, is told its name, and then is instructed to say the word's name. This procedure is then carried on or continued until the child can read supposedly by sight a large number of words.

It is clear, therefore, that both the traditional look-say method and the procedures that Smith recommends represent the notion that "Nobody knows enough about the distinctive features of print, for example, to give a child the knowledge that he really needs in order to be able to distinguish letters or word" (4:225). It is obvious that both Smith and the advocates of the traditional look-say approach concur that all the child needs to know is "which configurations of words should or should not be treated as the same" (4:227). All the learner of reading needs be told, they would agree, is whether or not he has correctly identified the name of a word he has attempted to recognize. In short, all the reading teacher is required to do, they assert, is to tell the child whether words have the same or different names. It is up to the child to induce the rules for recognizing these words for himself, (what Smith calls feature-analytic categories).

The major weakness of Smith's notions about teaching reading, it is thus easy to see, is that the method he recommends has already been tried but has been found repeatedly to be inferior to

the teaching of intensive phonics. We have ample research evidence that children left to their own devices for inducing the rules that govern word recognition (the look-say approach) do not learn to read as well as do children who are taught phonics in a systematic, intensive, early, and direct manner. Thus, while Smith has conceived of an intriguing theory as to how children best learn to read, this theory appears to be dashed by his suggestions as to how its validity should be tested. He would have teachers try to implement his theory in a manner that research shows would not lead to its support. It is apparent, then, that Smith's theory that phonics instruction hinders the development of children's reading abilities so far is a failure.

Kenneth Goodman, who also currently disparages the use of phonics instruction, does this from a somewhat different perspective than that used by Smith. Goodman would substitute for phonics teaching what he calls instruction in the "cue systems in the flow of language" (5:271). Upon close examination of his explanation of these cue systems, it becomes apparent that what he wishes to recommend is the use of a new sentence method of teaching reading to replace the use of intensive phonics. In the past, the advocates of the sentence method have argued that the sentence is the normal unit of expression, and therefore, that the sentence will be understood in reading, as a whole, better than if it is presented in detail (6) While this **old** sentence method called for sentences to be used first in beginning reading instruction, eventually in this earlier approach sentences were analyzed by pupils down to the level of words, to each letter in words, and to the speech sounds that these letters represent. Thus, it is obvious that the old sentence method and the traditional look-say method held in common the belief that the development of word analysis or phonics skills should follow at some distance the establishment of sentence reading skills. The major distinction between these two approaches was that the look-say method began with words, and the sentence method with sentences.

Goodman's new sentence method bases its validity on distinctly different assumptions. Goodman believes that "the assumed controversy between phonics and the whole-word approaches to reading in reality turns out to be two sides to the same coin. Both treat words as "ends in themselves". But "words cannot be defined, pronounced, or classified," Goodman argues. Therefore, "they cannot be recognized" (5:271). He and Frank Smith protest that "psychology shows that our working memory is so constrained that we could not possibly comprehend speech or writing if we analyzed individual words" (7:178-79). An identification by the child reader of the meanings intended in sentences "either precedes or makes unnecessary the process of identifying individual words," they go on (7:179). So, instead of teaching children to use phonics to learn to read, Goodman suggests for this purpose six "cue systems in the flow of language". It is apparent from an examination of these six systems that, primarily, they are just differently-worded versions of the traditional look-say method, and then, that despite Goodman's disclaimers, they do require the child to read and analyze individual words.

The **first** of Goodman's flow of language cue systems is **syntax**. He instructs teachers to guide, children toward making correct guesses about unknown words from what the rest of a given sentence (or the surrounding sentences) imply the word should be. It is quickly apparent, however, that Goodman's assertion is false when he says that this cue system is different from what is practiced in traditional look-say reading. By no means does his new sentence method exclusively advocate the use of sentence context cues to guess at the identification of unknown words. It is clear that the look-say method has long used sentence contexts as a means of teaching its "sight" words.

The **second** cue system that Goodman includes in the defense of his flow of language reading method is **inflectional endings**. Obviously, this is a cue that can only be applied, however, if

children pay attention to individual words. Here Goodman contradicts his principle that words cannot be recognized. How could children recognize and utilize the inflectional endings of words to derive meanings from sentences unless they analyzed the individual words to which these inflections are attached? Goodman is silent on this issue, significantly enough.

The **third** cue system that Goodman accepts as legitimate, **function words**, must suffer similar criticism. (Function words are words other than nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs.) To give children special training in the reading of function words means it is manifest that they must carefully analyze individual words. Goodman's statement that children cannot comprehend the meaning of what they read if they analyze individual words surely is contradicted by his advice on the teaching of function words.

The **fourth** cue system Goodman cites as imperative in learning to read, **intonation** appears to be unacceptable simply on the basis of its own shortcomings. While it is true that children do use stress, pitch, and juncture (intonation) in their oral reading, how could training in such overt oral expression possibly serve to help them recognize the peculiar meaning a sentence signals for a word, e.g., **Lead** is heavy, as versus, **Lead** the horse? It is obvious that the child must previously have derived a certain meaning for "lead" in these two sentences; before he could correctly read the word "lead" aloud.

The **fifth** type of cue system Goodman offers, **context cues**, is no truly new category, but merely a repetition of the first of his language cue systems as described above. Accordingly, what has been said about syntax as a cue system applies to Goodman's fifth cue system.

The **final** cue system Goodman allows in his new sentence method is **redundancy**. This refers to the previously described language cue systems acting together to help the reader narrow down the possibilities of an unknown word in a sentence. Since redundancy is simply the amalgam or combined effect of all the previously noted cue systems, the criticisms applied to each of them can also be addressed to **redundancy**.

There are yet other weaknesses to be found in Goodman's new sentence method. It must be noted that there is no evidence that Goodman's new version of the old look-say method would prove to be more productive than phonics teaching if it were put to such a test. No such comparison has been made. It appears safe to say, nonetheless, that phonics instruction, which has been shown to be superior to look-say instruction in various pieces of comparative research, would also be shown to be superior to Goodman's new sentence method. In addition, we have a significant number of research studies of late that suggest that the use of context cues by children may not be significantly helpful in developing beginning reading skills (6).

These findings disagree, of course, with the value of syntax and context cues. Finally if the major contention of Goodman's new sentence method were true – that is, that the comprehension of a written passage is not possible if children read its individual words — then one would find only small, insignificant or negative relationships between word reading as versus sentence-paragraph reading scores on standard reading tests. But quite to the contrary, the correlations obtained between word reading and sentence-paragraph reading scores in these tests have been positive and uniformly high. The 22 positive correlations of such nature that I have identified (6) range from .68 to .96, with a median of .81. The positive correlation of .81 between these variables badly damages Goodman's notion that word reading is not an important skill (a correlation as high has seldom been found in reading research.)

Another prominent and presently active member of the new anti-phonics movement is Kenneth Hoskisson. He indicates that his dislike for systematic phonics instruction is based on his belief that "no formal hierarchy of reading skills can be imposed on the child" (8:50). To him,

"learning to read is a problem he (the child) must solve, not a set of skills that he must be taught" (8:48). Accordingly, "sequences of reading skills may by their very nature be counter productive to learning to read" (2:446) These assumptions lead Hoskisson to conclude that "it would make sense to use the sentence as the main unit of reading" (2:444). Instead of as a result of the teaching of phonics, he maintains, children "will discover the orthographic regularities of the written language only if they are provided with complete stories that are truly representative of the writing system" (2:443-44). He uses the titles, "reading by immersion", or "assisted reading" for the anti-phonics teaching method he would have teachers employ.

To this effect, Hoskisson insists that children best learn to read "by being immersed in reading in a manner similar to the way they learn to speak and to discover the systematic nature of their spoken language by being immersed in speech." Thus "children should learn to read by reading, just as they learn to speak by speaking" (2:447).

It follows, of course, that Hoskisson denies the need for any of the customary controls on the types of vocabulary, syntax, or range of concepts in the written material used to teach young children to read. It is wrong in beginning reading instruction, he declares, to try to control the length of words provided young readers, or to pay any attention as to whether these are frequently-used words, or are spelled predictably. Since an unlimited linguistic environment surrounds the child learning to speak, "assisted reading purports to do the same thing" he observes (2:447).

It is true that the instruction that Hoskisson would have teachers use to replace intensive phonics is of the utmost simplicity. His plan for teaching is broken into three seemingly easy-to-apply steps. In the first stage of "reading by immersion" the teacher reads aloud a given context while the child "reads" along after the teacher. As soon as a child in stage one can recognize some unnamed number of words, the teacher then reads aloud a given passage leaving out words she thinks the child now will know how to recognize. The child reads these omitted words. The third and final stage of reading by immersion is begun when the teacher thinks "children have enough words to do the initial read to themselves" (8:51). At this last stage, children read passages aloud while the teacher supplies the words they cannot recognize. While the teacher seems in charge in deciding when stage three should be begun, as Hoskisson describes it, the child "alone is in a position to determine when he is ready to read" (8:50). Hoskisson points to a certain level of fluency and complexity in young children's oral language as a sign that "most children are probably ready to begin to solve the problem of learning to read" (2:447). He does not, unfortunately, specify how a teacher can know when this level is reached. When beginning reading instruction should be started is an open question in Hoskisson's reading by immersion version of the look-say method.

It is readily apparent from the description of his plan for reading by immersion that Hoskisson favors a genuine and unadulterated look-say method for teaching reading. His claim that this approach represents "an economical, efficient and effective program" (9:714) remains highly unconvincing, however, for several reasons. Leading one to a rejection of his claims, first of all, is the research evidence that look-say methods in beginning reading instruction have repeatedly been found inferior to the systematic, direct, early and intensive teaching of phonics.

Beyond this, there is impressive evidence that it is foolhardy to be unconcerned about having beginning readers try to learn to read with materials that have an unrestricted range of intellectual concepts. Then, it is rash, indeed, to ignore the problems presented young readers by unpredictably-spelled words (10), by polysyllabic words (11), and by sentences of indeterminate length and complexity (12). One must add that Hoskisson's stands on these issues are also not supported by the notable and well-accepted formulas for predicting readability, which use both

the syllabic length of words and the complexity of sentences as key elements in determining the difficulty of reading materials.

Then, Hoskisson uses an astonishing form of logic by insisting that children will discover the spelling regularities of words only if they are instructed by his version of look-say reading. There is no research to support the notion that any look-say method is likely to be the most successful way to teach children that written language has spelling regularities.

Hoskisson's claim that his look-say method, which does not concentrate on teaching predictably-spelled words, is the best way to teach them to recognize such words thus appears totally without foundation.

In addition, there remain many ascertainable differences between written materials and the way children learn to read them and speech and how children master this (13). This information effectively contradicts Hoskisson's notion that children best learn to read in precisely the manner they previously had learned to talk. Then, as a matter of fact, the three stages of reading by immersion that he described do not approximate the stage in which children learn their oral language. That is, children do not learn to talk by first listening to an adult's spoken sentences and repeating these utterances verbatim. Children learning to speak do not attain this linguistic competency by filling in words in sentences that are purposely deleted by mature speakers to whom they are listening. Then, adults do not intercede in a systematic way in the oral language of children by supplying words in sentences that children will eventually need to say. It is obvious, therefore, that Hoskisson's claims that his three stages of reading by immersion "solve the problem of learning to read just as he (the child) solves the problem of learning to speak" (8:50) is a misinterpretation of children's language development data.

Finally, Hoskisson's idea that the thinking of a child involved in reading aloud, as in reading by immersion, is the same sort of thinking that he does in oral language is a highly dubious one. Mosenthal (14) recently has discovered that the linguistic competence which underlies oral language processing is not shared by reading aloud. This further damages Hoskisson's assertion that his look-say method rests on a sound empirical base.

Conclusions:

It has been demonstrated in this discussion that three of the leaders of the new anti-phonics movement would have teachers substitute for the teaching of intensive phonics what turns out to be, at best, somewhat revised versions of the traditional look-say method. It is imperative, however, that this advice about teaching reading not be followed. Primarily, the lure of the newly-designed plans for teaching reading should be resisted because research has repeatedly shown that the intensive teaching of phonics brings on greater gains in primary reading than does the use of any kind of look-say methodology. The number of logical and structural weaknesses of the three new anti-phonics look-say methods pointed to in this discussion give further reasons to teachers for rejecting them. The evidence presented in this discussion, signals a strong warning for the reading teacher: Do not abandon phonics in the hope that the plans for the teaching of reading offered by Smith, Goodman or Hoskisson will prove more effective.

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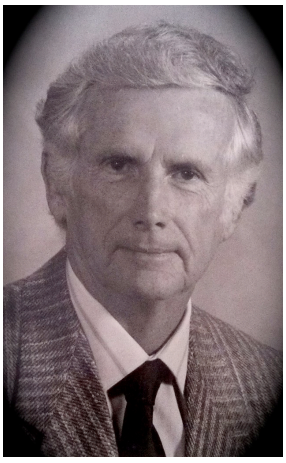
17th Annual Conference of the Reading Reform Foundation, July 20-22, Boise, Idaho

Conference Report

There was a meeting of minds when Dr. Pat Groff and Mrs. Minnie Thomas got together for a visit: they agree that intensive phonics is essential in learning to read. Both were featured speakers a Boise.



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January 20, 1923 – April 2, 2014

Note from Internet Publisher: Donald L. Potter

December 27, 2008

It is with a sense of urgency that I publish these articles from the archives of the *Reading Reform Foundation*. We are emerging from an era of Whole Language dominance over reading education in America. An enormous amount of damage was done to literacy and verbal intelligence during the Whole Language hegemony. I am not sure whether it is with reluctance or relish that the publishing companies are switching to phonics.

Fortunately, I was warned of the dangers of Whole Language by Mr. Samuel L. Blumenfeld whose phonics-first program, *Alpha-Phonics,* enabled me to experience great success in teaching English reading to many English and Spanish speaking boys and girls. I had also read Rudolf Flesch's 1955 *Why Johnny Can't Read and what you can do about it*. I am happy to be able to testify first hand to the effectiveness of Dr. Flesch's 72 phonics exercises for curing difficult cases whole-word dyslexia.

I am publishing this essay in hopes of helping to promoting the current nationwide crusade to make sure that every child in America learns to read well with the only reading method guaranteed to work for all children: phonics-first. Mr. Groff's paper continues to be of first rate important because of the fundamental insights into the defects inherent in the whole-language method.

I would like to invite readers of Dr. Groff's brilliant essay to visit the Education Page of my website: www.donpotter.net where they will find more eye-opening essays like this one from the Reading Reform Foundation Archives.

While I am not personally acquainted with Professor Groff, he probably knows me rather well since Charlie Richardson used to send him carbon copies of the school reports that I sent to Charlie concerning my experiences teaching phonics in schools that were being heavily influenced by Whole Language (Fountas & Pinnell Guided Reading & Balanced Literacy).

Geraldine Rodgers, my mentor and confidant, wrote me on 12/28/08 concerning this paper by Dr. Groff, "It was from that paper that I first learned of the existence of Reading Reform Foundation, way back about 1979!!"

Last updated on February 23, 2019.

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The harmful influence of Whole Language has continued to raise its specter under the guise of Reading Recovery, Balanced Literacy, and Guided Reading.