Donald Potter's Choice Quotes

from

The Hidden Story: How America's Present-Day Reading Disabilities Grew Out of the Underhanded Meddling of America's First Experimental Psychologist.

by Geraldine Rodgers

Preface to the Quotations

This short paper is a medley of quotations from Geraldine Rodgers 1996 *The Hidden Story*. Miss Rodgers is one the most provocative and insightful researcher into the history of the teaching of reading in America. The following quotes are concerned with the "meaning" method (sight-word method): its methodological flaws, its theoretical shortcomings, and its universally disastrous pedagogical consequences.

The Hidden Story is jam packed with hard to get information vital to understanding correct beginning reading instruction. It is essential to understand that a student's *first steps* into reading **must be** the *correct ones* or they will develop less than optimal reading habits, which are perhaps impossible to change after second grade.

It was the impact of this book on my thinking that influenced me to work with kindergarten students. I shall never forget the joy of hearing kindergarten students reading on a solid third-grade level. When students are taught to read "from the sounds" (looking at all the letters the right way, without guessing), instead of "from the meaning" (looking at a few letters, or the shape of the word and guessing the meaning from the context), then and only then, will we be blessed with a generation of students who are able to reach the highest levels of literacy and intellectual accomplishment.

I trust that everyone who reads these quotes will have their interest aroused sufficiently to purchase their own copy and further pursue this vitally important subject.

A word of personal gratitude to Miss Rodgers for permission to quote from her Block Buster Exposé.

Quotations from Geraldine Rodger's

The *Hidden Story*

Two different and opposite kinds of readers are developed at the very beginning stages of reading instruction as the result of different and opposite kinds of teaching. One kind of reader is taught to read by the "sound" of print, and reads automatically and with great accuracy. The other kind of reader is taught to read by the "meaning" of print, as Chinese characters are read, and not only reads inaccurately, but is actually encouraged to do so by so-called "psycholinguistic guessing." (Front matter)

Beginning reading can be taught either by "sounds" of the print (letter-sounds, which is true phonics) or by the "meaning" of print (by *sight-word* and by whole sentences). (1)

As I have discussed at length and suggested in my earlier books and papers, the evidence seems to indicate that, when the beginning reading sound–bearing alphabetic print is taught by "meaning" instead of by "sound," a conditioned reflex is wrongly formed to the right angular gyrus on the special "all at once," meaning-bearing picture side of the brain, instead of correctly to the left angular gyrus on the sequential, serial "sound" side of the brain. To make matters worse, when phony phonics is later taught, two opposite avenues, both "meaning" and "sound" are then consciously and simultaneously brought to bear on the same printed word. Using the mirrored counterparts on both sides of the brain (the simultaneous vs. the serial sides) at the exact same time on a single object is something that happens in no other activity. … Therefore, when the sound-processing left angular gyrus area finally becomes partially involved along with the right angular gyrus, with the left gyrus jugging and then trying to put together sound-bearing chunks from meaning-bearing alphabetic words, conscious conflict has to result. …Phony, conscious phonics is one of the reasons that the deaf-mute sight-word methods result in the habitual reading of print consciously, with a resultant loss of automaticity. (20, 21)

Guessing is built right into the sight-word method at its very beginning stage. Guessing the meaning of sight-words results from the fact that beginning readers, with one fixation of the eyes, are aware of only the first few letters in a word. If beginning readers are taught by sight-word "meaning," using the right simultaneous side of the brain instead of the left sequential side, they necessarily must immediately guess the meaning of a whole word even though they have only picked up its first few letters. By contrast, beginning readers who are taught phonics "sound" use the left sequential side of the brain and so do not decide the meaning of a whole word until they have made enough fixations of the eyes to pick up all its letters. (21, 22)

In summary, (even though it is an over-simplification), space and time are normally handled on opposite sides of the brain, space on the right, and time on the left. Pictures and Chinese characters are spatial objects, so they are normally handled by the right, spatial side of the brain which perceives things all-at-once, or simultaneously, and without involving any time element. Their meaning must be perceived with the very first fixation of the eyes, since the right side of the brains "reads" things instantly. Yet sound-bearing print, by its nature, is sequential or serial and involves time, so it obviously must normally be handled by the left, serial side of the brain. It is not read instantly like a spatial picture but instead is only read after the sound-bearing unit has been perceived. (23)

The fact that beginning readers can handle only handle the first few letters of words with one fixation of their eyes is one of the reasons why the sight-word method lacks automaticity, Unlike beginning phonic "sound" readers, beginning sight-word "meaning" readers are forced to guess the identity of a whole word even though they have been able to process only its first few letters. *Guessing is built right into the sight-word method.* (24)

The fundamental difference in teaching the beginning reading of alphabetic print by means of "meaning" or by "sounds" is in where the initial conditioned reflex is to be formed: either to the right, spatial, simultaneous, all-at-once side of the brain (in the right angular gyrus area), or to the left, temporal serial, sequential side of the brain (in the left angular gyrus area), (or to mixtures of both). All of the reading-instruction wars between "meaning" and "sound" that have been going on for the last two-and-a-half centuries can finally make sense if only the brain-based origin for the conflict is admitted. (24)

"Sound'-approach spelling books as Webster's speller, had been used to teach reading until 1826 and has produced the almost-universal general literacy to which John Adams had referred. [Yet the disappearance of spelling books for beginners was certainly no accident. It was the result of curriculum control in government schools by that same interlocking group of "experts" who had first promoted government support of education.] (72)

Nevertheless, very few high-frequency words do account for so very much of running text: about 300 covering 75%, 1,000 covering 90%, and 3,000 to 9,000 covering 98%. The rest of those half million words in English only turn up in the remaining 2% of running text. Yet, even with such enormously limited ability as the recognition of only 300 or so of the commonest words, it is possible to read at least 75% of most texts. If such a "crippled reader" is intelligent, perhaps 90% of such texts can be read accurately by context-guessing from the initial consonant sounds of the unknown words (phony phonics in action!), and 90% accuracy is above frustration level. (75)

The high-frequency-word effect, which is the fact that the greatest part of any selection is expressed by a very small number of words, is the thing that made the deaf-mute method possible in the first place. The deaf-mute-method could never have been possible except for that high-frequency-word effect. (75)

Yet the lowest-frequency words are the kernels of real thought, even though they compose only about two per-cent of almost any running page of print. It is only those lowest-frequency words that all but the simplest thoughts are transferred. Since functional illiterates lack the ability to sound out those low-frequency words and therefore to learn them, they are reported to have appallingly low "reading comprehension." What they really suffer from, of course, is not low "reading" comprehension" but true illiteracy, since the term illiteracy really means the inability to derive spoken language from printed letters. Therefore the term, "functional illiteracy" is simply a pompous mask fashioned to hide what is really true illiteracy. (77)

Their first-grade-induced "meaning" reflex is apparently, and most unfortunately, irreversible. (79)

From my 23 years in teaching primary grades, I concluded that the guessing "meaning" reflex, once it has been established in first grade, is irreversible in second. … It is true that children can be taught true phonics, not just phony phonics after that and so can achieve a very high degree of success in reading. Real synthetic phonics helps them to memorize many, many more sight-words by their "meaning" than they ever could have done without the use of true phonics. Yet I believe they still continue to read (and to guess) consciously and not automatically by the meaning of print, instead of by its sounds. In contrast, phonically-trained children read print automatically and without conscious guessing. … Readers who read automatically by sound … have their consciousness totally free to concentrate (if they choose to concentrate) on the meaning of the print that their conditioned reflex is decoding automatically. That is the same way that their consciousness is totally free when they are hearing spoken language (on which they also may or may not freely choose to concentrate), since spoken language is also processed by their brains automatically and not consciously. Consciousness has to be used to decode spoken language only after we have become hard of hearing and have to depend on context of what is being said in order to figure out badly-heard words. That is, of course, uncomfortable and unpleasant. (81)

"Meaning"-trained readers continue to use consciousness in decoding print, just as hard-of-hearing people have to do when listening to speech, or just as people with normal hearing have to do when talking to which they have been listening becomes partly masked by some loud background noise. (81)

The effect from the "meaning" approach in the teaching of beginning reading is to make *readers permanently "hard of hearing"* when faced with print. … Since being hard of hearing (whether with speech or with print) is uncomfortable and unpleasant, depending on the degree of impairment, *it is hardly surprising that many "meaning"-trained people spend little time reading long and complicated books.* (82)

Yet phonics is only successful if it gets such a "heavy emphasis," heavy enough to overcome any emphasis on sight-word "meaning," since sight-words and phonics simply do not mix in the teaching of beginning reading (148).

…objective readers potentially have all their attention free to concentrate on the text's message, if they freely choose to pay attention. Yet subjective readers have a divided attention, part to figuring out the words, and only what is left over to concentrate on the text's message. (422)

(The greatest majority of children in good phonic first-grade programs have learned to read 2,000 words by June, and have the decoding ability to read almost anything in print.) (445)

The pure deaf-mute method teaches a strictly controlled vocabulary of basic sight-words by pictures, and employs context-guessing on new words. While context-guessing the child makes a mental comparison of the new word to previously memorized whole words so as to see like parts, in order to fix the new word in visual memory. The best label for that method is "visual phonics." (515)

…Gallaudet, knew that a *context bed* of ninety percent or so of old words was necessary to assure correct context guessing on the "meaning" "new" words. In other words, Gallaudet set a "frustration level" for understanding the general meaning of a selection at the point at which the context bed of "old" words dropped below ninety per cent of the total. (515)

The idea of the ninety per cent "frustration" level for understanding general context of a selection is present today n so-called "individual reading inventories" which are used in individual oral testing. If children cannot correctly pronounce ninety per cent of the words in a selection, they are said to be reading below their "frustration level." That means they are not absorbing enough of the meaning of the selection as a whole. (515, 516)

By the mid-1930's, even children's library books not only had controlled vocabulary but also rigidly controlled "readability levels. … It was not too long after the 1930's that even high school texts were published with rigidly controlled so-called "readability levels," and the readability levels" in such high-school texts have been dropping lower and lower ever since. (534, 535)
The post-1930 carefully constructed linguistic monstrosities for children and for adolescents resulted in impoverished vocabulary and an inability to handle complex syntax. The ultimate result was the lowering of the nation's verbal intelligence. (535)

Almost endless examples could be given of simple words which the great majority of phonetically-taught first graders can read and spell with ease, but which most "meaning" taught third graders cannot even read. (620)

Yet most third-grade teachers do not even know that there is a real problem. If a child stumbles over a lower frequency word which has not already been taught, the teachers pronounce it and think the problem is solved, because most children can read their controlled-vocabulary sight-word reading books very well and can score very well on the phony standardized "reading comprehension" tests given annually. This is, of course, because only 1,000 words compose about ninety per cent of most reading materials. Once children know those 1,000 words, they are automatically reading above frustration level on most reading comprehension test materials. They are therefore able to guess the meaning of most of the unknown words from the context of the selection, and they can guess the answers to the questions. If third-grade teachers gave their "good" "meaning-trained" readers a list of low frequency word to read, which list would have no context help in guessing, they would be astonished at the degree of failure. (620f)

Children's inability to read independently only shows up on such oral word lists test or on the oral reading of paragraphs with unknown, low-frequency words whose meanings they cannot guess. Disabled "meaning"-trained readers cannot pronounce (and therefore cannot hear) such low-frequency words because they are not already in their spoken vocabularies. (621)

However, at about the fifth-grade, most "meaning"-trained children to achieve some success in using conscious, phony phonics on unknown words if they make an effort to do so, but they commonly sip such unknown words when actually reading to themselves silently, in order to avoid that unpleasant effort. (621)

As a result, instead of accumulating vocabulary through their reading, as they should be able to do, "meaning"-trained children are arrested in their vocabulary development and become like badly deaf-mutes whose growth in vocabulary is so severely limited. Yet group oral-accuracy tests which could reveal the reading failure of the "meaning"- trained classes are almost non-existent.

As has been discussed, the use of "reading comprehension scores" as an indexes of reading ability are fallacious. Stable, fairly high reading comprehension scores are NOT an indication that a class has acquired good reading ability. Stable scores may result from the artificially controlled attention of "psycholinguistically-guessing" readers. The attention of such readers switches back and forth between figuring out the words and getting the message of the selection. They may actually be unable to read many of the words, despite "psycholinguistic guessing" and their potential "reading comprehension" is actually depressed because of their constantly switching attention. Yet the scores on "sound" trained classes, who have the ability to read automatically and so do not have a divided attention, may vary widely, depending on whether or not the children freely chose to pay attention to the reading comprehension test. (622)

Therefore, reading comprehension tests are an invalid test of reading ability, whether they are used on "meaning"-trained or "sound"-trained classes. (622)

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Note From Internet Publisher: Donald L. Potter

May 17, 2008

It was almost four years ago (7/29/04) that I first published my quotes from Miss Rodger's *The Hidden Story*. Her book was published in December 1998, after many years of massive library research. She has been a constant source of information and inspiration to me over the years. Recently I publishing a *You Tube* clip briefly introducing the message of The *Hidden Story*. My website, www.donpotter.net, features several important essays by Miss Rodgers.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BuGb6YEXF4Y

I first read *The Hidden Story* in February 2002.

A number of very effective reading methods that teach reading correctly (from the "sounds" with phonics-first, instead of from the "meaning" with sight-words taught as wholes) can be found on my web site for free download.

I would especially like to invite you to visit my www.blendphonics.org for information on a wonderful phonics-first method that has a 40-year track record of success in producing "objective readers."

Last updated March 23, 2013, December 20, 2015, and July 22, 2017.

Appendix

Wherein the Importance of Latin Elements in English Vocabulary

Is Demonstrated

Of the 500 words most frequently used in present-day English, according to Thorndike's well-known word count the native words are 72 per cent, the borrowed 28 percent; and furthermore, the derivatives of the native words are three times as numerous as those of the borrowed words. In general, one fourth of the task of expression in English is accomplished, so it is said, by just nine words: and, be, have, it, of, the, to, will, and you; and one half of the task by these and thirty-four others, likewise exclusively of native origin. No wonder then if counting every word every time it occurs in a passage of literature reveals that the writer of the most highly Latinized style still employs man more native than borrowed words. The exact proportion will vary both with the individual writer and the subject on which he writes. Kent's figures show that while poets of the last hundred years have employed only from 10 to 20 percent of classical words, the percentages in some recent technical writing sometimes runs as high as 40. Shakespeare is given credit for using 90 percent of native words and only 10 percent of foreign ones, while the King James Bible (on the basis of three gospels) the proportion is 94 to 6. In contrast with these proportions are those for writers of notoriously Latinized vocabulary: Samuel Johnson's figures are 72 and 28, and Gibbon's 70 and 30. Midway between the extremes stand such writers as Milton with 81 and 129, Pope with 80 and 20, Addison with 82 and 18, and Tennyson (who prided himself on his "Saxon" English) with 88 and 12.

The English vocabulary, then, as it has been used by different writers and for different purposes, exhibits considerable diversity in the elements of which it is composed. The difference between the 6 percent of borrowed words in the King James Bible and the 30 percent in Gibbon is really very great – enough, certainly, to give the two styles quite divergent colorings. This is more evident when one considers that the native words included almost all the necessary machinery of the sentence but relatively colorless in meaning. The borrowed words, on the other hand, are almost always essential to meaning. It can easily be demonstrated that while to remove the borrowed words from almost any passage of English prose or verse may leave the sentence structure intact, it will almost inevitably rob the passage of many of the words that carry the essential meaning. By the exercise of a little ingenuity one could fairly easily construct sentences of Anglo-Saxon words only, though hardly of borrowed words only; but with that part of the vocabulary alone one could not go far in the realm of ideas.

The Development of Modern English 2nd by Stuart Robertson, Revised by Frederic G. Cassidy, 1934, 1938, 1954, Prentice-Hall, Inc., Pages 174f.