

## Why Don't They Teach My Child to Read?

by Howard Whitman  
*Colliers* November 26, 1954

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **Overworking a Psychological Method**

The modernists in education were given a push toward the word-memory method by the popularity in the 1920's and the '30's of Gestalt psychology (from the German word *Gestalt*, meaning a total organization or configuration). This approach stressed the wholeness of perceptions (we perceive a whole melody rather than the notes which make it up). Although it was a valuable contribution to psychology, the Gestalt idea attracted enthusiasts who made a fad of it; they applied it indiscriminately to nearly every field of living. If someone wanted to paint he was to go ahead and paint a whole picture; never mind learning about line, form, composition and color. If one wanted to try carpentry he was to “build things”; never mind learning how to square a board. And in reading, the Gestalt enthusiasts hoped children would learn to take in whole sentences and paragraphs at a gulp without first having learned to cope with words. There was reason for the big swing to new-style reading. In the early 1900's, our schools had gone far overboard in the other direction. They had made a fetish of phonics, and children were laboriously sounding out a simple word like “room” as *roo-oom*. They were battling their way through polysyllables such as *or-gan-i-za-tion*, and pronouncing them piece by piece without having the slightest idea what they meant. It was a revolt against fanatical phonics which paved the way for the introduction of word-memory (and the Gestalt approach) in the 1920's.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Boy "Frustrated" by Failure to Read

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **Principal Flays Modernist Fad**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **In Defense of Phonetic System**

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

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

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

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

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

### **A Neurologist Makes a Report**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **Ruse didn't Fool First-Grader**

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

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

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

Note by Internet Publisher: Donald L. Potter  
9/18/05

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

For more information on phonics-first instruction, visit the Education Page of my web site:  
[www.donpotter.net](http://www.donpotter.net).

#### Brief Disclaimer

Overall the essay is excellent. But I do not for one minute believe there ever was too much emphasis placed on phonics; therefore, I beg-to-differ with the following quote: "In the early 1900's, our schools had gone far overboard in the other direction. They had made a fetish of phonics, and children were laboriously sounding out a simple word like "room" as *roo-oom*. They were battling their way through polysyllables such as *or-gan-i-za-tion*, and pronouncing them piece by piece without having the slightest idea what they meant. It was a revolt against fanatical phonics which paved the way for the introduction of word-memory (and the Gestalt approach) in the 1920's.

To see what was really going on in phonics in the early 1900's see Webster's *American Spelling Book* 1824, and his *Elementary Spellingbook* 1908. The latter is available for free download from my web site mentioned above. There never was any "fanatical phonics" or "phonics made into a fetish." That was all bogus history manufactured by the sight-word establishment. The author is not to be faulted too much for now knowing this piece of "buried history." The ability to read multi-syllabic words is a very important aspect of reading. Noah Webster's approach to teaching multi-syllabic words leaves nothing to be desired and should be diligently followed today.

September 18, 2005

Donald L. Potter  
Odessa, TX

