

Lyndhurst, New Jersey 07071  
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Dr. G. Reid Lyon  
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Dear Dr. Lyon:

Having read of the discouraging results from the “reading comprehension” scores for the *Reading First* program, I felt it necessary to write to you because I think the facts I learned from my 1977-78 sabbatical research demonstrate that such scores are meaningless. You may therefore find my material useful because of your interest in the Reading First program.

The scores from the *Reading First* program did show, not at all surprisingly, that the phonic groups read far more accurately than the sight-word groups. Yet the phonic teaching produced no improvement in so-called “reading comprehension,” and that can do great harm in future attempts to promote the use of phonics. For the reasons I discuss below, those unsatisfactory “reading comprehension” test results should be challenged strenuously.

We have accepted the “silent reading comprehension” tests as valid tests of reading competence. We have also accepted the definition of reading from which grew those “silent reading comprehension” tests, even though those tests have been wreaking havoc on the teaching of reading since 1914, when they first arrived in force. We must challenge the definition of reading which underlies such tests, that healthy reading means the turning of print into “meaning” first instead of “sound” first, and we must challenge the validity of the tests which grew out of that definition.

The silent reading comprehension test composed by the psychologist, E. L. Thorndike, in the virtual birth-year of the “silent reading comprehension tests,” 1914, was one of the most influential. It was published in the Teachers College Record of Columbia Teachers College in 1914, along with a report on the oral reading accuracy tests constructed and given by William Scott Gray, Thorndike’s graduate student in 1913-1914. Gray became, in 1930, the author of the Scott, Foresman Dick and Jane deaf-mute-method readers. Another graduate student and associate of Thorndike, Arthur Irving Gates, wrote the similar 1930-31 Macmillan deaf-mute-method readers. Both the Scott, Foresman and Macmillan readers were the first to use rigidly controlled, high-frequency vocabulary (which had finally been properly identified by Thorndike’s 1911- to -1920 counting of millions of printed words). Some of those words were first taught as sight words, and then new words were inserted in texts composed of those sight words, and the meaning of the new words was identified by context guessing. That is the deaf-mute approach.

The use of the term, the deaf-mute-method, is valid. In 1927, one of Gates' graduate students, Helen Thompson, published her report on her work with deaf-mute materials for six-year-old deaf-mutes, which she had revised for dull, but hearing children. Gates reported at length on that work of his graduate student in his 1930 text, *Interest and Ability in Reading*. Gates implied that his own readers were an outgrowth of those earlier materials. Those deaf-mute-method materials taught by "meaning," totally divorced from "sound." Their use grew out of that false definition of the reading act, that "to read" means to take "meaning" from alphabetic print (as we do when looking at pictures), instead of taking "sound" (as we do when listening to speech).

The historical background helps to explain the fixation of Thorndike's group with "meaning" and their disregard for "sound" in teaching reading, and that background includes the denial of consciousness. William James wrote an essay in 1904 titled, "Does Consciousness Exist?" In it, James traded in his earlier ideas for a belief in "monism" which means the only thing that exists is the material universe. James wrote in his 1904 essay, "The word consciousness is just a loose way of indicating that certain sensory occurrences form part of my life history." E. L. Thorndike, just like his mentor, William James, denied the existence of consciousness. With James's definition for consciousness, the brain had to be seen as an independently, automatically functioning machine. With such a "monistic" view, "meaning" would be used in teaching reading in order to form the proper stimulus-response connections with "meaning" in the brain so that the brain would be able to use those "meaning" connections whenever it encountered print in the future. An emphasis on "sound" in the brain's processing of print would be counter-productive because it would result in empty "sound" connections when faced with print in the future.

No doubt whatever can exist for the fact that it was such reasoning, which prompted the promotion of "meaning" over "sound" from about 1911. Very influential people promoted sight-words and silent reading comprehension tests, and we know that they did so because they wrote at length about their viewpoint. For instance, very clear confirmation of the "monistic" viewpoint of the enormously influential E. L. Thorndike is contained in Frank N. Freeman's disapproving review of Thorndike's 1922 book, *The Psychology of Arithmetic*, which review appeared in *the Elementary School Journal* in June, 1922. Freeman wrote, "...In the author's view, learning consists of the formation of bonds or connections between situations and responses.... The higher mental processes are reducible to the same kind of bonds as the simplest motor responses.... There is therefore no fundamental distinction between reasoning, analysis, abstraction, etc., and acts of skill...."

Concerning what amounted to the "bond" connections in reading, see Professor Henry Suzzallo's 1913 *Cyclopedia* article on reading, posted on [www.DonPotter.net](http://www.DonPotter.net). It includes the Suzzallo reading triangle, which shows the different, opposite and contradictory paths taken in reading, one for "meaning" and the other for "sound".

Ludicrous as it appears now, many very influential people really believed the “monistic” nonsense back then, that consciousness does not exist, and therefore the proper stimulus-response route in learning to read had to be the “meaning” route, not the “sound” route. Yet they did pick their words very carefully concerning such teaching because they were very much out of tune with the non-materialistic rest of America.

Mountains of materials have been published since 1914 purporting to “teach” the “skill” of “reading comprehension (which, in the materialist view, consists of those proper stimulus-response connections). That makes it interesting that Robert L. Thorndike, E. L. Thorndike’s son, and also at Columbia Teachers College, denied the existence of various subsets of “reading comprehension” (inferences, details, etc.). Robert L. Thorndike concluded that “reading comprehension” is simply “reasoning”, just as his father had done in his famous 1917 articles, although R. L. Thorndike acknowledged it does include a word knowledge factor. Yet, since R. L. Thorndike’s father had thought “reasoning” was also only the result of automatic interaction among “bonds”, so possibly did the son, years later.

Therefore, the accepted definition of reading today (as taking “meaning”, not “sound”, from print) and the use of “silent reading comprehension” tests, are the outgrowth of the wrongheaded thinking of materialists almost a century ago. It is ridiculous that no one has publicly punctured their imaginary “silent reading comprehension” balloon before this, which balloon was only floated because they denied the existence of consciousness.

However, something that disturbed me when I first ran my scores from my 1977-1978 oral reading accuracy/comprehension research on 900+ children in five languages was the fact that the averaged “reading comprehension” scores from all the second-grade phonic classes was slightly lower than the averaged “reading comprehension” scores from all the second-grade sight-word classes (just as has apparently happened with *Reading First*). Obviously, that 1977-1978 finding would have been the kiss of death for my argument that phonics was the way to teach, unless I could find some way to explain it. I did, and it turned out that it was those slightly higher averaged scores for the sight-word classes that explained why the method had taken over after 1930, (because of its apparently improved “silent reading comprehension”). It also explained, after further digging, why the sight-word method is a failure because it actually produces worsened, not improved, so-called “silent reading comprehension.”

The averaged scores from the 1977-1978 oral reading research, not for the whole groups, but for each class tested, were then lined up - those for the sight-word classes, and those for the phonic classes. Those ranked scores produced the solution. The phonic-classes averaged scores went all over the scale, from horrible to marvelous. However, the sight-word-classes averaged scores fell into a very narrow band, much, much higher than the worst phonic scores BUT LOWER THAN THE BEST PHONIC SCORES.

That demonstrated that the teaching of phonics had no influence at all on “reading comprehension,” either positive or negative, and that the greatly varying high and low scores for the phonics classes must have resulted from something else (obviously, voluntary, conscious attention or the lack of it to the content of the reading comprehension questions). But it also demonstrated that the narrow band of sight-word scores had to be a direct result of the sight-word method used, and had to be a function of that method, with its forced conscious attention to word identification by the meaning of the context.

A final table for all my sabbatical 1977-1978 research scores (accuracy, speed, reversals, and “comprehension”) showed that the better the accuracy and speed, and the fewer the reversals, then the lower was the averaged comprehension, but the worse the accuracy and speed, and the greater the reversals, then the higher was the “comprehension.” That demonstrated that the slightly higher averaged reading comprehension scores for the sight-word method were nothing but the result of the method’s crippled decoding. However, “psycholinguistic” Kenneth Goodman would have been delighted, since the sight-word children were obviously reading BY guessing from the text’s apparent meaning (since they couldn’t read all the words accurately). Yet they certainly were also not reading competently FOR meaning, which is what Goodman claims for “psycholinguistics,” since none of the sight-word classes scored as high as the best phonic classes.

When I ran a visual graph on the scores, it showed the American sight-word classes produced a noticeable bell curve. Bell curves result from inborn abilities, and the ability that the curve demonstrated was IQ in operation, the IQ used in conscious guessing. The American phonic classes produced a lessened bell curve - but still a bell curve. In American classes, so much attention is paid to comprehension drills that its influence showed to some extent, and therefore demonstrated the IQ bell curve to some extent.

I had rated the classes on a sight-word to phonic scale from Code 1 to Code 10. I rated Scott Foresman at Code 2, Houghton Mifflin at Code 3, and the old Open Court and Lipincott at Code 10. However, the European classes - all of them - paid much attention to teaching beginning reading by “sound”, so the lowest rating I gave any was Code 6, and the rest from Code 7 to Code 9. When I recorded the final graph on the Code 6 European classes, I did not get a bell curve on reading comprehension as with the American classes, but I did get a piling up of scores toward the end. However, when I recorded the final graph on reading comprehension for the Code 7 to Code 9 European classes, the result was very amusing. No semblance showed up at all of a bell curve, or any kind of curve, on reading comprehension. What I got instead was an almost flat table from 0 accuracy to 100% accuracy!!!

I think all the European scores showed the effect of voluntary, conscious attention, although it was absent to some degree on the Code 6 classes, which had emphasized meaning, because they produced a semblance of a curve. But the graph for the Code 7 to 9 European classes showed instead the totally chance and independent sampling of the two factors, IQ and voluntary, conscious attention. It was that uncontrolled chance sampling of the two factors that produced an almost totally flat graph with no curve at all.

Concerning the inborn IQ factor, Binet about 1908 used “reading comprehension” as one of the subtests on his IQ test. It is also of great interest that Binet said some subjects, who read so inaccurately aloud that they could not be understood by listeners, nevertheless scored well on “reading comprehension.” Naturally, if variations in the use of voluntary, conscious attention are displaced in testing by the constant and forced, conscious attention of the sight-word method, then the only factor that can show any variation when testing reading comprehension will be the IQ factor. So it is not at all surprising that testing sight-word classes for “reading comprehension” results in a beautiful IQ bell curve, which is the IQ result that Binet recorded back about 1908, even for disabled readers.

Therefore, the scores produced for *Reading First* should be challenged, so that it will be possible to rank them, just as I did on my sabbatical research, and to challenge them on the issue of voluntary versus forced attention. I believe such ranking will produce the same result - with phonic class scores varying greatly, depending on whether or not the classes had been drilled with some kind of “reading comprehension” worksheets so that they were conditioned to pay attention to such tests. However, I believe the sight-word class scores will fall into a narrow band, just as mine did, higher than the worst phonic classes but lower than the best phonic classes. It should show that some of the phonic classes - those encouraged to “pay attention”, probably by class drills like SRA cards, scored higher than the sight word classes, and demonstrated that phonics does produce higher “reading comprehension”.

Other than on the ranking of scores, however, the very concept of “silent reading comprehension” tests themselves should be challenged. Thorndike (and those like him) were wrong in their view that there is a “skill” called “silent reading comprehension.” Their twisted view grew from their materialistic conviction that there is no such thing as consciousness. If those promoting silent reading comprehension tests today were asked, “Do you believe in the existence of consciousness?”, most would answer “Yes.” That “yes” answer pulls the rug out from under the worth of the “silent reading comprehension” tests promoted since 1914.

Furthermore, and on completely different grounds, the testing of silent reading comprehension is very much like going to gather nuts in May, because there really is nothing there to gather. There really is no such thing as “reading comprehension” because the term is an oxymoron. Reading, properly understood and learned, is an automatic conditioned reflex (or a collection of them). If it were not totally automatic, software could not read texts aloud with virtual perfection, but software can and does read texts aloud, just as it could read aloud what is written here, although such software totally lacks comprehension of what it is reading. However, comprehension, unlike a conditioned reflex, (and contrary to Thorndike, et al) totally lacks automaticity and is instead totally conscious

A proper understanding of reading can be gained from the terminology used by the famed neurosurgeon, Dr. Wilder Penfield, in his book, *The Mystery of the Mind* (Princeton press - 1975). After decades of operating on human brains, with the patients fully conscious and answering his questions, Penfield concluded that the brain has two main areas. One is the higher brain mechanism (toward the front of the brain), where consciousness resides. The other (largely to the mid and rear of the brain) he labeled the automatic sensory motor mechanism, in which learned behaviors (conditioned reflexes) are stored - and which is NOT conscious. Penfield concluded that the connection between the two is deep in the brain, where the conscious mind can call on the automatic sensory motor mechanism to perform behaviors, or can ignore it and let it operate on its own while the conscious mind thinks of other things. Most of our necessary daily actions, as I believe William James said, are done automatically - walking, brushing our teeth, etc. Normally, we focus no conscious attention on them. (Penfield has detractors, it is true, but none of them spent decades operating on the open brains of fully conscious people, so Penfield has considerably more credibility than his detractors.)

Human reading, once learned, can also be automatic, as S. J. Samuels (and Cattell, himself, and Freud and others) noted. Samuels compared learning to read to learning to tie one's shoelaces. While it is being learned, the action occupies the conscious mind, but, once learned, the action can be carried out automatically, and the conscious mind is free to wander elsewhere. It is the existence of such free attention (with phonics readers) vs. forced attention (with sight-word readers) that explains the differences in "reading comprehension" scores.

But those reading comprehension scores become meaningless once "reading" and "comprehension" are properly defined. Reading (once learned properly) is an automatic conditioned reflex and is carried out in the automatic sensory motor mechanism of the brain, which, by definition, totally lacks consciousness. Comprehension is carried out in the higher brain mechanism, which, by definition, lacks the ability to store conditioned reflexes. So there IS no such thing as a "skill" called "reading comprehension"!

We know software can read aloud with almost flawless perfection. We know that a total illiterate may understand perfectly what the software is reading. To speak of the software having "reading comprehension" is meaningless (even though it scores dead zero on a reading comprehension test), but so is it meaningless to speak of an illiterate having "reading comprehension" (though he might score at 100% accuracy on what the software reads aloud to him). The problem obviously is that "reading" and "comprehension", by definition, are two totally different things, and that, therefore, to test for a skill called "reading comprehension" is to go looking for nuts in May.

This has been a difficult letter to write, and is far too rambling, but it includes two important points with which to deal with the hobgoblin, "silent reading comprehension scores." One is that phonically trained children have healthy free attention, and therefore may, or may not, pay attention to the content of the test they are reading. Sight-word trained children have unhealthy forced attention, and, by definition, since they are reading BY meaning, cannot take their attention off the content of the test without stopping

the reading. The phonic children will produce the best scores, if they pay attention, since they have all of their attention free to focus on the content. The sight-word trained children have part of their attention tied up in word identification, and so will score lower.

However, the very concept of a teachable skill called “silent reading comprehension” is totally wrong. Since there is no such skill (but only the application of IQ to the reading task, as shown by Binet), then we should dispense with the concept. We should, of course, spend much time in schools teaching vocabulary, background information, and logic, but these things are not “silent reading comprehension.”

I am enclosing a copy of my re-issued book, *Why Jacques, Johann and Jan CAN Read*, which reports on my 1977-1978 six-months’ sabbatical research. It resulted in my finding that there are two different and opposite kinds of readers (by automatic “sound” or by conscious “meaning”). I later found to my surprise that my finding had been essentially the same as the finding of Oskar Messmer in Germany in 1903 (which two types Messmer named “objective” and “subjective”). Those chapters and tables in my book, which relate specifically to the points I have mentioned may be of interest to you. However, as you will note, in order to compare the oral reading accuracy of phonic-trained second graders to sight-word trained second graders, I had to use an oral test consisting almost completely of very high frequency words, because sight-word-trained second graders are largely limited to reading only those words. If I had used a normal vocabulary instead, I would have effectively been comparing literate children with illiterate children and could have received no usable scores comparing the methods.

Sincerely,

Geraldine E. Rodgers

## **Note from Internet Publisher: Donald L. Potter**

August 15, 2015

This carefully written letter to Dr. Reid Lyon is of great importance both historically and theoretically. I obtained it via a carbon copy from Miss Rodgers to myself, Dr. Patrick Groff, and a few other close associates.

In this expository letter, Miss Rodgers explains the reasons for the curious fact that inferior readers can sometimes score higher on silent test of reading comprehension than superior readers. This fact casts suspicion on all research into reading based solely on silent reading tests of reading comprehension.

### **Brief Annotated Biography of Miss Rodgers' Published Words**

1. *The Hidden Story: How America's Present-Day Reading Disabilities Grew Out of the Underhanded Meddling of America's First Experimental Psychologist.* (1998). This was the first book that I read by Miss Rodgers. It reads like a mystery thriller, with famed American Psychologists, William James, as the antagonist. I read much of James' *Principals of Psychology* while in high school, and have a well-read copy on the shelves of my personal library. William James accepted James Cattell's time reaction experiments.

2. *The History of Beginning Reading: From Teaching Sound to Teaching Meaning.* (2001). Three thick volumes. This is unquestionably the premier work on the history of reading instruction. It is based on years of meticulous library research. It should be on the library shelves of every college of education in America.

3. *The Case for the Prosecution: The Trial of Silent Reading "Comprehension" Tests, Charged with the Destruction of America's Schools.* (reissue of 1981-1983 essays). This enlightening book of essays explains the Two Kinds of Reads (and mix of the two) and why silent reading tests of comprehension are an inaccurate and misleading form of reading assessment, when used to the exclusion of oral reading

4. *The Born-Yesterday World of Reading Experts: A Critique of Recent Research and the Brain* (2004). This paper was written in response to a request from Dr. Patrick Groff for Miss Rodgers to comment on recent brain research into reading. Miss Rodgers demonstrates that modern researchers are unaware that two different types of early reading instruction produces two different types of readers.

5. *Why Jacques, Johann, and Jan Can Read* (2008) Appalled at the reading disabilities in her third-grade classroom in New Jersey, Miss Rodgers took a sabbatical in 1977-78 to observe reading instruction in first-grade classes and test oral reading in second-grade classes to see how first-grade different kinds of instruction impacted reading. Over 900 students were tested in six countries. This book is a detailed account of what she discovered. It was this hands-on research that lead to her rediscover of the Two Types of Readers.