Albert J. Mazurkiewicz

The Initial Teaching Alphabet for Reading? Yes!

ALL of us involved in the teaching of reading and the preparation of teachers to teach reading have followed various trails over the years. We have been searching for more acceptable solutions to the problems involved in teaching beginning reading. We have recognized that every existing program for teaching reading does in fact teach children to read. The question has always been: How well?

The National Council of Teachers of English estimates that four million elementary school pupils have reading disabilities. Other reports indicate that reading is the handicap for 25 to 35 percent of all high school students and that our nation has a minimum of eight million adult functional illiterates. We have recognized, too, that we are required to introduce remedial reading instruction in the elementary school, beginning in the second grade generally, and to continue it through high school and college and university.

What appears to be wrong? Our methods have been of proven excellence, for we do develop a high degree of reading skill in the population. While no single factor can be isolated which limits learning, current studies show the spelling of our language to be a significant fact. These studies may be interpreted as bringing to an end the greatest longitudinal study in history. Since we all admit to the need for longitudinal studies to inform us about long range effects, it is unfortunate that it has taken us some three hundred years in American education to draw conclusions about traditional orthography and its negative implications for reading instruction.

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Sound and Symbol

Tardy though we may be, we have in recent years begun to agree that there are many irregularities in the relationship between sound and symbol in English. We have begun to agree that almost every phonic rule children can be taught, or can be led to discover, has exceptions. We have come to agree that this makes the teaching and learning of English phonics considerably more difficult than it would be if each letter represented just one sound, as is true or nearly true of several European languages.

Current research evidence points out

that the normal learning curve (which we had seen to exist in virtually every facet of the curriculum as a reflection of the normal distribution of learning potential) also exists in that aspect of reading called word recognition when the medium has been modified to a more regular system. We can conclude, therefore, that if English were regularly spelled (not necessarily perfectly encoded) that learning to read and write would be essentially a simple process, that the mean of word recognition ability for a normal population would be at the fifth grade or a fifth grade reader level by the end of the first grade, and that it would be a simple process to isolate those children who are having significant learning—not necessarily *reading*—difficulties, problems of learning related to intellectual potential, emotional or neurological disturbances, etc.

Few, if any, educational leaders see a complete reform in our orthography as practical in the foreseeable future. We can, therefore, ask whether we should keep trying for a simplified orthography if a temporary i/t/a, such as Pitman has constructed, can be used successfully to introduce the child to the complex world of English orthography. Thus, the design of i/t/a is *not* a design for spelling reform; rather, the initial teaching alphabet is what its name implies. In this context, it seems to be the most serviceable pattern that has up to now been proven workable in introducing the child to the reading and writing process. i/t/a design was intended to encourage early reading as much as possible on a frustration free basis. When the child develops his reading skills (somewhere around the third reader level), he makes an effective transition from i/t/a to traditional orthography. This usually occurs in the first grade.

Studies of Transition

An examination of i/t/a's use shows it to epitomize a psychologically valid principle which we follow in other areas of life: that learning proceeds from the simple to the complex. It parallels our treatment of another familiar area of the curriculum: handwriting. In our present writing system we go from manuscript to cursive, and we demand a transition which seems to be more difficult for a normal child in a traditional alphabet than the transition in reading which moves from i/t/a to T.O. (traditional orthography).

Research in the United States confirmed the findings of the earlier research in England and added data such as the following:

At the ten week mark, the top groups of the population were capable of reading and dealing effectively with the vocabulary of 320 words. This compared with the third pre-primer status achieved by the same percentage of the population using the traditional alphabet. Under the T.O. procedure, children could read 66 words on a purely sight basis at the end of this period.

At the beginning of the fifth month of instruction, significant differences in the i/t/a population were observable:

For the i/t/a population, the reading program could be structured to follow the various rates of learning of children. The skills portion of the program was found to be embodied in the initial tasks the child had—learning to make, fix and use associations between the sounds of his spoken language and the i/t/a symbols used to represent them. For the bright child, this word recognition program appeared to become a program of two to three months and about four to five months for the average child.

Statistics in the eighth month indicated that the instructional levels of the i/t/a-taught children were as follows: 24 percent of these first grade children were instructionally placed in third reader materials, 51 percent were reading second reader materials, 15 percent were reading first reader materials, and 11 percent were reading at or below primer level. In contrast, only six percent of the children taught using the traditional alphabet (T.O.) were found at second reader levels.

Standardized tests in their T.O. form given in May to document the status of both populations indicated that no differences existed between the populations, though most of the experimental population children were still in i/t/a instruction. As noted by the children, this type of procedure was unfair since they commented: "We'll take this test if the other kids take a test printed in our alphabet." Since the question always arises concerning the child's ability to read in T.O. though he is given i/t/a instruction, and since earlier American research on this question has been largely ignored, it was important to test and report such data.

At the post-transition period, however, differences between the populations begin to point to a superiority in favor of the i/t/a taught child. On the standardized tests given, some 91 percent of the i/t/a population achieved at second grade or above point, compared with 67.4 percent of the T.O. population at this early point in instruction. Better than 29 percent of the i/t/a population achieved third reader or above grade levels, compared with 10.8 percent of the T.O. population. These results when tested for significance indicated that the i/t/a population was generally superior in word recognition and comprehension as well as total reading. Again, when tested in terms of a measure of spelling achievement (Stanford Achievement in its T.O. form), no significant differences between the spelling ability of the populations were noted.

The follow-up into the second year indicates that further improvement in reading ability on a T.O. basis exists in an i/t/a taught population, whereas the T.O. population's results indicate a drift toward the mean achievement of the population.

Conclusions such as the following can be drawn from the bare statistics of the studies:

1. Traditional spelling of English is a significant source of difficulty in beginning reading, though not the only factor in reading instruction.

2. Children can learn to read more rapidly (with less observable frustration) when the beginning reading program is printed in i/t/a.

3. Children can learn to encode sound and to communicate through writing with a high degree of facility when taught using i/t/a. i/t/a seems to have a releasing effect on a child's ability to communicate through writing.

4. The first grade classroom, according to teacher reports, is more easily controlled, fewer organizational problems occur and more individualized teaching is accomplished within a grouping structure. These reports indicate the child develops independent work habits much earlier than usual, appears to have a better test-taking ability because of his improved work habits, has a greater capacity for work, and appears to be more self motivated in learning situations.

5. Through the use of i/t/a, the sentence structure and vocabulary of first grade materials can more closely approximate the vocabulary and sentence structure of the child at an early point in the

first year of school. His wide interests can be more readily met in such reading material.

6. Post-transition reading performances in T.O. of i/t/a-taught children as measured by standardized tests in the ninth month and then in September following the summer hiatus appear to be much better than that developed by children taught by similar procedures in T.O.

7. T.O. spelling achievement post-transition for the i/t/a child in the ninth month of school is no different from that developed by children taught only T.O. spellings. Spelling achievement in an ongoing program during the second year for i/t/a children seems to be improving markedly.

Advantages of i/t/a

As with any application of a new idea, many observations have been made independent of statistics which further point up the desirability of the use of i/t/a as it is presently conceived. Observers note that improvement of speech defects is a natural by-product; reading failures are greatly reduced; advanced children are sped to high reading levels. The most dramatic flowering of all is evident in the large numbers of free, self-expressive six-year-old writers. They write more abundantly and about many more subjects than do children learning the traditional alphabet. They write alone, without help or editing from teachers, sounding out their own spellings and using any words they feel like using in any sentence pattern that occurs to them.

Other observations indicate that the first grade teacher's complaint about "what to do with the other children when working with one group" seems no longer

COURTESY, I/T/A PUBLS., INC., N.Y.

Pitman's Initial Teaching Alphabet, with its 44 symbols and words illustrating the sounds these symbols represent.

to be a problem in i/t/a classes. While learning may start with whole class activity, this disappears in a short time in favor of individualized activity based on the rates of learning of individual children. The range of ability in a given classroom begins to show itself and the teacher finds himself working with individuals within groups. It is noted that the teacher with many years' experience in first grade feels that an i/t/a approach answers the first grade teacher's cry: "There must be an easier way of teaching reading."

Based on the language and experiences of children, the earliest reading material in i/t/a is centered on the child's world;

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under the auspices of the Cooperative Research Branch of the U. S. Office of Education to develop ways to overcome the lag between what is now known from social science research and what is taught and also to identify needed areas of research and to stimulate research in critical areas. Well-known educators; social scientists from geography, anthropology, political science, sociology; psychologists, researchers, classroom teachers and testing experts participated in examination of studies now in progress and their implications for teaching social studies. Focus was on *research needed* in the social attitudes, beliefs and values in teaching social studies, teaching social science as method, selection and organization of content for teaching, psychological factors in learning that relate to the social studies and the cultural backgrounds, attitudes and knowledge of social studies teachers.

The National Council for the Social Studies has published proceedings of the conference in *Needed Research in the Teaching of the Social Studies*, edited by Roy A. Price, Research Bulletin No. 1, ($2.50, from NCSS, 1201 Sixteenth Street, N. W., Washington, D. C.). Highlights of the deliberations, including quotations from the conference, may be looked at in a schematic design developed to study modes of inquiry in the field. Under th oroad headings of general societal task, social studies curriculum and instructional task, and appropriate inquiry and research task, the participants devised a working plan for use in coordinating the wide range of modes of inquiry in social studies now under way.

Of course, no absolute standards to apply for study of social studies were developed, since this was not the goal sought, but the report describes the ways in which the research process develops and the many complex variables involved in research.

Any school system faced with improving its study and research in the social studies will find help with understanding and developing various types of research. Immediately it becomes increasingly obvious that there is no problem to dream up needed research, but *how to do it* is the problem. This bulletin offers tremendous help in devising ways to look at social studies and to ask the right questions in this curriculum area.

—MARGARET GILL, *Executive Secretary, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.*

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i/t/a? Yes!—Mazurkiewicz

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yet soon textbooks begin to expand his interests and abilities. Basic texts served as a nucleus for a reading program but in no way are a limitation of the program; wide personal reading in i/t/a and T.O. is encouraged from the outset. This is true, since 40 to 65 percent of the words in an i/t/a program are regularly spelled (or quite similar) to a T.O. procedure.

Other observers note that the normally strong teacher is permitted a freedom to teach under an i/t/a procedure—a freedom very often inhibited by the T.O. medium—and that the weaker teacher is supported by i/t/a. Some observers now conclude that the weaker teacher no longer exists in this educational situation because i/t/a, being a simple medium, encourages the child to engage in self-teaching.

All of the above might cause the uninitiated to think of i/t/a as *the panacea* which seemingly no one has been looking for. However, i/t/a's purpose is not to show dramatic differences in achievement at the end of the first, second, or

third grade; its purpose is not to suggest that all learning problems may now be eliminated and that no attention to individual rates and ways of learning need be emphasized. Its purpose, as a simple alphabetic medium approximating the traditional, is to insure that the beginning stages of reading are as natural as possible, that reading can begin without frustration, that the child will learn readily, learn reading and writing easily, and that, after he has developed his decoding skills to an efficient level, his transfer to traditional print will be as simple and effective as possible. These purposes are met. As suggested by various observations on concomitant effects, these purposes are exceeded.

Shall we encourage wide use of i/t/a for beginning reading instruction? The research evidence, the observations of teachers, supervisors, and specialists and I say, "Yes!"

Editorial—*Shores*

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read. To have experience prerequisite to understanding is not reading. There is a real fallacy in confusing these relational factors with the reading process.

Functional Elements

The actual process of reading is concerned not with *relational* factors but with *functional* elements. Instead of asking what factors are related to reading ability or inability, the answer to which provides the relational factors, we now ask, "What does a reader do when he reads?" He locates information. He surveys material to see what is there. He gets main ideas. He memorizes facts. He follows directions. He skims for general impressions or for one fact. He appreciates. He criticizes. He evaluates. This list of functional tasks, like that of relational factors, could go on and on.

The point here is not that reading theorists and researchers should abandon study of relational factors. These are extremely important in development, diagnosis and remediation. It is instead that increased attention must be given to the actual process of reading, the functional tasks, and especially that these be understood and developed beyond the primary grades when the need for them expresses the limits of reading as a social skill.

As the impact of science and technology places greater and greater demands upon our reading and thinking abilities, the need for understanding the functional reading processes increases proportionately. For what purposes must we read in mathematics, science, the social sciences? What are the basic research-study skills? Locating them is a first step toward theory and research in their development, and to understand these is to understand reading as a social skill.

—J. Harlan Shores, *Professor of Elementary Education, University of Illinois, Urbana.*

Values—*Lieberman and Simon*

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teaching. It has made teaching for us an ever more humane act. Perhaps the reader will understand this better by reading one last values card.

I keep thinking that someday I will no longer be on this earth.
I will not be alive.
I will not exist.
My eyes and my soul will be closed forever.
Forever is a frightening word.
I don't want to live the unlived life.
I want to fly *now* while I still have the wings of life.
Only I don't know where to go.