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Cathy Collins  
*Texas Christian University*

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# WHEN READING INSTRUCTION BEGINS AND IS TESTED IN 25 COUNTRIES THAT USE AN ALPHABETIC LANGUAGE SYSTEM

*Dr. Cathy Collins*

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR, SCHOOL OF EDUCATION  
TEXAS CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY, FORT WORTH, TX 76129

The purpose of this article is to present results from one segment of an 18-month research project concerning beginning reading instruction. The project was designed to identify conditions under which initial reading activities were implemented in 25 countries that use an alphabetic language system: Argentina, Austria, Australia, Belgium, Canada, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, England, Finland, France, Guatemala, Ireland, Japan, Korea, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Newfoundland, Nicaragua, Norway, South Africa, Sweden, Switzerland, United States of America, Virgin Islands, and West Germany.

Data were collected concerning:

- 1) the types of skills and tests used to assess beginning reading achievements;
- 2) the age at which formal reading instruction and remedial reading instruction begins in each of the alphabetic countries surveyed;
- 3) the characteristics of classrooms and the objectives of programs used for instruction;
- and, 4) the most significant advancements made during 1975-1979 in the beginning reading program of each of the 25 countries listed above.

Comparisons were also made as to the percent of time each country reported to spend in reading readiness activities, basic sight word instruction, increasing positive attitudes and values toward reading, learning letter-to-sound correspondences and comprehension instruction. Answers to questions concerning improvement of beginning reading instruction in each of the 25 countries were also obtained.

The objectives of the project were to gain greater insight into the common bases of learning to read alphabetic languages and to identify successful programmatic elements in one national system that might strengthen an instructional program in other nations. This article focuses upon a discussion of the types of skills and tests used to assess beginning reading achievements and the ages at which formal reading instruction and remedial reading instruction begins in each of the 25 nations surveyed. Discussion of other data in the project will follow (in press).

The impetus for this project arose from Nila Banton Smith's 1974 analysis of the state of knowledge about beginning reading instruction. In her address to the Fifth World Congress of Reading, Smith stressed the need for an international effort to explore the theoretical and practical bases for reading readiness, assessment and instruction. Durkin (1977) reemphasized the value of such a project. She based her argument on the continuing disjointed and segmental efforts of the past toward identifying and substantiating a definition of exactly what a child must be ready to do as s/he approaches the task of learning to read his/her native, alphabetic language.

The project began through a written request to 168 educational authorities from the countries listed above for 1) copies of curriculum documents and beginning reading tests, and 2) open-ended response to a three-page questionnaire concerning beginning reading programs. The questionnaire, shown in Table 1, was constructed by the author and Ms. Susan Tong, the Research Assistant. Educational authorities were selected on the basis of either their personal contribution to the field of reading or the position of responsibility they held in an exemplary educational institution in their country. The countries were randomly selected from a list of nations that have a national alphabetic language (as identified in Katzner, 1975) and an affiliate council of the International Reading Association.

Each of the 168 educators was asked to complete one questionnaire and to forward the five additional questionnaires, mailed to him/her, to two or three public school personnel and two or three university personnel within their country who would be most knowledgeable in beginning reading practices. In this manner, each country would have a potential representation of 36 separate respondents. Sixteen percent of all potential respondents from a single country, or six of the thirty-six respondents, had to return the information for the responses to be included in the project report. Twenty-five countries met or exceeded this requirement, with a total of 293 educators participating (as listed in the References) in the project. As shown in the References, project participants were presidents of IRA Affiliates, Ministers of Education in State Departments of European and Asiatic countries, educational researchers and psychologists, public school teachers, head teachers or leaders of teacher teams, speech therapists, reading resource teachers, principals, superintendents, professors of reading and education, and consultants.

#### Data Analysis

When the open-ended questionnaires (Table 1) were received, they were translated verbatim and classified by country under each of the 19 questions on the survey. Curriculum guides, tests and curriculum objectives, types of testing tasks and elements of instruction given in that country. The data and lists from the questions were condensed and often appear as tables in this article, and the companion article. In some instances, percentages were computed to make inter- and intra- country comparisons.

Table 1

Survey Used in International Beginning Reading Research  
Project of Office of International Research, Southern Illinois  
University of Carbondale, Illinois

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Position \_\_\_\_\_  
Address \_\_\_\_\_

1. How many students do you have? \_\_\_\_\_ boys \_\_\_\_\_ girls
2. What standards do you use to decide when you begin to teach reading skills?
3. What is the average age when reading readiness instruction begins?
4. What percent (%) of your primary teachers are men?
5. What person is mainly responsible for giving reading readiness tests?
6. What measures and tests are used?
7. Do all children receive a test for reading readiness?  
When is the test given?
8. How are the results used? \_\_\_\_\_ For ability grouping  
\_\_\_\_\_ Small group instruction \_\_\_\_\_ Promotion  
\_\_\_\_\_ Whole class instruction \_\_\_\_\_ Reports to parents  
\_\_\_\_\_ Tutoring \_\_\_\_\_ Individual instruction

Please list others \_\_\_\_\_

9. Past research seems to indicate that there are several factors that relate to reading readiness. Some of these factors are listed below. Would you please indicate how you measure each of these factors now. Please list any other readiness factors you consider before teaching young children to read.

Socioeconomic Status, by doing what \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Home influence, by \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Books in home, by \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Hours parents read to child, by \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Chronological age, by \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Learning rate, by \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Mental age, by \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Maturity, by \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Memory, by \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Oral language abilities, by \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Gaps in experiential background, by \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Dialect, by \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Student's best learning style (sight, hearing, touch), by \_\_\_\_\_

Please list others: \_\_\_\_\_

10. If a child does not do well on readiness tests, what do you do?
11. What reading authority has had the most influence in helping you decide which method of assessing reading readiness you use?
12. Are you aware of any research that indicates the best way to assess reading readiness? List this research.
13. At what grade level is a student referred to remedial help in reading if such help is available?
14. Do the students in your class read aloud? Do you read to them?
15. In beginning reading instruction, approximately what percent of time do you spend in:

- teaching letter/sound correspondences
- teaching basic sight words
- teaching whole words as a reading unit
- teaching spelling patterns
- increasing comprehension skills
- increasing positive attitudes and values toward reading
- teaching study/reference skills
- teaching student self-directed reading skills

Others: \_\_\_\_\_

16. Are parents responsible for any reading readiness instruction?
17. What percent of a normal day would be spent in giving reading readiness activities to:
- the entire class at one time
  - to small groups of 4-8 members
  - to individuals
18. If you could add anything to your present reading program and reading assessment, what would you add?
19. Would you please indicate below those changes in your beginning reading program that have taken place in the last three years?

Please attach one copy of each readiness assessment test you use.

### RESULTS

#### Assessing Readiness for Initial Reading Instruction

Informal tests, observation of individual skills in oral language, tests of visual/auditory discrimination and demonstration of motor coordination are the standards most frequently used to determine when reading instruction should begin. Thirty-one percent of the countries use this standard, as reported in responses to questions 2 and 9 of the survey. Twenty percent of the countries used entrance into first grade and observations/reports of kindergarten teachers as the predominant criteria for the time at which reading instruction should begin. Four countries use neither of the above, but base time to begin on chronological age (Sweden, Norway, Korea, and Taiwan). Mental age, the interest a child has in reading, depth of prior background experiences, readiness checklists (mentioned specifically were the Barbe Readiness Skills Checklist and the Catterson Checklist of Reading Skills) and unidentified criterion referenced tests over single skills are each used 16% of the time as criteria for when to begin initial instruction. In the USA, Denmark, and England conferences with parents and educational specialists are used frequently as a criterion to determine when reading instruction is to begin. Canada uses mastery of the concept of "words and sentences"; Taiwan uses successful completion of a test of sound (pronunciation) after ten weeks of instruction; and in Argentina, a child's abilities to analyze and synthesize material presented orally, and to use temporal order and serialization to derive meaning.

To obtain more specific information about exact criteria used to measure a student's first level of success in reading-related activities, 41 tests for beginning reading assessment from 15 countries were collected, translated, and compared (Norway,

Finland, Denmark, Sweden, Newfoundland, Canada, South Africa, Virgin Islands, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, Luxembourg, England, Argentina, Poland, and U.S.A.). In analyzing each test, a listing and tally for each task in the test was made. In the 15 "alphabetic language" countries we compared, 95 different testing tasks were present in one or more tests as determiners of beginning reading.

"Testing task" is defined as any task in a test that is different from other tasks in either the skills needed or the activities used to complete the test being taken. Of the 95 task types, 52% or 49 tasks were unique to single tests. That is, more than half of the indices used to determine beginning reading skills in standardized tests from different alphabetic languages appear in only one of the 41 tests. One might reason that a wide variance between test tasks is logical because the tasks reflect the uniqueness in the fifteen languages tested. As shown in Table 2, however, the 49 unique tasks, although variant in some ways (e.g., matching two shapes as opposed to matching two pictures) call upon skills that are applicable to learning more than one alphabetic language. In other words, most tasks are designed to test students' skills in performing very basic fundamental competencies such as vocabulary recognition, visual discrimination/memory ability and auditory discrimination/memory ability and not the perceptual and cognitive processing unique to specific alphabetic languages.

In the comparison of tests, it became apparent that the types of tests included in beginning reading are less influenced by the characteristics unique to the language being tested than by the contents of tests published in other countries. In 1977 and 1978, however, a trend toward developing language specific tests was beginning. As was suggested by project participants, when these country-specific tests are refined and validated, the former practice of verbatim translation of tests into the national language of their own country will be less frequent.

When the total 95 test tasks were categorized according to the specific skills assessed, fifteen skill categories resulted. That is, on an international basis, fifteen different norm-referenced skills are used to analyze the degree of success beginning "alphabetic-languaged" readers are having, or will likely have as they begin to learn to read. Table 2 presents these skill categories from the two skills most frequently assessed to determine beginning reading achievements (visual discrimination, oral syntactic language ability/vocabulary development) to the skills least frequently used (reading speed, oral phrase reading, and use of geometric symbols to represent ideas indicated by pictures). Five tests also included an informal checklist or observational information form. Three tasks appeared on 25% or more of all the tests. Those most commonly occurring beginning reading achievement measures were: 1) matching a word or letter to the identical, printed word/letter (stimulus); 2) marking the written form of a spoken letter name; and 3) copying a shape that is printed to the left of the copying space.

## Uses of Beginning Reading Tests

The people responsible for giving the first tests of reading assessment are remedial specialists, psychologists, classroom teachers, teachers' aides, nurses and speech therapists (question 5 on survey). No country gave a standardized readiness test to all students; when given, tests are taken during the last few months of kindergarten/nursery school, or during the first few months of the first grade.

All countries reported to use formal and informal test results to determine whole-class instructional programs, individualized and tutorial instruction, small group instruction, ability grouping and reporting to parents and promotion. (question 8)

Nine different programs are used for students who do not do well on their first reading assessments: (question 10) students were tutored, teaching to student-strengths in small groups (Newfoundland and USA); conferences were held with parents (Sweden, with nurse and principal also present, USA, South Africa and Argentina); students were placed in a special reading clinic called a Technical Orientation Center (Argentina, Taiwan, Norway); remedial reading programs were given in the child's first year of formal instruction (Denmark, with remedial instruction including motor skill training, body concept awareness and vocabulary development through play, Argentina with individualized training, Canada with oral language development, Guatemala and Poland); special lessons are given in the regular classroom (Norway, Finland, Sweden, Virgin Islands, Belgium, Luxembourg, Guatemala, and USA); reading instruction of any type is postponed and entrance into formal schooling is delayed (Canada, South Africa with students being placed in nursery schools, Belgium, Guatemala, Luxembourg, Virgin Islands, USA where students may repeat kindergarten); more tests are given (by psychologists, pediatricians, neurologists and foniatrists in Luxembourg, USA, with more testing being conducted by psychological technicians; Britain, with tests being given primarily to determine if cause for first failure was emotional or physical; and Argentina, to conduct a deep study of the child including identification of learning difficulties, family history, I.Q. of individual children).

Questions 11 and 12 were designed to identify the most influential people and research studies being used (during 1976-78) to make decisions about assessment of beginning reading skills. Many project participants gave titles and/or author of specific research studies. Because complete bibliographical information of the research studies is not available, data from questions 11 and 12 were combined; authors of the studies are cited in Table 3. Specific names of educational authorities as well as citations of person and/or the research which predominantly influenced the assessment of beginning reading skills are given.

## Conditions Surrounding Initial Reading Instruction

Although conclusive evidence has not been obtained concerning

the optimal age at which initial reading activities should begin, we found the largest proportion of countries beginning formal instruction in reading immediately upon completion of preschool experiences, and at the beginning of the first formal year of school (question 3). Also, the age at which children can enroll in preschool and kindergarten is younger than in any previous period in history. As a matter of fact, Belgium is designing legislation to provide formal, compulsory preschool experiences for all children two years of age and older. As the data in Table 4, fourth column, illustrates, six nations are allowing formal entrance into first grade reading experiences to begin at age five. None of the countries using an alphabetic language system has a policy to begin formal instruction later than age eight. As also shown in Table 4, during the time in which initial reading instruction most often occurs only three countries maintain an average class size of more than 29 students to one teacher.

Because all project participants did not have information about the number of students enrolled in kindergarten and first grade (question 1) and the percent of primary teachers who were male/female (question 4), data was obtained from the UNFSCO Statistical Yearbooks of the United Nations Educational Council.

As shown in Table 5, with the exception of a 1% decrease in kindergarten and nursery school enrollments in Belgium, all countries have significantly increased the total number of students enrolled in their kindergarten and nursery schools between 1965 and 1978. The range of increase was 11% to 1100%, with mode of increase between 50 & 60%. Four nations showed significantly higher increases than others; these were France 100%, Saudi Arabia 500%, Panama 150%, and Denmark 1100%. The overall international enrollment in 1973 was 107% greater than the preschool enrollment of 1968.

In the 22 countries where data were available, only four nations have fewer than 1,000 preprimary educational institutions sponsored by both public and private sources. While Japan, Italy, Luxembourg, and Spain have increased in the percent of preprimary institutions supported by private funds, 15 nations either have no privately supported institutes or have decreased the number of privately supported preschools.

In the USA, the total population of children ages 3-5 years decreased from 12.5 to 10.4 million between 1964 and 1974 (a decrease of 17%). Despite the decrease in total number of preschool-aged children, however, the number of children who enrolled in preprimary programs increased from 3.2 to 4.7 million (an increase of 47%). In 1974, four and one-half times as many 3 year-old children were enrolled in preschools as the number enrolled in 1964. By 1975, 81.3% of all 5 year-old children in the USA were enrolled in preschools.

In every country but Japan, 95 to 100% of the teachers in preprimary educational institutions are women (question 4). Japan

alone has as many as 15 men in every 100 preprimary teachers. With the exception of Saudi Arabia and Belgium, 49–53% of the preschool students are boys. Saudi Arabia has a preschool population composed of 63% boys, whereas Belgium has only 36 boys in every 100 students.

### Discussion and Conclusions

The data of this project suggest that the majority of the countries using an alphabetic language system are judging success in beginning reading as the ability to do tasks that demonstrate mastery of the same set of skills. The types of tasks used to measure these basic 15 skills, as well as the number of skills tested, vary considerably from language to language and from country to country, however. The four measures most frequently used to show beginning reading successes are remembering and discriminating visual and auditory units, and recognizing the meanings of numerous words presented auditorily and/or visually. Tests have not been widely used to assess children's abilities to deal with semantic and syntactic features that distinguish one language from another.

One third of the nations surveyed also used a second criterion for beginning reading success, an informal checklist of skills that are not easily measured by paper and pencil tests.

If students are not successful in their first attempts at reading, one of nine types of programs could be used to help increase the students' successes. The type of program used is not based upon the language the child reads, as several countries using different language systems use the same type of remedial reading program, and countries using the same language system use separate remedial reading programs.

Most children who speak an alphabetic language will learn to read their language after they leave their preschool and kindergarten classes. Because the age at which children in all the countries in this study are entering preschools and kindergartens is continuing to decrease, students in alphabetic languaged countries are learning to read at a younger age than did children as recently as ten years ago. Most of the beginning-reading instruction is also offered by women.

While there was a commonality between nations in the methods used to assess beginning reading successes and the time at which instruction begins, administration of and decisions concerning alternate approaches for less successful beginning readers vary considerably.

Each of the 25 nations surveyed appear to be making definite contributions toward attaining a unified goal: increasing the number of young children who become highly successful, beginning readers. Educators in this research feel that through this and continued cooperative research, we will enrich our understanding

of the reading process. We are also confident that, in the near future, we will find more and better methods of reading instruction which can be shared among these nations. This project teaches that our bond is the objective of eliminating illiteracy in our world.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Durkin, Dolores. "Facts About Pre-First Grade Reading" In Ollilla, Lloyd O. (Ed.) The Kindergarten Child and Reading. Newark, Delaware: IRA Press, 1977, pp. 1-13.

EDITOR'S NOTE:

As the reader may note in the article, there is much more information which may be gleaned from the tables summarized here. We have made arrangements to print the tables in the Winter '82 issue, so that closer study of this interesting survey will be possible. We hope all beginning reading teachers will take the time to look at the tables.