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# WHO HAS THE BEST METHOD FOR BEGINNING READING?

*C. Hap Gilliland*

Who has the best reading methods? As we watch children learning to read in other parts of the world, it makes us wonder! In South America they are taking primitive Indians who have never before seen a book and in two to three years they are reading well enough to read the Bible. In New Guinea, primitive people who have been head hunters can learn a new language and learn to read it in a year. In London four-year-olds are learning to read.

People hear about these things, and they say "What is wrong with us? Why don't we do these things? Let's take a little closer look at what some of these people are doing." I spent my summer this year in the jungles between the Amazon and the Orinoco, 700 miles from the nearest civilization, with a tribe of completely primitive Indians. These Indians have had, until the last five years, absolutely no contact with the outside world. These are Stone Age Indians. They have no metal, no tools of any kind, wear no clothing. They are a happy, cheerful group of people and very friendly and nice to visit, as long as you go alone so they know you're not a raiding party.

Two missionaries have gone there and put the language into writing. They are trying to teach the Indians to read. They found that in a period of three years, they can teach them to read the Bible. The system they use is the old phonetic system. They have a picture of a parrot which in Guika is *ala* so they put up a picture of a parrot for the sound of "a." Then they have a picture of *basko*, the spider monkey, and put *ba*. Other words represent *ca*, *da*, *ma* and so forth. They have made a chart with all the syllables in the language. The first column lists all the consonants followed by *a*, the second followed by *e*, and so on. After about three years of this, they can sound out and read any word in their language. The missionaries use this system instead of the system we use for several reasons. First, the language recently has been put into writing so they have written it completely phonetically. It is not like English in which about 80 per cent of our words are fairly phonetic. We have many sounds for some of the letters, and many different ways that we represent certain sounds.

Their language is completely phonetic because they planned it that way. Don't you wish we could do that with English?

For another thing there are no primary materials. They have no stories like we have for teaching beginning reading. Since there is no simple material to read, they have to practice on these syllables to try to put them together into words. The only thing that has been translated into the language is the Bible.

I asked one of the missionaries, "Why don't you write some simple stories like we have for primary reading? Write about their experiences and write them in very simple language and start out with these."

He said, "They don't like stories."

I said, "Oh, all people like stories. Surely they have legends and stories they tell."

"Oh sure," he said, "If you tell stories about raiding other villages, they'll listen all day. They just love this. But we're trying to teach them not to go on raids."

I suggested that there were lots of exciting things going on all the time. "There are all those poisonous snakes around, and they are always meeting jaguars. Write about them."

He said, "We tried that. We wrote a story about a man being attacked by a jaguar, and we wrote one about someone just narrowly escaping a deadly poisonous snake, but the Indians weren't interested. They were no more interested in that than we would be in a story about somebody crossing the street and stepping in the way of a car. It happens every day."

Another reason the missionaries use the phonetic system is because they are teaching adults. The system they are using is similar to the system that Laubach has set up for adult reading instruction in 101 countries. The adult knows he wants to read and keeps this in mind even if he has to practice on syllables for a year in order to start. He knows that eventually he is going to read. Would you like to try to motivate a child for a year before he got any fun out of reading?

Even with these differences, they might not be satisfied with this system of teaching if they expected all the people to learn to read. One of the things that is different about their teaching is that they only expect about one third of the Guika Indians who start their classes to learn to read. The other two-thirds give up and quit. Would we be satisfied with teaching only a third of our children to read?

This system of teaching all the sounds and then building them into words works fine if you have no other reading material to use, if you have a completely phonetic language, if you are teaching adults,

and if you don't care how many of them drop out. But there are some real problems if you are trying to use this system by itself to teach children.

I spent some time in New Guinea a few years ago with some of the people who were just changing over from being head hunters. Here again I saw what the missionaries were doing, and it is really remarkable.

You can take one of the native languages of New Guinea and put it into writing and in three years you can teach that tribe to read their language. The only trouble is there are over 700 languages in New Guinea, and very few of them have anything written in them. You could teach them English in which there are many materials, but they first would have to learn English and then learn to read it. This takes about six years. So the missionaries have settled on another solution; they teach Melanesian Pigin English. You can teach people who have never heard the language to speak pigin and read it in about a year. In from one to two years, people who have never heard the language before can learn to read anything that is written in that language.

Why can they do that when we can't do that with English? In pigin English there are only 150 words. They never add a new word so all you have to do is teach 150 words, and teach them how to put them together to make a language. For this they are using a strictly sight vocabulary. They can learn 150 words of sight vocabulary and then read anything that is written in the language. So they translate the Bible into pigin and read the Bible in one year. Translate anything into the language and they can read it. But it is different with the English language. You know how fast we add new words. They have a different system. If they need a new name for something, they simply add a new description. When you want to say elbow in Pigin, you say screw below arm. Knee is screw below leg; hair is grass belong head. You just describe the thing you're talking about. When you want to say piano—well, piano is a box. A box in pigin is bokas, so piano is big—fello-bokas-you-fight-im-teeth-belong-im-now-bokas-hercry. That is one word! All these parts are in their 150 words, so there is never an addition of a word.

It's a little hard to express some things in Pigin. Suppose you want to say, "How far is it to the next village?" They don't measure time, and they don't measure distance, and they don't count, so what you want to say is, "If I start here at noon, where will the sun be when I get to the village?" Only they don't have all those words. "Kai-Kai" means food, so noon is "bell-o-Kai-Kai." What you actually have to

say is “S’pose im place ’ere long bell-o-kai-kai, sun ’e stope where, me come up alongside place-belong-Kanaka?” In a few months you could learn to speak fluently and read it.

Sight vocabulary alone is fine—that is if you only have 150 words in your language. It takes an estimated 10,000 word reading vocabulary to read the *Reader’s Digest*. They estimate about 35,000 words to read *Scientific American*, and nearly 30,000 to read the Sunday edition of the *New York Times*. That is to read it with understanding. We need more than a sight vocabulary.

I observed some first grade classes in the Philippines, and I thought, “Well now, here is the answer! If we only had a language like they have in the Philippines, this would be wonderful.” Tagalog, the national language, is an absolutely phonetic language. I used to go to church in the Philippines and they used to ask me to read the scripture, not because I was a leader of the church, simply because of the fact that they thought it was unusual that an American could read in Philippine. I didn’t have to have the slightest idea of what it said. All I had to do was take this material written in Tagalog, and read it to someone before the meeting so they could tell me if I emphasized the wrong word. I didn’t know what these words were. I didn’t need to know. There is only one sound for each letter; each letter has only one sound. You can’t misspell a word because all you do is put down the letters that represent the sounds. You can’t say a word incorrectly if you see it written because those letters tell you what to say.

With a language like that, it should be simple to teach reading, shouldn’t it? So about five years ago, I was very interested when two Americans went to the Philippines to help set up an experiment. Part of the object of this was to show what could be done. These men were very convinced that if we had a phonetic language we could teach reading phonetically, and this would be simple. I felt the same way. I’ve always said I just wish we had a language like this. Just think how simple it would be to learn to read. So I followed the experiment with great interest.

In Cazon City they divided all the first graders into two equated groups. They equated them for IQ and for socio-economic background. They even equated the teachers on the amount of experience and the amount of education. Half of the first graders were taught by the completely phonetic method. The other half were taught by the combination system, commonly used here.

Of course all of us were waiting to see the results of how the phonetic system worked when you have phonetic spelling. Maybe

we could even promote the idea we should have phonetic spelling of English! The phonetic groups started off much faster than the others. The system worked fine at first. At the end of three years, when these children finished the third grade, we were all a little surprised to find that the group who had started with a small sight vocabulary and added phonics as fast as possible—the combination system that most of you use in teaching beginning reading—were far ahead of the group who had started out by learning sounds and putting them together in words—even in a language in which every word is spelled phonetically! I think I was somewhat pleased to hear it though, because at least it should have shown that we were on the right track. Even where a situation is ideal our system works best.

I'd like to give you one more example, and tell you about a boy and a girl that I had in a fourth grade class. These two children both tested tenth grade reading level.

One of these was a boy who knew phonics. For science he got college textbooks and made his reports from them. He could sound out any word that could be sounded out. He read everything he could get his hands on, mostly high school and college material. He knew his phonics thoroughly, but he was a slow reader. He sounded out every word. He couldn't spell. When he wrote a report everything was spelled phonetically. He spelled it just like it sounded. You had no trouble reading it because you could sound it out as you read it.

The girl was the opposite extreme. She was an exceptionally fast reader. She had no idea of phonics whatsoever, but, when she came to a new word, she would figure out the new word by context alone. If she couldn't figure it out through context, she would come and ask what the word was. She would never ask the word again. She read at a very high speed because she had learned this way. She could spell anything that she could read because she knew what the word looked like. Therefore, if she wrote it down incorrectly, it didn't look right to her.

As I said previously, on a reading achievement test, both of these fourth graders rated tenth grade level. They had gone through kindergarten, first, second, and third grades together, always in the same group. They had had exactly the same reading instruction. Neither of them had been absent from school more than two days since they started the first grade so neither one of them had missed any instruction. Now, one of them was a phonetic reader, one was a sight reader. Most children are a combination, as you already know. What would have happened if the teacher had taught by phonics only, to

these two children? What would have happened if she had used a sight approach and let it go at that? All children are not alike.

Let's use a combination of methods that will give every child a chance! We can give them some sight vocabulary. Yes, and we can give them some phonics, and we have some individualized reading. If we have some programmed materials, let's use them. When we have a child who doesn't learn by our usual system, let's find something else. When they can't remember what a word looks like, let's do some tracing and let them learn kinesthetically. Let's use everything we can, and not expect that there is any one panacea for all the reading problems. There is none.

We can start with a small sight vocabulary. Nearly all children can build a few words by sight. Then as soon as we have three or four words that begin with the same letter, we can teach them the sound of this particular letter, and they learn it in relation to the word. As they go along we can add other helps. When we find a child who doesn't learn by our usual methods then we can try something else.

The experimental evidence shows that this combination of methods is needed if we want all children to learn. If we recognize this, we won't fall for the propaganda of those who claim to have a cure-all; such as a man who recently made a fortune on a book in which he says, "I taught reading to a sixth grade boy who didn't know how to read. If you'll use the phonetic system they were using 60 years ago, all children will do fine." All of us have taught one child to read who couldn't read before, but this doesn't mean we have the solution for every child.

I hope some of you will experiment with the new programmed materials and with the new initial teaching alphabet. When somebody comes along with a new idea, if it's good let's adopt it as a part of our reading program, but let's not throw out everything we ever knew about reading, everything that has been learned in 50 years of experimentation. Let's adapt and adopt whenever we can. Let's experiment and test. Let's use discretion and common sense in assimilating new ideas into our teaching.

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