

# The Whole-Language Fraud

by

Samuel L. Blumenfeld

## Introduction

Back in 1955, Rudolf Flesch wrote *Why Johnny Can't Read*, which has become a classic in educational literature. In that book American parents found out for the first time why their children were having such a difficult time learning to read. Most of the parents had been taught to read by way of the centuries-old alphabetic phonics method, and they assumed that the schools were still using the same methods. Thus it came as somewhat of a shock when they found out that their children were being taught to read by a new and very different method.

Flesch explained that in the early 1930s, the professors of education changed the way reading was taught in American schools. They threw out the alphabetic phonics method, which is the proper way to teach anyone to read an alphabetic writing system, and they put in a new whole-word, look-say, or sight method that taught children to read English as if it were Chinese, an ideographic writing system. Flesch explained that when you impose an ideographic teaching method on an alphabetic writing system, you get reading disability.

Actually, Flesch was not the first to make this observation. The first man to do so was Dr. Samuel T. Orton, a neuropathologist who had studied cases of reading disability in Iowa in the late 1920s. He came to the conclusion that the cause of the children's problems was the new sight method of teaching reading, and he wrote an article on the subject which appeared in the February 1929 issue of the *Journal of Educational Psychology*, entitled "The 'Sight Reading' Method of Teaching Reading as a Source of Reading Disability." Dr. Orton wrote:

"I wish to emphasize at the beginning that the strictures which I have to offer here do not apply to the use of the sight method of teaching reading as a whole but only to its effects on a restricted group of children for whom, as I think we can show, this technique is not only not adapted but often proves an actual obstacle to reading progress, and moreover I believe that this group is one of considerable size and because here faulty teaching methods may not only prevent the acquisition of academic education by children of average capacity but may also give rise to far reaching damage to their emotional life."

Unfortunately, Dr. Orton's warning fell on deaf ears, and the professors of education

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launched their new textbooks on the education market, the most famous of which were the Dick and Jane basal readers. It didn't take long for the reading problems to begin showing up. Parents began to hear of a new reading disorder called dyslexia, which many children were coming down with. In April of 1944, *Life* magazine ran a major article on the subject, reporting:

"Millions of children in the U.S. suffer from dyslexia which is the medical term for reading difficulties. It is responsible for about 70% of the school failures in 6- to 12-year-age group, and handicaps about 15% of all grade-school children. Dyslexia may stem from a variety of physical ailments or combination of them -- glandular imbalance, heart disease, eye or ear trouble -- or from a deep-seated psychological disturbance that 'blocks' a child's ability to learn. It has little or nothing to do with intelligence and is usually curable."

The article went on to describe the case of a little girl with an I.Q. of 118 who was being examined at the Dyslexia Institute of Northwestern University. After her tests, the doctors concluded that the little girl needed "thyroid treatments, removal of tonsils and adenoids, exercises to strengthen her eye muscles." The article concluded:

"Other patients may need dental work, nose, throat or ear treatment, or a thorough airing out of troublesome home situations that throw a sensitive child off the track of normality. In the experience of the institute these range from alcoholic fathers to ambitious mothers who try to force their children too fast in school."

Strange as it seems, no one at *Life* seemed to know that Dr. Orton existed or that in 1929 he had identified the cause of dyslexia: the ideographic way of teaching reading. In fact, Dr. Orton had popularized the term dyslexia.

In any case, by 1954 it was clear to a lot of intelligent people what was causing the reading problem. *Collier's* magazine of Nov. 26, 1954 explained it all in an article entitled "Why Don't They Teach My Child to Read?" by Howard Whitman. He wrote:

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 youngest 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.

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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 "spit 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 the parts come first, the word-memory people say we start with the whole and the parts fall into place in due course.

The article explained it all quite clearly. The cause of the reading problems children were having was the teaching method. And what happened to that method after so much criticism and parental concern? Did the educators change anything? Did they admit that they had been wrong? On the contrary. They stuck to their guns and insisted that their new way of teaching was the better way. And if parents didn't like it they could lump it. In fact, in 1956, the professors of reading organized the International Reading Association, which has become the most powerful professional lobby for the advocacy of the look-say method. In the main, its presidents have been the authors of the leading reading textbooks used in the schools.

Does that indicate some sort of conflict of interest between professors of reading who train their students to teach by their methods, who train the directors of reading who then recommend the books to the school boards, who receive royalties from the publishers who sell the books to the school districts? These same professors also control the professional publications that show a distinct bias and hostility toward phonics. If that isn't a conflict of interest, then what is?

There is also the issue of deception. Have the educators been deceiving the parents all these years? They never asked the parents whether or not they wanted their children to be taught to read English as if it were Chinese. Have they deliberately foisted on the American people a defective teaching method which has caused enormous harm to millions of children, many of whom are now adults? Are they not responsible for our nation's precipitous decline in literacy?

In the early '60s, Dr. Jeanne Chall obtained a grant from the Carnegie Corporation to do an in-depth study of the two reading instruction methods to find out which method was the more effective. The study was finally published in 1967 under the title, *Learning to Read: The Great Debate*. Dr. Chall's conclusion was that a phonics approach, that is, decoding, was the more effective teaching method for beginning reading.

You would have thought that Dr. Chall had settled the issue and that phonics had won the great debate. But no such thing happened. True, for a time more phonics was included in whole-word basal reading programs, but the basic ideographic approach remained unchanged. The professors of reading remained totally committed to their methodology. In fact, they invented a new term to describe it, "psycholinguistics."

Indeed, it was Professor Kenneth Goodman who formulated the new definition of reading which he articulated in the May 1967 *Journal of the Reading Specialist* as follows:

"Reading is a selective process. It involves partial use of available language cues selected from perceptual input on the basis of the reader's expectation. As this partial information is processed, tentative decisions are made to be confirmed, rejected or refined as reading progresses.

"More simply stated, reading is a psycholinguistic guessing game."

That said it all. Moreover, it indicated that the professor made no distinction between an alphabetic writing system and an ideographic one. And that was the key to the deception. Some years later Goodman told a reporter from *The New York Times* (July 9, 1975) that it was perfectly all right if a child read "pony" for "horse" because the child had gotten the meaning.

A professor of reading who does not understand the difference between an alphabetic writing system and an ideographic one is like a mechanic who doesn't understand the difference between a horse-and-buggy and an automobile. The alphabet did for the ancient world what the computer is doing for the modern world. It made learning to read easy and speeded up the reading process enormously. It was a far more accurate and precise form of writing. It permitted a tremendous growth in vocabulary, thereby expanding the use of language and the ability to think. It enhanced the exchange of information and knowledge. It helped produce better speech because now language was visible in the form of symbols representing speech sounds. And because it permitted man to do so much more with so much less, it is probably the single most significant invention of man.

To require children to give up all of the advantages of alphabetic writing in favor of

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an ideographic theory of reading makes no sense at all. What have we gained by it? Nothing. What have we lost by it? The literacy of a nation. It is time for the American people to decide that enough is enough. The experiment has gone on far too long. The great debate should have been settled a long time ago.

But now, in the '90s, we are in a new phase of the debate -- open warfare. This is what we were told by *Education Week* of March 21, 1990 in an article entitled, "From a 'Great Debate' to a Full-Scale War: Dispute Over Teaching Reading Heats Up." The article states:

In 1967, one of the most prominent researchers in reading instruction, Jeanne S. Chall, analyzed the controversy that was then raging in the field in an influential book called *The Great Debate*.

Today, nearly a quarter of a century later, the Harvard University scholar says the "debate" not only persists, but has, in fact, escalated to a full-scale war.

The battle lines are drawn between advocates of phonics, who stress the importance of teaching the relationships between letters and sounds, and those of whole-language methodology, who believe children should be taught reading by reading whole texts.

And so fierce have their arguments become that two recent attempts to find a common ground -- a federally funded study and a proposal for the 1992 national assessment -- have not only failed to quell the debate, but may have exacerbated it.

"It's always been, in reading, that there was restraint with all our fighting," Ms. Chall says. "Now it's as if all restraints are gone."

And so, we are now in an educational war, dealing with the very same issues described by Collier's magazine in 1954 and Rudolf Flesch in 1955. In all this time, alphabetic phonics has remained alphabetic phonics, but look-say has evolved into psycholinguistics, which has further evolved into whole language. Quite an interesting metamorphosis. What exactly is whole language?

Whole language is an even more extreme form of look-say. It not only does not recognize any distinction between an alphabetic writing system and an ideographic one, it doesn't even recognize that alphabetic writing is a representation of speech. In a recently published book, *Whole Language: What's the Difference?*, the authors write:

"Oral language, written language, sign language -- each of these is a system of linguistic convention for creating meanings. That means none is 'the basis' for the other; none is a secondary representation of the other." (page 9)

Those statements not only indicate a lack of understanding of what alphabetic writing is, but a lack of understanding of its benefits.

Whole language is the latest educational fraud being perpetrated on the American

people. In fact, the whole language fraud is nothing less than the usurpation of primary education by a group of radical, politicized educators whose goal is not the improvement of reading but the inculcation of children with collectivist, left-wing ideas.