

In 1964 when I became interested in literacy, there were 7 million functional illiterates in America; now there are 27 million and counting--about one in six of the adult population. We shall see that about 40 percent of today's children do not learn to read. U.S. News and World Report estimates that in 20 years only 30% of the population will be literate. Is that what we want?

What can be done? There is doubtless no simple solution to this worsening crisis. But learning math, history, or science, or winning and holding a meaningful job, is tough if you can't read well. So the most fundamental part of the solution is to teach everyone to read, as all other leading non-English-speaking industrial countries do.

We can do that by returning from "whole word," "whole language" to a method of reading instruction that works.

There is such a method. I shall show you that it works now in Russia; it worked all over the U.S. 60-70 years ago, and does now where used; I shall explain the method, then suggest how the switchover can be made and what you personally can do.

II. A. 1. Arther Trace wrote in 1962 in What Ivan Knows that Johnny Doesn't, that Russian children, by the end of fourth grade, can read anything. Fifth-graders read classical Russian literature.

I decided to check that out. In Moscow the first evening of a two-week Toastmasters (public-speaking organization) tour last September, I met a young college student, Philip Kuzmin. He belongs to one of two Toastmasters clubs there. Philip informed me that at the end of first grade every child can "sound out" any word. Words in his spoken vocabulary, he understands.

I told him of illiteracy in America, what Dr. Trace had written, and proposed my idea of recording average Russian fifth-grade children--whom I would select--reading literature they had not seen before. I wanted to demonstrate to America why the literacy rate is so much higher in the backward USSR than in supposedly enlightened America. As a Toastmasters member, Philip is "on my side."

Ten days later, we walked from a downtown Metro station to a nearby sturdy, concrete-constructed school. About 20% of the elementary schools in large Soviet cities specialize in one area of learning; that one specializes in the English language.

Philip introduced me to his former fifth-grade teacher, Ivanova Elena Konstantinovna. Her class of 33 friendly, well-behaved 11-year-olds seemed to like and respect her. It included no non-readers. The principal told me afterward that Mrs. Konstantinovna is "a credit to the school" but gave no intimation that she is unusually good.

On the roster I marked numbers 5, 10, 15, 20, and 25. The teacher told me afterward that those five were average.

One at a time they came into another room with Philip and me. After we got acquainted, they read two pages of Dostoevski's "White Nights" and two of Turgeyev's "First Love."

School had just started, and the kids hadn't previously been exposed to general literature. Only one had seen one of the selections.

Now listen to random portions of my tape.

The Cyrillic alphabet of 33 letters has a separate symbol for each sound. It doesn't offer such problems as "o-u" sounding different in "through," "though," "rough," and "cough." So orally reading Russian is easier--but not that much easier.

They summarized accurately, Philip said, and could have told him more. Later he wrote, "I want to stress that school #31 is average; everything in studies is like everywhere ... The school program is common in the USSR." Whether that is true is hard to know. Philip hopes to come to the U.S. in May, and I'll meet him in Los Angeles.

2. I am angry! When average Russian children can read that well at age 11, why aren't American children, millions of them, being taught to read well enough to function in a modern economy?

After fourth grade I could read, not 15 hundred, but more than 15 thousand words. I remember reading at that time--and understanding--geography books, "Robinson Crusoe," ...

Historically, nearly all American children were taught to read. During the Great Depression, 375,000 Civilian Conservation Corps youths were tested. Most of those young men were from the lower socio-economic class. Only 2 percent couldn't read a newspaper or write a letter.

The CCC youths and I--and doubtless many of you--learned to read by the system that has always been used in the Soviet Union: early, intensive, articulated phonics teaching. Phonics worked!

B. What is phonics? Phonics information is the rules and generalizations that explain how the black squiggles on

paper represent individual speech units and how they function in words. Phonics teaching imparts this information to pupils.

When learning any complex skill, common sense tells one to master the simplest elements first, then move to the more-complex. To learn the old Morse code, you simply learned the dots and dashes for the letters, then put them together--with drill and practice--into words and messages.

To master shorthand, you learn the shapes representing the sounds, and drill and practice putting them together into words and phrases and writing messages.

In intensive phonics teaching, you learn the alphabet--one of mankind's greatest inventions!--you learn the sounds represented by the individual letters (A, apple; B, an insect; E, egg) and letter combinations ("th," "ng," etc.), and blend them together--again, with drill and practice. It's not hard.

It is possible to learn decoding without understanding the words, though this is unlikely. This outcome is avoided by frequently discussing the material.

Eventually, you can "sound out" any word. If it's in your spoken vocabulary, you understand it; if not, there's the dictionary. From then on you recognize the word quickly, accurately, and confidently. You can read!

Some educators want to get rid of standard reading tests. Here's why: Dr. Rudolph Flesch cited 125 comparisons between large groups of children taught by intensive phonics and large groups taught by today's methods. 124 showed phonics-taught students read and understood better, and in most instances far better. Do our educators have a reading disability?

C. Why isn't intensive phonics used?

1. "If it ain't broke, don't fix it". The professors tried to fix a working system; they really fixed it!

Though the names--whole word and now whole language--are different, the system now used in 90% of American public schools is fundamentally the same as "look-say," which began to sweep the country in 1930. (That--not coincidentally--is the year the first remedial-reading clinic opened.)

Stripping away the fluff, whole language is mostly memorizing whole words. If you don't know a word, guess from the context and pictures--or teacher will tell you.

But look-and-guess creates exactly the wrong attitude for science studies or for any reading that requires accurate comprehension.

High-school juniors and seniors read "delicacy" as "delinquency," "bivouac" as "bifocals," "hurricane" as "hammer," "Solomon" as "salemi." Paragraph after paragraph reaches their minds garbled, blurred, altered, vitiated. This is not reading. Can you imagine such a person thinking--or doing research?

And now, they memorize stories. After one mother listened while her son "read" a story, she cut the paper up and mixed the pieces. The child couldn't read the words!

2. School superintendents say, "We do teach phonics." But intensive phonics teaching is not at all the kind of "phonics" instruction given in most American public schools.

Some schools teach the sounds of the letters. Aside from that, they offer occasional phonic clues: "Notice, children, that 'ring,' 'sing,' and 'bring' sound alike." These clues are offered only incidentally to the flow of instruction using the whole-language approach.

This is not enough information about phonics to make its application functional. Phonics information should be taught directly, systematically, and early.

No phonics rules are stated--and drilled--in whole language to help the children tie things together. They are expected to figure out phonics generalizations inductively. Could you yourself have worked out the theory of evolution from what you observed and a few clues, without studying Darwin?

It isn't easy! The Condition of Education, A Statistical Report, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Dept. of Education, 1987 edition, reports about forty percent of the children don't catch on to the phonics clues and so never learn to decode a strange word. Some of those kids have genius IQs. At the end of fourth grade, they can read only those 1,554 words they have memorized like hieroglyphs--or those that they haven't forgotten.

The frustration of being unable to read, of being considered stupid, causes emotional and behavioral problems. Carl L. Kline, M.D., a child and adolescent psychiatrist, is internationally known for his expertise in children's learning problems.

Dr. Cline says that reading disability is the leading cause of emotional problems in children and adolescents in North America. It is a mental-health epidemic affecting 35 percent of the population. In many documented cases, showing a child how to read has effected seemingly miraculous cures.

And how can one study science or history, unable to decode any new word beyond those 1,554? We see now why high-school textbooks have to be simplified to about fifth-grade

reading level, and at least beginning college textbooks to 9th-grade level. Only 5% of 17-year-olds can read genuine college material. Everything must be brought down to the lowest common denominator.

Authors cannot write challenging, creative work in that simple language. Here we have a great part of the cause of America's backslide in science and technical education.

What happens to those 40 percent who drop out illiterate or graduate illiterate? They can flip hamburgers--or deal drugs. They are wracked with low self-esteem and emotional problems; many join the overwhelmingly illiterate prison population. That, my friends, is our new generation!

And businesses, faced by a worsening shortage of qualified workers, spend hundreds of millions trying to teach employees to read well enough to read safety warnings and instructions. But they too listen to the "experts" and futilely use look-say.

3. Memorizing 30,000-50,000 or more written words is obviously impractical--and if you did it, any new word would stump you.

Then how do those remarkable Asian students and others learn to read really well? They do not learn in class from the teacher. They figure out phonics information themselves--my roommate on the Russia tour told me he had a terrible time reading until he figured out phonics--or are shown phonics information by parents or friends. Millions more or less learn phonics, so read only marginally.

4. Hundreds of thousands of students read words backward. Yet medical specialists find only one in several thousand has true dyslexia caused by a genetic defect or brain damage.

Our pen-pal Karin Nielsen, a perceptive economics master's-degree graduate, visited us last summer. The Danes teach phonics information intensively. Karin told us most of the dyslexic children from her entire country are taught--by more-intensive phonics--in one small government-paid boarding school in Randers, her home-town.

The population of Denmark is about 3 1/2 million. Washington state--population 4 1/2 million--has thousands of "dyslexics." Don't you see: more than 99 percent of American "dyslexia" is acquired in school. Test before kindergarten and see. My students who had been diagnosed as "dyslexic" confirmed: they simply hadn't been taught to read from left to right.

5. Why do the schools of education cling to this benighted whole-language system against all the evidence? Bluntly--because big money is involved. We've all heard of

Eisenhower's "military-industrial complex." Well, there's an education- industrial complex too, the "Great American Reading Machine."

a. Academics must "publish or perish," so professors churn out new methods, new refinements;

b. The publishers make tens of millions of dollars in profits and pay large royalties to the professors;

c. The teachers' unions gain more dues-paying members justifying higher salaries for union leaders; state education departments hire more bureaucrats, more psychologists and counselors,

d. No one is held responsible for the reading failure mess.

For these vested interests, "education" has become a path to a secure livelihood, an end in itself, rather than a way to actually teach children. Of course they bitterly oppose phonics: it would hit them in the pocketbook. More details in a minute.

D. What to do. 1. We must acknowledge that the present system of reading instruction, like the "New Math," doesn't work--and dump it. Other fundamental changes are also required.

2. Will the change-over be difficult?

(a) Sue Dickson, teaching first grade in a public school, switched. She wrote, "My class scored so high on the standardized tests, the school administrators thought I had cheated in reporting my test scores!"

(b) Mary Musgrave used to teach in southern Arizona at the Gallegos Elementary School, Tucson. In 1987 when I met her, she had become the principal. Mary has now quit the school and launched a career of writing and lecturing.

Achievement in reading, math, and writing in the Sunnyside school district was last in the area, well below grade level. Mary was appointed to chair a study committee. Education professors had pounded into their heads that "phonics" is a nasty word. But they liked what they saw at a school in nearby Mesa that uses intensive phonics instruction. So their chief recommendation was to change to early multi-sensory intensive phonics teaching: seeing, saying, hearing, writing.

No one claims that "phonics alone" will rescue American education. The teachers and staff at Gallegos now treat each child as though he or she had an IQ of 150 and expect each to perform accordingly. They test every month for comprehension and vocabulary, and applaud effort.

They use corporal punishment when the child asks for it --this happens!--expect good behavior outside school hours, and require appropriate dress.

The parents participate in P.T.A. and other school activities, sign each year and carry out a pledge to actively encourage their children, and expect them to do well. Homework is assigned four evenings a week, starting with ten-minute assignments in kindergarten.

The school of 650--of whom 58% are minority-group--is not a neighborhood school but is open to students from all over the district; in 1987 it had a waiting list of 400. Children are accepted "first come, first served."

All the children at Gallegos learn to read. Some transferring into the school gain three or four years' reading improvement in one year. Some do far better.

Real spending on education (i.e., adjusted for inflation) per pupil is six times its 1929-1930 level. The National Education Association to the contrary, compared on the more-accurate O.E.C.D. purchasing-power-parities index, only Switzerland spends more per student, Japan not much more than half as much (Wall Street Journal, Feb. 9; London Economist Feb. 17, 1990).

Where is all that money going? Half of American education spending goes to administration, compared to about 20% in many European countries (idem).

And enormous sums have been used to build up a myriad of special classes for the many kinds of "learning-disabled," "dyslexic," "emotionally handicapped," and "special education" students--with attendant bureaucracy, psychologists and counselors, etc. There are no dyslexics at Gallegos School, no learning-disabilities teachers and no special-education teachers--and no need for them.

Not only "dyslexia" but many of these other "handicaps," we see, are in fact created by bad methods of teaching reading and by lack of the supportive, yet disciplined environment found at Gallegos. Little or none of that would be needed if everyone switched to Musgrave's system.

American teachers wish parents would help. Well, the parents of many of those Hispanic-immigrant Gallegos schoolchildren do not speak or read English. Though they do encourage their children, they can hardly help them learn to read English (there's no bilingual education at Gallegos). But the kids learn anyway.

Many of the children in the school are from "disadvan-

aged" homes--single parent working all day, unemployed parents ... As a result of all that--supposedly--a surprising 46% of the students in the intermediate grades were formerly in special education. After one year, only four students.

Their ability to read well and their belief in themselves enable Gallegos children to excel in all subjects. The school has a stricter grading system than the 12 other elementary schools, which do not teach intensive phonics. Yet 33 percent of students on the district honor roll are from Gallegos.

Now that Musgrave has left, will her successor continue her innovations? In Rochester, New York, and elsewhere, when a dynamic phonics-oriented leader has left, practices have soon slipped back to look-say and all its evils.

c. What about the cost of reading instruction? The schools in Groveton, New Hampshire, changed to intensive phonics. (The teachers learned in two weeks how to teach it.) The cost per pupil per year for books, materials, and all dropped--from \$20 to \$3.

Remember all those "workbooks" the children write in? Well, they juice up profits of the publishers, royalties to the professors. In intensive phonics instruction, the children read books, write on paper, and don't use up anything expensive.

3. Milton Friedman and others urge: give parents "vouchers" to cover the cost; and let them choose what school their children shall attend--public or private. Seattle's Zion Christian School and hundreds of other private schools educate their students far better and at lower cost than the public schools. They use intensive phonics and create the supportive, yet disciplined environment here advocated.

Educational monopoly, dominated by teachers' unions, engenders mediocrity; competition would breed quality.

5. Until such a fundamental change is made, what can you do?

First, join the Reading Reform Foundation: P.O. Box 98785, Tacoma 98498; phone (206) 572-9966; Marian Hinds, president. You are invited to pick up leaflets.

Second, tutor a functionally illiterate youth or adult. The schools churn out thousands of illiterates for every one that tutors can help. So don't think you can make a dent in the number of illiterates. Rather, do it to get a first-hand impression of the enormity of the problem.

But do not use the methods of the local tutoring organizations. They use a mixture of phonics and look-say. That's better than the schools, but far inferior to pure intensive

phonics--with a psychological technique to improve self-image. I can give you a paper telling my simple, effective method; the Reading Reform Foundation catalogs suggest teaching materials.

Third: Each school district is to a great extent independent. So to begin to attack this tremendous and worsening problem, we have to change one school district at a time.

Organize a group and tell the community incessantly about all this. Elect sympathetic people to the school board and keep up the pressure until intensive phonics instruction and these other changes are installed and continue permanently.

III. In summary: I have told you the first need for a solution to the American education crisis is to teach everyone to read, and to read well;

I have told you the way to do that is to dump look-say and return to old-fashioned early, intensive phonics instruction --along with other sensible changes in school operations;

By playing a tape of Russian students, by reviewing records of reading performance in the U.S. 60-70 years ago and of reading ability where the system is used now--I have proved to you that intensive phonics instruction works;

I have told you how the change-over to this tried-and-true method can be accomplished, and how to attack the problem locally.

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