Learning to Read:

The Great

Debate

An inquiry into the science, art, and ideology of

old and new methods of teaching children to read

from 1910-1965

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PREFACE

THIS BOOK presents the findings of a study conducted under a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York. The major work of the study was completed during the years 1962 to 1965 while I was at the City College of the City University of New York. A two-volume mimeographed report was presented to the Carnegie Corporation in September, 1965 and was also distributed to a limited number of readers for their criticisms and suggestions. In 1966 the original report was rewritten to its present form at Harvard University to permit a wider distribution of the findings.

A considerable amount of research on issues relevant to this study has been underway since 1965. Some of this new research, especially the USOE first-grade reading studies completed in 1966, is mentioned briefly throughout the text. The reports of the second- and third-grade continuations of some of these first-grade studies, scheduled for completion in 1967 and 1968 respectively, are not yet available. I wish to call the reader's attention to the existence of these and other studies, particularly since some of them may present a point of view somewhat different from the one taken here.

I am indebted to many people for their assistance—to the Carnegie Corporation for the grant which supported the study and the writing of the present book; to the City College and particularly to Harold H. Abelson, then Dean of the School of Education, for releasing me from part of my teaching duties during 1962–1964; to the Harvard Graduate School of Education, and especially to Dean Theodore R. Sizer, for cooperation in the completion of this book.

I wish to acknowledge with warm appreciation the assistance of my research staff who spent long and difficult hours analyzing the research and the

various reading programs. They brought to this work the kind of dedication and commitment that made of our study a great adventure. Adele Kramer worked with me on all aspects of the study, but was especially concerned with the analysis of the experimental and correlational studies. Mildred Bloomfield, with the assistance of Lillian Shafran, worked on the analysis of the reading programs. Miriam Balmuth assisted in the analysis of the classroom experiments, and Marion Klein assisted in the analysis of the clinical studies. Elizabeth Nardine, Lucy Carroll, Joseph J. Tremont, and Frances Ricker helped in the final stages of the revision.

I also wish to thank the many authors and publishers who made copies of their reading programs available to us for analysis.

A special note of thanks is extended to the many authors and proponents who consented to a two-hour interview, but who must go unnamed here. Others who cannot be identified, but who contributed immeasurably to my understanding of the issues and problems in reading instruction, were the several hundred superintendents, principals, reading consultants, and teachers throughout the United States, England and Scotland who welcomed me into their schools and classrooms and talked freely of their views on the teaching of reading.

I am grateful to John Downing for arranging most of my school visits in England and Scotland and for his aid in observing the ITA experiment in England. Those in England and Scotland who helped me understand the problems of teaching reading not only in their own country but in the United States as well are M. D. Vernon, Joyce Morris, D. H. Stott, Sir James Pitman, D. E. M. Gardner, W. B. Inglis, J. C. Daniels, and Hunter Diack.

I am indebted to many people for their reactions to the early formulations of the study. Especially helpful were John B. Carroll, Arthur I. Gates, Albert J. Harris and Allan Barton and David Wilder who were directing a parallel study at Columbia University on the sociology of reading research. I also benefited from the comments and criticisms of the two-volume report by Edgar Dale, Arthur I. Gates, Helen M. Robinson, Charles C. Fries, Harold H. Abelson, Omar K. Moore, Nancy Larrick, Marion A. Anderson, Gladys Natchez, Helen Popp, and Joel Weinberg. While I know that the present book is the better for their criticisms of the earlier report, I am mindful too that I could not follow through on all of their suggestions.

To Margo Viscusi of the Carnegie Corporation, my thanks for her gracious and skillful assistance in converting a weighty technical report into a book; and to Florence Roswell for the continuous dialogue on education, life and reading that we have carried on for nearly twenty years.

Although I am keenly aware of and grateful for the assistance of many people, I am equally aware that the responsibility for the statements and views expressed in the present volume is solely my own.

Jeanne S. Chall
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INTRODUCTION

The Crisis in Beginning Reading

WHAT IS THE BEST way to teach a young child to read? No two people, it seems, agree on an answer.

For over a decade almost every basic issue in beginning reading instruction—how to begin, when to begin, what instructional materials to use, how to organize classes for instruction—has been debated with intense heat and considerable rancor. Laymen and self-styled reading specialists have confidently provided answers in a stream of popular books and magazine and newspaper articles. Most of these answers have been rejected with equal confidence by teachers, administrators, and reading specialists in the professional educational literature. Each side has claimed that it knows how to give our children "the best" in reading instruction. And in the United States, where dedication to the best is tantamount to belief in democracy, the debate has often taken on political proportions.

Controversies over beginning reading instruction are not new. Previous generations have witnessed similar debates during periods when theories and practices were undergoing change. But this time there is a difference: The body of knowledge and practices now being attacked is the first to claim validity on scientific grounds. (Indeed, reading has been the most researched of the school subjects; for each study in arithmetic, there are probably three studies in reading.)

Another feature sets off the current debate from previous ones—the prevalence of "outsiders." The first forceful criticism and most of the current reforms have come not from professional educators of children but from interested laymen, popular writers, and college English teachers. More recently linguistic scholars, sociologists, and psychologists have entered the fray.

By now the debate has lost much of its bitterness, and each side is willing to concede points to the other. Nevertheless, the controversy has left parents, teachers, school administrators, and book publishers confused about which methods and materials are most effective.

What many people do not realize is that in spite of the general confusion, practices have been changing at an increasing pace. Many schools have adopted newly published reading programs that incorporate the very features originally rejected when first proposed by the critics. There has also been a swing toward an earlier start in reading instruction, whereas just a few years ago most educators were convinced that the later the child began learning, the better.

Are these changes justified by existing evidence or by the results of current experimentation? If so, what justified the original opposition? Perhaps the present changes are being made because we realize that the problem has not been solved satisfactorily and want to try something new—anything new—even if it is basically a return to the old. But many of the practices now being challenged were themselves adopted with great hope and promise, only to prove disappointing later on. Is it not possible that the current reforms, if not fully understood, may suffer the same fate?

Such questions have troubled me for a number of years. They needed answering not only for myself as a researcher and teacher of teachers of reading, but also for all those concerned with reading. These include parents, teachers at all levels (even university professors decry the inadequacy of their students' reading, writing, and spelling skills and tend to attribute it to their early instruction), authors of reading programs, publishers, and employers, who complain bitterly about the illiteracy of their employees. At a time when literacy is recognized as the key factor in the attack on poverty, how to give children the right start is more than an academic question.

In this book I shall attempt to bring together the relevant facts in the debate, facts uncovered during the course of a study conducted from 1962 to 1965. I believed then, as I do now, that it is particularly during a time of change and flux that we need to stop and take a look at where we have come from, where we are, and where we are going. Perhaps such a look can help avoid some of the errors of the past and engender

greater sophistication in theory, research, and practice in beginning reading.

This book is addressed to a wide audience. For my fellow researchers and reading specialists, I have tried not only to answer questions that plague us all, but also to raise questions that require further thought and study. For authors, editors, and publishers of reading materials, I have attempted to provide evidence useful for making decisions on new reading programs. I have also included material for teachers and administrators who are faced with daily decisions on methods and materials, for their teachers in schools and colleges of education, and for parents who know only too well that reading is the most important skill their children learn in school and that all other education depends on it.

HOW THE STUDY CAME ABOUT

Despite thousands of research studies and scholarly discussions on reading since the turn of the century, it has been difficult for researchers to state with any degree of confidence that one particular method or approach[1] to beginning reading is really better than another. From time to time there has appeared to be a consensus on *how* and *when* to begin and *what* to emphasize at the beginning stages of reading instruction. Then a period of disagreement and confusion sets in.

Such a period began in 1955 in the United States with the publication of Rudolf Flesch's *Why Johnny Can't Read.*[2] This book took the nation by storm. It stayed on the best-seller lists for over thirty weeks and was serialized in countless newspapers. Although the general press reacted favorably to it, reviewers in educational periodicals almost unanimously rejected it (Riedler, 1962).

Flesch challenged—strongly, clearly, and polemically—the prevailing views on beginning reading instruction, which emphasized teaching children by a sight method. He advocated a return to a phonic approach (early teaching of correspondences between letters and sounds) as the best—no, the *only*—method to use in beginning instruction. He found

[1] Throughout this book *method* and *approach* are used synonymously. These terms refer to the particular sequencing, focusing, and pacing of a given set of stimuli to which the learner responds in certain ways in order to achieve a given objective or set of objectives. What constitutes method is itself an issue in the debate. In Chap. 1 I describe the prevailing as well as innovative methods in broad terms. Appendix A, in which twenty two beginning reading programs currently in use are analyzed and compared in terms of a variety of linguistic and psychological distinctions, contains a more detailed discussion of method.

[2] See "A Note on References" at the beginning of this book for a guide to using the bibliography for reference information.

support for this view in his interpretation of the existing reading research, particularly the research comparing sight and phonic methods. (Oddly enough, this same body of research formed the basis for the prevailing methods, and proponents of *those* methods used it to defend themselves.)

Several years later, the conclusion reached in other popularly written books—Sibyl Terman and Charles C. Walcutt's *Reading: Chaos and Cure* (1958) and Walcutt's *Tomorrow's Illiterates* (1961)—perhaps with less anger but with equal force and certainty, was essentially the same: that the prevailing approach to beginning reading, with its stress on sight reading, was incorrect.

England saw the beginnings of a similar controversy in 1956 with the publication of the first experimental report of J. C. Daniels and Hunter Diack. These authors concluded that their newly devised approach, which they called the "phonic-word method," produced better results than the prevailing mixed methods (sight, then phonics) then in use in England.

In the United States the dissatisfaction continued to spread. While the public was becoming more and more concerned about how children were being taught to read, various experts were proposing and developing a wide variety of solutions. The most important of these are described in Chapter 1.

In the fall of 1959, when the debate was at its most bitter point, the National Conference on Research in English[3] called together a special committee on research in reading for a three-day conference at Syracuse University. The purpose of the meeting was to map out programs of needed research. Participants generally agreed that the problem of beginning reading, although acknowledged to be a difficult one, desperately needed more attention from researchers. They felt that the research then available provided evidence so vague, contradictory, and incomplete as to encourage conflicting interpretations. No serious researcher could state with any degree of certainty, on the basis of such evidence, that either one or another approach to beginning reading was indeed the best or the worst.

A subcommittee of the larger one (composed of Ralph Staiger, now executive secretary of the International Reading Association; James Soffietti, linguist at Syracuse University; and myself) believed

The members of the NCRE Committee on needed research held in Syracuse were Russell G. Stauffer, Chairman; Guy L. Bond, Jeanne Chall, Theodore Clymer, Donald D. Durrell, William D. Sheldon, James Soffietti, and Ralph Staiger.

The Syracuse meeting, as well as another held the following year in Chicago, was initiated and brought into reality by William D. Sheldon.

that the problem was not insurmountable. We thought that large-scale cooperative experimentation undertaken with proper, clearly defined controls could provide better evidence on whether some approaches were indeed more effective than others for specific outcomes in reading, for particular kinds of children, with particular kinds of teachers, and in particular kinds of school situations.[4] To guide such experimentation we identified a series of variables that influence research on success in beginning reading.

I believed that the same guide could and should be used as a basis for a critical analysis of the research already in existence. This, in essence, is what I proposed to the Carnegie Corporation in 1961, and under a grant from the corporation I began such a study in 1962.

THE STUDY

The study, then, was to be concerned primarily with a critical analysis of existing research comparing different approaches to beginning reading. Such a critical analysis, I thought, would salvage whatever we already knew and would also help point up specific gaps in our knowledge. Since research should ideally be cumulative, I hoped that a detailed critical analysis and synthesis of the findings would help future experimenters design more crucial, meaningful studies.

My major concern was with studies investigating method—the *how* of beginning reading instruction. Although the *when* was also being challenged, with most critics calling for an earlier start (the most recent proposal suggesting eighteen months),[5] I studied this issue only in relation to method, for *when* to start is intimately related to *how*.

In analyzing the experimental comparisons I sought not only to find whatever kernels of truth were contained in these studies, but also to determine *why* it has been so difficult to arrive at any consistent conclusions from them. Why, for example, did Flesch and Terman and Walcutt conclude that a strong phonic emphasis was the best beginning approach? Why did other researchers and the authors of most basal readers[6] conclude from essentially the same body of evidence that the best way to start was with whole words (e.g., with a sight method), introducing phonics later and more slowly?

For further evidence on the issue of *how*, I sought to pull together the correlational studies of reading achievement, with particular emphasis on the beginning stage. What, for example, is known about the relationship between knowledge of the alphabet and phonics for achievement in

[4] Comparative studies along these lines for first-grade reading have been conducted recently under grants from the U.S. Office of Education. Some are continuing for another year or two. The results of the USOE studies are discussed in Chap. 4.
[5] See Doman, *How to Teach Your Baby to Read.*
[6] See Chap. 7 for a definition and description of basal readers.

the beginning stages of reading and for later progress in reading? What is known about the influence of general intelligence and language skill on success in learning to read?

Another area that I wished to investigate was the relationship between the extent and the kinds of reading failures children experience and the methods used in initially instructing these children. Would an analysis of some of the classic studies of retarded readers provide any evidence that certain beginning reading methods produce more reading failures than others? Indeed, many critics believe this to be the case.

A second aspect of the study was concerned with rigorously describing the different methods or approaches to beginning reading. It is difficult to discuss a method, and particularly to study its effectiveness, if we lack a clear definition of what that method includes or excludes. Often considerable time, energy, and money are spent in experimenting with a "new" method, when a careful analysis of that new method would show that it is quite similar in one or more significant essentials to a method widely used in the past, fairly well researched, and since discarded.

A third aspect of the study involved interviewing leading proponents of the various methods and observing these methods in schools suggested by them. The interviews were designed so that each proponent would explicitly state how he viewed the reading process, his own approach, and that of others. By observing classrooms I hoped to see whether I could distinguish the different approaches by such characteristics as the kind of motivation used. Frankly, I wanted to see for myself whether some approaches were as dull for the children as their critics said or as fascinating as their proponents claimed. I also wished to find out why a given school chose a given method—whether certain kinds of schools tended to prefer certain methods. Visits to schools would also permit me to talk informally with administrators and teachers about the methods they were using. In the classroom I hoped to discover whether other, unrelated factors contributed to the results claimed for a particular method—for example, the superior efforts of outstanding teachers.

Finally, the readers, workbooks, and teachers' guidebooks (instructional manuals) of the two reading series most widely used in the United States during the late 1950s and early 1960s were analyzed. This analysis was made because much of the criticism was based on erroneous knowledge of existing practices. Thus, though Flesch stated flatly that no phonics was taught in 1955, a mere perusal of the pupils' workbooks and teachers' guidebooks of these series shows that phonics was indeed a definite part of the reading programs.

For an insight into historical shifts in method a limited content

analysis was made of earlier editions (1920, 1930, and 1940) of the most widely used basal series. The first-grade reading program of a newer basal-reading series (coauthored by one of the most vocal critics of prevailing methods) was also analyzed.

REFLECTIONS ON THE STUDY

What I learned, with the aid of a small staff, is presented in the succeeding chapters. What the book may not convey, however, are the joys and frustrations, the doubts and the certainties we felt while sifting through the mass of evidence.

The task was not an easy one. The joys were great, but the frustrations were even greater. The overriding impression was one of strong emotional involvement on the part of authors, reading specialists, teachers, administrators, and, unfortunately, even researchers. Their language was often more characteristic of religion and politics than of science and learning.

Visits to classrooms in particular impressed me with the ideological nature of the controversy. In general, I found emotion where reason should prevail. There appeared to be such a need to defend what one was doing—whether it was following the prevailing method or trying one of the newer ones—that it was difficult for each to perceive in what respects his method was similar to another and in what respects it was different. Each could see only the one special feature that was added or changed and usually failed to notice that much of the old was incorporated in the new and much of the new was inherent in the old.[7] Those adopting one of the newer methods were also, as a group, unaware of, or quite hostile to, other new methods that differed from their own in only minor respects.

I was personally buffeted by persuasive arguments and testimonials for or against a given method. It took time, distance, and much agonizing to arrive at the interpretations presented here. Since neither the issues nor the evidence was clear-cut, I describe, wherever possible, the process of reasoning I went through to arrive at my interpretations. Although this

[7] A recent article in *Look* (June 18, 1966, p. 39) quotes Maurice W. Sullivan as saying: "Every reading primer before his own programs . . . presented written English to the child in a hopelessly confusing way. . . ." This statement is valid only if one ignores Noah Webster's *American Spelling Book* (1790), used by millions of American children; the primers of Webster's predecessors; and those of his innumerable imitators. The statement is not even valid for today. See Chap. 1 and especially Appendix A for descriptions of other programs, published before Sullivan's, that follow similar principles.

lengthens the book, it will, I hope, shorten the reader's path to conclusions of his own in dealing with questions surrounded with confusion and controversy.

PLAN OF THE BOOK

This book is divided into five sections. The first introduces the debate in reading instruction: the various methods proposed for teaching beginning reading and the basic questions at issue. Here I also report on interviews with leading proponents of these methods, allowing them to declare their positions on the issues in their own words.

The second section is the heart of the Carnegie study. In it I present my analysis of the existing research on beginning reading and give my conclusions on this research.

Section 3 presents the results of a detailed study of basal-reading series in widespread use as well as reports on my interviews with the authors and editors of these series. Here I also make some suggestions for changes in the basal series.

Section 4 explores the implications of a basic finding of this study: that research results are only one of several factors that influence the practice of beginning reading instruction. In this section I discuss the larger world in which how children are taught to read is determined: the world of classrooms, publishing houses, schools of education, parents' meetings. I describe my visits to classrooms and my discussions with teachers and administrators and suggest some present and future trends in these influences on beginning reading instruction.

Section 5 contains the overall conclusions I have reached as a result of this study and my recommendations on how more children can be taught to become better readers in the future.

The bibliography at the end of the book lists published studies, books, and articles on beginning reading and published reading programs now available. It also contains a glossary of familiar names for widely used or widely discussed reading programs with complete bibliographical information for each, including publishers' data on planned revisions and new editions.

Appendix A contains a scheme for classifying beginning reading programs according to several important variables. This I used to classify twenty-two reading programs. It is also offered as a tool, which can be further expanded and refined, for analyzing other present and future programs. Finally, Appendix B contains the schedules used in the study.

WHAT is the debate over beginning reading all about? What are the various ways of teaching children how to read that parents, teachers, educators, and critics praise or blame so vehemently? What are the major issues in the controversy?

In this and the next chapter I describe the approaches to beginning reading that are important today—because they are in widespread use, because they influence programs in widespread use, or because they are expected to have an impact on how children are taught to read in the future. I also identify the issues in the debate and how the proponents of the various approaches feel about them.

In Chapter 1 the approaches have been divided into those representing what I call the conventional wisdom and those that challenge this bloc of beliefs. The challengers form no particular unified body; they do not even agree on what aspect of the conventional wisdom to criticize. They do, however, feel that some change is necessary.