

**SUBMISSION**  
**TO**  
**NATIONAL INQUIRY INTO THE TEACHING OF LITERACY**  
**PRESENTED**  
**BY**  
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## SUMMARY

This submission is based upon the research, teaching and teacher education experiences of a now retired educator who commenced his teaching career in 1950 and taught in remote one-teacher schools in Victoria prior to teaching in Melbourne metropolitan primary and secondary schools. The writer taught in these schools over a period of eighteen years prior to assuming a role in teacher education and continuing his ongoing research into literacy, its acquisition and practical implications. His final roles were as a university researcher, teacher and administrator.

Reference is made to the current confusion over the use of terms used in the debate on reading. The submission denies the proposition that emphasis on one methodology, whether it be an emphasis on sounding out words or identifying them in isolation, leads to reading success. It also points out that modern approaches that focus on comprehension and use of the child's language need to take into account that the reading process can only be mastered by the learner being led to understand grammatical features of text and relationships between printed symbols and sounds. The principle underlying the submission is that mastery of the reading process requires an understanding of the semantic, grammatical and sound/symbol relationships inherent in alphabetised text and any methodology that ignores any of these features cannot succeed. Limitations of the various methodologies are discussed.

The writer provides examples from his own teaching career of proficient and deficient learners of the reading process and indicates the teaching strategies that need to be used with certain learners if they are to become proficient. His claim that there is something to be learned from all methods does not lead to an assumption that a combination of methods should be tried but that their underlying principles have relevance and that teachers should understand the reading process prior to deciding upon what is relevant for particular children. In stating this the writer deplores the introduction of systems into the classroom and questions why, if these strongly marketed commercial packages are so successful, they last only for a brief period before being replaced by one claimed to be even better.

References to the relevant research and examples are documented and brief attention is given to the limited capacity of the brain to transfer information to the short-term memory where comprehension of text results. The writer is concerned that debates over literacy are often emotional and that criticism of research can be motivated by a fierce defence of one's own position.

The writer's proposition is that reading seems easy because we can all do it but, in truth, it is particularly complex for the learner, particularly the one who does not have the advantage of home support. He suggests that the easier it is to teach a particular method the more difficult it might be for the child to grasp what is being taught. The converse might similarly apply.

The submission finally has a message for teacher educators whose responsibility it is to ensure that their students have a thorough understanding of the reading process, how the respective methodologies relate to this and what strategies then become relevant for particular learners. He questions the education of secondary teachers who do not appear to have insights into literacy acquisition generally.

The submission deliberately avoids a detailed analysis of the theories underlying the various methodologies and the relationship between reading and listening on the one hand and writing and speaking on the other.. These can be found in separate publications of the writer and others.

# THE READING PROCESS

## The Purpose of Reading

The purpose is to understand what is being read. Just as we attend a lecture in order to understand what the speaker is saying, we read in order to understand what the writer is saying. Listening and Reading may be regarded as the receptive processes as distinct from the productive processes of Speaking and Writing. The aim in the classroom is to enable children to comprehend the written message. The debate in education should be about how to achieve this.

## The Present Confusion

### 1. Phonics and Phonetics

These terms are not interchangeable.

Phonics is a method of teaching children to relate the sounds in words to written symbols.

Phonetics is a system that permits readers to sound out words accurately even though they may not have any understanding of what they are saying e.g. “ruf” is a phonetic transcription of “rough”. Phonetics is **NOT** a method.

### 2. Whole Word and Whole Language

These terms are **not** interchangeable.

Whole Word is a method of teaching word knowledge in isolation usually through the use of cards on which individual words are written and held in front of the child with a view to the word becoming familiar and subsequently recognized in context whereas Whole Language uses the natural language of the learner to integrate the writing/reading processes.

### 3. The “Great Debate”

The original “great debate” of nearly fifty years ago was restricted to a discussion of the merits of phonics and whole word, the only two methods in vogue at that time. It was authored by Jeanne Chall, at the time a well-known North American educator. Accordingly, recent newspaper statements (and even those from some modern educators) that we now have “The Great Debate Revisited” are inaccurate.

The original “debate” resulted in the claim that phonics was the superior method. If it is, it is superior to the whole word method. It did not, and could not, take into account any other approaches.

### 4. The Psycholinguistic Method

There is no psycholinguistic method although this is often claimed to be the case. Psycholinguistics is a study of the relationship between thought and language and is used to analyse the reading behaviour of children with a view to determining their strengths and weaknesses. It has been used to develop models of the proficient reader with a view to providing insights into relevant teaching programs for poorer readers.

## Which Method Is Best?

It is easy to lay claims to success with children through the use of one particular method. The reality is that all methods work with some children. Some seeming miracles occur with children who cannot read one day and within a month they are writing stories and poetry. The fact is that with good teachers working on a one-to-one basis with disabled readers all the above-mentioned methods can achieve this. The trick is to find out why the various methods work with most children and what is it in each of them that prevents some children from learning to read.

It should be stated at this stage that an attack on the method or methods used by one school of thought and the principles that underlie them does not automatically result in one's own method being the key to success. Learning to read is so complex that no single method can be regarded as the panacea. What experience does teach us, however, is that it is teacher ability and understanding of the total process that results in reading success.

## Which System is Best?

One can be forgiven for thinking that no **system** (commercial package) works. We are frequently confronted by systems that are foisted on us by the commercial market and which are claimed to be the solution to all reading problems. These seem to follow in sequence which can only cause us to wonder why we ever needed more than the original one if it actually lived up to the hype that accompanied its launch.

## What Happens When We Read

Probably one of the best books written on the subject was that by Edmund Huey (1) in 1908. It was regarded as of such significance that it was republished in 1968. Unfortunately it is now out of print but its impact has been noted by a number of the literacy researchers of the past three decades.

### (i) The Fluent Reader

The fluent reader has a significant advantage over the beginner because he can go direct to the meaning of the passage by using the visual features. He has an intuitive knowledge of how the print is likely to unfold and what printed symbols are likely to follow others. In fact, he is so aware of the story line that he can use a minimum of printed features to retain meaning. As he becomes more involved in the context he may even ignore some of the actual printed features. This phenomenon has been explored in work undertaken by Paul Kolers(2) who showed how fluent English/French bilinguals read text containing both English and French phrases. When the reader encountered such passages as

*.....his horse, followed de deux bassets, faisait la terre resonner  
under its even tread. Des gouttes de verglas stuck to his manteau...*

Kolers found that subjects tested for their understanding of such mixed passages could understand them as easily as they understood a unilingual passage. What was most interesting, however, was that they often made errors of translation i.e. they read English for French words and vice versa. For example

- (i) ... *his horse, followed by two hounds* .....
- (ii) ...*porte for door*

He also found that errors did not occur haphazardly and that most occurred as translations of the first word in the second language that followed a sequence in the first language. The implication was that these skilled readers focused on the meaning and did not use all of the print once they immersed themselves in the text.

We can see the same feature with a highly proficient grade 2 child reading the following text (3)

Text: ...*he'll burst himself **with** keeping all his breath in*.....  
Child: .. *he'll hurt himself keeping all his breath in* .....

Text: ...*about those three naughty little **gnomes**, Ding, Dong and Dell*...  
Child: .. *about those three naughty little **goblins**, Ding, Dong and Dell*...

It might be noted that the preceding examples might **NOT** be regarded as “proficient reading” by those teachers who choose to correct this straying from the text and who admonish the readers for not looking more closely. Such teacher behaviour can be responsible for a child not moving to the proficient stage. Suffice to say that the fourth grade child emerged as dux of her school and completed a PhD at the University of Sydney later in life.

It would appear that as the reader becomes proficient he needs fewer of the visual features to confirm the meaning of what he is reading. How, then do we get children to arrive at this stage of development? We need to hold in mind the idea that the beginner is not a reader. He is a learner, that is, he is learning to read. As he works his way through phonics, whole word, whole language or any other approach he is a learner of the reading process. It is only when he can interact with the text in a search for meaning that he can be regarded as a reader.

### **(iii) The Learner Reader**

The learner has to encounter difficulties not confronted by the proficient reader who has learnt to integrate the various skills required to comprehend the written passage. It is a fact that some learners remain learners because of their inability to accomplish this integration. An examination of the various methods used to teach reading can account for this failure.

### ***Phonics Instruction***

If he is taught by use of a phonics method he has to cope with letter-sound correspondences. English does not have an alphabet that can cope with the range of phonemes that exist, nor is there a simple answer to how many phonic rules there are. Yet, in order to read, the child has to understand that there is such a phenomenon as letter-sound relationships. This is not the same as saying that there are letter-sound correspondences. There have been attempts to construct a set of phonic rules for English(4). An analysis of 6,092 words of **one and two syllables** extracted from the vocabularies of children ages 6 to 9 years, and which were contained in the books from which the children were learning to read and that children ought to be able to identify, revealed that the selected words contained 211 distinct spelling-sound correspondences, that is, that there were 211 different spellings of the phonemes that did occur. Six hundred and sixty-one words were not covered by “rules” and had to be regarded as exceptions.

Early primers attempted to overcome this problem to some extent by assuming that letters and their sounds could be learnt in isolation even though there are variations in these e.g. the letter “c” can be realized through a variety of sounds. Such primers used sequences such as

*Len has a red rash.*  
*Edna. Give it a big rub.*

Obviously the writers of these books of the 1930’s did not care too much for the medical implications of such exhortations!

Irrespective of the merits of phonics as an instructional method it is clear that it requires a significant effort on the part of the child to master phonics knowledge. Moreover, if it used in isolation as a teaching method the child is at risk of not seeing how reading must sound grammatically acceptable and meaningful. A word by word rendition of the text does not result in comprehension occurring.

### ***Whole Word Instruction***

The method of using cards with separate words written on them and held in front of children who respond by calling the words has been in vogue for more than sixty years. It is claimed by proponents of this method that the “overlearning” of words will result in them becoming integrated into the child’s memory and transferred to the reading situation. The use of the tachistoscope to teach rapid recognition of enemy aircraft during World War 2 encouraged educators to believe that the use of what came to be known as “flash cards” could effect the same rapid recognition of words.

The difficulty with this approach with young children is the burden it places on the memory. Bearing in mind that the learner is not able to relate words seen in isolation to the total reading process he has to absorb each of them in isolation. Moreover, the word “John” seen in isolation might be recognized again by the learner when he sees the word on the “flash card” but it might be that such recognition is based on the downstroke of the letter “J” rather than the features of the entire word. There is the added difficulty of the variations of the printed features e.g.”John” and “JOHN”. The method also assumes, as is the case with phonics instruction, that an accurate rendition of the words once they are in context will result in comprehension occurring. We shall see later that this cannot happen.

### ***Whole Language Instruction***

There seems to be a variety of methods within this approach but they all have one focus – the emphasis on meaning and the integration of writing and reading.

An example might be the use of the “story language” of the child in an attempt to make reading and writing meaningful. The child’s language becomes the story and is written down. The child can then read the story with the teacher or alone and come to understand that the print has meaning. He can see that the separated components, or words, are integral to the story line. The expectation is that the learner will, through saturation to writing and reading in this way, understand the relationships that the print has to the various sounds of the language as well as the syntax or grammar required to write and read with comprehension. The basic proposition is that children come to school with a well-formed linguistic system and that this should be used as the basis of learning rather than force children to use an unnatural language format as reading learners.

The difficulty with this approach is that, while it focuses on the desirable aspects of the reading comprehension process, it does require great teaching skill and an understanding that relationships between the printed features and their phonemic relationships can be lost on some children who may see the written array as nothing more than an arbitrary set of features. Accordingly, any attempt to ignore the fact that there are grapheme/phoneme relationships will cause confusion in the learner's mind. With such children teachers need to reinforce the fact through appropriate instruction that the printed symbols and their sound relationships need to be held in mind if their reading is to make sense.

### **An Attempt To Resolve the Problem**

As stated previously, attempts to undermine the strategies used by particular groups do not have the effect of validating an alternative proposition. Nor do attacks on a method by claiming that they lack a scientific basis have credibility. Even though they held opposing views, the research methods used by leading educators such as Bereiter and Engleman, Frostig, Clay and Goodman were sophisticated and scientifically rigorous and, in the case of the latter, were based on an analysis of the reading behaviour of thousands of children of varying ability levels. Such attacks are often based on an antagonism towards the methodology, or even its proponent, rather than on an understanding of the science underlying it. Usually there is a high degree of emotion involved in debates over the respective methods.

I believe that many of the researchers, irrespective of their final positions, have something to offer in a resolution of the methodology problem. This is not to say that teachers should use a variety of methods to teach reading. Rather they should take from the researchers an understanding of how reading works, understand what the limitations of the various methods are, and use their insights in the classroom. This statement requires an analysis of how it works and why.

### **How Reading Works and Why**

#### **Syntax (Grammar):**

Fluent, mature reading requires an understanding of how to acquire meaning from various texts through an understanding of grammatical features of the language and the relationships between sounds and symbols. It is this interaction, not the knowledge of one in isolation, that is necessary. The grammatical features of the following passage are totally satisfactory

*The sedut was joved by the dubos*

We can even ask questions of the example e.g.

What happened to the sedut?

Unfortunately, such examples often appear in what are called "comprehension questions" in children's reading tests e.g.

*The burglar entered the house and stole the jewels*

Questions : Who stole the jewels?  
What did the burglar do?

Such questions do not test comprehension. They merely test the child's capacity to match the grammatical features of the text with the grammatical features of the question. However, it is necessary to understand the grammar or syntax of the language to become a fluent reader. An analysis of the reading of proficient, average and low ability readers highlights the superiority of the proficient reader in his ability to make reading sound like real language with respect to its grammatical form. The lowest ability children remain focused on the visual and sound features to the exclusion of the syntax. It is essential that children who do not understand that reading has to follow acceptable grammatical structures are provided with such insights through repeated work on such structures. Even requiring them to place the following jumble in an appropriate grammatical sequence assists in overcoming this problem as does requiring the pupil to insert an appropriate part of speech into missing gaps:

Jumble: *kump The poving marlup was his*  
 Rewritten: *The marlup was poving his kump*

Jumble: *mother helped dishes Tom his the wash*  
 Rewritten: *Tom helped his mother wash the dishes*

Fill the gaps: *The ----- boy ----- into the -----*

### Sound/Symbol Relationships

It is not possible to read English without an understanding of the relationship between the visual features of the language and their phonemic (sound) relationships. Again I do not refer to their matching features because they cannot be matched. Whether this is called

phonics or something else is not relevant. However, it is essential that children do not become "phonics bound" to the exclusion of looking for appropriate syntax and meaning

as they read. An obsession with sounding out can lead to this. Teachers have to avoid situations where children try to read a text in the following way(5):

Text: *No one lives there but some little lost toys*

Child: *On one li- the- but som little l-u-s t-o-y-s*  
*lits there toys*

(The child has made two incorrect attempts at "lives", reverses "No" reads "som" for "some" and "lus" for "lost". He eventually gets "toys").

Children who become so bound up with sounding out to the exclusion of focusing on comprehending the story line need to be taught that the story can be read sensibly. They should write their own brief passages with the teacher in their own language and read it with the teacher. This can be undertaken in group situations using one child's language.

One advantage of teaching in one-teacher country schools was that the teacher could follow the progress of children through the various stages of reading development. Some young learners actually learnt to read through the teacher's use of monitors i.e. older children who sat with the five-year-old and read them simple stories. They intuitively grasped the concept and even worked out basic grapheme/phoneme relationships. On the other hand there were those who needed to be taught these relationships. However, an analysis of their reading by the time they reached third

grade (year) level suggested a disintegration of oral reading behaviour which gradually changed by late grade four. My analysis of this was that as these children moved away from simple text and began to involve themselves with interesting story lines they started to exhibit the characteristics of proficient readers, i.e. in their search for meaning they made what might be called “mistakes” in the traditional use of the term but which was really a move to the final stage of learning to read – a focus on comprehension.(6)

Of course, this is the real “laboratory” where any analysis of the teaching-learning process can occur. Teachers working with large numbers of children of varying abilities on a daily basis may not be in a position to claim the reading miracles that researchers claim when working with selected small groups in intensive situations. If ten per cent of children have reading problems perhaps the equivalent classroom miracle is that ninety per cent do not.

### **Semantic Relationships (Comprehension)**

An understanding of how links occur in the process of comprehending is the ultimate stage of reading success. It cannot be achieved only by being able to relate sounds to symbols and by understanding the grammar of the language. Nor can it be achieved by precise word identification. The following text

*away e-mail an just is trip cheap a*

comprises easily-identifiable words which in this context mean nothing. This reversal of text was a device often used by teachers aiming to force children to focus on words only.

Nor can the ability to sound out words or identify them in sequence result in comprehension. As an example take the following text which is written phonetically:

*yah moshet bit zvuchoo horosho no yah nye znaiyoo chto yah che tah yoo*

The speaker of this extract might have little difficulty in being clearly understood by a fluent speaker of Russian. It translates as

*I might sound good but I don't know what I'm reading*

It is a fact that some children can reach a similar stage of being quite accurate in their word rendition without appreciating that it is language and meaning with which they must interact.

There is an idea in some quarters that comprehension is the sum of the meanings of the words being read. The idea that a child should identify the words in sequence and this will lead to the total meaning of the passage flies in the face of what is known about the capacity of the brain to process information. Probably the best-known and most sophisticated work in this area was undertaken by George Miller(7) whose research into information processing is still used as the basis for comprehension studies. While long-term memory has no storage limitations in that whatever enters it appears to be stored permanently, the reason that we cannot often access the information is because we have lost the means to do so. However, in reading, short-term memory becomes significant. The problem is that it can contain only four or five elements at any one time. These may be letters, words or meaning. By “chunking” the visual information into meaning the latter can be stored in long-term memory. In

summary, we can store meaning, words or letters but we cannot do all three. The consequence is that efficient and effective readers appear to process such visual information as they require to retain meaning. Some of the print becomes redundant as more and more meaning is established as was the case with the English/French bilinguals.

The implications for the teaching of reading are enormous. If children are going to be taught phonics or whole word strategies initially, they must also be taught to “let go” of such strategies as soon as possible so that they can acquire the next-level strategies that lead to comprehending. The old grade 4 reading book in Victorian schools contained a story about the platypus. Most children had little difficulty in reading the story but some of them became silent when they came to the substitute word used in the text. It was “ornithorhynchus”. I have a clear memory of one highly proficient reader saying aloud “it must be platypus but it doesn’t look like it” so she pressed on with her reading, each time saying “that platypus word again” instead of trying to sound it out. She certainly had the meaning of the text and wasn’t about to be non-plussed by some writer who was trying to make reading difficult. In more modern jargon she was “guessing”. Only recently a senior officer with the Department of Education commented adversely to the media on this strategy. The reality is that the pupil was not guessing but providing a perfectly acceptable alternative substitute for something with which she had not been confronted previously and was not in her language. Had she stopped and tried to sound it out she may well have lost the meaning of what she was reading and it would not have achieved anything in any case.

It has been claimed recently by a proponent of one method that his theory of reading is universal. By this he meant that the capacity to sound words separately in text and subsequently comprehend the passage apply everywhere. Apart from the limitations on short-term memory such a view is incompatible with linguistic facts as well as the views of Edmund Huey(8) previously referred to. In 1908 Huey described the development of written language from pre-alphabet days to more modern times. He showed how graphic displays shifted from direct representation of meaning to more representation of oral language. What he was in fact describing was what does not appear to have occurred in the Chinese language which is a semantic system as distinct from the alphabetic system to which we are accustomed. It uses abstract designs to project meanings and does not have a relationship to a particular spoken language.. Chinese logographs were designed to be semantic only and did not provide for their pronunciation. Moreover, it is possible to find Chinese dialects which use identical logographs to convey identical meanings but whose oral realization is unintelligible across dialects. The reader goes direct to the meaning. Print should not be regarded as speech written down.

An interesting question arising from the Chinese example is how do foreigners used to an alphabetic language acquire a knowledge of written Chinese. Because there is no alphabet it has to be assumed that they have to access the semantic features direct. In other words, they would have to use a different model from the one they allegedly used to become literate in English. Whether the proficient reader is using an alphabetical system or a semantically based one the strategies that he uses to comprehend are based on the same model.

Those of us who taught in classrooms in the early 1950’s had the opportunity to examine the process by which newly-arrived migrant children from Eastern and Southern Europe learnt English. Many of these had come direct from the middle and upper levels of primary and secondary schools in their own countries. The playground often taught them the kind of English that was often frowned upon by their teachers

but they absorbed the new language rapidly. Moreover, they knew that what they were expected to read in their new books was real language. Starting from this base they were able to unlock the code without going through the “*Dan sat on a fat fan*” type of text. They usually had prior experience of text even though this was of a different variety for the Eastern Europeans. In effect they worked from a meaning-based approach downwards to unlock the code upon which the visual features were based.

## **Implications For Teacher Education**

Anecdotal evidence suggests that emerging teachers do have some methodology upon which to base reading instruction. Unfortunately, the methodology is often dependent upon the prejudices of the academic department responsible. There is at least one Australian university acknowledged for its ongoing adherence to a particular philosophy of teaching reading and there are probably more. This is unhealthy, and dangerous for the

teaching of literacy generally. Young teachers need to have a clear understanding of the reading process and what is involved in teaching children to read. They need to understand how the principles underlying the various aspects of the process cannot result in an obsession with a particular methodology and, as teachers, it is up to them to determine how they will teach young children to become proficient readers. In effect they should do this without resorting to a methodology but as a result of their understanding of how reading works. It is not the task of researchers to tell teachers how to teach. It is their task to keep an open mind and interpret the data accordingly. It is the task of teacher educators to use the data obtained to provide the insights that will enable teachers to make appropriate decisions for themselves. This cannot be done by promoting any one method nor a combination of methods. In any case, history has taught us that as soon as a new method is “discovered” and named it becomes a target for those who refuse to renounce their long-held beliefs. What is necessary is an understanding of how the various aspects of the different methods impact on the total process and how children need to be moved from strategy to strategy so that they gain a clear understanding of what the ultimate goal is. We often hear from outstanding teachers who claim that they use a combination of methods. I suggest that what they are doing is using the principles underlying certain methods and applying these principles where necessary i.e. when they see gaps in the learner’s needs.

It is not only the emerging primary teacher who needs these insights. Secondary school teachers undertaking end-on diplomas allegedly equipping them for teaching have marked limitations in their insights into the reading process. If, as is claimed, pupils are entering secondary education with reading limitations, it is essential that teachers of these children have the necessary insights to work appropriately with them. Only this year I was approached by a parent whose son in year 11 in 2003 had been told by a teacher that he had a reading problem even though he had performed in the top percentile in English the previous year(9). This teacher’s statement was based on his observation that the student had “stumbled over a few words” when reading an extract from a text. Again, this student performed outstandingly at English in the 2004 Higher School Certificate examinations. It would appear that some secondary school teachers not only know little about the criteria by which literacy proficiency can be evaluated, but assume that all knowledge about reading and writing should be the domain of primary school teachers only.

## Conclusion

I would hope that this submission contributes something positive to the Inquiry. It is an attempt to convey the notion that, while reading seems to be easy to teach, given that most of us can do it, and we fall back on our own school experiences to recall how we learnt to read, the process is much more complex than it seems. In fact, it might be reasonable to claim that the more complex it appears to the child it is easier to teach and the simpler it is for the child it is more difficult to teach. As adults we remember the actual teaching but we don't recall how we intuitively worked out, possibly without teaching, that text had meaning and a grammatical form that was acceptable as a result of which we actually learnt how to do it. At the same time we forget that some of the children with whom we attended school failed to learn to read despite the use of phonics or whole word or anything else. Therefore, it seems logical to promote the particular pedagogical view that we think worked for all of us. It is commonsense to believe that the learner need only work on letter-sound relationships to become a reader. In this regard I would point out that it was commonsense in the period prior to 1492 to believe that the earth was flat!

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