



deciphered it as best as you could. Quite soon, it became second nature.

Meanwhile, they had already taught you to write, at first very slowly, with much curling of your tongue, but soon as fast and as accurately as your spelling and punctuation skills allowed.

Later came grammar, the rules for the educated English refinements of which I had dinned into me by a sarcastic, somewhat predatory homosexual, much given to lashing us with his horrible silver propelling pencil. I can't now remember all the exact grammatical labels for the various word groups and structural features by means of which you put together a nice sit-up-and-talk English sentence, but the procedures that the labels originally introduced me to are now wired into me.

I learned what I know of English style by discovery methods. I was taught, that is, by writers through their stories and books, rather than by being hit by writers with propelling pencils whenever they thought I had written something bad. I read things, and copied what I liked.

LOOK AND GUESS

Whatever happens when you are young seems like a law of nature. I was taught to read properly and took it for granted that the same applied to others. I only gradually discovered that all was not well with the teaching of reading to less fortunate persons. Not long after teaching me to read, my mother got to know some teachers and found out about the "look-and-say" method for teaching reading, and from then on, whenever education was mentioned, she would complain about this doctrine.

This look-and-say method of "teaching" is to me so absurd that even now I am handicapped when describing it by sheer incredulity. At its heart is the denial of any one-to-one relationship between a single letter of the alphabet and a single noise. The exceptions become the excuse for a new, more arbitrary rule: that letters on their own, especially vowels, say nothing. Instead of looking at letters, you look at entire words, and try to remember what each word, viewed as a single indivisible pattern, says. Look-and-say turns the deciphering of English into a project as daunting as the deciphering of Chinese or Japanese.

To make this daft process easier, you are given incidental clues. A sentence about a pig is shown next to a *picture* of a pig. If you get stuck at P I G, you guess — guessing being much encouraged — either from the picture or from the face of whoever is reading along with you. Then, while remaining confused about what you just "read" and how you did it, you bash on. The one thing you are not told is that P spells puh, I spells i and G spells guh, which means that P I G spells puh-i-guh pig, and you don't need to guess about it. The one thing, in other words, that you are not told about, when subjected to the look-and-say method for learning to read is: reading.

I never suffered from look-and-say at a time in my life when it would have confused me. After all, I can now look-at-and-say any word you throw at me, either because I already know it, or if I don't know it by spelling it out syllable by syllable. But such is my understanding of this bizarre idea.

TWO BOOKS — AND A QUARTER OF A CENTURY MORE DAMAGE

The first book I encountered which criticised look-and-say was Stuart Froome's *Why Tommy Isn't Learning*, which came out in 1970.¹ Froome was the headmaster of a primary school near where we lived, so my mother knew him. And now a more academic and research-based book about the teaching of reading has recently been published by the Institute of Economic Affairs Education Unit. This is Bonnie Macmillan's *Why Schoolchildren Can't Read*, which came out in 1997.²

The big difference between *Why Tommy Isn't Learning* and *Why Schoolchildren Can't Read* is that between them there has been another quarter of a century of educational damage for Macmil-

I was first taught to read, by my mother and by teachers whom my mother had selected, on the good and true basis that however complicated the English language can often get ("thought", "though", "through", "cough"), the basic rule is that each letter stands for a noise. The alphabet is based, that is to say, on "phonics". You look at each letter, make the noise, put the noises in line until you get words, and then put the words in line until you get: reading!

You practised reading with special books from which, to begin with, all the thought-though-cough stuff had been removed. Then gradually the complications were introduced and explained, like "sh" and "ch", the way that adding an E at the end of a word changes how the rest of it is pronounced, and what "ing" and "ed" are for. Then came word lists, arranged according to the various kinds of bizarreness that English spelling obliges us all to live with. As soon as you could, you went on to reading real books in which the writer said whatever he wanted, with all the thoughts, thoughts and coughs he needed, and you

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lan to write about. She catalogues the alarming rise in illiteracy, and in “dyslexia”, which in most cases, she says, would be better described as “dysdidaxia”,³ this circumstance mostly being a failure of teaching rather than of brain function. (People who are confused about the way letters come together to make words are mostly confused because others have confused them.) And Macmillan references a mountain of educational research to prove how right she is and how right Stuart Froome was, all those years ago, about a problem which afflicts not just Britain, but the entire English speaking world.⁴

A NATIONALISED INDUSTRY

Why has this disaster gone on for so long? The silliness of look-and-say is not a recent discovery. People like Stuart Froome and like my mother have known about it for decades. Yet still, according to Bonnie Macmillan and according to the mass of other educational researchers whom she cites, the foolishness persists and continues to wreak havoc. Why?

Being a libertarian, I note that education is in most countries an almost completely nationalised industry. Here in Britain, only the very well-off or very desperate buy private education.

If you are running a nationalised industry and are creating some havoc, this need not be a problem for you; it can instead be an opportunity. You can say that you need a bigger budget, to unscramble the mess that you have created, which you can say has really been caused by mysterious social and economic circumstances far too wide, deep and baffling for you to be blamed. The failure to teach reading (and hence everything else), and the ever vaster sums of public money being thrown at the problem (and at education in general) are not mysterious. The failure causes the spending increase. After all, if the teaching worked, there'd be no need for more money, would there?

As a libertarian I have got used to observing just how wrong — how persistently wrong and how ever more expensively wrong — the public sector can be, once some pack of maniacs has managed to push it off the rails that it inherited when its industry was first nationalised, which in education happened as long ago as 1870. I was, for example, an architecture student in the early 1970s, and learned something of the insane architectural and planning theories that were then rampant, and which have since been replaced with a mixture of rediscovered architectural sanity and quite other sorts of foolishness — most of them involving either environmentalism or housing benefit. Private sector efficient. Public sector garbage. So far so obvious.

But if the teaching of reading has been such a disaster, why hasn't its badness become obvious to all, to the point where not even a nationalised industry could any long postpone the necessary replacement of stupidity by sanity, failure by success? After all, the follies of public sector modern architecture were noted, and, on the whole, corrected. Architecture, even public sector architecture, is now quite good. Why didn't something like that happen with look-and-say?

DISCOVERY METHODS ARE NOT COMPLETELY WRONG

Suppose you rephrase the question. *How come so many children do still learn to read?* Why has the teaching of reading not been a *complete* catastrophe? Most children do still learn eventually.

Partly this is because look-and-say is not now and never has been completely dominant. Stuart Froome and his mates have to some extent still managed to stay in business, and from time to time a particularly illiterate fragment of the education system sees the light and replaces look-and-say with proper teaching based on “phonics”, with predictably rapid benefits.⁵

But more fundamentally, I believe that majority — even if no longer near-universal — literacy has survived because of the nature of the human mind. To put it bluntly, “discovery” methods of learning, do, after a fashion, often work.

Another book I've recently been reading is *Hare Brain Tortoise Mind* by Guy Claxton.⁶ This is about the other way, so to speak, that the human mind works, aside from the one that consists of logically following or applying an argument, and then quickly thinking or doing whatever you deduce. Human thought doesn't only happen at the conscious and narrowly logical level. Equally potent — sometimes more so — is the “thinking” that consists of immersing yourself uncritically in a mass of different experiences and evidence concerning whatever it is you're trying to understand, including some logical rigmaroles, but also some seemingly somewhat irrelevant things, and then just relaxing and letting it all wash over you. Then, often while you're thinking consciously about something else that's more relaxing, the answer to your conundrum pops out of your subconscious. Humans, Claxton points out, are rather good at this. We are not only logic machines. We are pattern finders. We experience a jumble of stuff, and we are genetically programmed to set about making sense of it. Sometimes the pattern we make is wrong, but often it is right, especially if we are surrounded by people who clap when we get what they already know is the right answer, and tell us to keep looking if we get it wrong.

Here I think we have part of the explanation of why so many children do learn to read, despite having been taught in such a perverse fashion.

Many pupils taught reading by look-and-say rather than with phonics are permanently damaged. Their wretched subconscious minds fail to arrive at any conclusions. They never get reading at all. Or, their subconscious minds supply them with wrong conclusions as well as right ones, this being “dyslexia”. Almost all look-and-say victims are slowed down by not being told the secret of reading straight away and being made to practise it.

Nevertheless, the majority of the humans who are subjected to look-and-say, being humans, do eventually crack it, this being exactly the sort of language, says Bonnie Macmillan, that these children use. They eventually “crack” or “get” reading. They do eventually discover the central fact about reading — *each letter makes a sound* — that they need to grasp, and off they go. Discovery methods speak to something deep within us, which is our natural urge, up there with sex and eating and wanting to keep warm, to make sense of things. The discovery method, like sex, can be great fun, for both pupils and teachers.

Talking is also an instinct, which is why there is no national why-children-aren't-talking debate to set beside the why-children-aren't-reading debate. Dump ten babies on a desert island and return ten years later. Provided they are still alive, they will be talking in their own private language. They will have a rich vocabulary, and will be speaking grammatically. Grammar is also an instinct, even if the finer points of English grammar as ordained by grammatically educated English people, are not.⁷

But, the babies will not have become literate. Reading and writing, unlike merely talking, is not an instinct. Setting aside the handful of geniuses who invented literacy, you only get literacy if infected with it by others. Because humans do try instinctively to understand what is in front of them, discovery methods of teaching reading — getting the child to stare at bits of writing, while making encouraging noises about it all — are far better than nothing. Discovery methods do at least assemble clues and steer children towards them. The nothing method would be to ignore the entire subject of reading and writing completely, and to stay at the Teletubbies and plasticene level for ever.

Which is not to say that look-and-say isn't a huge problem. For the only partial failure of look-and-say is, paradoxically, part of the reason why the catastrophe has occurred and has lasted so long. Had the best method for teaching reading been the *only method for teaching reading at all*, the best method could never have been dethroned. As it was, the best method was replaced

by a method that still did sort of work. Look-and-say has been sufficiently undisastrous to be defensible by semi-honourable people, and it still flourishes, leaving a huge trail of educational non- and under-achievement in its wake.

THE INVISIBLE MISSING INGREDIENT

There is surely another reason why look-and-say methods cause less harm than they might. Regular folks, not having been brainwashed by idiot look-and-say lecturers at teacher training colleges, are far more likely to believe in teaching reading in the obvious way, by referring to the sounds made by each letter. So when children are being badly taught to read at school, they are quite likely simultaneously to be being taught better by others, in other places, such as in their homes. That parents should be encouraged to help is a commonplace of education-speak these days. If what I suspect is right, the outsiders are the true teachers, and the teachers are the ones helping, and in many cases not even that.

However, these unofficial remedial teachers are not necessarily going to realise how important their contribution is, and how incompetent the official teachers are. Small children are not necessarily good witnesses about the teaching methods they're being subjected to, and I can't be the only one whose understanding of the look-and-say disaster is held back by sheer amazement at such foolishness. And anyway, if you do discover that what your kids are doing at school is confusing them, the important thing is for you to unconfuse them and for them to press on, not for you to be making difficulties for them by picking fights with their "expert" teachers, who are also going to be expert at justifying or concealing their follies.⁸

By the same token, the truth of what is really going on may also elude the look-and-say teachers. Just as parents may not know how silly the teaching of their children is at school, so too the teachers may be unaware of how sensibly things are being done at home and of what a big difference this is making. If you are a discovery, look-and-say, teacher, the inner intellectual details of how your charges learn whatever they learn remain invisible to you. Phonics-based teachers get inside the brains of their pupils, to remove false ideas and to insert true ones, like benign torturers, but if you are a look-and-say "teacher" whose charges are being surreptitiously taught actual reading by their parents, how would you know? How would you realise that it was really the parents doing the teaching, rather than merely your pupils finding it out for themselves? The kids are now reading, says the "teacher". Well done me. I "taught" them. Who knows how and who cares? They looked, and at first they didn't see. A few weeks later they're still looking, and by golly, now they do see. Hurrah. The discovery method works.

Besides which, a look-and-say teacher won't *want* to understand what's really going on. According to that mad old geezer who taught the look-and-say method at college, the teacher ought to be stamping out the phonic heresy, in the school and in the home. But what the hell. Why not let the parents teach their kids properly if they want to, and you can take the credit?

Look-and-say is thus, I surmise, a very different sort of public sector disaster to the modern architecture disaster. That was an incredible horror story also. How could architects, of all people, produce deliberately ugly and relentlessly non-functioning buildings? Yet the evidence that they did was all around us and staring us in the face. You didn't have to read the theory of "the new brutalism", or to know that architects had suddenly become obsessed with dumping all experience from the past and thinking about each new building "from first principles" (imagine trying to design a car engine on that basis) to know that something extremely perverse and stupid was going on. We don't rely on confused three-year-olds to tell us about nightmare council estates where the lifts don't work and where the ceilings cave in. Almost all of us have personally seen such evil places, and several millions of us have had to live in them, often having

previously lived in far nicer places. The look-and-sayers, by contrast, have largely escaped public condemnation.

If I'm right that the rest of us are tidying up after the teachers, this makes sense of another fact about literacy — or rather illiteracy — which is that it is the poorest children who are the ones now failing in largest numbers to read. Simply, poor kids aren't taught to read properly by the official teachers, but unlike the rest the poorest kids are not surrounded by unofficial remedial teachers. Hence a growing underclass of poor illiterates, trapped in poverty for life by their illiteracy.

Which is a huge, but again invisible, problem. The unpoor and literate majority can see the wretched architecture that the poor must live in, but we can't tell, just by looking at someone, if they can read or not. To find this sort of thing out you have to do research, of the sort Bonnie Macmillan has done but which the rest of us are all too liable to ignore, or dismiss as too vague or too complicated or too politically contentious.

ARE THERE ANY CAMPAIGNS?

Can anything be done about this mess, aside from the usual Libertarian Alliance procedure of writing about it and hoping that truth will eventually prevail? Maybe yes. My immediate reaction to reading Bonnie Macmillan's book was not: I will write about this and wait for truth to prevail. It was: I will write about this, and also start to investigate any campaigning that may be happening on this issue.

As my libertarian friends will know, I am not usually keen on would-be mass appeal, single issue campaigns. But here we perhaps have a matter where populist methods might achieve something. Almost everyone has opinions about education, if only because almost everyone has to some extent been educated. In my experience, starting a discussion about education is like uncorking a severely shaken champagne bottle, which means that the popular media, especially talk radio I surmise, would love it. There'd be no shortage of callers-in with education war-stories. What is missing is a publicity machine to explain both the bad news about look-and-say and the good news of how much things improve when it is dumped.

The campaigning wouldn't basically be about money. Not the money of the people taking part in the campaign, nor even money which the campaigners would be wanting the government to spend, for teaching reading well costs no more than teaching it badly. If only for this reason, our new, New Labour, government — in the person of education minister David Blunkett — now loves phonics. So does the Grand Panjandrum of the Education Inspectors, Chris Woodhead.⁹ Here is that magic piece of politics: a way to improve things that won't cost anything. But Blunkett, Woodhead and their allies are now embroiled in a hell of a battle within the education system. Some outside support for them could surely make a big difference.

Such campaigning needn't only consist of "campaigning", that is, badgering politicians. At the heart of the project could be, not politics, but the teaching of reading, to whoever wants to learn it, or to whoever wants it taught decently to their children. This would put an entire generation of under-achieving educational "experts" on the defensive, by switching from begging them to do better to showing them how, and supplying the general public with the facts that they need to drive the look-and-say people crazy at parties. Remember what happened to those nincompoop architects of the sixties and seventies. "Oh, you're an architect are you. With a knighthood even. Fancy that. That means you've presumably been responsible for *lots* of ugly bollocks buildings. You aren't just obeying the orders, you're giving them! How do you sleep at night? No wait, let me tell you about our lift!" Eventually the architects could stand it no longer and reverted to doing things semi-intelligently. Could not something similar be done to the look-and-say brigade?

Does such a teaching-plus-campaigning organisation devoted to contesting look-and-say already exist? I have yet to pester people like Bonnie Macmillan or her IEA patron James Tooley. But I rang my mother and she told me about Blunkett, whom I'd been ignoring, having been paying more attention lately to Frank Field and the welfare debate, and to transport minister John Prescott's pronouncements. So what do I know?

Perhaps you know about phonics and look-and-say the way I know about libertarianism, and have been plugging away, for sanity and against folly, for the last twenty years, and are somewhat irritated by the above few paragraphs. Here's me saying what you and your friends "could" have been doing, which you *have* been doing. (As a libertarian activist, I know exactly how you feel.) After all, you can be teaching reading in your living room to your own and your friends' children without the media noticing. And someone has convinced David Blunkett and Chris Woodhead about this stuff, so something has been achieved. Anyway, if you are already involved in such things, I'd like to hear from you. I'm a bit bored being only a desktop publisher and libertarian hack. I need to get out more.

A MAGIC WELFARE BUTTON?

I've not done much arguing about the ins and outs of teaching, but I've been arguing for some time now about welfare policy, especially on the radio. Most of those involved in the welfare debate talk as if, buried in among all the statistics of rising welfare costs and the complaints about dodgy neighbours and the cries for help, there exists a magic formula for "solving" the welfare problem — a magic policy button, so to speak, which if pressed, will make all the problems of the welfare state go away. But there is no such button. If you abolish means testing you run up a huge bill for the taxpayer, and you universalise the temptation to rely on welfare. If, on the other hand, you try to make means testing so Gestapo-like that the government will finally be able to discover who deserves welfare and who does not, you never do find out, but you do get your Gestapo. We libertarians favour the abolition of the welfare state, but we too are fooling ourselves if we think that this can be done cheaply, quickly or painlessly.

Defeating look-and-say is the nearest thing to a welfare button that I know of. To the extent that knowledge of this look-and-say versus phonics controversy, and of who is right about it and who is wrong, could be spread around, to that extent will one of the main causes of poverty be abated.

RESCUING PHONICS FROM RIGHT WING BOMBAST

I want to make a final point, which many libertarians will have been surprised to see me ignoring until now, and which deserves a whole pamphlet to itself. This concerns the relationship between the apparently neutral technicality of phonics-based teaching, and the wider question of "progressive", or even "libertarian", teaching methods.

Most of those involved in the look-and-say debate, on both sides, seem to assume that there is an automatic connection between progressive teaching methods and look-and-say on the one hand, and between old-fashioned "discipline" and phonics on the other.

There is some truth in this, as Bonnie Macmillan explains. "Progressive" teaching is about responding to each pupil as a distinct and different individual. Different kids will "discover" different things at different times. No says Macmillan. The research shows, she says, that there is a best way for children to learn reading, which is why teaching lots of them at once, with all the desks pointing at the teacher, is the best and most efficient way to do it.

Yet freedom and look-and-say don't automatically go together, nor do phonics and authoritarianism. Those millions of remedial parents aren't teaching their kids to read in great squads, hurling bits of chalk at them when they make a mistake. No,

they're cuddling them on their knees and responding to them individually and on a one-to-one basis, just like a progressive teacher. The difference is merely that intelligent instead of stupid things are being said and taught. And I bet you there are lots of fascistic look-and-say merchants out there, screaming at their wretched massed victims to just look at the damn word!

Nevertheless, this misleading equation — look-and-say nice, phonics nasty — may help to explain the persistence of look-and-say and the failure of phonics to reconquer the teaching of reading as quickly as it should have. I suspect that there *are* lots of pro-phonics, anti-look-and-say campaigns and campaigners out there, but that they've got nowhere because the people running these campaigns are if anything even keener on "discipline" than they are on phonics. As far as they're concerned it's all the same argument. I seem to recall, for example, someone a while ago setting up a "Campaign for Real Education". I bet that was all about lining desks up the way they used to and teachers yelling like they used to and pupils wearing uniforms and showing respect like they used to, and learning patriotic history dates by rote like they used to, all of which may or may not be good ideas but which are not the same idea as that of dumping look-and-say. I suspect that the only effect of this Campaign for Real Education on the argument against look-and-say has been to suck it into oblivion along with the Campaign for Real Education's other more obsessive obsessions. Our previous Conservative government was fanatically phonic, but that may also have made matters worse, by causing all state teachers, who hate the Conservatives, to hate phonics also.

By contrast, we now have a caring, concerned government, which believes in responding to pupils on an individual level, *which nevertheless favours phonics*. New Labour may now be rescuing phonics from right wing bombast. Our saintly Education Minister David Blunkett, complete with his saintly guide dog, has broken from the progressive ranks and has made this one, separate particular switch in his thinking, and may thus be dragging a generation of look-and-sayers back to sanity.

Maybe I should just join the Labour Party.

NOTES

1. Stuart Froome, *Why Tommy Isn't Learning*, Tom Stacey, London, 1970.
2. Bonnie Macmillan, *Why Schoolchildren Can't Read*, Studies in Education No. 2, Institute of Economic Affairs, London, 1997, cover price: £12. The IEA's address is 2 Lord North Street, Westminster, London SW1P 3LB. Their phone number is 0171 799 3745, their fax number is 0171 799 2137, their e-mail number is iea@iea.org.uk and their website is: <http://www.iea.org.uk>.
3. Macmillan, pp. 120-122, 134.
4. Although in Scotland things aren't as bad. Macmillan, p. 76.
5. "In 1987, in Raglan School, South London, a third of 7-year-olds were found to be two years behind in reading achievement. Reading standards six years later in 1993 were approaching the best among state schools, since the head directed that children be 'almost indoctrinated' with phonics." Macmillan, p. 75.
6. Guy Claxton, *Hare Brain Tortoise Mind — Why Intelligence Increases When You Think Less*, Fourth Estate Paperbacks, London, 1997.
7. For chapter and verse on these confident pronouncements, see Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct — The New Science of Language and Mind*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1994.
8. I first aired some of the ideas in this pamphlet at one of my last-friday-of-the-month libertarian discussion evenings on August 28th, 1998. The most interesting thing I learned that night was this point about the ignorance of parents. Presnet was a real live parent, who, when asked about how they taught his daughter, started his reply with: "I don't know." Since then, I have met an *experienced state school teacher* who said she had just the same problem when enquiring about her dyslexic daughter's problems. Not even she could work out what was going on. "So what chance ..." she added, do Mr and Mrs Average have?
9. Macmillan, p. 156.