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THE NATURE AND FUNCTIONS OF I.T.A. IN BEGINNING READING.

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THE NATURE, FUNCTIONS, AND TRANSITIONAL STAGE OF THE INITIAL TEACHING ALPHABET (I.T.A.) IN BEGINNING READING IN THE UNITED STATES ARE DISCUSSED. THE MEDIUM, I.T.A., WAS ORIGINALLY CONCEIVED AS A TRANSITIONAL ALPHABET, OF WHICH SPELLING IS AN INTEGRAL PART. THE MEDIUM IS DESIGNED TO RATIONALIZE THE DECODING PROCESS AND AT THE SAME TIME PROVIDE A FOUNDATION FOR EASY TRANSITION TO TRADITIONAL ORTHOGRAPHY (T.O.). METHODS FOR USING I.T.A. IN TEACHING READING ARE THE SAME AS THOSE USED WITH T.O. IN DEVELOPING MATERIALS. OPTIONS ARE TO TRANSLATE EXISTENT T.O., TO PRODUCE NEW MATERIALS, OR TO DEVELOP MATERIALS ATTEMPTING TO UTILIZE THE ADVANTAGES OF THE NEW MEDIUM. THE NEW MATERIALS DEVISED BY TANYZER AND MAZURKIEWICZ CONTAIN DISCRETE FEATURES WHICH DIFFERENTIATE THEM FROM TYPICAL BASAL READERS. INITIAL READING AND WRITING ACTIVITIES, DEVELOPING AND EXTENDING SKILLS, AND TRANSITION IN READING, WRITING, AND SPELLING ARE DISCUSSED. REFERENCES ARE INCLUDED. (BK)

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TITLE: THE NATURE AND FUNCTIONS OF i.t.a. IN BEGINNING READING

PROGRAM
SESSION: A DECADE OF INNOVATIONS: APPROACHES TO BEGINNING READING

USING i.t.a. IN BEGINNING READING (UNITED STATES)

The question of how best to teach children to read and write English has produced much controversy over the years. Out of contemporary controversy have come many proposals, each advocating different approaches and programs; each challenging conventional materials, methods, and practices. One of the most unique of these innovations, and one that is generating much interest in educational circles, is the Initial Teaching Alphabet (i.t.a.).

At this point, it seems almost superfluous to describe this new alphabet. i.t.a. is so widely used in the United States, in England, in Canada, in Australia, in New Zealand--in other words, throughout the English-speaking world--that a surprising number of people, in and outside the profession, are familiar with Sir James Pitman's alphabet and the principles on which it is based.

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Nature of i.t.a.

Briefly, i.t.a. is a forty-four character alphabet using our conventional lower-case alphabet (excluding q and x) plus a number of augmentations. Its purpose is quite simple: it is designed to make the decoding aspects of the learning-to-read process simpler and more rational by regularizing the symbol-to-sound relationship. Its goal is to assist the beginner in acquiring the skills necessary to read conventional print proficiently. i.t.a. is distinguished from other phonemically- or phonetically-consistent English alphabets in that it was clearly and originally conceived by its inventor to be a <u>transitional</u> learning alphabet, to be used only during the beginning stages of learning to read and write English. It is to be discarded once fluency is achieved, the time when the learner meets our traditional orthography (T.O.) at a level of linguistic competency that permits him to deal with it efficiently and meaningfully. By using twenty-four of our twenty-six lower-case Roman characters, adding fourteen additional symbols which are digraphic combinations of familiar characters, and by adding only a few specialized symbols, Pitman has reiterated the relationship between i.t.a. and traditional orthography.

Pitman has done more than produce a set of alphabetic symbols. He has also established a number of spelling rules

which are an integral part of his conception. In other words, the i.t.a. characters and the spellings of words in i.t.a. were created by Pitman to correlate very closely with conventional orthography in order to facilitate transition at a later stage. Pitman developed the i.t.a. medium to meet head-on the orthographic problems created by what Coleridge called, 150 years ago, "our lying alphabet." Why our "lying"alphabet? Because the English alphabet contains too few letters to encode the phonemes of English speech on a one-to-one basis. In addition, our capricious English spelling contributes to the disrelationship between the graphic representations of words and their speech equivalents.

A few examples should illustrate the disparity between sounds and symbols in English orthography:

(1) The letter "s" represents different phonemes in bus, his, sure, treasure. The combination of letters "one" signifies a different sound in each of the following words: one, done, bone, gone.

(2) The same phoneme can be represented by a variety of characters or graphemic units; e.g., right, white, buy, by, I, eye, choir, aisle, aye, island, etc.

(3) Since our alphabet does not provide individual symbols for some of the phonemes of English, complex combinations of letters must be used to represent

these sounds; for example, the initial sound in slow, cheese, the, thick, oil, awful, etc.

(4) Spelling in conventional orthography does not always consistently represent the left-to-right sequence of our phonemes: kite, lake, mete, like, same, etc.

The rationale underlying i.t.a. is that the easiest and most rational approach to learning to read is to start with a simplified and reliable alphabetic medium which approximates T.O. It is Pitman's contention that i.t.a. reduces, and to a large extent eliminates, a number of the unnecessary orthographic difficulties of conventional print by circumventing them in the initial learning stages. When the learner has progressed to the point at which he can read fluently and with adequate comprehension, he transfers his skills to reading in conventional print. It was essential that the designer strike a delicate balance between two conflicting considerations: the need for a simple and consistent alphabet that would serve the learner effectively during the initial learning period, and the necessity for visual compatibility with word forms in conventional orthography (with all their inconsistencies) to make transition as effortless as possible. The single most important characteristic of i.t.a.'s design is, therefore, that it represents a carefully-weighed compromise between a perfect phonemic alphabet

(which i.t.a. is not) and the traditional alphabet and its spelling. Sir James' selection of the number and forms of augmentations required to design a simple and effective reading alphabet and his choice of spelling principles were formulated in the light of his analysis of the phoneme-grapheme relationships of our conventional graphic system. Unlike traditional orthography, with its frequently misleading and variable print-sound relationships, each of the forty-four i.t.a. characters carries a single consistent sound value and the alphabet contains enough characters to represent the significant phonemes of spoken English. A comprehensive linguistic analysis of i.t.a. is not appropriate here; I understand that a forthcoming book by Sir James Pitman will provide a complete review of this and related issues. However, certain misconceptions about i.t.a. should be dealt with:

i.t.a. is not a phonetic alphabet.

i.t.a. is not a pure phonemic alphabet.

i.t.a. is not a method for teaching reading.

i.t.a. is not an insidious attempt at spelling reform.

As its name implies, i.t.a. is a learning alphabet and its spellings, designed to rationalize the decoding process at the same time that it provides a firm foundation for easy transition to the orthography the child will use for the rest of his life.

The Functions of i.t.a. in Beginning Reading

What has been most confusing in any discussion of i.t.a. is the common failure to distinguish between the alphabet as an orthographic medium and the methodology employing it to teach reading. The fact remains that i.t.a. is a medium. Like our orthodox alphabet and orthography, it can be used well or badly, sensibly or not, with or without good teaching.

In beginning reading, i.t.a. will be used according to the perceptions of the user. The teacher has the same variety of options as there are when teaching reading with the conventional alphabet. In other words, any method or combination of methods proven successful in teaching reading with the orthodox alphabet can be used with i.t.a.

One option is simply to transliterate any basal reading program, utilizing the new alphabet for whatever benefits accrue. Indeed, perhaps because of the need for comparability in an experimental situation, this is what was done originally in Great Britain. The children in the experimental i.t.a. classes used the Janet and John basal reading series, a British version of our familiar Alice and Jerry readers. A number of British publishers have produced i.t.a. reading programs in this way; that is, the materials are simply transliterations of their books originally in traditional orthography.

and the methodology and the rationale are, inevitably, the same as those for the original editions. At least one leading American publisher has also chosen this option. The question that arises about these "instant" i.t.a. books (books that are created simply by changing the print) is whether these books exploit the benefits of i.t.a. since their rationale was based on the requirements of traditional orthography. While, to quote the British Times Educational Supplement (February 3, 1967), "It is not surprising . . . that most publications in i.t.a. are reprints of material issued in T.O."; one may note, along with the Times Educational Supplement, that "if i.t.a. really makes a difference then the way has been cleared to design a more exhilarating approach to early reading."

A second option is to produce new materials which follow the precepts established for traditional basal reading programs. According to the Times Educational Supplement,

> The Downing Readers were the first infant readers specifically written for i.t.a. In design and form they proved to be indistinguishable from standard T.O. readers. But they were written when i.t.a. was in its infancy. There had not been time to work out a new teaching approach (5).

A third option is to develop i.t.a. instructional materials for beginning reading which attempt to utilize the advantages of the new medium. What one does is dependent upon his perceptions of what those advantages are, upon his philosophy and personal opinions regarding the teaching of reading, on the children themselves, and, of course, on his use of the many existing studies of learning theory and child development, and research in reading. One example of such a program, developed by Dr. Albert J. Mazurkiewicz and the writer, is the Early-to-Read i.t.a. Program. It is presently being used in most of the first-grade classes in this country in which reading is being taught with the initial teaching alphabet. It is, obviously, a product of our own perceptions; we wished to produce a reading program which exploited the full potential of i.t.a. Our fundamental assumption was that with the change to a simplified, more rational medium it was essential to review our previous assumptions about the teaching of beginning reading in general, and our assumptions about methods of teaching word recognition, about content, organization, sequence, and reading levels in particular. Finally, we felt that there was a need to consider which training procedures and practices would best prepare the way to transition in reading, writing, and spelling in conventional orthography.

Since the British experiment with i.t.a. replicated conventional approaches with instructional materials originally intended to be used with the orthodox alphabet, we could gain little information and guidance from it. From the very beginning, the British research pointed to the fact that the orthodox alphabet and conventional orthography are a source of difficulty in the earliest stages of learning to read and write English, and that a more consistent, rational medium, such as i.t.a., significantly reduces the learner's burden and results in early independence in reading. This was our basis for selecting i.t.a. in the first place. These hypotheses have now been validated, as Downing has so conclusively reported (2). But i.t.a. was selected as a successful medium which was still to be employed--hopefully--in an optimal way.

An analysis of the Early-to-Read i.t.a. Program Revised (4), (the first edition of which was introduced in this country in 1963) shows that it contains a number of discrete features which differentiate it from most typical basal series in the nature of its initial readiness activities and experiences in meaningful reading and writing; in its word recognition program--its organization, sequence, and timing; in the control exercised over the language factor with respect to vocabulary load and frequency of word repetition; in the nature of the content and readability levels of the selections in the readers;

and in the presentation of independent reading and writing activities.

Initial Reading and Writing Activities Early reading and writing activities are designed to assist the child to acquire basic decoding and encoding skills. These should enable him to engage in meaningful reading from the very outset of reading instruction and to develop early independence in reading and writing.

The initial reading and writing activities are of two types: first, those intended to teach the symbol-to-sound associations in order to help the child to apply this knowledge in word-building and in word identification. The second type stresses a language--experience approach, whereby children read stories composed and dictated by them as well as those written by the teacher. Picture stories are used to stimulate experience-story work that provides the child with a written record of his own idiomatic use of language.

At the very outset of formal reading instruction, emphasis on learning the phoneme-grapheme correspondences of i.t.a. is coordinated with an experience story approach. After pupils have gained considerable experience in reading experience stories and have learned the sound-symbol associations for seven of the i.t.a. characters, charts are used to introduce gradually the twenty-two

word vocabulary of the first paperback reader. These words are taught through a visual-auditory, or look-say, procedure. The advantage of i.t.a. in whole-word approach is that the different visual patterns for the same word which occur in traditional orthography are eliminated. When a word is formed from characters already taught, the child is encouraged and expected to work out its pronunciation on his own.

Children are taught phonic analysis through intensive training in auditory and visual discrimination skills. As children develop the visual and auditory association of a character, they learn to write it and reproduce it from memory. Writing serves as an additional avenue of learning and helps the child to form a strong visual-auditory bond between the sound which the character represents and its written form. The order of presentation of the characters is based on a study of the frequency of sound occurrence in story material written for children and Godfrey Dewey's (1) study of relative frequency of English speech sounds. Pupils are taught to use an analytical procedure to unlock the pronunciation of new words. This approach emphasizes the analysis and synthesis of the characters of a word as the principle method of word identification. Phonics instruction is thus a direct outgrowth of a meaningful reading activity.

with decoding skills treated as a part of the larger issue--the gaining of meaning. Emphasis on word analysis and sound synthesis activities helps the child to develop independence in word identification and independence in reading.

The task of the first phase of the Early-to-Read program thus becomes one of systematically developing the basic perpetual skills in reading that enable the child to link each character with its appropriate sound and to utilize this knowledge in unlocking the pronunciation of new words. Thus he can engage in independent reading at an early stage. When the child completes two more paperback readers and two cloth-bound ones, he has learned the forty-four i.t.a. characters as well as those analysis and synthesis skills which will permit him to identify any i.t.a. word in his spoken and listening vocabulary reliably and effectively.

While the development of basic phonic skills here requires less than a year, the complex and elaborate phonics instruction required in most T.O. basal series often must be spread over three years of instruction. Also from the very beginning, since i.t.a. simplifies decoding, strict vocabulary control and frequent repetition of words are not as necessary as they are in a conventional T.O. program. Thus, the program introduces a significantly greater number of words--three to four times greater than

that found in conventional first-grade basal reading programs. In addition to the separate phonic elements that are taught, virtually every basal reading program teaches a number of phonic generalizations. The child taught in i.t.a. does not need to learn multiple word analysis skills or phonic generalizations during the initial learning period.

Developing and Extending Skills With the development of independent reading in the child's next two readers, fluency is stressed and the decoding and comprehension skills developed in the early books are maintained and extended. At this point in the program, structural analysis skills, consisting of compound words, contractions, possessives, derived forms, inflectional endings, comparatives, and beginning syllabication skills, are developed. Preparation for transition is made by introducing the concept of long and short vowels.

Since the i.t.a. medium affords the child the opportunity to express his thoughts in writing more easily and spontaneously, written composition work is stressed throughout the program and it inevitably reinforces reading skills development in a positive and significant way. When T.O. is used as the initial learning medium, it appears that conventional spelling thwarts the child's early attempts at writing and insecurity with his ability to spell is a significant factor in retarding early desire and independence in writing.

Transition in Reading, Writing and Spelling The third phase is designed to develop fluency and comprehension, and to move the child into the conventional alphabet. The instructional program concentrates on traditional orthography and prepares the child for making a formal transition to T.O. by gradually introducing words in T.O. and replacing i.t.a. spellings with conventional spelling. Virtually all of the last reader in the series is written in conventional orthography. By now, the child has formally made the transition from i.t.a. to T.O.

The transition process is an area in which relatively little controlled and systematic research has been conducted. An unpublished study by Tanyzer and Alpert (3) investigated the effect of transition upon the child's reading level in traiitional orthography to determine whether children of different levels of intelligence maintain their i.t.a. reading skill in the orthodox alphabet when they transfer from i.t.a. to T.O. Transition was operationally defined as the point at which the child completed the last reader of the Early-to-Read series. Alternate forms of the Stanford Achievement Test, one printed in conventional spelling and the other transliterated into i.t.a., were administered to a sample of 104 pupils at the time transition was made. To summarize the results, it was found that the children generally maintained their i.t.a. reading skill in conventional orthography when the formal transition was made. There was no loss, or relatively little loss of practical significance, in Word Meaning, Paragraph Meaning, and

Spelling. Also, regardless of the time at which the child made the transition--near the end of the first-grade or sometime during the second-grade year--or level of intelligence, children generally achieved a comparable reading level in both i.t.a. and T.O., although the time of transition was usually later for the low I.Q. (less than or equal to 100) children. Only on the Word Study Skills subtest was the i.t.a. level generally higher than the T.O. level, regardless of the intelligence level or time at which transition was made. This finding suggests that the i.t.a. medium is easier than the orthodox alphabet for learning to decode.

It should be pointed out that the reduced need for a controlled vocabulary and repetition has provided an opportunity for significant changes in content throughout. Thus stories can now be intrinsically interesting, and the child can be introduced to literature rather than to synthetic concoctions which must depend on orthographic circumscriptions. It is likely that the concept of reader level must be modified, since i.t.a. permits reading of an "advanced" level if level reflects syllabic load, sentence length, unfamiliar words, etc. The guiding principle could now be to select stories which expand conceptual horizons as well as verbal ones and approximate more nearly the intellectual and comprehension capabilities of the child. Reading can become a pleasurable activity, from the very beginning.

This program is that most commonly conceived of as "i.t.a." in the United States. The confusion between method and medium, however, seems inescapable, no matter how often one attempts to clarify it. Much of the U. S. research often fails to note the fact that the i.t.a. used is used in a context--and that the context is always relevant.

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