

Older But No Wiser

Written in 1937, these insights still apply today.

By Anna Gillingham and Bessie W. Stillman

A student who has a reading problem that is not identified in elementary school may be called a “poor student” in high school. In giving a case history of the student, a parent may refer to her child’s initial difficulty in learning how to read, unaware that the difficulty with reading still exists. The student may excel in mathematics and lab science classes, but graduation and college look doubtful.

The primary reason for his difficulties may go unnoticed because students in the upper grades are seldom required to read aloud. Therefore, his teachers may be unaware that he is failing in his work because he cannot read the text with understanding. The student himself may reject the idea that he has a reading problem, although he may admit that he does not like history or lengthy novels, and has difficulty writing essays and compositions or doing research projects.

His reading difficulties may be a mystery to him because he is not aware that others have less difficulty. Never having read accurately, he has no conception of what real reading is. To miscall little words, often not even noticing them, slide over long ones, and catch only a point here and there seems perfectly natural to him.

Such a student can be “cured” if he is taken back to the start and taught to read phonetically. The outstanding value of the Orton Gillingham plan is that, while dealing with facts and skills fundamental to reading, for a time it excludes from the *remedial* periods all reading from books, and consequently the fumbling and disregard for detail which blocked intelligent interpretation for so long. If possible, the daily assigned textbook lessons should be read aloud to the student until skills are commensurate with grade-level reading demands.

Before he is allowed to return to a book, the student has to become familiar with many new and interesting aids to a successful attack on the words that until now have always stood like barriers between his mind and the thought of the passage. No other approach could so clearly demonstrate to the student his habitual inaccuracy and how this can be replaced by correct pronunciation.

Symptoms

Some students have no knowledge of the phonetic units on which words are built. If they have been taught phonics, they may not have had sufficient opportunity for review, and the information may not have been introduced systematically enough to ensure that important concepts were presented. Failure to do so often results in a weak foundation of basic reading and decoding skills which may affect fluency of reading, and will ultimately affect reading comprehension.

- Although they may have been taught to read words as whole units, the students may often confuse the “little” words on which meaning so often depends (such as: if, is, it, on, off).
- Limited word attack skills make reading multisyllabic words a significant challenge. If students do not “slide over” these words, they often pronounce them with a meaningless sound, or substitute some word remotely resembling the given word.
- The dictionary may not be useful for them. Students may not understand what information the dictionary entry can provide.
- Their vocabulary may be limited.
- The only remnant of their study of literature may be a feeling of loathing for books that have been recommended to them as enjoyable to read.

The procedures in the formal skills developed in *The Gillingham Manual* depend upon a thorough knowledge of the phonograms (single letters or letter combinations that represent sounds). The manual outlines the order in which the phonograms should be presented, followed by carefully-sequenced lessons and practice in spelling and pronunciation patterns.

Once the student has made sufficient progress, selection of the first book for reading enjoyment is of vital importance, and should be a joint decision between teacher and student. It is important that the student is not set up for failure and discouragement.

The goal of speed reading is not addressed as part of this program. It is our experience that as skill and accuracy in reading improve, so does speed. To set speed as a goal is to place emphasis at the wrong end of the process. Fluency and comprehension increase speed, but striving to read more words per minute does not bring fluency or comprehension.

Teachers should make every effort to prevent the resumption of old habits, such as omitting unknown words or substituting and adding words. The student must make an effort to apply newly-learned skills and concepts. When possible, most of this early reading should be done orally, so the teacher can assess application of skills.

While the need for continued training and review in the translation of symbols into sounds must be continually emphasized, neither the teacher nor the student should forget that the purpose of reading is to gain meaning and enjoyment from the printed page.

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