A Reading Course for the Adolescent and Adult Slow Learner

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THE PROBLEM presented by the illiteracy of a considerable proportion of delinquents has become more and more manifest during the last 10 or 20 years. It has even been said that a good deal of emotional maladjustment and the social inadequacies shown by the delinquent may be due to educational incompetence which cannot be explained in terms of lack of intelligence. Practically all young people going through the prisons have enough intelligence to acquire the mechanical skills of reading, writing and arithmetic and even though, in many cases, dull intelligence sets a ceiling on the adequate and flexible use of these technical skills, there is no reason why these skills cannot be acquired. Whatever the reason which led to educational under-functioning, there is little doubt that something should be done in the educational field to give these people a higher degree of literacy which may in some ways even help to make them more settled and more responsive to the pressures exerted by society. Overcoming illiteracy is, therefore, not only important from the point of view of giving people a better skill in tackling ordinary practical life situations, it also contributes substantially to the therapeutic efforts which have to be made to overcome the consequences of deprivation and maladaptation.

This has been recognised for a long time. Many prisons and borstals have developed educational provisions which are intended to give some extra help and assistance to learn the basic skills required for education at a comparatively late stage in peoples' lives. Reading has practically always attracted the main attention and classes have been instituted which have tried to cater for the needs of the completely illiterate to the semi-literate reader. One of the main difficulties encountered in teaching is the fact that very little reading material is available which would appeal, or at least not disturb and upset the adolescent and adult would-be reader by childish content. Being faced with having to return to the school desk and to start learning to read with the help of reading materials which, as he knows quite well, are used for very young children, the adult illiterate is not in the least stimulated or encouraged by having to tackle these "baby books" which provide the only reading matter which he could read at this early stage. This situation creates a major obstacle in the illiterate's desire to learn to read and

in consequence he may develop a very ambivalent attitude towards reading, wanting at one and the same time to learn to read but being repelled by the fact that this would mean a return to childish reading matter.

The new series of reading books discussed in this article has been designed to overcome this particular objection and to provide a reading course which would give a useful reading skill to the illiterate in the very first stage. It is generally assumed that learning to read has to start on an "easy" stage, even so the acquisition itself at that time might be pretty useless from the practical point of view. For example, the fact that Tom plays ball or Ruth caught the ball as learnt in the first books of the usual series of childrens' reading books represents scarcely reading matter which is recognised by the adolescent illiterate reader as worthy of extra effort. A more adult approach is required.

In this reading course, designed for adolescents and adults, the first step consists of "reading" by sight a number of words known as the social sight vocabulary. These words are of immediate social usefulness because they convey warnings, e.g. DANGER, admonitions, e.g. NO SMOKING, advice, e.g. PULL, information, e.g. SALT. These words are a type of shorthand system used by the community to provide guidance and orientation in life by being shown on notices and labels, and they are an extremely helpful first acquisition in reading skill.

Very often it is impossible to plan a course of reading instruction extending over a considerable time and it will save time and encourage the beginner if a reading skill can be acquired from the outset which is of immediate practical usefulness and adult in outlook.

The words of the social sight vocabulary which have been chosen for this series are no more than 45 in number. These words have nowadays been generally accepted as the most important reading possession for people who will not acquire an advanced reading skill. They are being taught even to severely subnormal people in training centres and hospital schools and are now taking the place of the more formal reading instruction based on books for the junior school. For people with limited intelligence who will either not be able to acquire a more advanced technical reading skill or people who have not the necessary intellectual resources to understand what they read, the possession of those words is not only useful because their recognition provides guide-posts in daily life, but because it gives the illiterate a feeling of security by apparently having acquired a working knowledge of reading. From that point of view teaching the sight vocabulary might be considered a therapeutic measure.

The words of the social sight vocabulary are usually best learnt

with the help of flash cards* which display the word on one side and a picture or significant clue to the meaning of the word on the other side. The flash cards which have been developed for this reading material provide not only help in recognising the word as such, but attempt also to convey the fact that many of the words have a more general meaning and are not necessarily only tied to one particular meaning. For example, the words "ON" and "OFF" which are part of the social sight vocabulary are obviously the words usually found on switches of gas and electric apparatus. They are learned in that context but, obviously the words "ON" and "OFF" have a more general meaning. This is illustrated in the flash cards by showing as the cue-picture for ON a boy riding *on* a horse whilst OFF is illustrated by the same boy falling *off* the horse. Such "off key" clues for remembering the social sight vocabulary could assist considerably in the general language development which should be part of a general social education programme.

It is important that the social sight vocabulary should not be learnt mechanically even if pleasantly, but that the words should convey the appropriate meanings. Two packets of flash cards provide opportunities for playing games such as "Snap" and "Remember". Many other games can obviously be invented by the teacher.

Other games which help in memo-rising the words of the social sight vocabulary and assist in acquiring comprehension are played with the "Word Situation Cards" of the SEFA Teaching Set†. The principle involved in these cards is to show the same situation on two different pictures where only recognition of the social sight word helps to find the right answer. In other words it is only possible to decide which situation is "right" and which is "wrong" by reading and interpreting the social sight vocabulary word.

The acquisition of the social sight vocabulary words by using cards, games, etc. (there is also a bingo-type of card game in the SEFA Teaching Set) should be reinforced and made far more meaningful by using a series of reading books known as the "Clumsy Charlie" series. There are four books in the series called "Clumsy Charlie and those Doors", "Clumsy Charlie at Work", "Clumsy Charlie at Home" and "Clumsy Charlie at Large."‡

The books present the words of the social sight vocabulary in different sizes and different types of print, in the context of a story which illustrates the usefulness of reading and understanding the words which are seen on doors, boxes, packets, etc. Recognising these words and associating them with meaning is important and the stories show how Charlie could have avoided many frustrating and embarrassing situations if he had looked for and responded to these words.

The books consist of a story part read by the teacher, and the words of the social sight vocabulary which are read by the pupil. The method of presenting these books can vary. Generally the story part is read to small groups after the relevant words have been taught and explained by using flash cards and blackboard techniques. The teacher pauses at each word of the social sight vocabulary which is then read by the group or an individual pupil. The response will depend on a lively and well acted presentation by the teacher and this can help much in overcoming wandering attention. Text parts can be shortened if necessary, comments interpolated and stories be acted out. It is important to draw the pupils' attention repeatedly to words of the social sight vocabulary seen outside the classroom and to make their responses as automatic as reactions to coloured traffic signals.

Once the words of the social sight vocabulary have been mastered and the pupil has acquired the feeling that he has learnt something worth while, this knowledge of 45 words can be used for learning to read. For this purpose the 18 books of the series "Out with Tom" §have been designed which extend gradually the vocabulary by adding a few words in each book until a reading skill of about age eight to eight and-a-half years has been obtained.

Well-known words of the social sight vocabulary such as "PULL" and "PUSH" are now read in new forms by adding the simple endings "ing", "es", "ed", etc. forming the words "pushing", "pushes", "pushed", etc. By the addition of a few new words, sentences in a continuous story are presented in a very simple manner. There is much repetition and pictorial material to support the understanding for words which so far have not been encountered. Though the techniques used are those of children's reading books, the difference in content and approach is quite marked and there is not much likelihood that the adolescent will be offended by the childishness of the material even though it is presented in such a simple form.

Tom is first encountered as a chap who paints a wall in a factory. He mixes with other people, goes to the canteen, has a smoke, has to pay for cigarettes and for the food from the canteen and leads, generally the normal life of an adolescent working class lad. Gradually new experiences are added such as a youngster of his age would encounter—going to the cricket match, the pictures, having his trouble with the telephone and on the bus, and many other ordinary every day occurrences.

Though Tom himself is a fairly serious lad who sports a modern Beatle haircut, the lighter side of life is provided for by the appearance of Charlie of "Clumsy Charlie" fame, who quite involuntarily provides all those silly adventures for which he has become notorious in the preceding series. He tears his

bus ticket apart in the bus, walks out by the wrong door when at the pictures and is unable to find his way back, gets himself into trouble at the cricket match, and is generally an example of how *not* to behave.

Whilst the series is primarily designed to help in teaching the illiterate reading skills on a modest level of word recognition, the books illustrate social incidents with which the adolescent should be thoroughly familiar to avoid embarrassing and frustrating situations. Looked at in this way the series provides incidental social education and much opportunity for discussion and widening the reader's understanding at the level with which he is superficially familiar.

This theme is continued in the series "Spotlight on Trouble" ‖ . This series does not really need any introduction. It has been discussed in a previous issue of the Journal ¶ and only a summary of that discussion will be given here. Generally speaking, the eight books of the "Spotlight on Trouble" series are intended to give the semi-literate reader practice in reading at a level of approximately eight to eight-and-a-half years. At the same time, the books tell him about the world around him—the difficulties one may have with the landlady, with the foreman, the wage packet, clerks behind the counter, when shopping, when going to the pictures, to the dance, to an outing.

George is a dull, well-meaning youth whose difficulties in life are mainly due to his social ignorance. In this respect he is rather different from Charlie who makes avoidable mistakes simply because he is very young and does not care to use the knowledge he has actually acquired. Whilst the average illiterate or semi-literate reader tends to look with amusement at the antics of silly little Charlie in the same way as he would look with a patronising smile at the frolics of a younger brother, George is a different chap. He is the one the reader can identify himself with. George is a chap who encounters the same difficulties as the reader himself has experienced and who goes through similar embarrassments and disturbances. It is well known that many people like to hear about their own lives in reading, to compare and to learn from the experiences of others. The illiterate delinquent is no exception to this and the George of "Spotlight on Trouble" may well help to throw some light on many social difficulties for which academic education fails to prepare. George's adventures are based on actual occurrences as encountered in interviews and conversations with dullards who have troubles in ordinary day to day experiences. To the original four "Spotlight on Trouble" books, four new ones have now been added which include George's girl friend and, of course, Charlie who is George's younger brother.

It has been the aim throughout the course to offer reading matter for adults which would not offend

by childishness, be useful in providing relevant social knowledge and give the beginner, right from the start, the feeling of learning something of importance. The point of departure, namely, the use of an adult social sight vocabulary requiring apparently advanced reading skill, is unusual and perhaps unique. Experience has shown that there is no difficulty whatsoever for an adolescent or adult slow learner to recognise by sight the various words of the social sight vocabulary. Recognising these words and knowing their meanings is far more a gratifying, rewarding and exhilarating experience for the illiterate than learning the simple words of children's books, "dog" and "cat", "ball", even if he learns to analyse them phonetically. It must not be forgotten that by the time the adolescent and adult begin to learn reading he has been thoroughly disappointed and disturbed by his failure to learn to read at school. Presenting the task of learning to read from a completely new angle and with a new type of material will help considerably to make him accessible to teaching, and the easy initial success obtained by simply "barking" at adult words, makes him ready to try the reading course which follows the traditional and well-established pattern of learning a few words, with frequent repetition and with phonic exercises, etc.

Combining the easy reading approach as far as the technical skills of reading is concerned with a primary of social know-how in disguised form should make this series doubly useful to those teachers who look at their work not merely in terms of conveying the three Rs, but wish also to help the illiterate who is generally also socially submarginal in mastering the skills of living required for avoiding many of the disturbing and unhappy events which have often repercussions completely out of proportion with the insignificant size of the original cause.

References

* "CLUMSY CHARLIE FLASH CARDS", from SEFA Ltd., 240, Holliday Street, Birmingham 1.

† "SEFA (SOCIAL EDUCATION FIRST AID) TEACHING SET", from SEFA Ltd., 240, Holliday Street, Birmingham 1.

‡ "CLUMSY CHARLIE" Reading Books (4 titles), from SEFA Ltd., 240, Holliday Street, Birmingham 1.

§ "OUT WITH TOM" Reading Books (18 titles), from SEFA Ltd., 240, Holliday Street, Birmingham 1.

‖ "SPOTLIGHT ON TROUBLE" Reading Books (8 titles), from Methuen & Co. Ltd., 11, New Fetter Lane, London E.C.4.

¶ "READING BOOKS FOR THE ADULT SEMI-LITERATE", *Prison Service Journal* 1964, III, No. 12, pp. 43-48.