Hearing, Speaking, Reading

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THE ILLITERATE DELINQUENT is probably the most tragic casualty of mankind's ability to blind itself with science.

In a world increasingly preoccupied with complicating the simple, and measuring intelligence by the capacity to acquire pieces of paper indicating a good memory for academic information, he finds himself labelled "stupid". Those who would normally have formed his own kind draw away from him with ridicule and thinly disguised contempt.

All too easily in the modern "streaming" system, he finds a new pack with which to run.

But for all the companionship of his fellows, he is never very far away from grim reminders of his subnormality. His ego is constantly subjected to depression. He cannot escape the print around him and before him at every turn. Every child who passes him carrying the week's current comic is a torment. Every shop window that takes his eye bears mute witness to his ignorance. Unless he recognises a box by its colour scheme and size it could contain chocolates or cheeses for all he knows.

Small wonder he seeks to redress the balance of his self-esteem by proving greater guts and physical prowess, particularly against those patterns of behaviour most highly valued by his natural enemies—the normal.

Only those who have engaged in remedial work within the family group can grasp the true extent of the welter of misery suffered by parents and children when reading is essayed, or discussed.

The root of the emotional conflict is the insane conviction in *homo sapiens* that anyone who cannot do that which he personally finds easy —is stupid. This unshakeable belief in man that the store of knowledge in his mind reflects his intelligence rather than a long, grinding acquisition of know-how, is productive of more friction than any six other less-lovely facets of human nature.

The parents, then, feel angry and hurt that they should have produced

a numbskull. The child is bewildered and hurt because no matter how hard he tries he cannot for the life of him make top nor tail of what they place before him.

According to his *milieu* he will suffer every type of exhortation from kindly encouragement based on advancement that he well knows he has not made, to ranting, roaring vituperation and blows from the figure he would most yearn to please—his dad.

Oddly enough, only if he has a fair amount of native intelligence will the desire to swing the pendulum as far as he knows how towards flaunting his ignorance as a badge of "difference", occur to him. The genuinely mentally-handicapped lad will supinely accept a lesser status and go along with it. But not so your border-line and above case; he will burn for revenge.

Before moving on to study the causes of and cures for illiteracy, let it be said that the teacher who cannot generate compassion for the unlovely lout before him should not come within a hundred miles of remedial work. My experience suggests that teaching methods diametrically opposed to the boy's capacity to profit from them certainly contributed to his eventual psyche.

If, alternatively, mother nature dispenses a package deal personality at birth, then remedial work is a criminal waste of public money.

Since reading is a facet of our natural system of communication which employs sound or light waves to evoke apparent noises in the mind (tip some matches on the table and try to count them without "hearing" yourself utter each figure), let us first examine what the boy CAN do in this direction.

Although unlikely to employ a wide spoken vocabulary himself he will respond to a much wider one aurally. The chances are that his speech will be even less clearly enunciated than the bulk of the people in his home neighbourhood. Indeed, he is likely to have difficulty with specific sounds. But nonetheless, speedwise both his oral and auditory circuits will approximate to normal.

Thus far he will enjoy the same psycho-physical equipment as the rest of us. And since speech is transmitted or received withoutabreak betweenwordsatsomethinglike20 soundspersecondofdifferentwave lengthandmagnitude, clearly, with regard to the physiological mechanics of communication, his brain is as efficient as our own.

Reverting to the subject of his vocabulary and bearing in mind it will be stunted both by lack of reading and the pattern of speech favoured by his cronies, he nonetheless has a distinctly measurable repertory of words sufficient for his limited needs.

And since, with one or two exceptions, each word requires a multiplicity of sounds to utter it, then his brain is well able to record each pattern of individual signals that evoke a given word in his mind. Conversely, when thinking

these words and desiring to utter them, his brain will readily transmit the necessary motor signals in the correct order to the diaphragm and other speech organs.

It is not generally realised how wonderfully complicated are the mechanics involved in speaking and hearing. Particularly speaking. Elsewhere I have said that it is more difficult to teach a baby to talk than it is to teach a normally articulate child to read. Few, if any, real clues can be given a baby who understands almost no English at all.

Explaining reading to the articulate illiterate is an immeasurably easier task.

To accept that as a true (if somewhat astonishing) statement of the situation confronting us it is first necessary to reject one of the greatest fallacies of all time. "Of course, English is one of the most difficult languages in the world to read". The fact is, it is one of the easier phonetic languages once the pattern has been laid bare. When I first said this it was held on all sides to be screamingly funny. I fancy it is given a more sober reception now.

If three out of four children around the ages of seven and eight are well on the way to fluent reading of a moderately high level WITHOUT the aid of a teaching method that reduces written English to the level of a simple code, then manifestly English must be an easy language to learn given a mental quirk that is shared by the lucky three, but lacking in the fourth.

This was my initial thought when puzzled by the fluency of my son and the illiteracy of his playmate in 1952. The maze I entered was long and tortuous but the solution was unutterably simple.

The answer was an extremely poor pictorial memory in the illiterate lad. He was the complete antithesis to the custodian of a "rogues gallery" who, given a fair description of an unnamed suspect, will produce a sheaf of pictures that might well contain a photograph of the wanted man. Our illiterate delinquent and our hypothetical policeman represent two extremes in more ways than one.

To revert to my opening paragraph: the point here is that where those of us who are highly literate went wrong in our approach to teaching was the assumption that for all practical purposes the word was the unit of speech and writing. We became so used to exchanging torrents of speech that APPEARED to be separate words instead of, remember, an unbroken stream of individual sounds, we fell into the natural trap once the eye had attained the same skill as the ear, of thinking we read whole words.

This led us to the "eye-span" theory. But if you choose a word of not less than 11 letters and look at the middle one you cannot clearly see the first and last letters even although you know perfectly well what they are. It is the speed with which the eye sweeps the word that suggests we can see it in its entirety. We became, after infancy, so slick

at dealing in this form of communication we completely forgot the long, dreary road that led to our expertise.

This led to the sincerely held belief that if you put enough words in front of a pupil often enough, he would remember your verbal equivalents and become a reader. It was argued that a wide knowledge of phonetics was too involved for the infant to cope with. For some peculiar reason infancy was taken to square with near-imbecility.

Happily, a wind of change is fast blowing this fallacious premise into limbo.

But the child with a good memory for collections of letters and the spoken word they represented supported the first thesis. He became a reader. The child who took much longer to make the grade was "dull of intellect". The child who became an illiterate young man who could jack up a car and pinch the wheels before a racecourse mechanic could say "chequered flag", had a "psychological barrier".

It was all so pat—and so wrong. A tilted glass of wine will spill its contents; the earth is surrounded by water; therefore, the earth is flat. So reasoned the ancients.

Both the dull, slow learner and the illiterate have one physical imperfection in common. That area whose job it is to remember and associate pictures and words runs at a very low ebb. It is important to dwell on the words "pictures and words" to avoid getting entangled with the ability to remember words associated with ideas and things—vocabulary.

I have met many illiterates who defeated themselves by a keen analytical eye for detail in printed words that indicated only confusion and anomalies. Lacking the memory to acquire hundreds of words they were precluded from converting apparent anomalies into facets of a regular pattern from an abundance of available evidence. We were luckier. It is as simple as that.

Thus, our potential illiterate was inexorably forced towards abysmal failure by the application of the most inapposite instruction. He was, in effect, invited to continually walk around an art gallery where all the canvasses were blanked out and commit the pictures to memory by the shapes of the frames.

Since three out of four children master the art of reading, the method is not quite as silly as I would make it appear. Nonetheless, as a means of introducing children to the delights of a simple extension of speaking and hearing it leaves much to be desired. The vast numbers of fluent readers who are very ifsy-butsy spellers bear mute witness to the fact that they have no trained eye for detail.

In the field of reading, teaching methods have been unique in that they started with the complicated, thereafter working back to the simple. This came about through a twin preoccupation with the roman alphabet and its phonetic equivalent, and words like "tough" and "bough". Thus phonetics became

understood as those three and four-letter words wherein the number of the letters clearly reflected the multiplicity of sounds needed to utter them.

From here it was but a short step to the mistaken idea that phonetics as an aid to reading were limited in their application and tended to hinder the tyro.

The astonishing thing is that Shaw, that master of language with a compulsive urge to do something about English orthography, never ever began to see the simple and beautiful phonetic pattern devised by Middle English scholars to overcome the need to write 36 sounds with a 26-letter alphabet.

It is the more astonishing when you reflect, as I have indicated, that he had to pass through the stage of reacting to this pattern to attain really fluent reading of any new matter placed before him.

In fact, medieval scholars augmented the roman alphabet with digraphs and three and four-letter groups that obey very rigid rules. True, the precise sound ascribed to these various elements will vary from district to district but in the main, only the 20 laryngeal sounds needed to speak English will reveal this variation.

But in the classroom where we need to vocally illustrate the function of consonants, the number of sounds needed to speak English can be taken as 36.

Now let us look afresh at our illiterate or woefully backward pupil who is convinced that reading is not for him. How do we overcome his genuine psychological barrier—a dejected conviction of continuing failure?

In a class strung out like cross-country runners with discharge dates occurring here and there in every week, this is comparatively easy. The new boy will see other chaps reading with apparent ease various messages on the blackboard as they appear from the teacher's chalk. He will see these same fellows enthusiastically racing each other against a stop-watch around sheets bearing the alphabet or two, three, or four-letter groups, uttering apparent gibberish.

Over and over again he will hear: "Well, now you can see what I mean, Harry. I keep telling you that reading is dead simple—when you know the trick. And the tricks you have been punching into your tape are beginning to pay off".

His certain knowledge that only a few short weeks before, these same cocky scholars ("Here, Sir, want to hear me read me last letter?") were in the same boat as himself has a marked effect on his failure-conviction. It does not melt away just like that, but its reduction does permit him to lower his defences and have another go. He is helped, too, by being with his own kind in a comparatively relaxed atmosphere where "Sir" seems to be very easy-going if you don't "sass" him too much.

The most difficult job is establishing a friendly relationship without losing command. Any teacher whose spiritual eyes stare constantly at a reflection of a superior and

dignified Being clothed in a majestic cloak will ill serve his class.

The lads before him lack practice in the art of polite conversation delivered in a respectful tone. They also have the conviction that all adults are a miserable, griping lot. Again, any teacher who fails to recognise the completely friendly rapport established when one of these reprobates enters the classroom and smilingly delivers himself thus: "Hello, you little old fat Sir", will, if he gives a sharp retort, miss a possible chance of altering the whole life of the seemingly impudent pupil.

In the extremely earthy currency of his kind the apparent insult delivered in a kindly tone is the nearest he will permit himself to go towards indicating a shade of friendship tinged with affection. The inflexion of the voice and the play of the facial muscles mark the difference between an insult and a friendly greeting whatever the turn of phrase.

This is, of course, yet another widely enjoyed form of humour that falls flat on its back when engaged in by persons over whom the recipient feels compelled to maintain an aloof, dignified role.

In the illiterate classroom we have a collection of brains who lost the urge to study for intellectual advancement very early in life, if indeed, it was ever awakened at all in classroom conditions. While avoiding an anarchistic free-for-all, the lucky teacher will steer a profitable course between entertainment and disciplined instruction.

How often have I heard variations on the theme: "We likes coming in your class, Sir; we gits a laff 'ere". To which I often reply with grossly hammed-up vituperation: "It may be a laugh to you, John, but you brainless, idle, unenlightened lay-abouts make me want to cry at times. How much practice have you put in since my last visit, you addle-pated nit?" Hardly normal classroom exchanges. But then, we are not dealing with normal scholars.

From a position that enabled him, if need be, to swiftly change his proffered friendly hand to a mailed fist he has established from my tone that I, for one, do not consider him a stupid oaf to be insulted and pushed around like some lower form of animal.

This rapport is indescribably vital in detention centre conditions where the total time available for instruction even in the favourable circumstances of complete loss of remission cannot exceed 36 hours. In a fresh attack on what reading is all about, the pupil must be induced to control the auditory shutter that automatically drops when someone is trying to "improve" him.

Genuine pleasure on my part as he surmounts successive hurdles I place before him coupled with his own surprised delight as he passes from a study of the multiplicity of sounds needed to utter each word to a moderately swift recognition of those same sounds in printed form, raises his down-trodden ego and makes of it a powerful ally.

The more intelligent respond to

my repeated exhortation: "Get this stuff on your 'tape-recorders' now. In a few weeks' time we shall part, never to meet again. You could go home from here blessing the magistrate who sent you down. Your mother will probably cry when she sees the change in you. But this time, you'll both enjoy it". They achieve a standard of reading where they call for more and more "long" words on the blackboard, and would hog my time at the expense of the new boy struggling with the mysteries of "gr", "spr", and so on.

A swift word here on "intelligence" in the context of reading instruction. It should be taken as a marriage between the capacity to form memories and the ability to freely permute them at speed. The more a fellow inclines towards measurable mental handicap, the less will the latter be seen to operate even although the former has been coaxed to a fair operation level.

An educational psychologist who sat through a series of four lectures I gave at Caerleon in 1959 said I had reduced the teaching of reading to a narrow science based on the implantation of conditioned reflexes. I think that was a very fair judgement.

For instance, what does "slautary" mean? You don't know? Then mentally remove the "l" and place it between the "a" and "u". It should have a very salutary effect on any belief you may have that you read words by "knowing" them. You surely said: slaughtery?

So the instructional approach is a contemptuous dismissal of the study of reading matter as a waste of time. Our "whole-word" reading-failure will certainly go along with that. The emphasis must be placed on recognising that sounds can be written down and that the code we use is not so complex as he at first thought. This latter suggestion is a form of hypno-suggestive lying in that he had never thought of reading matter as a code-form, anyway. But it shapes their approach in the desired manner.

As they pass through the successive stages of phonetic alphabet, blended consonants, two, three and four-letter groups plus a few rules it becomes clear to them that reading is something they could have achieved long since, but for one thing: initially they had not the memory for sufficient words for the code-pattern to emerge and lead them forward.

In the context of ascribing this lack to a small physical imperfection in the brain their need to defend themselves against the charge of stupidity ceases to be an over-alert fundamental of their psyche.

How far this change can overcome the habit of the tart retort bred through years of unhappy duncehood is a matter for conjecture. Those less naturally inclined to violence stand a fair chance of a complete metamorphosis where a job and the chance to slip quietly into the company of literate people offers immediately, or soon after discharge.

Several times pupils almost ready to dispense with me have volunteered a great truth that has suddenly occurred to them.

"Y'know, Mr. Needle, I don't reckon I would have had my record of violence if I had had this as a kid. But when littler kids pokes fun at you and calls you 'dunce', what else can you do, but thump 'em?"

This, surely, is the nub of hooliganism? Nobody likes a contemporary who is cleverer than he should be. But the gorge really rises when inferiors abundantly clearly reveal their mental superiority. It evokes an urge to rend and destroy.

It is a malaise that occurs in every walk of life and explains, among other things, why so many British inventions are lost to foreign competitors. It is all, as has been said before, a question of injured vanity.

At Haslar we try to implant in the minds of our illiterate intake a new, uplifting vanity born of achieving a measure of normality in a remarkably short time. The occasional letter that arrives sometimes months after a pupil's discharge suggests that here and there we succeed.

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