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PROMISING USES OF THE i.t.a. MEDIUM IN BRITAIN AND MICHIGAN

by John Downing, University of Victoria, B.C.
and Philip G. Hilaire, Oakland County Schools, Michigan

(Note on authors: Dr. Downing was formerly Senior Lecturer in Educational Psychology and Director of Reading Research at the University of London's Institute of Education. On January 1, 1970 he left England to take up a permanent position as Professor of Education at the University of Victoria, British Columbia, Canada. Mr. Hilaire is Reading Consultant in the Oakland County Schools, Pontiac, Michigan. It was through Mr. Hilaire's work with Dr. Downing in England that i.t.a. was first introduced into American public schools in 1963.)

i.t.a. gets a new boost

The Minister of State for Education and Science in England and Wales declared recently in Parliament that i.t.a. (the "initial teaching alphabet")

"will feature in in-service training for teachers which is provided by authorities, institutes and colleges of education and other bodies, and also through my Department's short courses."

Important new evidence

This official backing for i.t.a. is based on the special report commissioned by the Schools Council, the official body for curriculum in England and Wales. **Professor Frank Warburton** and **Mrs. Vera Southgate** of Manchester University's School of Education were invited to make a completely independent and detached review of all i.t.a. research and to study intensively i.t.a.'s current use in British schools. This is what they found.

1. Easier beginning

Southgate's interviews with teachers and other British educators led her to conclude:

"among infant teachers who had used i.t.a. there was almost total agreement concerning its favourable effect on children's reading progress. . . . i.t.a. enables children to make a good beginning with reading; the task is simpler and consequently children can begin earlier, learn more quickly and achieve greater pleasure and satisfaction in so doing."

Hard statistical research leads to the same conclusion. Of the seventeen i.t.a. experiments conducted by various British and American authors, Warburton selects Downing's original British experiments as the best in scientific design and methods. Statistics from those are completely in agreement with Southgate's interview results. When i.t.a. students were test-

ed at the end of one year, they were able to read more than twice as much of the English language printed in i.t.a. as the control group could read when the same material was printed in T.O. (the traditional orthography of English).

2. *Creative writing*

Southgate states: "The common features which most teachers noted in children's free writing when i.t.a. was used were as follows: it begins at a much earlier age; it is greater in quantity; and the quality has improved in content, in the flow of ideas and in the breadth of vocabulary used."

Downing's statistics showed that i.t.a. pupils wrote 50 per cent more than T.O. students, and that the breadth of vocabulary in the i.t.a. sample was 45 per cent wider in range. Independent judges asked to grade i.t.a. and T.O. compositions for quality of creative expression, gave consistently higher grades to the i.t.a. compositions, despite the fact that all the compositions were re-written in correct T.O. spelling.

3. *Transition from i.t.a. to T.O. is not difficult*

Southgate concludes: "Of all the verbal evidence collected in this enquiry, the fact most frequently and most emphatically stated was that children did not experience difficulty in making the transition in reading from i.t.a. to T.O. Teachers and those experienced visitors to schools who had observed the transition taking place had no doubts whatsoever on this score."

The latest tests in Downing's scientific experiments confirm this conclusion. Various T.O. tests administered in the fifth year of school all show that pupils who started with i.t.a. are significantly superior to children who began with T.O.

Warburton concludes that, even if the T.O. students did catch up with

the i.t.a. students after a few years this would not "necessarily imply that i.t.a. has failed. The educational and intellectual advantages of a child learning to read fluently at a very early age are very considerable and may affect his whole confidence and future progress."

Southgate expresses the same point like this: "Even if i.t.a. children are only at the same level of attainment as T.O. children after three or four years, if learning to read has been easier and more pleasant for them, if fewer children have experienced frustrations and failures and if many have known the enjoyment and value of reading a year or so earlier than they would have done, it can fairly be claimed that its use has been justified."

In that statement, Vera Southgate, summarizes the opinions of the many British teachers who are getting so much more satisfaction from their teaching of the first and second years of the primary school curriculum because i.t.a. has replaced T.O. in their classrooms.

4. *Spelling in T.O.*

The Schools Council report concludes: "The verbal evidence given by infant teachers, as well as observations in schools, led to the conclusion that teachers' original fears that the use of i.t.a. would be likely to have a harmful effect on children's spelling have not been justified. No evidence of a decline in spelling ability was noted in infant classes and there were certain indications of improvements."

Her last sentence is supported by Downing's new fifth-year follow-up tests in which the T.O. spelling attainments of the i.t.a. pupils were significantly superior to those of the T.O. students.

Which children are helped most be i.t.a.?

The statistical data from the British experiments show conclusively that

the biggest improvements in test scores produced by i.t.a. occur among the superior students — those who learn to read satisfactorily with T.O. anyway. In i.t.a. these students seem to leap ahead much faster than usual. Furthermore, Downing reports in a recent article that:

“i.t.a. reduces the proportion of poor achievements both in reading and spelling. The results of new follow-up tests show that these advantages of i.t.a. persist until at least the fifth year of school.”

This effect of i.t.a. in reducing the incidence of reading failure seems likely to be regarded as its greatest benefit in most classrooms.

British conclusions

Some people seem to believe that it is obvious that if a child is going to read T.O. for the rest of his lifetime, then it must be best to teach him T.O. from the beginning. But Warburton says in his report to the Schools Council:

“There is no evidence whatsoever for the belief that the best way to learn to read in traditional orthography is to learn to read in traditional orthography. It would appear rather that the best way to learn to read in traditional orthography is to learn to read in the initial teaching alphabet.”

Because the research conducted over the past ten years has produced “no evidence whatsoever” in support of T.O., but a great deal of evidence to sustain the claims of i.t.a., the Minister of State for Education and Science in England and Wales has given her support to official actions which seem bound to lead to the eventual ousting of T.O. from beginning reading classes in Britain, where already i.t.a. has taken over in 20 per cent of the schools.

i.t.a. in Michigan

In the Fall of 1964, Oakland Schools, Michigan under the leadership

of Harry Hahn became involved in the first grade reading studies sponsored by the U.S. Office of Education. One of the programs he investigated was i.t.a. It is important to specify exactly which of the many different i.t.a. programs available has been used with such notable success in Oakland Schools. This Michigan i.t.a. project incorporated the *Downing Readers*, a basal series specially designed for the use of i.t.a. internationally throughout the English-speaking world, plus the Language Experience Approach as described by Roach Van Allen. Furthermore, each classroom was provided with a generous supply of i.t.a. library books. These methods of implementing i.t.a. are very similar to the ones which originated in the British infants schools.

Teachers in Oakland County are very enthusiastic about the effects of i.t.a. on children's reading but especially on their creative writing. Rochester, Michigan Public Schools compared i.t.a. pupils and T.O. pupils on the Carlson Analytical Originality Scale, an instrument which is designed to assess “the original elements of children's stories.” The results indicate that, well beyond the state of transition to T.O., i.t.a. continues to enhance children's creative ability in writing. Lois Thompson and Philip Hilaire report:

“A group of youngsters some one to two years after i.t.a. training exceed youngsters from conventional programs in originality of their compositional skills.”

Therefore, they conclude:

“If, as we say, a basic purpose of education is to enable youngsters to use the skills they acquire in a meaningful and confident manner, then a program such as the i.t.a. seems to be warranted. Herein described is a study that helped youngsters be more effective in the use of their language. After participation they conceptualized stories

(Continued on Page 17)

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PROMISING USES OF THE i.t.a. MEDIUM IN BRITAIN AND MICHIGAN

(Continued from Page 6)

better, developed more imaginative story lines and generally showed more original and flexible use of the words they selected. Taken away from our passive acceptance mode and placed in one demanding participation, children clearly demonstrated the superiority of one over the other." ("i.t.a.: A review and an assessment" *Occasional Paper* — available from Oakland Schools, Pontiac.)

Conclusion

British teachers and Michigan teachers have tried i.t.a. independently, and confirmed each other's experi-

ences. They agree with the teacher interviewed by Vera Southgate, who quotes her as saying:

"I have accepted i.t.a. so happily that I just cannot imagine teaching infants without it now. I am absolutely in favour of it. I only wish all schools would use it."

Vera Southgate comments:

"This last opinion was expressed by many teachers who approved of i.t.a. They felt sorry for children in other schools who did not have the advantage of i.t.a. and could not think why other schools were taking so long to change over from T.O."