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## Reviews of:

# LEARNING TO READ: THE GREAT DEBATE

by Jerry L. Johns

Since the publication of Jeanne Chall's book (*Learning to Read: The Great Debate*, New York McGraw-Hill, 1967), it has often been cited in current articles concerning reading and in new reading programs which emphasize a code-breaking approach. To aid the discerning reader in evaluating the content of Chall's book, the following selected annotated bibliography has been prepared. The annotations are not to serve as abstracts, but as a guide for selecting reviews which critically analyze the strengths and weaknesses of *The Great Debate*.

Durkin, Dolores. *Nation's Schools*, March 1968, 81, 126-132. Durkin contends that popular reviews have tended to highlight only the book's insistence on the importance of a decoding emphasis in beginning reading instruction. There are other items in the book which merit careful attention. It should be realized that "very little about the teaching of beginning reading stems from research data" even though Chall believes a decoding emphasis more productive than meaning emphasis. Durkin reviews Chall's analysis of basal readers and agrees with many of her conclusions. Durkin argues that although Chall gives specific help for the present,

she does not stress the need for teachers to learn more about phonics which is the most common reading skill. Basal readers, according to Durkin, now give more attention to word analysis skills than in the early 1960s so that some of Chall's recommendations have, to some extent, become a current reality. Durkin also emphasizes the possible fear that the recommendation for a code emphasis approach could ultimately lead to the extreme of "no phonics" of earlier decades. Although Durkin's review is primarily directed toward administrators, it offers considerable insight into Chall's work.

Everetts, Eldonna. *Elementary English*, May 1968, 45, 652-656. Everetts views the debate as the method of instruction in reading so she devotes considerable space to a discussion of the classification scheme employed by Chall for the study. There is, according to Everetts, a meager amount of background information provided in Chall's discussion of linguistic programs and the content of phonic approaches. Some of Chall's research is already dated. At least one of her recommendations for popular basal programs (based on the 1956 edition) has already

found its way into the basal series. Even though Chall writes that the "research on beginning reading is shockingly inconclusive," much of her book is based on this research. It is suggested that perhaps Chall could have selected "more carefully designed studies to support her conclusion."

Everetts, Eldonna. *National Elementary Principal*, January 1968, 48, 83-86. After a succinct description of Chall's main findings and recommendations, Everetts states that the book "is weak only in that the author did not take time to develop her definitions, her classification of the readers, and her reasons for selecting some programs and rejecting others." Chall is also criticized for not presenting the details on the concepts or language principles upon which a code-emphasis approach can be based. In addition, Chall's bias of favoring the code-emphasis approach has, at times, only let her see the implications in studies which reinforce her point of view. Although Everetts states that Chall has presented a "straightforward message," it is clear from this review that the debate on reading has not been concluded.

Fay, Leo. *The Reading Teacher*, March 1969, 21, 575. Fay contends that confusion is the result of Chall's book. The real value of her work is a "clearer definition of what still needs to be done."

Jennings, Frank. *Education News*, 1, 18. Jennings believes Chall provides the documented answer to the question, "Do children learn better with a beginning method that stresses meaning or with one that stresses learning the code?" He also identifies Chall's analysis of research on beginning reading as "the armature of the book." All in all, this review is a glowing one with no analysis of the ideas presented.

Larrick, Nancy. *Saturday Review*, January 20, 1968, 63-64. This general review concerns the debate and discusses the basal readers cited in Chall's book. It explores the reason why publishers are reluctant to try new innovative programs in reading. The challenge of Chall's book is for teachers, administrators, and all those concerned with reading — — meanwhile "the children are waiting."

MacCampbell, James. *Library Journal*, 93, January 15, 1968, 184. MacCampbell presents a short, favorable review that commends Chall's excellent contribution toward clarifying the debate. There are no critical comments included.

Richards, I.A. *Harvard Educational Review*, Spring 1968, 38, 357-364. Richards does not dwell on the recommendations but upon theoretical considerations. He believes Chall's definitions are as "precise as the material and the time-labor factors allow;" nevertheless Richards is unclear

about "meaning," "stress," "emphasis," and the essentials of, "learning the code." Richards presents a very penetrating review that requires careful and thoughtful study.

Scheman, Blanche. *Grade Teacher*, May/June 1968, 85, 137-141. Chall's book, according to Scheman, has provided groups like the Reading Research Foundation to come to some fantastic conclusions. Scheman contends that to establish a code-emphasis approach as the single method of meeting children's various needs is unsound since such an approach may ignore individual differences. She also argues that it is important to stress meaning in beginning reading rather than to merely break the code as Chall suggests. Scheman's overriding criticism is that it is the teacher instead of the system that determines reading success. It is this emphasis on the teacher that is almost entirely lost in Chall's book.

Smith, Carl. *Phi Delta Kappan*, March 1968, 49, 404-406. Smith's review has clarified the qualifications underlying many of Chall's conclusions. Because her conclusions and interpretations are placed at the beginning of each chapter, the casual reader may accept them without cognizance of the discussion and qualifications Chall includes in the main body of the book. The dichotomy of meaning-emphasis, according to Smith, "is unreal in the Sixties." He

also mentions the need to go beyond the 67 research studies used by Chall in her analysis. The book, nevertheless, can have a sufficient impact on reading theory and practice if educators and scholars do not divide themselves into warring camps, but realize that Chall's conclusions only apply to "the broad spectrum of primary grade children and not to specific individuals."

Strang, Ruth. *The Reading Teacher*, March 1968, 21, 575-577. If Chall's book is widely read, it could have a similar impact on reading instruction as *Why Johnny Can't Read*. Strang states that "the teaching of reading should be a problem for discussion and research, not debate." The dichotomy between code-emphasis and meaning-emphasis is false since effective beginning reading instruction involves both. Strang also suggests some possible consequences of beginning with a code-emphasis method. Instead of Chall's recommendation to develop better diagnostic tests, Strang places emphasis on correcting the "overuse and misuse of test results." Chall is also brought to task because she uses the same "inconclusive" research to support her conclusion for more emphasis on decoding. This review by Strang offers one of the best probing analyses of Chall's book.

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