

A READING EXPERIMENT WITH PITMAN'S WORLD INITIAL
TEACHING ALPHABET (W.I.T.A.)

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Summary

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W.I.T.A. is a coding system aimed at making learning to read English easier by using more consistent symbol-sound relationships than exist in Traditional Orthography. W.I.T.A. also gives clues for identifying stressed and unstressed syllables, and changes in vowel sounds in stressed and unstressed positions. The study investigates longitudinally (1966-68) the values and problems of teaching young children (7-9) to read through W.I.T.A. by comparison with a controlled group learning to read T.O.

Some of the major recommendations of the report based on the findings are:

- 1) W.I.T.A. should be used more widely in Nigerian schools and throughout the Commonwealth where English is a second language.
- 2) It should be introduced before pupils have had contact with T.O.
- 3) Since W.I.T.A. improves pronunciation Primary school teachers (through in-service training) and all those in teacher training institutions should learn to read it.
- 4) All primary school teachers should be trained in the techniques of language teaching.
- 5) Further investigations should be conducted in other related problems arising out of this study, and tests should be designed and standardised for measuring performance in English.
- 6) An analytical study of the orthographic systems of the major Nigerian languages should be undertaken.

Report*

The Investigation

World Initial Teaching Alphabet (w.i.t.a) was designed by Sir James Pitman who thought it would be supremely suitable for the teaching of English reading in countries using English as a second language.¹ This coding system is another one in the long line of new coding systems aimed at making learning to read English easier by achieving more consistent symbol-sound relationships than is the case in Traditional Orthography (T.O.). In addition, w.i.t.a. contains clues for identifying stressed and unstressed syllables as well as the changes in vowel sounds in stressed and unstressed positions.

In this study, a survey of the various methods used in the teaching of reading led to the examination of the different graphemic systems which have been suggested for the writing of English at one time or the other, and this finally culminated in the tracing of the antecedents to the development of the Initial Teaching Alphabet (i.t.a.) which gave birth to w.i.t.a. An experimental study of the values and problems of teaching children to read through w.i.t.a. in schools in some parts of Nigeria was planned and executed. The investigation was a longitudinal one in which, during the years 1966 to 1968, some groups of young school children first learnt to read English through w.i.t.a. and then changed over to reading T.O., while other parallel groups of children who learnt to read through T.O. right from the beginning served as control.

Two distinct types of schools were involved in the experiment, viz: seven schools in the rural areas to the north of and near Ibadan, and fourteen schools situated in urban settings in Lagos areas. Two Groups of children, i.e., A. and B, were taken into the experiment in 1966 when they were in their first and second years respectively, in schools in the Ibadan area, and a third Group i.e. D, was taken in 1967. In the Lagos area, one Group, i.e. C, consisting of children who were entering school for the first time were taken into the experiment in 1966. Each of these four Groups of children consisted of two sub-groups, i.e. the experimental and the control sub-groups. Efforts were made to ensure that the sub-groups in each case were equally matched in ability and location of school. The experimental and control classes were similarly treated and all the essential materials for both teachers and pupils were supplied. By means of tests, observations and teachers' reports, the differential effects of using two different coding systems in the teaching of English were discovered.

Results

It was found that this type of investigation was fraught with problems relating to the continuity of teachers and pupils. Unexpected changes in staffing and the departure of some pupils made the even matching of experimental and control groups difficult. The controlling authorities as well as the teachers, however, co-operated to maintain continuity of teachers as far as possible.

¹ c.f. Pitman, Sir James, & St. John, John (1969). Alphabets and Reading. London. Sir Isaac Pitman and Sons.

It was also found that the beginners, that is, in Groups B, C and D, who learnt to read through w.i.t.a. were superior to their control counterparts in oral reading and pronunciation in English before they made the transition to T.O. This superiority was maintained after the transition to T.O. It is argued that the relative consistency of the symbol-sound relationships in w.i.t.a. helped the children in the experimental groups to make better progress in reading than did those in the control groups who used T.O.

In the case of Group A children who were in their second year in school before the experimental programme was introduced it was found, however, that the control group performed better than experimental group both before and after transition to T.O. The suggested explanation is that the introduction of w.i.t.a. when the children had had some contact with T.O., even though they could not read yet, probably had some adverse effects on their progress in learning to read. It is thought that their former contact with T.O., probably interfered with their efforts in learning to read through w.i.t.a. later.

In these Groups where w.i.t.a. helped the pupils to make better progress than did T.O., it helped both the more and the less intelligent pupils more than T.O. did. The result is that a greater proportion of pupils using w.i.t.a. reached a criterion level in reading than the proportion of those using T.O.

Performance in Arithmetic and Yoruba reading appeared not to be directly related to the coding system used in learning to read English, because experimental and control groups tended not to differ significantly in this respect. In attitudes to school and reading, experimental and control groups were not different, excepting in the case of Group A pupils where the experimental group had more favourable attitudes. The performance of this group is explained by the fact that w.i.t.a. which was introduced when they had had some contact with T.O. was some sort of novelty to them and for this reason probably aroused more favourable attitudes, whereas in the case of the other groups both w.i.t.a. and T.O. would be equally novel since there had been no previous contact with any other system.

A period of about twelve to fifteen months of reading w.i.t.a., subsequent to about nine to twelve months of purely oral English lessons, was required before transition to T.O. The transition period was not associated with any special problems for the pupils although, as might be expected, there was a temporary slowing down of progress during this stage when they had to learn some new symbol-sound relationships in T.O. The teachers were however confronted with the problem of organising lessons in a class containing pupils at different levels of attainments in reading, with some reading w.i.t.a. and others T.O. Better training in the handling of small groups within a bigger class, development of the flexibility of approach, and patience on the part of the teacher, as well as a change of attitude among those who inspect teachers' and pupils' progress would however make the transition stage an easier and smoother one for the teacher.

In reading comprehension and general reading attainments, the experimental and control groups were not significantly different, probably because the acquisition of a functional vocabulary and syntactic structures in English was not much different for the two groups. Although T.O.-taught pupils tended to be superior in spelling, soon after the w.i.t.a.-taught pupils had changed to using T.O., attainments in spelling became progressively similar in time. Finally, it appeared that the differences between experimental

and control sub-groups within each of those Groups of pupils in the rural areas of Ibadan tended to be greater than those observed between the two sub-groups within Group C in the urban areas of Lagos. This indicates the influence of social background.

Recommendations

In the light of the results obtained in this experiment, the following recommendations are put forward:

- (i) Since w.i.t.a. has appreciable values in teaching English reading in second language situations, it should be more widely used both in Nigerian schools and in other parts of the Commonwealth where English is used as a second language.
- (ii) For maximum benefit to be derived from the use of w.i.t.a. as an initial teaching medium, it should be introduced before the pupils have had contacts with the Traditional Orthography.
- (iii) Since w.i.t.a. has the effect of improving the teachers' English pronunciation, primary school teachers in Nigeria should be taught to read w.i.t.a. through in-service training, and all those in teacher training institutions should learn to read it.
- (iv) In addition to the recommendation in sub-section (iii) above, all primary school teachers should be further trained in the techniques of language teaching - both in speaking and reading - so as to promote greater initiative and flexibility in their approach to teaching.
- (v) An investigation should be conducted in the near future to discover the relative values of using phonically graded material to teach children to read by the 'phonic-word method' in T.O. and w.i.t.a.
- (vi) Where schools having multi-streams are involved in any such experiment, attempts should be made to let the same teacher teach the matched experimental and control classes using two different orthographic systems, in the same school.
- (vii) Course books recommended for the teaching of English in second language situations, such as in Nigeria, and most especially at the initial stages, should always be those that provide in the "Teachers' Notes" suitable and adequate guidance on both the organization and contents of oral English lessons.
- (viii) Comparative studies involving the use of w.i.t.a. and other new orthographic systems should be undertaken in a continued search for the most advantageous system for teaching reading and writing to learners of English.
- (ix) Tests should be designed and standardised for measuring Nigerian primary school pupils' attainments in spoken English and reading.

- (x) Analyses of the orthographic systems of the major Nigerian languages should be undertaken with a view to designing initial reading materials in English which would enable Nigerian children who first learned to read in the mother tongue, or any other Nigerian language, to make maximum transfer of the skills acquired in reading such a language to the reading of English.
- (xi) The progress of the pupils involved, both as experimental and control groups, in the experiment reported in this thesis, should continue to be observed and measured for the purposes of comparison until they complete their primary school course.

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