

Simplified Spelling Society Pamphlet No. 9.

**The use of simplified spelling
in teaching infants to read and write**

**Incorporating the Results of an Enquiry into
the Teaching of English in Welsh Schools**

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The Simplified Spelling Society's Pamphlet No. 7, "The Best Method of Teaching Children to Read and Write," tells the story of certain experiments in the teaching of reading and writing to young children by means of systematic spelling. The evidence is limited but is unanimous. Naturally it may be assumed that those who experimented were converts to the Society's aims, and it would not have been unfair for critics to suggest that their reports on the results of their experiments might be more favourable than the reports of an entirely neutral observer. It has always, too, appeared to me difficult to account to hostile critics for the cessation of this work in view of the success claimed for it.

Looking at the method adopted from the viewpoint of an educationist it seemed to me that there lay behind the success of the experiments a very sound reason. The best teaching consists not in giving instruction but in awakening interest. When interest has been awakened the pupil learns rapidly of his own volition, seeking guidance when he meets with difficulties which he cannot solve. The need for giving a child simple tools to use and simple goals at which to aim is recognised in connection with all school subjects, but the fact that the spelling of the English language is anything but simple has been completely overlooked, probably in the main for the two following reasons. First, the spelling has become simple to facile readers, to which group all educationists belong, and, secondly, because the ability to spell well has come to be regarded of itself as a mark of educational attainment, since only those who possessed this aptitude made any headway in the educational profession. The spelling of English is merely a means to an end, the end being to be able to read and write. This end may be expected to have an interest for the young child, but the means to the end, having no intrinsic value whatever, could not be expected to rouse any interest except where the goal which lay beyond the mastery of the spelling, was clearly perceived. Bright children, who regularly come into contact with books, may be expected to see their ultimate goal and therefore to throw themselves into learning the spelling which leads to their goal, but dull children, and even bright children, whose environment and experience give little opportunity for the development of a desire to make the contents of books their own, cannot be expected to see the ultimate goal, and therefore the learning of English Spelling can be in their cases only meaning- less drudgery. This drudgery will very quickly make literary effort seem miserable and difficult. If the spelling difficulty could be completely cut out so that the

child in the earliest months in school could immediately extend the interest, which all children have in pictures, to the reading of the words which accompanied the pictures, it seemed to me not unlikely that many, who in other circumstances would never like books and never wish to read them, might, before any sense of drudgery crept in, learn to delight in books. The spelling difficulty cannot be completely cut out, but by the use of the simplified system it can be drastically cut down.

This argument has been developed in the “Teachers’ Manual,” which I have written to accompany the school readers and story books now being prepared for the Society. On the basis of this reasoning the Society is constructing its system of teaching the *conventional spelling* by first giving young children books in simplified spelling.

Apart from the experiments of over twenty years ago we had no evidence to support our theories. I have pointed above to the weakness of relying solely upon this old evidence. Other arguments were advanced against us. Our theories had been put by one Education Officer of a very important Local Education Authority before a meeting of his Inspectors of Schools. One of these Inspectors was a staunch supporter of the sentence method of teaching reading, and he contended that the simplification of English Spelling could not materially aid the young learner, because it was wrong to teach reading by analysis of words into sounds and that the only good method was to teach words, and indeed phrases and complete sentences. There is so much good sense in the assertion that children should learn to read whole phrases, as fluent readers naturally do, that it is easy to overlook two important points. The child must learn to recognise words new to him by reference to the component letters, and, simplified spelling would make fluency in reading complete sentences as wholes so much easier to acquire. This sentence method enthusiast went further, however, and made the claim, in my view untenable by anyone not hopelessly biased against any change, that English spelling had now become ideographic and that this was accepted; that the phonetic principle had practically disappeared from the language, and that this was an advantageous position in the development of a language. There was much more, which, as a complete disbeliever, I could not attempt to state fairly.

My own enquiries in the past have shown me that the sentence method is very rarely used in its pure form. Many teachers, claiming to teach by it, in practice bring to their aid much phonic teaching and, indeed, there is clearly no method of recognising the pronunciation of a new and unknown word except by constructing the sound from the characters used in the spelling. I firmly believe that the arguments of the “full-blooded” supporters of the sentence method are formulated *post hoc ergo propter hoc*, and that, if English educationists had not been confronted by the chaotic spelling which they had to teach, none of them would ever have felt impelled to invent the sentence method, far less to make the more extreme claims which they now make for this method.

I, therefore, set out to discover whether teachers of any phonetically spelt language used the sentence method or anything other than the phonic method.

Before the war it would have been possible to find out something of the school methods used in, say, Italy or Spain, where the spelling approaches very much nearer to phonetic

spelling than in England. In these days, however, I have not been able so far to discover a source from which the necessary information concerning these or other foreign countries, whose language is very nearly phonetically spelt, can be obtained. Fortunately there is nearer home a language with an almost phonetic spelling system. It was possible to try and find out what happened in Wales, and it seemed likely that such enquiry would be particularly valuable, since in many parts of Wales both Welsh and English are taught side by side to children, for whom both are native tongues. In the first instance I got into touch with two Directors of Education in Welsh-speaking areas. From one I received the information that whereas the Director advised his teachers to use the sentence method in the teaching of English, the phonic method was used for Welsh. From the other I received the information "that the phonic method is used in our Welsh infant schools. But one does occasionally find teachers using the sentence method as well." A letter to the Director of Education for a big Welsh city extracted no information concerning school methods, but he did express the opinion that he could teach anybody to read Welsh in an hour, not so that the reader could understand the language, but certainly so that any Welshman could understand what was being read aloud. Inquiries through the National Union of Teachers, whose Secretary was very helpful, could discover no similar information from Scotland or Ireland, but I was advised to write to the Principal of an important Training College in Wales. In her reply the Principal said that she knew of no school in Wales where the reading of Welsh is taught by the sentence method, nor had she been able to discover any such school after careful enquiry. In her opinion there was "not the same need for this method in the teaching of Welsh, as Welsh is a phonetic language, and the same difficulties do not arise as in the teaching of English."

I followed up that reply by asking the Principal whether she knew of Welsh schools where English is taught by the sentence method, alongside the teaching of Welsh by the phonic method. It seemed important to prove, if proof existed, that the same teachers who supported the sentence method where English was the subject, immediately put their faith in the phonic method when the peculiar difficulties of the English language had not to be faced. I was supplied with the names of two of His Majesty's Inspectors of Schools in Wales who might be helpful in seeking an answer to this question.

I wrote to the two Inspectors, a man and a woman, and later discussed the subject with the former at his home in South Wales. This Inspector deals in particular with problems of language in Wales and has also a wide general experience of schools throughout a large area, which combines both industrial and rural districts and parts of Wales where English parts where the native tongue is essentially Welsh. He possesses, therefore, knowledge both of English-speaking schools and of schools where English has to be taught as a foreign language after the infant school stage. This Inspector of Schools was quite definite in his conclusions on the following points -

- (a) Spelling causes more trouble than anything else in the teaching of English to Welsh children, and it is not unknown for Welsh teachers to simplify English spelling in the first stages of teaching it to Welsh children. It is only fair to add that instances of this practice, known to him, are rare.

- (b) He knows no school whatever in Wales where any method other than the purely phonic method is used in teaching the Welsh language to Welsh children, but he knows a number where the sentence method or the “look and say” method in some form or in some combination with the phonic method, is used for the teaching of English, and, since all Welsh state schools are bilingual, it follows that Welsh teachers who are converts to the sentence method where English is concerned never use that method where the phonetic Welsh language is concerned. He mentioned in particular a Swansea school where the pure unadulterated sentence method is used for the teaching of English. Not often in England does one find the sentence method completely relied upon in this way. It has never, however, occurred to any teacher in that school that the same method should be used in the teaching of Welsh.
- (c) I mentioned the claims of sentence method enthusiasts that their method was the correct way of teaching spelling of any form, whether phonetic, ideographic or chaotic. In his view there was no reason whatever to depart from the phonic method where a language was spelt phonetically, and he was clearly of the opinion that anyone using and teaching a phonetically spelt language would never for a moment think it necessary to invent any method approximating to the sentence method.

It seems unlikely that one could find a more experienced and impartial judge than such a one, whose work takes him into schools of every type and whose particular interests bear upon this problem both in respect of the English language, which we are seeking to reform, and the Welsh language, which is the type, in respect to its spelling, which we are seeking to establish.

With reference to paragraph (a) above, one might add that while it is true that it is rare to find instances of Welsh teachers who simplify English spelling, it is phenomenal to find teachers without any predilection to the reform of English spelling who, in the face of the conventional attitude to correct English spelling as a mark of scholarship, dare to introduce into their work such a method, which must appear, both to them and to those who supervise their work, absolutely revolutionary.

The woman Inspector in her reply bore out what I had learned from the man Inspector in that she did not know of a single school where the phonic method “does not form the basis and mainstay in the reading of Welsh.” She makes the point that Welsh children have little difficulty in learning to read English, but she points out that “writing is a different matter. It is here that chaos sets in.”

I feel that these enquiries have been worth while, and that the evidence produced should encourage us in our support for the method of teaching children to read and write by first giving them books in simplified spelling. Quite apart from the bigger, though related, issue of the systematisation of all English spelling, it would appear that the argument set forth in the “Teachers’ Manual’ has support in the actual work of Welsh teachers, and is not wholly dependent upon our academic views of educational requirements. The fact that the support found in Welsh practice is unconscious is not the least of its merits.