

Cultural perspective on literacy teaching and methods for young readers

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Pour alphabétiser et instruire tous les enfants, la plupart des nations occidentales ont rendu l'école obligatoire à la fin du XIXe siècle. Alphabétisation, éducation universelle de base et scolarisation obligatoire sont ainsi devenues trois réalités indissociables pour les habitants de ces pays et un modèle de référence pour le reste du monde. Aujourd'hui, l'écriture est l'outil sans lequel aucun développement économique, politique, culturel n'est imaginable. «Literacy for all is at the heart of basic education for all» and «creating literate environments and societies is essential for achieving the goals of eradicating poverty, reducing child mortality, curbing population growth, achieving gender equality and ensuring sustainable development, peace and democracy», dit le rapport de l'UNESCO, paru en avril 2006, intitulé *Literacy for Life*. Le degré d'alphabétisation est un indice de développement dont les évaluations internationales (PISA, TIMMS, PIRLS) donnent une version moderne. Dans l'Europe entre XVIe et XIXe siècles, les villes sont «en avance» sur les campagnes, les hommes sur les femmes et que les groupes sociaux les plus pauvres sont toujours les derniers à savoir lire. Hors des pays de l'OCDE, c'est la même chose aujourd'hui.

Les travaux des historiens ont conforté cette vision d'un progrès mesurable par des taux d'alphabétisation, faibles ou forts, croissants ou stagnants, selon les politiques des États et les contextes économiques. Ces décalages ont à voir avec la diffusion inégale du matériel technique de production et réception de l'écrit, presse de Gutenberg jadis, photocopieuse hier, ordinateurs aujourd'hui. En effet, les technologies numériques (ICTs) bouleversent la communication écrite et creusent à nouveau l'écart entre les pays «en avance» et les pays «en retard», qui peuvent ou non équiper les écoles d'ordinateurs. Cependant, les objets techniques ne marchent pas tout seuls. Les «technologies of the word» fonctionnent dans un espace social, culturel, politique qui autorise ou interdit, facilite ou décourage certains usages. Les jeunes générations apprennent à travers les techniques de l'écrit, les contenus et la valeur des textes à lire et écrire.

Les recherches historiques récentes se sont interrogées sur les visées, les méthodes et les conséquences de cette massification dans la lecture. Quels étaient les buts de l'alphabétisation populaire qui s'est développée bien avant l'école obligatoire? La capacité à lire («reading skill») n'a pas toujours été considérée comme un outil universel, permettant de lire n'importe quel texte. Dans de nombreux pays d'Europe, la lecture était une pratique encadrée, accompagnant l'instruction religieuse. L'écriture relevait d'une autre culture sociale, savante ou marchande, inutile à la plupart des enfants. La «literacy» scolaire a eu des visées religieuses et profanes, une fonction identitaire et utilitaire, grâce à des textes pour adultes ou pour enfants, évoquant la morale, la science, la fiction ou la vie courante. Ces mutations obligent à parler des «litteracies» au pluriel, plutôt que de «literacy» au singulier.

Les changements de visées et de contenus ont eu des incidences directes sur la conception de la lecture, de la langue écrite et sur ses procédés d'enseignement. Les débats modernes sur les «méthodes de lecture» naissent au XVIIIe siècle, lorsque les précepteurs trouvent de nouveaux procédés pour apprendre à leurs élèves à lire n'importe quel texte dans leur langue maternelle. Ils sont les premiers à traiter la lecture comme une pure technique de déchiffrement, indépendante de tout contenu. Un siècle plus tard, les inventions rodées pour les éducations particulières deviennent utilisables dans les écoles élémentaires.

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Avec la généralisation de nouveaux outils d'écriture et l'abandon des plumes d'oie, l'apprentissage collectif de l'écriture peut commencer en même temps que celui de la lecture. De ce couplage découlent de nouveaux changements : la méthode d'épellation, en usage depuis l'Antiquité, est abandonnée en une génération, alors qu'apparaissent les nouvelles méthodes (syllabic ou word-method), toujours en usage aujourd'hui. Le curriculum «moderne» se met en place, faisant du savoir lire et écrire un préalable à l'instruction.

Quelles ont été les conséquences culturelles de cette alphabétisation généralisée? Elle a modifié la langue des locuteurs, leur représentation de la langue, les façons de penser, de raisonner et de communiquer, disqualifiant ou éradiquant de nombreuses langues minoritaires. La culture a été identifiée à la culture écrite, et les savoirs transmis hors de l'école, par «voir faire et ouïr dire», en ont été exclus. Enfin, si apprendre à lire et écrire est aussi nécessaire qu'apprendre à parler, que faire des enfants «en retard» ou en échec? Sont-ils «anormaux»? Lorsque les «technologies of the word» se généralisent par l'école, les différences entre enfants deviennent des écarts, et le déroulement de l'enfance est étudié comme un développement intellectuel.

En partant de quelques cas historiques situés à des moments critiques, ce sont ces trois dimensions des technologies d'écriture que nous voudrions interroger (visées et contenus, méthodes de lecture, représentations de la culture et des savoirs).

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In April 2006 the UNESCO report *Literacy for Life*¹ was published in which we can read:

In the mid-nineteenth century, only ten percent of the world's adult population could read or write. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, UNESCO estimates that eighty percent of adults worldwide can read and write at some minimum level.

This high global percentage masks discrepancies between countries where all children go to school and those for which elementary schooling is still a privilege. How can children learn to read, write and count without tightly networked elementary schools? For international experts, literacy and compulsory schooling go hand in hand. As we may read in *Literacy for Life*:

Schools have been, and continue to be, the sites in which most people acquire their core literacy skills, reading, writing and arithmetic.

Indeed, for more than a century, most Western nations have made school compulsory in order to teach all children, and it was widely believed that compulsory schooling would eradicate illiteracy and guarantee progress. One century later, we find the same belief in the UNESCO report *Literacy for Life*:

Literacy for all is at the heart of basic education for all and creating literate environments and societies is essential for achieving the goals of eradicating poverty, reducing child mortality, curbing population growth, achieving gender equality and ensuring sustainable development, peace and democracy.

It is as if the benefit of development has been an automatic consequence of schooling, a belief that cannot be checked (and it is difficult to agree with it, when we remember what happened in Europe concerning peace and democracy during the last century, in spite of compulsory schooling) and as if no other path is available to those nations lagging behind.

¹ UNESCO, "Education for All," in *Literacy for Life*. Global monitoring report 2006, <http://portal.unesco.org/efareport> (accessed January 24, 2008)

However, this approach was questioned by a historical study of elementary schooling. In 1981, Harvey Graff published *Literacy and Social Development in the West*.² When I read his book, the article which struck me most was unquestionably that of Egil Johansson.³ He explained how all inhabitants from Sweden and Finland had learnt to read during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries without going to school. In Sweden, the responsibility for teaching children to read was ultimately placed on the parents, the responsibility for examination was placed on the pastors, and people who failed in reading and knowledge of the Bible were excluded from confirmation and marriage. For French, and also German and English researchers, that was hardly imaginable at the time. In Western and Southern Europe, schooling of the population had been instrumental in rising literacy rates. In Sweden, conversely, religious education without school had managed to ensure that the whole population could read.

The article by Johansson drew attention to the contents (religious or not) which allowed this learning to take place. In Catholic France prior to the Revolution, as in Lutheran Sweden, prayers and catechism made up the first school aid with which children began to read. The research on those issues in Umeå University opened up new areas of thought on written culture and its transmission. It backed up another approach to the history of reading, by connecting two questions, the growth of literacy rates and the contents provided by social or political authorities. Statistic rates cannot be understood if they are disconnected from cultural practices of reading in various social groups. But I would like to connect a third question, the issue of learning methods.

Usually, the methods to make beginners read take place in pedagogical history; they are not a cultural issue. The spelling method that had worked since Antiquity was used to read Latin as well as other languages. It began to be questioned during the eighteenth century, but only in aristocratic education, and it had been forsaken for syllabic methods around 1850. Word methods and whole-word methods were invented very soon after, and the “great debates” began between schoolteachers and psychologists. In the twentieth century, the teachers considered methods to make beginners read as independent tools. How did learning to read become this neutral, early and universal “technology”, which has nothing to do with instruction as it has no content, but is the condition for any future instruction, religious or non-religious, scholarly or utilitarian, formal or informal?

In France, such change occurred towards the end of the nineteenth century. For instance, at the end of a famous primer published in 1883, the pupil could read a text printed in the last pages, after pages and pages of syllables and separate words:

Now you can read and you will soon be able to read lovely stories in books by yourselves. All human knowledge can be found in books. So, when you can read, you can become a scholar. You have to understand what you can read very well. To be able to understand what you read, you must not read too fast. This primer has taught you to learn one difficult problem at a time and constantly review what you have learnt. Keep this good habit. It is easy to overcome difficulties if you tackle them one after the other, and as long as you don't forget what you have learnt, you will always progress fast enough.

At that time, teachers agreed with Cuissart, the primer's author. In the common representation of school reading, learning to read and reading for learning and for instruction were two different things, and two different stages. That was not the case two centuries before and for a long time the method to teach beginners was not an issue. The old spelling method was used in all countries, for all social groups, in individual teaching as well in collective schooling. What made primers

² Harvey Graff, ed., *Literacy and Social Development in the West. A Reader* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

³ Egil Johansson, “The history of literacy in Sweden,” in Graff, *Literacy and Social Development*, 151–182.

different was the religious content (Catholic, Lutheran, Calvinist, Anglican) and language (Latin or national languages). The method to make beginners read was not a complex apparatus, disconnected from contents, and any reader was supposed to be able to teach a beginner to read. The central question of this paper can therefore be expressed in this way: Why did learning to read become this controversial “technology of the written word”, whilst the old spelling method had been banished by the teachers in all countries in the mid-nineteenth century as unable to produce proper readers? The old method seems to have been intended to forbid them to read and not to help them to do so. When we consider all the present models of learning, elaborated by scientific scholars to explain how a pupil becomes a new reader, it is actually very difficult to understand how people became literate during the eighteenth century, but we have to try. Drawing on a few historical cases, we shall examine three dimensions of the “technologies of the written word”: aims and contents; reading methods; culture and language representations. The great change will be exposed in three stages: first, the conception of reading, which was forged when learning to become a Christian and learning to read were the same thing; then, the first debates about reading during the Age of Enlightenment, and their consequences for reading methods; finally, the birth of modern methods and why and how the old spelling method, which was considered a good device to help beginners for thousands of years, became an issue and was rejected.

Learning to read in the time of catechism classes

As Johansson and Lindmark⁴ stressed, the ABC books reflected the basic pattern of medieval Christian instruction, and this was preserved in all religious traditions, Lutheran and Anglican, as well as Catholic and probably Slavonic Orthodox.

What were the aims of instruction? Learning to read was not an aim in itself. It made sense only in that it was useful to ensure the population’s elementary religious knowledge. The tools for reading were no other than prayer and catechism books.⁵ In both the Protestant and Catholic regions, the method of learning was the same. From texts already known by heart, because learnt orally with the family or in Church services, the teacher made children break down words by making them spell the letters and pronounce the syllables. The reading process implied spelling the letters in order to pronounce the syllables [pe]-[a], [pa], [te]-[e]-[r], [ter] and the two syllables of the word *Pa-ter* (Figure 1). In fact, the young reader connected the signs identified in the page with the text he knew by heart (*Pater Noster, qui es...*). The children who could read syllables could directly move up to texts without learning to read separate words, as seen in conserved documents. It was the old spelling method that had been in progress since earliest Antiquity; it was passed on to medieval schools, where young clerks were trained on the *Pater Noster* to start with. It was only in the second stage that the teacher asked for fluent reading, linking words or sequences of words.

Here is an example⁶ of a teaching practice described in “the school ordinance” in Lutheran Saxony, in 1580:

⁴ Daniel Lindmark, *Reading, Writing and Schooling, Swedish Practices of Education and Literacy, 1650–1880: Kulturens Frontlinjer* (Umeå: Institutionen för Litteraturvetenskap och nordiska språk, Umeå universitet, 2004), 41.

⁵ J.-F. Gilmont, “Réformes protestantes et lecture”; Dominique Julia, “Lecture et Contre-Réforme”; Roger Chartier, “Lectures et lecteurs populaires de la renaissance à l’âge classique,” in *Histoire de la lecture dans le monde occidental*, ed. Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier (Rome: Laterza, 1995; Paris: Seuil, 1997).

⁶ Strauss, “Techniques of Indoctrination: the German Reformation,” in Graff, *Literacy and Social Development*, 102.

When you are certain they have mastered the alphabet, teach them the syllables, using the Lord's Prayer as your text. All this time pay close attention to their pronunciation, and do not allow the boys to slur or drawl their vowels and consonants in the manner of their natural speech, but make them separate and distinguish the sounds clearly from one another, as is done in Latin diction....

We must remember that in that Lutheran countries, prayers were still in Latin at that time: "What's the first letter in *pater*? It is a p. Show me the p in the alphabet. What comes after the p? an a. Show me the a." And so on.

The model for good oral reading was not at all the fluent reading aimed at today, but, "as is done in Latin diction", reading corresponded to this collective practice in use at church. Just as young singers used the notes written in a score to sing, even though they could not read musical signs very well, in the same way, young readers used the texts to "read/say" the prayers slowly together at church. The fact that they uttered them with faith was in itself valuable and the pastor's role was to explain and develop the meaning, Sunday after Sunday. Nowadays, we would say that a child or an illiterate adult reading like that did not really "understand" what they were saying/reading. But at the time, reading did not mean as now "getting information" or "abstracting the major ideas of the text". It meant praying, that is to say proving one's faith in God, remembering the text which expressed God's power and glory, and expecting in return graces for oneself.⁷ Written texts made it possible to say and repeat over and over again, without making errors, the words people had to meditate on when their true meaning was not directly given. It was exactly the same process in Catholic countries. However, the catechism was always recited and read in the country's language. According to some testimonies, praying and reading were synonymous words in many countries until the nineteenth century. For instance, the writer Mihály Táncsics, born in a Hungarian village, wrote that, in 1815, "During the long evenings in winter, I read all I could find in our village, what people called praying and not reading".⁸

As teaching laymen to read was only a limited practice, there was no need for an elaborate methodology. The pupils who had difficulties mastering the alphabet with its numerous typographic variants, and who failed to memorise and combine syllables, were nevertheless able to use a text as a useful prompt, having heard it repeated in chorus by people around them. Was it really necessary to set up schools all over the country for such a result?

As we know, for Sweden and Finland, the Lutheran Church authorities relied on families to teach their children, and the Church Law of 1686 obliged clergymen to check the proficiency of adults and children in an annual examination, and nobody could be confirmed or get married until he could read and repeat his catechism.⁹ During the examination children had to read from the Bible and repeat the Catechism, and the two tests revealed how literacy was perceived at that time: pupils never had to read a new text alone, or explain what it meant. Reading was always a collective practice.

In Germany, in the seventeenth century after the Thirty Years' War, the Duke of Sax-Gotha reformed schools. When he published the *Schul-Methodus*, he recommended that each pupil should be given a reading book including a syllabary, the Gospel, a songbook and a book of arith-

⁷ William A. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). For the practices of prayers in the Middle Ages, see Michael T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record. England 1066–1307* (Oxford: Blackwell, [or. ed. 1979] 1993); Jean Batany, "Écrit/oral," in *Dictionnaire raisonné de l'Occident médiéval*, eds Jacques Le Goff and J.-C. Schmitt (Paris: Fayard, 1999).

⁸ Mihály Táncsics, *Életpályám [My Life]* (Budapest: Mgvető, 1978). Quoted by I. G. Tóth, in "Une société aux lisières de l'alphabet. La paysannerie hongroise aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles," *Annales* 4–5 (Juillet–Octobre 2001): 870, and in *Literacy and Written Culture in Early Modern Central Europe* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2000).

⁹ Johansson, "The History of Literacy in Sweden".

metic. Therefore religious instruction was always backed up with an initiation into utilitarian learning such as arithmetic. The hymns of the Songbook, in German at that time, were sung in chorus, which perpetuated the slow syllable reading to fit the music that the children discovered in church on Sundays. In 1698, the Duke created the first *seminarium scolasticum* to train masters.

The same evolution was witnessed in Catholic countries, but with a gap in time. In France, teaching reading was carried out using prayers in Latin, then in French, and reading of the catechism was then done in the language of the country, French or other dialects.¹⁰ Towards the end of the seventeenth century, some teaching orders taught pupils to read directly in French and also taught them to count. There were two reasons for this: working-class parents were more interested in reading and counting in French because it was socially useful. As French typography and spelling had been simplified, reading in Latin was left to liturgical purposes only, at the end of the curriculum. As Jean-Baptiste de La Salle remarked, the social benefits of literacy were what convinced parents of the need for reading. A way to put an end to:

... parents' carelessness – above all poor parents – is to make clear to them that they have an obligation to educate their children, that they will hardly be able to learn any trade if they fail to read and write. This is what one must endeavour to make them understand, instead of putting forward the harm which a lack of education could cause as regards their salvation by which the poor are seldom affected, having no religion themselves.¹¹

As a result, he organised a learning course of a period of three years at least. Brothers from Christian schools had enough time to teach catechism, prepare everyone for Holy Communion, and set up Christian habits for all children, even for those who were able to read much faster and leave school to begin their working life. La Salle wrote:

As regards small children who have a lot of wit and memory, they mustn't change [class] even if they are gifted, because otherwise they wouldn't go to school long enough. This should however be advisable and be done to the best of our ability, without displeasing parents.¹²

What should we think of these learning methods, which had been so disparaged afterwards? Directed reading was a restricted, intensive reading, but according to a number of testimonies many pupils could then read lay texts. The various topographies could be an impediment, as reading in gothic letters did not help to read in roman letters, and reading printed matter did not make it easy to read manuscripts. As for the practice of oral reading, it was common at the time, even in cultured circles. What is difficult to imagine nowadays is how important the oral memory of texts was when a novice reader came to reading texts which he had already heard or known from his audience.¹³ Here is the testimony – at the end of the eighteenth century – of a young boy reading a book to an illiterate servant who knew it by heart:

I had to repeat each sentence whenever she couldn't hear it properly so as to grasp its meaning. She led me to feel that too. When I read without stopping at full stops or commas, she would whack the book with her spindle, telling me to break off.¹⁴

¹⁰ André Chervel, *Histoire de l'enseignement du français du XVIIe au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Retz, 2006). Catechisms were published in languages spoken by French but also Basque, Breton, Franco-Provençal, etc. During and after the Revolution, the Catholic Church was seen as hindering the linguistic unity of the nation; see Michel de Certeau, Dominique Julia and Jacques Revel, *Une politique de la langue. La Révolution française et les patois* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975).

¹¹ Jean Baptiste de la Salle, "Conduite des écoles chrétiennes," in *Oeuvres complètes* (Rome, 1993), 680.

¹² *Ibid.*, 717.

¹³ On this point, see Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

¹⁴ Quoted by Julia, "Lectures et Contre-Réforme," 312 [*Vie de Mr Grosley*, 1787].

It is therefore wrong to claim that this hard, awkward reading only boiled down to a practice of oral deciphering, regardless of the meaning of the text. In this case, it is an illiterate woman who teaches the young reader, who is concentrating on his words during his reading word by word, to respect punctuation and understand what he is reading. Until the twentieth century this was one of the foundations of school reading aloud: the beginner who read a text aloud had to make it heard by his audience.¹⁵ Read in order to understand, but understand what? It was not news read from a newspaper, or the adventures of an unknown novel, but a text that could be heard and reread indefinitely to grasp its religious meaning literally. From this example, one can understand how interpretive communities were set up alongside official churches, as Daniel Lindmark showed in the case of Swedish “New Readers”,¹⁶ coming back to texts written by Martin Luther to the letter.

On the contrary, in countries like Italy¹⁷ (Southern Italy), Spain¹⁸ and Portugal,¹⁹ and in the South of France, illiteracy rates remained high until the nineteenth century. Was it not so important to connect Christian instruction with reading? In those Catholic lands, prayers were only in Latin, but the vernacular languages were closer to the sacred language than German or English. Was it so necessary that a translation be understood? If numerous practices of writing were attested in popular classes for social uses,²⁰ lay teachers taught writing and reckoning only to those who were in need of these skills for social or economic reasons. Historians²¹ opposed two models, a religious and parochial school, which was more present in the North, and a “municipal” and lay school, which was more present in the South. Religious education had therefore much more to do with oral transmission and rituals. If Catholic authorities did not forbid books for use (to count, to know “civility”, to pray), they did not encourage reading, because they saw the books with texts (such as novels, chap books) as more dangerous than useful for individual education.²² As a consequence, learning to read just for the sake of religious reading, which characterised instruction in Northern countries, did not concern them at the time, and reading never became a generalised proficiency.

Debates on methods in the Age of Enlightenment

The first great debates about teaching methods for reading came from the privileged classes during the Age of Enlightenment; however, not all countries were concerned: it was chiefly

¹⁵ Anne-Marie Chartier, “L’école entre crise des croyances et crise des pratiques. L’exemple de la lecture à voix haute,” in *La crise de la culture scolaire. Origines, interprétations, perspectives*, ed. François Jacquet-Francillon and Denis Kambouchner (Paris: PUF, 2005), 227–61.

¹⁶ Lindmark, *Reading, Writing and Schooling*, ch. 10.

¹⁷ Marina Ruggero, *Insegnar lettere*. (Torino: Edizione dell’orso, 1992); id., *L’alfabeto conquistato* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1999).

¹⁸ Antonio Viñao Frago, *Leer y Escribir, Historia de dos prácticas culturales* (Mexico: I.A.P. 1999); Antonio Castillo Gomez, ed., *La conquista del alfabeto, Escritura y clases populares* (Somonte: Ed Trea, 2002).

¹⁹ Justino Magalhães, *Ler e escrever no mundo rural do antigo regime. Um contributo a historia da alfabetização em Portugal* (Braga: U. Du Minho, 1994).

²⁰ Armando Petrucci, *La Scrittura. Ideologia e rappresentazione* (Turin: Einaudi, 1986); D. Marchesini, *Il bisogno di scrivere. Usi della scrittura nell’Italia moderna* (Roma–Bari: Laterza, 1992); Rita Marquilhas, *A Faculdade das Letras. Leituras e escrita em Portugal no séc. XVII* (Lisboa: Imprensa nacional/Casa da Moede, 2000).

²¹ Gilles Rouet, *L’invention de l’école: l’école primaire sous la Monarchie de Juillet* (Nancy: Presses universitaires de Nancy, 1993); Jean-François Chanet, *L’école républicaine et les petites patries* (Paris: Aubier, 1996).

²² See testimonies for Italy in Ruggero, *Insegnar lettere*; and for France in Anne-Marie Chartier and Jean Hébrard, *Discours sur la lecture 1880–2000* (Paris: Fayard, 2000).

England and France. Private tutors taught one child at a time by an individual method. A boy who had to go to learn Latin at school also had to learn to read in the national language, which was always spoken with the family, unlike the lower classes who often spoke in dialect. Tutors always relied on the oral memory of their pupils, but instead of depending on prayers learnt by heart, they favoured the memory of the lexicon:

The French can speak French already, of which they know an infinity of words: why not teach them to read in French first, since this method is shorter and not as hard?²³

Pupils no longer switched from a written text they knew by heart and had to recite, to a written text they had to read, but from spoken language to written language. As soon as the child could speak properly, he could move on with French literature and language. The best method was to read at the earliest possible age, and some children proved capable of performing this feat at the age of four or five.

I certify that my son has followed the Berthaud method since before the age of four, and started reading – to my great satisfaction – after one month, and a fortnight later, was able to read quite nicely from different books without having any feeling of disgust or boredom whatsoever.²⁴

There was an attempt to invent processes adapted to children's vocabulary but, despite simplified spelling,²⁵ French and English do not have the graphic simplicity of Latin, German or even Spanish words. To make children read all the written words they were supposed to know orally, the list of syllabic combinations to remember grew longer. One did not directly go from syllables to texts any more, but from syllables to words, classified in columns of one, two or three syllables. The time devoted to learning lengthened too, as did the children's disgust and boredom. Thus, the first testimonies about reading features appeared.

To overcome such difficulties, two methods were proposed: the first one was aimed at devising progressions that were regarded as convenient or rational, ranging from the most simple and regular syllables (ba, be, bi, bo, bu, or ab, eb, ib, ob, ub) to the most complicated ones (guez, ctum, xaille, brê, ffrois, quoir).²⁶ Syllabaries designed for private tuition provided columns of artificial syllables, of words classified according to their length (one, two, or three syllables), as one can see in the French ABC by Dumas (Figure 2), which was chosen to teach the King's son in 1733. This very method was used to practise the reading of words and sentences which made up no text but trained in faultless deciphering. It is also the case in the famous *New England Primer* (Figure 3), introduced in the American colonies in 1690 before being printed in Boston in 1777.

This progression from the simple to the complex, seemingly based on logic, was adopted in all nineteenth-century schools, just as it was abandoned in domestic education: "What is the point in forcing a four-year-old child to spell the words eternity, faithfulness, jurisprudence, magnetism? Let them be given words from the children's environment: sleepy and yummy are better than sleep and food", wrote Félix Berriat Saint-Prix in his *Reading Method* in 1852. The other path, more heedful of children's psychology, looked at transforming these series of exercises into games. To keep up the interest of the child in its tender years, pictures were resorted to (as in *The Children's Quadrille* by Berthaud), as well as the handling of printed letters on cards. *The Typographical Bureau* by Dumas allowed one to play the printer. In England, Locke invented a game of dice

²³ Thomas Guyot, *Méthode en forme de préface pour conduire un écolier dans les lettres humaines* (Paris, 1668).

²⁴ Quoted by Berthaud. *Le Quadrille des enfants ou Système nouveau de lecture*. [or. ed. 1744], 10th ed., 1768, 151.

²⁵ André Chervel listed 17 spelling reforms between 1650 and 1835 in *Histoire de l'enseignement du français du XVIIe au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Retz, 2006), 77–152.

²⁶ Berthaud, *Le Quadrille*, 65.

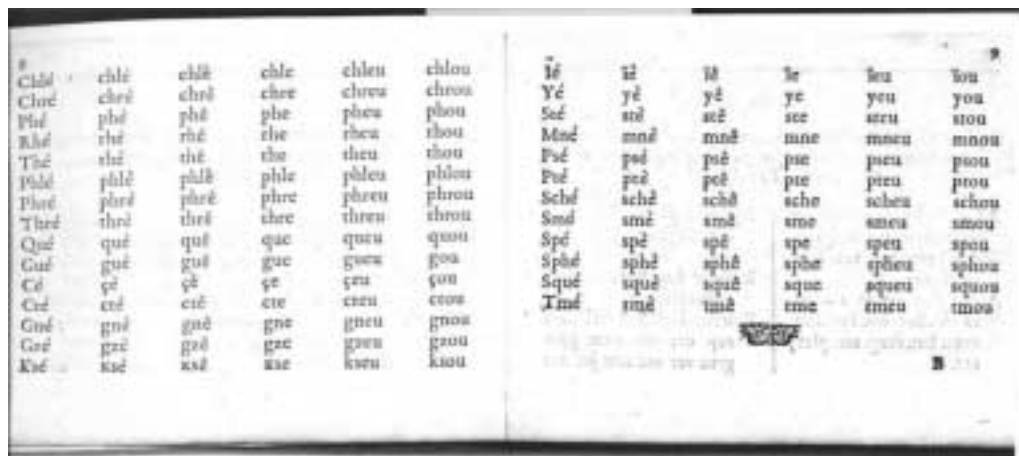


Figure 2. Dumas: page of syllables.

immediately taken up in France: one die with vowels, the other with consonants, formed syllables that a child had to read in order to gain points.

It was in this context that a new teaching movement developed, which rejected the precocious learning to read, “the curse of childhood” as Rousseau put it. This movement went down in history as regards “new teaching methods” to which were linked such famous names as Pestalozzi, Rousseau’s pupil, and Froebel who, one century later, made the Kindergarten into an institution where reading was forbidden. These educational movements had faith in the nature of the child, who had to be spontaneously imbued with the desire to learn, with a moral sense, and even a religious sense. On the other hand, they were hostile to the dogmatism of established religions and the recitation of texts learnt by heart, instilled into children before they could understand them. The old learning method through prayers and catechism was thrown aside, nor could they accept the solutions advocated by tutors.

These disagreements arose in the famous criticism written by Rousseau against Locke. Rousseau looked down on all these innovations thought up to make children read as early as possible.

People make a great fuss about discovering the best way to teach children to read. They invent “bureaux” and cards, they turn the child’s bedroom into a printer’s shop. Locke would have them taught to read by means of dice. Is not that a well-found invention? What a pity! A means more sure than all of those and which one will never forget is simply the desire to learn. Give the child this desire, and you can forget your “bureaux” and your dice; any method will be good for him. I will just add a few words, which contain a principle of great importance. It is this: What we are in no hurry to get is usually obtained with speed and certainty. I am almost certain Emile will learn to read and write before he is ten, just because I care very little whether he can do so before he is fifteen. But I would rather he never learnt to read at all than that this science should be acquired at the price of all that makes reading useful. What is the use of reading to him if he always hates it?²⁷

Thus, while families asked tutors to teach their four- or five-year-old children to read, Rousseau offered to delay the learning altogether. This theoretical viewpoint was taken up in practical terms by Pestalozzi, in his well-known school of Yverdon and in his family education:

²⁷ Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Emile*, livre II, édition la Pléiade, 358–9.

Words of one Syllable.

Eat	ear	eggs	eyes
Face	feet	fish	foul
Gate	good	grafs	great
Hand	hat	head	heart
Ice	ink	ifle	jobb
Kick	kind	kneel	know
Lamb	lame	land	long
Made	mole	moon	mouth
Name	night	noife	noon
Oak	once	one	ounce
Pain	pair	pence	pound
Quart	queen	quick	quilt
Rain	raife	rose	run
Saint	fage	falt	faid
Take	talk	time	throat
Vain	vice	vile	view
Way	wait	waste	would

Words of two Syllables.

Ab-sent	ab-hor	a-pron	au-thor
Ba-bel	be-came	be-guile	bold-ly
Ca-pon	cel-lar	con-stant	cub-board
Dai-ly	de-pend	di-vers	du-ty
Ea-gle	ea-ger	en-close	e-ven
Fa-ther	fa-mous	fe-male	fu-ture
Ga-ther	gar-den	gra-vy	glo-ry

Figure 3. *The New England Primer*: words of two and three syllables.

In my view, the foundation of education in our century – that is the premature teaching of reading and writing – causes the power of judgement to be stimulated too early, and is far from granting the happy consequences which one would normally credit it with. My boy will be twelve in a few days and cannot read nor write, and I am not worried in the least.²⁸

In fact, according to testimonies quoted by James Guillaume in the *Dictionnaire pédagogique*, Mrs Pestalozzi was very much concerned about the future of her son, still illiterate at 12, and taught him secretly to read, in a very traditional way.

Historically, this innovation did not spread in schools and in family practices. It just remained an “innovation”, whereas other teaching inventions soon became commonplace (for example, illustrated alphabets linking a letter, a word and a picture). In the nineteenth century, in knowledgeable families, mothers would introduce their children to reading as early as three or four years of age²⁹ thanks to graphic alphabet books.³⁰ The most famous educational theories of the Age of Enlightenment were very much taken up in speeches, and altered certain representations (e.g. a child had to live its own childhood), but they had only little real effect on practices, as far as reading went.

Rousseau and Pestalozzi’s views cannot be understood unless the changes which occurred in French culture between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are taken into account. As we have seen, written culture was based on the indefinite reading of the same texts known almost by heart. In schools, children would read prayers and in colleges, pupils studying Latin would read, translate and learn classics according to an unchanging order that no teacher would have dared to upset. The intensive, slow, collective reading of commonly shared texts aimed at educating the people and the elite, whether they were religious texts or the classics of pagan antiquity. Literal memory played a key role at that time.

In the eighteenth century, the schools of classic humanities were threatened by private boarding schools which provided an education without Latin, centred on scientific and encyclopaedic knowledge, living languages and French grammar. In social life, intensive reading was threatened by extensive reading, which was necessary to read *the news* imparted by newspapers or correspondence, and to educate oneself (encyclopaedias, popular scientific books) or to delve into fiction novels that prevailed all over Europe: *Pamela* by Richardson (1740), *La Nouvelle Héloïse* by Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1761), *The Sorrows of the Young Werther* by Goethe (1774) were rapidly translated into most European languages. The general public was sent into raptures, heroes became models, their adventures examples, emotional reading became compelling: a reader shedding tears over a hero’s misfortunes was an individual who was affected personally, and this emotion was proof that the text was directly understood without any further scholarly interference. Diderot, who was an ardent admirer of *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded*,³¹ was convinced that the new moral education would emerge from the encounter of fictional heroes, the empathy they aroused, and the lesson of life they taught.

In contrast, religious and academic authorities strongly condemned novels considering all as substitutes. “Reading novels causes lack of attention to be a habit, among many other disturbances of the mind”, wrote Emmanuel Kant.³² Fichte referred to “*narcotic*” to denounce the devastating effects of addictive reading, resistant to the restrictions of spiritual and academic

²⁸ Quoted by J. Guillaume, article Pestalozzi, *Dictionnaire pédagogique*, 2293.

²⁹ Jean Noël Luc, *L’invention du jeune enfant au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Belin, 1997), shows how much people were concerned about precocious instruction in nursery schools, in spite of oppositions concerning content and teaching methods.

³⁰ Ségolène Le Men, *Les abécédaires français illustrés du XIXe siècle* (Paris: Promodis, 1984).

³¹ His *Eloge de Richardson* dates back to 1761.

³² Quoted without reference in R. Wittman, “Une révolution de la lecture à la fin du XVIIIe siècle?,” in Cavallo and Chartier, *Histoire de la lecture*, 356.

authorities. All these condemnations are reminiscent of what could be read from the 1960s onwards concerning the entertainment industry, and particularly television. Just like television, the novel enthralled, is comprehensible without effort, tolerates various reactions and makes emotions vibrate. The sharp contrast between ancient reading guided by teachers, and story-book reading, secular and eager for novelty, based on curiosity and emotion, astounded the observers of the time. This overwhelming craze for reading was more often denounced than hailed. “It is not unlikely that novels brought on as many troubles for men and their families behind closed doors, as did the so terrible Revolution out in the open”, wrote a Swiss bookseller in 1795.³³

Thus the world of books to read opened up immoderately. On the other hand, traditional deciphering was strengthened as pupils gradually read and recited new imposed texts. It could therefore be very brief. However, it was considered insufficient if pupils were to read any text in their native language. For tutors, pupils had to remember all the sound symbol correspondences before being offered unknown texts to read. It sounded illogical and pointless to make them read religious texts known by heart since the definition of reading had changed: reading was to establish the meaning of an unknown text thanks to deciphering. Any pupil who mastered this technique would find behind the written signs the words and sentences of the oral language that he had mastered already. These principles were quite easy to apply in languages where graphic systems are regular, but not in English or in French. Correspondences between letters and sounds are very irregular. Teaching “in line with principles” was therefore very uncertain, since exceptions constantly upset the rules. Teaching “in line with routine”, that is from sheer memory, was tedious, for the list of syllables – as seen in the ABC by Dumas – was much longer than in Latin.

As a young master, Pestalozzi attempted to streamline the learning of graphophonic code:

I started to yell out the morning ABC.... I stored syllabic combinations without flagging. I filled entire copy-books with syllables and series of numbers; I did my utmost to simplify as much as possible the elements of spelling and arithmetic, to adjust them under appropriate forms to the laws of psychology.³⁴

But his tremendous efforts failed, while on the other hand, Locke had chosen the path of play rather than imposed training. Hence, the use of dice with vowels and consonants, which could easily teach you how syllables were put together. Other tutors conceived game cards linking a picture to a word with one letter-sound (Arch for A, Bee for B, Cross for C, etc...) or a typographic bureau³⁵ thanks to which the child produced small texts by combining labels in front of him in printer's cases. Seated by his pupil, the tutor could answer questions immediately, rectify errors and ask for justifications. Thus, around a small-scale teaching aid, “new methods” were invented which are still in use today (active and diverting methods, methods connecting words and pictures, methods going from the meaning of the sentence to its dissection, methods linking

³³ Quoted by Wittman, “Une révolution,” 331.

³⁴ Guillaume, article Pestalozzi, *Dictionnaire de pédagogie*, 2308. Pestalozzi's reading method consisted of making beginners (from the age of five to eight) learn by heart the alphabet in five different ways: by joining successively the five vowels to all consonants, forwards and backwards (*ab, ba, ec, ce, id, di, of, fo, ug, gu*, etc). Then would come the combinations of two consonants and one vowel (*bud, dub, bic, cib, gaf, fag*); then he would make them spell long, difficult words starting with the first syllable and gradually adding the other elements of the word (*eph, ephra, ephraïm; buc, bucé, bucéphale; apho, aphoris, aphorisme; mu, muni, muni, municipal, municipalité*).

³⁵ Marcel Grandière, “Louis Dumas et le système typographique, 1728–1744,” *Histoire de l'Éducation*, 81 (1999): 35–62.

writing and reading etc...). Yet, at the time, nobody could see how this could be adapted from private tuition to collective education.

There was a price to pay for all these innovations. Learning to read and instruction through reading were separated completely. Rousseau and Pestalozzi thought this disconnection all the more perverse as it was implicit. The means became the end. In ancient forms of education, by reading or reciting the *Pater Noster* or the *Creed* or the *De Viris Illustribus*,³⁶ children simultaneously became involved in the process of reading and in the contents of the targeted written culture. By playing with syllabic dice, they learnt that reading was a pure combination with no content. They were trained to decipher as if being made to study “*solfège*” (musical notation) before listening to any music itself. Yet, the priority was the knowledge given access to by reading. “What is the point in reading if they hate it?” Rousseau emphasised what awaited any child from the moment when reading was made compulsory and privileged families demanded early teaching. Learning to read became an end in itself, disconnected from traditional sacred texts and the social practices of writing. Conversely, Rousseau provided Emile with a private tutor who cared little about teaching him to read, but invented situations for him which enabled him to use his eyes, ears and intelligence. They made him ask himself the right questions, those which gave meaning to secular knowledge intended to replace memory acquired from books. The child was taught to speak with his teacher on carefully chosen occasions. He learned, through lively experience and words, the knowledge that he would later find in books.

Thus Rousseau rejected prayers, fables and classic texts out of reach of young minds. But as much as he rejected the dead culture of traditional education, he also discarded the formal void of new methods. Emile was the ideal pupil to illustrate Rousseau’s doctrine, but how was it possible to take up the same challenge with proper pupils? Visitors from all around Europe on a pilgrimage to Yverdon wanted to find out how Pestalozzi had thought up “object lessons” and vocabulary lessons, physical and sensorial exercises, exercises of geometrical lines and drawings that his boarders would relentlessly do on slates. They can appear very formal to us today, but at the time they aroused much enthusiasm.

The teaching challenge consisted of inventing formative learning, intellectually, psychologically and morally speaking, which did not require reading as a preliminary condition. This issue was seen in the nineteenth century as central in the debate on teaching handicapped pupils, who could not learn to read and write like others. It was also a very controversial topic for nursery schools. While parents and teachers wanted children to deal with literature and language as early as possible, Friedrich Froebel objected to it, as did Maria Montessori later. Their reluctance towards early reading caused them to invent all sorts of educational games for the youngest pupils who had to be kept busy and instructed without having a book in their hands.

However, Rousseau’s stance remained irrelevant for elementary schools, where Locke and writers of primers got the upper hand. In books of history of pedagogy or history of doctrines or teaching ideas³⁷ Rousseau and Pestalozzi were recognised as “great educators”. They were the fathers of a definitively new teaching method which could not be put into the new norm, because their innovations were both irrefutable in theory and not feasible in practice. The requisites were a lot of time and few children, whereas the reality was quite the opposite. If reading was the starting-point of schooling and no longer its goal, making all children precocious readers was a matter of social urgency. The nineteenth-century school curriculum adopted the goals of eighteenth-century private tuition. Being able to read was the tool for all future learning, and literacy was now devised like a technique independent of targeted knowledge. However, whereas tutors’

³⁶ *De Viris Illustribus* was a short history of Rome’s great heroes, written in Latin by l’abbé Lhomond in 1779, to help beginners to read Latin. It was still in use in c.1960s.

³⁷ Gabriel Compayré, *Histoire de la pédagogie* 4th ed. (Paris: 1886).

methods catered to a very reduced private clientele, writers of primers produced tools for a public of children who were numbered in millions. If religious texts were no longer relevant throughout the nineteenth century, what was the new learning pupils had to read in their handbooks? And why did the new learning, which was then targeted, soon entail the rejection of the old spelling method?

Modern primers and secular knowledge

Primers at the beginning of the 1800s: moral and patriotic books in the USA

To show the discrepancy between the old and the new model, let us take the example of the book which ousted the *New England Primer* in the United States. In 1790, the *American Spelling Book* was published in Boston. In a few years, Noah Webster's book replaced the old ones. That book definitely opened a new editorial era, that of mass production. More than 10 million copies were distributed throughout the USA within 30 years,³⁸ and by the end of the century the number of copies approached a hundred million. The *Blue Back Speller*, as it was named, brought enough money to allow Webster to work on his famous dictionary.

And yet it revealed a new approach to reading and new goals. First, religious contents had almost disappeared (two pages out of 158) and had been replaced by patriotic and moral catechism. After the *Primer*, the children read in *The Little Reader's Assistant* stories from American history beginning with Columbus, a short grammar and a "Federal catechism being a short and easy explanation of the Constitution of the United States". The third stage, an *American Selection of Lessons in Reading and Speaking*, was also meant for college students. This was the first example of a complete progression, which provided young Americans with all the texts that had to be known by the citizens of a free nation. As a matter of fact, even if they referred to knowledge for adults (ethics, politics or sciences), all the texts were written especially for children.

The *Primer*, printed in small format, included an alphabet, long lists of syllables (two hundred combinations), words "arranged in order by their number of syllables, and further into lists according to the similarity of phonetics elements", followed by texts illustrated with small blurred engravings. Using written language as a basis, Webster wanted to normalise American pronunciation, fix the spelling and unify the country through its language as well as by its institutions. As he feared the harmful consequences of oral memory that he considered mechanical, he chose prose rather than verse to understand or to study. So, the model of good pronunciation in school became oral speaking. The slow syllable reading which was adapted to collective religious reading was then considered defective – that of a beginner or an illiterate adult.

What does "oral speaking" mean? The rules to achieve good reading required that words should be pronounced clearly, slowly, with pauses and the same intonation as the master's. In 1829 J. Leavitt³⁹ wrote:

Children will never be allowed to pronounce a sentence or even a word, in that dull, monotonous humdrum style, which so often disgraces our common schools.... Try to understand every word as you go along, and try to read as if you were telling a story to your mother, or talking with some of your playmates. Reading is talking from a book.

Oral speaking is not an informal form of speech.

³⁸ David H. Russel, and Henry R. Fea. "Research on Teaching Reading," in *Handbook of Research on Teaching*, ed. N.L. Gage (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1963), 866.

³⁹ J. Leavitt, *Easy Lessons in Reading*, 1829, in Nila Benton Smith, *American Reading Instruction: Its Development and its Significance in gaining a Perspective on current Practices in Reading* (Newark: International Reading Association 1965 [1934]).

Ancient forms, modern contents

It would be a mistake to believe that the advent of these new tools, carriers of secular knowledge, abolished old methods. In England as well as in Germany and France, old ABCs carried on being used, and the teaching forms, which had been running smoothly for years, did not disappear overnight. French Christian alphabets kept being republished in numerous copies between 1830 and 1880. In Catholic schools, thousands of children continued learning to read from the well-known prayer books, by going over the rules of deciphering learnt from lists of syllables and words cut up into syllables.

The catechism form was not abandoned either. Under the French Revolution, political catechisms were written to replace religious catechisms. Instead of the commandments of God and the Church, children had to learn the commandments of their Homeland and the Constitution. These books did not have the time to be fully used in class, and their distribution remained very limited. Other political catechisms were written throughout the nineteenth century. The form developed mainly in Latin countries, but not uniquely, for in his *First Reader* Webster wrote “a short and easy explanation of the Constitution of the United States” in the shape of a Federal Catechism. This editorial production lasted until the First World War,⁴⁰ which indicates that authors who rejected religion did not reject the catechistic form. It seemed well adapted for any elementary instruction and for passing on dogmatic knowledge or prescriptive content. A text with questions and answers was more easily memorised than a continuous text, and children could take it in turns to read and recite. This form survived as a protocol to quiz children, as long as school readings dealt with instructive contents (scientific knowledge, moral and civic instruction), which had to be remembered. But as soon as reading textbooks trained children to read anecdotal narratives or literary descriptions, this assessment method became irrelevant. Another method was necessary to check if children had understood texts properly (such as explaining difficult words, a situation or allusions), which was far more difficult than being asked for a literal reconstruction.

*The French ABCs with secular content*⁴¹

When secular texts replaced religious texts, the structure of reading textbooks always seemed the same (alphabets, syllables, words and texts), but to pupils everything was different. Let us take the example of the *Alphabet and First Reading Book* published by Hachette. In 1832 one million copies were bought by the ministry of education, with the aim of distributing them free of charge to poor pupils. The book did not start with the alphabet preceded by a cross, but with a scientific chart: a map of the globe with continents, simple devices (lever, scales, pulley and screw) and modern measuring instruments (barometer, thermometer). The first part included letters grouped together in order by their phonetic family under three typographies, and then 12 pages of syllables ranging from the most simple (C-V: *ba, be, bé, bè*, and V-C: *ab, ac, ad, al*) to the most complex (from *bal* to *phry*), always clarified by an example (*bal-con*) (balcony).

Subsequently, one could pass onto the reading pages which embraced a mini-knowledge encyclopaedia, where each topic was covered in one page. Lesson 1: Children: “*Les pe-tits enfants ne sa-vent ni par-ler, ni mar-cher...*” (Small children can neither speak nor walk); 15. Fruits

⁴⁰ Jean-Charles Buttier, “La réception des catéchismes politiques dans la France du XIXe siècle,” Colloque, *Le catéchisme politique, un prêche sur l’autel de la modernité*, à l’UEI de Florence 27–28 Octobre 2006.

⁴¹ Anne-Marie Chartier, “Des abécédaires aux méthodes de lecture: genèse du manuel moderne avant les lois Ferry,” *Histoires de lecture XIXe–XXe siècles*, présentées par Jean-Yves Mollier (Bernay: Société d’histoire de la lecture, 2005), 78–102.

and Vegetables; 36. Arithmetic; 31. New Measurements; 68. Volcanoes etc...). In lesson 7, “*Les plantes ne peu-vent se mou-voir*” (Plants cannot move), silent letters were no longer printed in italic type; in lesson 14, no more dashes dividid up syllables. Character prints disappeared as the book progressed, as far as the proverbs drawn from the Bible (74: Remember the Creator during your childhood days...) and extracts from French public law (75: article 1: The French are equal before the law whatever their titles and rank). Finally, there were two reading pages in Latin (*Pater Noster, Credo*). There was no indication as to how much time was necessary to go from one stage to another.

The book faithfully followed the structure of Christian alphabets (letters, syllables, syllabled texts, unsyllabled texts, without a list of words between syllables and texts) but letters were no longer presented in alphabetical order, but according to sound family. The number of pages dedicated to syllables (12) was not as substantial as in Webster’s *Blue Back Speller*, but almost. Finally, pupils who reached texts discovered a mini-encyclopaedia which combined useful knowledge and moral prescriptions. Scientific, political and moral documents in the last part dealt with contents unknown to them, and in a language which they were often unfamiliar with. They referred to a learned culture, re-written for their sake but absent from their social environment. They did not contain any narrative. By reading and re-reading them collectively with their master, pupils simultaneously learnt reading, and moral, instructive knowledge that their school was committed to passing on to them. The influence of tutors is clear to us: this method implied that the pupils’ mother tongue was French. It also suggested that they be socially familiar with the written language and the secular knowledge reading gave access to. These two requirements were far from being fulfilled in the French rural society between 1830 and 1880. Many testimonies indicated that a number of children were in an endless muddle over the learning of syllables and left school before being able to read. In 1865, the minister of state education estimated that, according to inspectorate reports, 40 pupils out of 100 left school without knowing anything, or so little that they would soon forget it all. As a result, thanks to repeated collective readings, pupils continued to learn their books by heart or almost, like in times of prayer and when using expressions of civility. Until the beginning of the twentieth century, the reading textbook was a book of lessons to learn and recite,⁴² but the existing written culture changed in nature: it became a school culture with no direct use in social life.

Consequently, the conditions for school learning also changed. Children who read prayers could practise their training for reading alone, since they learnt the texts by heart. However, to do this, they had to have a good reader by their side to help them in their first steps. In 1860, General Inspector Rapet set out the issue in the *Journal des Instituteurs*:⁴³

What can a poor child who cannot read or write be given to do? There is no way to keep him busy: because pretending it is possible by putting a syllabary in his hands and telling him to learn is an illusion that is not shared by experienced teachers. He will be able to hold his syllabary, twist it, nibble at it, but will not study it, for it is impossible for him to do so. To study reading requires the help of a teacher, and this for as long as the child has not reached a more or less standard reading.

A great number of children failed because of the new goals of extensive reading, which were much more ambitious than before. Several ways were explored to help them, which modified the curriculum, the contents of texts, the structure of primers and the deciphering technique.

A first path consisted of organising the beginners’ class in a different way by providing them with a full-time teacher: this was the role of graduate assistants, or teacher trainees who were

⁴² Chartier et Hébrard, *Discours sur la lecture*, 332–82.

⁴³ *Journal des Instituteurs*, 34 (19 August 1860): 118–19.

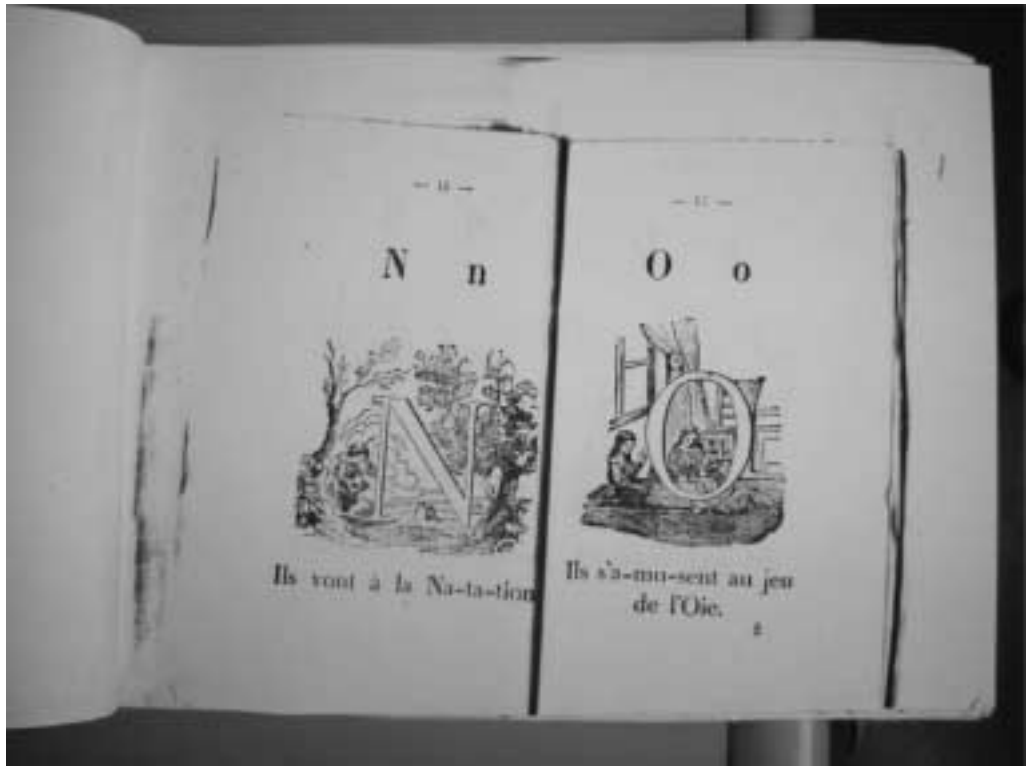


Figure 4. *L'alphabet des enfants*.

preparing to go into teaching. Spelling was displayed on big boards hung on the wall, and the assistant had the pupils spell and repeat syllables in chorus until they were memorised perfectly.

A second path consisted of dramatically simplifying the first reading texts, by taking up the texts for children that mothers used when teaching their own children. Indeed, families made use of alphabet books, which were also picture books used for enjoyment (Figure 4). When children showed “a first interest in letters”, it was advisable to make them attend two short quarter-of-an-hour sessions a day, in a pleasant and joyful atmosphere. Underneath the picture of the giraffe or the chimney sweep, they had to look for the written word for the animal or the job represented, find letters and known syllables, and search for the same on the following pages. The memory of pictures, repetitions, interrelations between grown-ups and children were enough for a child soon to be able to repeat all the words of the ABCs by himself. Supported by the adult, he could then have a go at small unknown texts placed at the end of the book by the author.⁴⁴ Scientific and moral readings were replaced by scenes of family life. The world of knowledge was that of play and situations adapted to children, and no longer that of the written

⁴⁴ The first texts from the *Children's ABC* describe several scenes of domestic reading: “Come here Charles./Come near Mummy./Hurry up./Sit down on Mummy’s knees./Now read your book./Where is the pin to point to the words ?/Here is the pin./Don’t tear your book./Only naughty boys tear their books./Charles is going to have a new lovely story./Spell this word: Good Lord./Now go and play.”

culture of adults.⁴⁵ Reading texts taught nothing other than reading. Whereas books read at school instantly aimed at textual, religious, moral or scientific learning, family primers thought out another strategy adapted for a very young public.

A third way changed the structure of primers. Instead of separating the study of syllables and the reading of first texts, as in the *Blue Back Speller* or *The Alphabet* published by Hachette, some primers proposed to read syllables, words and sentences in the same session. Such was the way chosen by McGuffey, published in millions in the USA from 1836 to 1907, or by Peigné in France. There were 136 editions of his famous reading textbook between 1831 and 1893. Thus, at the third lesson when children studied the *ac* and *ad* syllables, they had to be able to read “*mé dor a mor du la tar ti ne*” (Spot has bitten the slice of bread) and “*Papa sera de garde samedi, le sol a été cultivé*” (Daddy will be on duty Saturday, the ground has been cultivated). The primer gave a strict overall picture of the subject (letters combined in syllables, syllables combined into words, words in syllabled sentences, and then in unsyllabled ones), gradual and cumulative, since every piece of knowledge was revised during the following class. Of course one had to wait until the eighth class to deal with “real” texts: ONE: Virtues and Faults ... SIX: First Learning. But for several months, pupils had started to read small sentences and they knew that reading was neither reciting, nor spelling syllables without understanding. In the same way, in the American McGuffey’s, the first lesson begins by three sentences of one-syllable words, under the image of an ox: “It is an ox / is it an ox / it is my ox.” These sentences are printed in two columns, the first for spelling (with blanks between types) and the second for reading (with punctuation and the usual types).

Finally a last path aimed at curtailing the time devoted to syllables and to the acquisition of basic skills by improving deciphering methods. It sparked off great debates among practitioners about the teaching methods of the written code. Indeed as soon as a pupil managed to spell syllables slowly but directly *le rô-ti* [the roast], progress was made, since he “could hear” words and even sentences that the very articulate French learnt at school allowed him to understand. So, practitioners all dreamt of suppressing the stage of spelling. Lefèvre⁴⁶ outlined their perplexity:

Two reading systems, or rather two processes, spelling and non-spelling, that have not managed to meet with practitioners’ approval for too long a time can only have both genuine advantages and serious drawbacks.... Old processes of spelling are unanimously, and rightly so, blamed for being powerless to get one to find the phonic value of the syllable by reading out letters. The method without spelling consisted in making pupils learn syllables, but our language has thousands of them and pupils repeat the pronounced syllables without looking at them, instead of checking their various components one by one so to speak.

And yet, spelling was abandoned in one generation. A new method worked this wonder: it was called the “simultaneous method”, that is a simultaneous method of reading and writing. In the course of the 1850s, goose quills, which were so awkward to handle and so dangerous to sharpen, were substituted by resistant metallic ones. The invention of cellulose paper made prices drop and copy-books were within everyone’s means. Slates were introduced in small classes: children would sit on benches, busy drawing sticks and circles (i and o) in silence. This training had the excellent advantage of keeping them quiet by practising their hands, but it had nothing to do with what they actually read (the B, A, Ba). For feedback on reading to be visible, the simple drawing of the first letters (i, u, n, m, which string together short oblique lines) had to be the letters and

⁴⁵ In the nineteenth century, a “young child” is aged between two and seven, they are no longer “little kids” taken charge of in wealthy classes and in nurseries. Luc, *L’invention du jeune enfant*. Even if small children are separated from big ones in nursery schools, it is to Maria Montessori that we owe an educational description of ages that is the basis of a sensory and intellectual progression of learning.

⁴⁶ A. Lefèvre, *Méthode de lecture applicable à tous les modes d’enseignement*, 5th ed. (Paris, 1860).

the syllables (mu, nu, mi, ni) with which the reading started. Rounded letters (a, e, o, c, d) or letters with loops (l, b, j, g) were introduced later in the new progressions which gave up alphabetical order. The solution that imposed itself in one generation consisted of connecting “the teaching of reading with that of writing”, or rather “writing with reading” according to the form and the gradual difficulty of letter drawings.⁴⁷ Teachers begged for copybooks for all beginners and desks with inkwells, for in primary and nursery schools they were seated on benches.

Simultaneous methods of reading and writing brought to light the archaism of *Christian Instructions*, but also that of secular alphabet books like Hachette and Peigné in France, or Webster and McGuffey in the United States. In the new textbooks, letters, syllables, words and sentences to read were printed in cursive script and not only in typographic characters. Every pupil saw in the book the model to copy after each lesson. As a consequence, spelling could be eliminated; or rather it did not need to be read aloud any more, for it could now be written:

As a matter of fact, if in the reading lesson, the rapid utterance of sound (vowels) and articulations (consonants) does not always allow the pupil to perfectly distinguish the components of the words; in the writing lesson, he is forced to notice all of them since he must reproduce each one of them.

Thus wrote the schoolmaster Adrian, in 1853. Twenty-five years later it was the method which all students at teacher training colleges were trained in. The name “simultaneous method of reading and writing” was soon abandoned since it became the norm. Only the name of syllabic method survived, since pupils immediately linked together syllables pronounced directly (*r...ô...t...î*). At the end of the century, people asked themselves the following question: if one could do without spelling, thanks to writing, could one not do without oral syllable spelling? Would it not be possible to pronounce the whole word directly, as one would do in oral practice, after recognising it visually, considering that beginners analysed it letter after letter anyway? The gist of the debates about “modern methods” (syllabic versus global, phonic versus idea-visual) was presented as early as 1908 in Huey’s book *The Psychology and Pedagogy of Reading*.

For Republicans, school laws relating to compulsory and free education caused initial learning to speed up, as the last year of nursery school became the first year of compulsory primary school in 1887. In France, both country and city children could start practising at the age of six. The school curriculum started with a literacy class, entirely devoted to the learning of reading and writing. The *Cuissart Method* (Figure 5),⁴⁸ elaborated during the Empire, triumphant under Minister Ferry, encapsulated the advances made over 40 years, and stabilised a model which lasted until the 1950s.

At the top of the page was a sub-titled vignette (an island, for I, a nest, for N): thanks to the progress of printing, the luxury of graphic alphabet books was now within the budget of state schools. The drawing is framed by the letter I and N, and then U and M in both their written forms, in lower case letters and small cursive script; underneath, a line of syllables, and words exemplifying the initial syllable sound (*nu, mimi, muni*) and very quickly a small sentence in both types of writing: *riri a ri, bébé a du bobo, papa fume sa pipe* [Riri has giggled – baby has hurt itself – daddy is smoking his pipe]. Small children of the lower classes were entitled to the same childlike entertainment as small middle-class children, but they were six or seven, not four. The goal of the first lesson being standard instructive reading, primers stopped where reading books started. As I have said, the Cuissart Primer ended with a nice promise:

⁴⁷ A. Adrien, *Enseignement gradué et simultané de la lecture et de l’écriture. Méthode nouvelle où les leçons de lecture et celles d’écriture sont mises en corrélation* (Paris: Hachette, 1853).

⁴⁸ E. Cuissart, *Méthode Cuissart. Enseignement pratique et simultané de la lecture, de l’écriture et de l’orthographe* (1883).



Figure 5. Cuissart, 1883.

Now, you can read, and you will soon be able to read lovely stories in books by yourselves. All human knowledge can be found in books. So, when you can read, you can become a scholar.

What was put together in psalters – the illustrated alphabet, the primer or the first reader – was now dissociated into two subjects, becoming two different lessons that children could no longer go through at their own rate since the textbook was planned to last one year. The disconnection between form and content, between combinatory and written culture, so strongly dismissed by Rousseau, became the editorial norm.

Conclusion

To conclude, I wish to emphasise three points. The first concerns reading content and technology of reading. Reading texts went through three stages: from religious content limited in number but literally memorised, to a wider and wider array of lay content, to read and remember of course, but not literally, and subsequently to texts for children with no memorable content, constructed only to practise reading and control pupils’ skills. Conversely, the very rough-and-ready analysis of the written word in the first period gave way to a more and more complex technical analysis of the language, and later to tools (textbooks) which inscribed language analysis in time. This period of learning was rehearsed by groups of children and ended up being a necessary stage laid down by the school curriculum, which imposed the same speed on all pupils. Social culture and school culture were gradually separated: readings from religious sources were soon out of place in schools, and so were political and social readings (newspapers and novels were forbidden there). In France, only disciplinary knowledge and selected extracts from great classical authors became the sacred texts of the lay republic.

As regards language, specific learned concepts of the written word (such as the notion of sentence, word, punctuation) became commonplace notions, to such an extent that they ended up

being regarded as categories appertaining to natural languages. The written language became language, no more, no less, and the persistent discrepancies between oral and written language were reconsidered in the light of the standards of the written word, transmitted and imposed by schooling. In countries where children went to school, the relationship of all individuals to their own language changed drastically.⁴⁹ Conversely, teachers' belief (which seems quite naive today) was that the command of reading, a universal tool, made all written knowledge available, just as the access to resources on line on the Internet makes some surfers believe that "you know everything by just clicking".

My second remark concerns the issue of reading comprehension. During the nineteenth century, more and more warnings against mechanical reading and against literal reading could be found. A new belief in the need for a clear understanding of texts emerged little by little. While the lower classes were often attached to an idea of reading which did not dissociate literal reconstruction and comprehension, the authorities promoted another approach. The ability to learn to read and write was itself linked with intelligence. With the tests of psychologist Binet, in 1904, the children who could not learn to speak were referred to as profoundly retarded, those who could not learn to read and write as severely retarded, and those who could not learn without slow methods especially devised for them as mildly retarded. Individuals with normal intelligence were children who learnt to read and write in the brief time provided for by the institution. Whereas the art of reading had since Antiquity been assigned to the art of memory and related to a social memory carried along by collective practices, it became the "natural" expression of the development of individual intelligence. Such a change of paradigm made us unable to understand how children learnt to read in the past. Without an analysis of practices and contents, it would have been impossible to distinguish the old spelling method devised for religious instruction from the new spelling method to make pupils read any text. And yet, there was in terms of both a revolution in the aims, contents and learning practices. However, we have to remember that the old way is still in use for instance in Koranic schools, or in some Christian Evangelist communities. It is not always inefficient with illiterate people, as we know, and so it is not only a historic curiosity to understand why and how.

The last remark concerns the interrelations between reading and writing. We no longer have experience of a culture of the written word founded on reading without writing. It was when new writing technologies were implemented, with the distribution of paper and metallic quills, that the spelling method in use since Antiquity died out. However, while a culture drawn from books is always very slow to put together, the changes which affect technologies of the written word are not: this can be observed from experience, for we are now living such changes. Keyboards and screens are affecting our relation to the act of writing. The gesture of the hand has always been associated with the eye, like the scribe with his stylus, his reed pen, his paintbrush or his goose quill. The writing of a text on the screen has brought about a rupture between the age-old coordination between the eyes, which see and read, and the fingers that strike the keyboard. For the time being, beginners who use computers at school have difficulty typing and are more at ease with "clicks" or the "cut and paste" function than with ergonomic typing gestures, since in many schools these are not taught. But psychologists who work on ways to read a screen, pick out information, design and produce texts, have observed the changes introduced by these new technologies that make writing and reading interact.

So, as time goes by, the methods devised to teach reading have proved to be closely tied up with the written culture that brought them into existence. To have a clear grasp of these bonds, it

⁴⁹ Ivan Illich and Barry Sanders, *A B C: the Alphabetization of the Popular Mind* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1988); David R. Olson, "The Cognitive Consequences of Literacy," in *Handbook of Children's Literacy*, ed. T. Nunes and P. Bryant (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2004), 539–56.

is necessary to analyse the school working tools, by relating them to the practices of teachers working with beginners. Without this analysis of practices, it is impossible to tell the spelling method devised for religious instruction from the spelling method of tutors that aimed to make pupils read all texts. And yet, both have undergone a revolution in the aims, contents and learning practices. There is also the emergence of what today could be called school failure. Thus, the history of education can help us consider our present in a different way.

Notes on contributor

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