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## "UNIVERSITY REPORT"

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GWYNETH HENDERSON:

In this week's 'University Report' spelling and reading. Now I don't think anyone denies that the English language is crazy, unpredictable, and therefore very difficult to learn. In particular, of course, the way we spell our words makes learning to read a mammoth task for children here, and an even bigger one for those learning English as a second language. Well today there's news of experiments going on all over West Africa, in Kenya and in Uganda with an English alphabet that aims to make the task of learning to read much simpler and easier - the Initial Teaching Alphabet, or as it is more commonly called the i.t.a. Experiments with the i.t.a. started in Britain some ten years and in Africa some six years ago - the man who took it to West Africa is George O'Halloran, director of the i,t,a. foundation who spent years teaching in the Gambia, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ghana, Nigeria and Cameroun before he became involved with the foundation. Well I keep saying i,t,a. and I've said it was a new alphabet - but how does it work - what's the difference between it and our traditional orthography or alphabet? I asked George O'Halloran to explain.

GEORGE O'HALLORAN:

The Initial Teaching Alphabet is a modification of our normal traditional orthography which achieves regularity by adding in the characters which are necessary to make up the full number of sounds in the English language. For example English has between forty and forty-four sounds; phoneticians

GEORGE O'HALLORAN: are not exactly unanimous on this. The roman alphabet in which English was first written down has only got twenty-six letters. For this reason it is not possible for the roman alphabet to give a letter per sound to the English language. This is one of the main reasons for the chaotic state of English spelling, which is one of the main difficulties that young children, both in Britain and overseas, encounter when they are trying to learn to read. The Initial Teaching Alphabet has added twenty characters to the twenty-six of the roman alphabet and has thus made it possible for every sound in the English language to have its own particular letter to represent it in reading.

GWYNETH HENDERSON: Well, obviously from what you've said, the purpose is, in fact, to help children to read when they are presumably in the early years of primary school. How much difference do you think it does make?

GEORGE O'HALLORAN: It takes the difficulty out of English, difficulty in speed in learning to read and difficulty in mastering the process. It will take most of the difficulties out of the process and according to the intelligence of the child it will speed up the process of learning to read. Clearly the most intelligent children will get the most benefit from it, they will learn the most quickly, but it will help every child, probably in proportion to its intelligence.

GWYNETH HENDERSON: What about the problems of then switching to normal spelling?

GEORGE O'HALLORAN: I don't think there really is a problem here. Anybody who has learnt to read in another language, for example, if you've learnt to read first of all in English then you later learn to read in French,

GEORGE O'HALLORAN: which has the same roman alphabet, or in Greek, which has a different alphabet, or in Arabic, you find you don't have to learn to read again, all you have to do is learn how the new alphabet works. The skill of reading was learnt when you were learning to read English, and you just simply transferred that skill to the other languages. In the same way as a child who has learnt to read i.t.a. can transfer this learning skill across to the traditional orthography of English.

GWYNETH HENDERSON: Well in fact it's ten years since the first experiment in using the Initial Teaching Alphabet took place in this country, and in reading a book which is called 'An Independent Evaluation of the Initial Teaching Alphabet' it says in the introduction 'alike in reading and in spelling, the average differences reported by various investigators even when they seem to favour children taught by the Initial Teaching Alphabet are so slight and so variable that no over-all advantage of any practical importance can reasonably be claimed for the new medium'.

GEORGE O'HALLORAN: Well that's probably not completely fair when it says 'seem', because there is little doubt that it has been proven that there are advantages for children learning the Initial Teaching Alphabet. What is less clear is the amount of advantage a child gets from this. In the case of the most intelligent children this can be fairly large, children can learn to read six months earlier than comparable children would learn through traditional orthography. Children whose intelligences are at the lower end of the intelligence scale will learn more easily even though they may not learn very much more quickly. It seems to me that the big advantage of i.t.a. is for children whose language is not English.

GWYNLTH HENDERSON: The i.t.a has greater advantage for teaching English as a second language - which explains the interest there is in it in West Africa. i.t.a. trials have been going on for some time in the Gambia, where  $\frac{1}{3}$  of schools are now using it, in Sierra Leone and in the Western State of Nigeria, with another starting this month January in the East Central State - and discussions are going on between the i.t.a. foundation, Ghana and Cameroun too. So I asked Mr. O'Halloran what advantages it has over traditional orthography for children in West Africa - how effective is it?

GEORGE O'HALLORAN: Well I've done a great deal of this myself personally. I've taught folk ranging from five upwards in Africa to learn English as a foreign language. And anybody who watches the poor unfortunate little African children struggling with 'Once upon a time' will realise the great advantage which a phonetic script will give children at this stage of learning. In the trials which have been done in Nigeria and in the Gambia, there has been quite an amazing disparity of results come out, and I think a comparison of these trials has taught us something very new about the teaching of English as a foreign language and also the way i.t.a. works. In the Nigerian trials there was not a great deal to choose between the i.t.a. children and the t.o. children. The difference was distinguishable but it was quite small. In the Gambia there was an enormous result in favour of i.t.a. Now comparing these two trials has enabled us to pick out an important factor. That is, that in the Nigerian trial the books which were used were the New Nation Readers and they were used in i.t.a. for the i.t.a. children and in traditional orthography for the t.o. children. The difference between the achievement of these was quite small. Now in the Gambia we used the New Nation Readers for the

GEORGE O'HALLORAN: traditional orthography children and we used a series of books which were specially written to take advantage of the virtues of i.t.a. for the i.t.a. children. And the differences here were so dramatic that many people have great doubts when they look at the results of the trials, although they are indeed quite literally true.

GWYNETH HENDERSON: What sort of proportion then did you have in the Gambia that made it so startling?

GEORGE O'HALLORAN: Well in the first years results there was four times as many i.t.a. children as t.o. children in the top level of achievement. In the second year's results there was twenty-five times as many i.t.a. as t.o. children in the top level of achievement, and these are on tests, conducted and composed by the Gambian Ministry of Education. Now it's not absolute dumbness which is important here as the immense acceleration which occurred after the first year in the progress of the i.t.a. children. Now this was not matched at all by the t.o. children and it clearly seems to demonstrate that at the end of one year the i.t.a. children were in control of their own reading, and because they were in control of their own reading they were able to help themselves and make this immense difference in the succeeding year, but the t.o. children were not in control of their own reading at this point, and still are not.

GWYNETH HENDERSON: In what sort of ways does the i.t.a. reader differ to the traditional reader?

GEORGE O'HALLORAN: Well the main difference is in the vocabulary. If you're using a traditional orthography reader there are two main ways of teaching. There is the phonic way of teaching 'the black cat sat on the mat' variety

GEOURGE O'HALLORAN: and there is the look and say method of teaching in which words have to be repeated so often that it is impossible to get any variety into it. Now with i.t.a. the text book doesn't need to be tied to any limitation in vocabulary, either because of phonics or because of look and say, and this frees the text book to deal with matters which will be of interest to the children. Because this interest is then in their books they will be in fact interested, and because they are interested they will learn a great deal more quickly.

GWYNETH HENDERSON: Are you in fact going to have to then do any sort of extra teaching to get the children reading with the i.t.a. to traditional reading?

GEORGE O'HALLORAN: Now, Dr. Obcchi, when he was reporting the Nigerian experiment said that there were no difficulties whatsoever in transition, that the children simply moved from i.t.a. to traditional orthography with ease. This has been happening also in the Gambian experiment. In these circumstances I am not in favour of following the procedure which we follow in England. In England the tendency is to let a child transition when he himself, as an individual inside the class, is ready to transition. I think in Africa we must be sure that the children have a sufficiently large vocabulary to be able to recognise words they will meet in traditional orthography before we allow them to transition, and this is the way we are doing it in the Gambia. We are holding them to the entire course which we call Dynamic English and until they have finished that and have required a vocabulary of one thousand words we're not encouraging them to transition although we are not preventing them from doing it.

GWYNETH HENDERSON: So Mr. O'Halloran does believe that like all teaching methods and teaching mediums the localisation of the i.t.a. in its practice and the use of teaching aids like tex-books is essential. And on localisation how does the i.t.a foundation operate - is it all done from London or through local Ministries of Education, Universities or what?

GEORGE O'HALLORAN: Well it varies from country to country. In the case of Nigeria we're working in the Ibadan and Lagos area through the University of Ibadan, Dr. John Owerri, he is in control of the project there. In the East Central State we are working through the Education Department. In Sierra Leone we're working through the University College, Njala at the present moment, and in the Gambia we're working through the Ministry of Education.

GWYNETH HENDERSON: What are the major problems of teaching in English, or teaching English if you like, in Africa? Is the fact that so many primary school teachers are themselves very ill trained, and are not proficient in English? Do you think that the use of i.t.a is going to put too much strain on the back of primary school teachers, or are they going to be able to cope with this more easily than they would with traditional English?

GEORGE O'HALLORAN: The traditional way of doing it is to teach a child to read in his own language. While he is learning to read in his own language you teach him English orally and then, at a certain point, when you think he knows enough English words you move him over to English reading. You have in this way used his own language as a kind of initial teaching alphabet to help him over to reading in English. Now what we are doing with i.t.a. is we are in effect putting a phonetic script on to English from the very beginning. Now if you do this you are

GEORGE O'HALLORAN: getting a signajestic effect, now if the child starts to read from the very beginning in addition to his ears and his tongue he is also getting other impressions through his eyes and he is forming pictures of words which will be associated with their sounds. Now the greater number of senses working, the greater the impression will be, and we believe that children learning English from the beginning, reading, speaking and writing right from the very first lesson, will be the children who will learn English very very much more quickly. We believe also that this is probably easier for the teacher, in fact, because it enables him to put his whole attention on to one thing which he's attempting to do. Now there was one very distinct finding in the Ibadan trials and that was i.t.a. improved the English pronunciation of the teachers as much as it improved the English with the children.

GWYNETH HENDERSON: So the i.t.a. is not a difficult new means or medium to introduce - and it can specifically help the teacher. So looking forwards now how does Mr. O'Halloran see the future of i.t.a. in Africa.

GEORGE O'HALLORAN: I'm quite convinced that providing one picks the right kind of vocabulary and matches it in with i.t.a. we're going to have children learning English in both East and West Africa very much faster, I would say that children will be able to learn English to a stage of which they can use it for most purposes in a third of the time that they can now learn it in.

GWYNETH HENDERSON: Mr. George O'Halloran, director of the i.t.a. foundation. And if you would like to find out more about the initial teaching alphabet and how to use it, Mr. O'Halloran has in fact written a book which tells you everything you need to know - it is

GWYNETH HENDERSON: published in the Teach Yourself Books series by the English Universities Press - it's called simply i.t. and costs 45 n.p. in the United Kingdom. If you'd like a copy and can't get it locally write to us and we'll pass on requests - the address as usual 'University Report' BBC, London., now I really must go, I'll be back next week so join me then.

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