

RUNNING HEAD: Isabelle Yoffe Liberman

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Isabelle Yoffe Liberman (1918-1990), educational researcher, teacher, and clinician, was a champion of the scientific study of reading during the 1970s and 1980s. Liberman proposed that because the would-be reader must connect the sequence of letters in written words to the phonemic segments they represent, reading requires an explicit awareness of the phonemic structure of words (Liberman, 1973). Working with colleagues at the University of Connecticut and Haskins Laboratories, Liberman became convinced of the enormous importance of phoneme awareness for beginning reading acquisition in the early 1970s (Liberman, 1971; Liberman, Shankweiler, Fischer, & Carter, 1974; Mattingly, 1972). Research establishing the role of phoneme awareness has been described as “the single most powerful advance in the science and pedagogy of reading” in the twentieth century (Adams et al., 1991, p.392). Liberman proposed that reading is hard because segmentation of words into their constituent sounds doesn’t come naturally to preliterate children (Liberman, 1971). The difficulty of learning to read in an alphabetic system is therefore not due to problems with visual perception or auditory perception, but to a cognitive difficulty in linking things which initially are not language – graphic symbols – to the phonetic parts of words. Thus the principle of alphabetic writing is somewhat obscure.

In the years following the ground-breaking studies of Liberman and her colleagues, research from laboratories in several countries has shown that phoneme awareness is one of the best predictors of success or failure in reading acquisition, a finding that has prompted changes in the way reading is taught and changes in the definition of dyslexia (Lyon, 1995). While emphasizing the importance of phoneme awareness, Liberman also taught that the difficulties of poor readers are not confined to awareness, but often extend more broadly across the phonological domain of language to include difficulties in word retrieval and short-term memory (Liberman, Shankweiler, & Liberman, 1989).

Born in Latvia to Russian parents, Liberman emigrated to the United States with her family at an early age, receiving her education in the U.S. (A.B. Vassar; M.A. and Ph.D., Yale) While at Yale, she married Alvin M. Liberman, a fellow graduate student of psychology who also became a distinguished research psychologist. Isabelle Liberman decided to pursue clinical psychology after being informed that she could not expect to be hired in the same academic department as her husband.

Working at Connecticut's Children's Hospital, she became well-known as a diagnostician for children with learning disabilities. During these years, she became increasingly dissatisfied with the state of current knowledge in the field, noting that diagnosis and treatment of reading disability lacked a foundation in research and theory. Her practical experience in trying to help struggling readers inspired her search for the causes of reading problems in apparently normal children (Shankweiler, 1991).

In 1966, Liberman had the opportunity to join the faculty at the University of Connecticut in the Department of Educational Psychology. There, she directed the graduate teacher training programs in learning disabilities and began a remarkably productive research program, shared with colleagues Donald Shankweiler and Ignatius Mattingly, and also her husband and colleague, Alvin Liberman. Their work, and that of their students and collaborators, helped to create a new field of cross-national and cross-language study of reading (Liberman, Liberman, Mattingly, & Shankweiler, 1980). By 2005, research had established a link between phonemic awareness and reading acquisition in numerous alphabetic languages, including besides English, Arabic, Czech, Danish, Dutch, Finnish, German, Hebrew, Italian, Latvian, Portuguese, Russian, Serbo-Croatian, Spanish, and Turkish.

In 2000, phoneme awareness was identified by the National Reading Panel as one of the five core components for effective reading instruction (National Reading Panel, 2000). As a result, phoneme awareness was among the key elements in the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* ("No Child Left Behind Act of 2001," 2002). At this writing, phoneme awareness is included in state educational standards as an essential element of what students and their teachers must know and be able to do (Colorado Department of Education, 2000; Colorado Model Reading and Writing Standards Task Force, 1995). The research initiated by Isabelle Liberman and her colleagues continues to be applied in classrooms throughout the United States and abroad.

Selected Publications

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