

Paul A. Witty (1898-1976)

During World War II, just as in World War I, the armed services once again faced the need to utilize hundreds of thousands of men who were illiterate or poorly literate. Paul Andrew Witty, with an M.A. (1923) and Ph. D. (1931) from Columbia University in Psychology, specialized in understanding the process of learning to read and in developing methods for helping students who were having difficulties in learning to read. With this background, he was called upon to serve as an education officer in the War Department.

In May of 1943 the War Department published TM 21-500, entitled the "Army Reader". In this book, which was produced under Witty's direction, soldiers in the Army's Special Training Units for literacy instruction were introduced to Private Pete, a fictional soldier in a Special Training Unit who was also learning reading, writing, and arithmetic. The idea was that soldier's would be able to identify with Private Pete and understand what they were reading about him because they shared common experiences, such as living in the camp, sleeping in the barracks, eating in the mess hall, and so forth. These were all things that Private Pete did in the Army Reader. Witty was apparently the first to use this approach of trying to motivate adults learning to read by providing a fictional counterpart with whom they could identify.

Witty's analytic approach reflected the influence of William S. Gray, one of the founders of the famous Dick and Jane series for children, which provided a model for Witty's use of Private Pete in the Army Reader, and Arthur I. Gates, a leading reading professor at Columbia University. Both of these men were advocates of the analytic or "meaning emphasis" approach known as the "word" method. In this method students first developed readiness to read by discussing illustrations from the readers. Then they learned a basic store of sight words used in the readiness training. Then they moved on to simple sentences made up of the sight words. In this approach, phonics instruction was downplayed and postponed until the students could do quite a bit of reading based upon discussion and whole word recognition training.

In the Private Pete program, the teacher's guide of some 26 pages never goes into the teaching of phonics. Indeed, in Samuel Goldberg's (1951) book, *Army Training of Illiterates in World War II*, it is reported that, against advice, some of the teachers were making "excessive use of phonics in teaching word recognition and pronunciation." This was followed by a list of "unfortunate results" resulting from the over use of phonics against instructions to teach phonics only sparingly including: "first, the men were often being taught words, which happened to sound like others they already knew, but for which they had no real use; second, they were being taught words whose meaning they did not know; and third, they were being taught techniques which did not apply uniformly in all situations because of the non-phonetic character of the English language" (p. 200).

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Witty's program for the Army introduced several innovations in adult literacy education, including early use of audio-visual technologies such as film strips, cartoon strips in *Our War*, a special newspaper for literacy students, and photo novellas in which Private Pete and his buddy Daffy were portrayed in photographs of soldiers as actors in materials used to

teach reading to soldiers about to be discharged from military service. The program also innovated with unit tests to measure progress towards achieving the goal of 4th grade reading ability.

Found within

Seven Pioneering Adult Literacy Educators in the History of Teaching Reading With Adults in the United States

Tom Sticht

<http://www.en.copian.ca/library/research/sticht/feb05/seven.pdf>