

*Teachers, Always Use*  
*An Interview with* *Your* *Judgment.*  
*Jeanne Chall*



**J**eanne Chall, the diminutive, animated professor of education at Harvard, has been making waves in her field since she coauthored, with Edgar Dale, the widely used Dale-Chall readability formula. Her book *Learning To Read: The Great Debate* (McGraw-Hill, 1967), is largely credited with having turned the tide against the whole-word approach to teaching early reading.

At Harvard since 1965, Chall has been directing graduate programs in reading; working with children with reading problems in the Harvard reading laboratory; researching, writing; and consulting and lecturing across the country. Contributing editor Kim Marshall, on leave from his Boston classroom to do a master's program at Harvard, met Chall in her spring course *Reading, Schools and Social Policy*. In July, they sat down to discuss Chall's views on teaching and her soon-to-be-published book on the stages of reading development.

## BY KIM MARSHALL

**KIM MARSHALL:** Some of the open education folks have criticized you as an overly phonics-oriented, skill-driven person. Do you feel that's fair?

**JEANNE CHALL:** No, I don't think so. I've always felt that phonics and other skill training are stepping-stones to the reading of books. We teach phonics so that children are able to read literature and science and social studies.

**MARSHALL:** So what's your model for a good classroom reading program?

**CHALL:** There really is no one model. That is the point behind the stages theory. As students develop, they read differently; therefore the reading program should change as well.

**MARSHALL:** Your distress with the one-model approach to teaching reading led you to do research on stages of reading development, and your new book, *Stages of Reading Develop-*

*ment* (McGraw-Hill), will be published soon. Can you walk us through the basic structure you've put together?

**CHALL:** I do this with great hesitation, for I must in these very brief answers leave out the qualifications, the evidence, and the reasoning. I know I risk being misunderstood, but I will take the risk—with the hope that the readers will "argue" not with this brief overview, but with my full explanation in the forthcoming book.

I began to see after many years of research and practice that reading seems to go through characteristic stages of change and development that have some similarity to Piaget's cognitive stages. There's a pre-reading stage, which I call Stage Zero—a pseudo, make-believe stage when the child pretends to read books that have been read to him, and learns to recognize the letters and a few signs. Stage One reading is characterized by insight into the alphabetic system. During Stage One children puzzle out words, and recognize them and get sheer joy from this puzzling and knowing.

**MARSHALL:** They figure out that letters mean something.

**CHALL:** That's right. And what do they mean? They mean sounds that you say and put into words. Now you don't have to learn this by any one method; the insight can be gotten in different ways.

Stage Two is the beginning of "real" reading. If children don't know a word, they can figure it out from the sounds, the insights about phonics learned in Stage One, and also because they know the story or one like it in terms of its linguistic form and content. Familiarity with the material is a crucial element at Stage Two. Historically, some cultures have used regular adult materials, like the Bible or the Koran, to teach reading. Some religious schools still do. They succeed because these materials are familiar to the children, who have heard them and responded to them orally.

In any event, Stage Two children read mostly thin little books with lots of pictures of things they know. Then at Stage Three they move on to reading in order to learn something they don't already know—new information or feelings.

**MARSHALL:** Don't children read new and unfamiliar material before Stage Three?

**CHALL:** Yes, of course they do. Reading is always a new act, since the words and sentence structure and topics always vary. Unless children reread the same stories, everything they read is

new. But when we compare the textbooks and stories they can read in Stages One and Two to stories they can read in Stage Three and later, we find characteristic differences: the materials for Stages One and Two are about familiar experiences. The concepts are elemental, universally known in a society, even by those without formal schooling. The vocabulary is very familiar, already known in speech and understanding, and the syntax is known. Stage Three books, by comparison, are removed in time and place; the vocabularies are specialized, technical, abstract, and literary. The concepts are more difficult and rare and usually require formal schooling.

Stage Three lasts a long time because, essentially, what children are learning is how to deal with the new in different subject areas. They're not going up higher all the time; they're expanding. Reading is very, very circular, particularly beginning at Stage Three. You need the background knowledge to understand what you read, and you get knowledge and vocabulary from your reading. It goes round and round.

The next stage, Stage Four, is characterized by the ability to deal with different viewpoints, to read critically and to infer from what you read.

**MARSHALL:** But can't children read critically before Stage Four?

**CHALL:** Yes. Children do react critically to what they read earlier than Stage Four. But, I propose that developmentally, in order to be objectively critical, you must have knowledge of a wide range of facts and opinions. You must also be able to think abstractly. You have to know a lot, and you have to reason well before you can engage in informed criticism and evaluation.

The situation is similar for the relationship between Stage Four and Stage Five, the highest stage. In stage Five, all of the world's knowledge in print is there for you, not to be regurgitated, but to be used, to be integrated, to be made yours. Obviously, people reading below Stage Five make material their own, but it takes extended practice to do this with confidence and accuracy, and with the very high level of complexity that is usually required at this stage.

**MARSHALL:** Getting back to methods of teaching reading at the earlier stages, what is your feeling about programs that break reading down into small skills?

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**MARSHALL:** Getting back to methods of teaching reading at the earlier stages, what is your feeling about programs that break reading down into small skills?

**CHALL:** I am a little afraid that if we



break it down too much we may lose the larger picture. Some programs call learning the letter *b* a skill, and I think that's unfortunate; it's a kind of trivialization. What the teacher needs is the broader structure. The child, too, doesn't usually have to know *b* to perfection before he or she goes on to *c*. It's tragic to be so concerned with hundreds of so-called skills. (Incidentally, there is little agreement in the field as to the number and variety of the skills.) Practicing them is usually so time consuming that there may not be time left to read anything else. There's got to be time for writing, discussion, dictation, reading out loud, and, above all, for reading real books—fiction and nonfiction—newspapers and magazines.

**MARSHALL:** So you're not a fan of the so-called skills management programs, or "individualized" reading programs?

**CHALL:** They do not seem to work out, mostly because they take a lot of managing and for the reasons I just mentioned. The teacher must spend time managing and correcting and doesn't have much time to teach. And what the research seems to be showing now, in the middle grades in particular, is that you need discussion and dialogue, and children in larger groups reading the same material. Essentially we are finding that a teacher is a teacher, not only a guide.

**MARSHALL:** What is your feeling about grouping by learning style in the early grades?

**CHALL:** I tend to be a bit cautious here. Many people are talking now of separating children by pre-testing; currently there is also talk of being left-brained or right-brained. My fear is that we don't yet know enough about testing these, or further, how they would differently affect success with the different methods of teaching. Second, I think we should be cautious about giving different "kinds" of children different curricula in the same classroom. It is unrealistic for the teacher and may not be helpful for the child's confidence. There has in fact been a trend back to some learnings to be shared by all, as with Harvard's core curriculum. I've been thinking a great deal about that for reading instruction. There should be discussion of some of the same texts. How do you know whether the children are reading thoughtfully? In a discussion, they say, "Hey, I think it's this!" And another says, "I think it's that!" And the teacher might say, "You know something, you may both be right." This may be perhaps the

best way for children to learn that more than one interpretation of a text is possible.

**MARSHALL:** In the broadest sense, what makes a child get better at reading? Is it always having a certain amount of instruction above his current level?

**CHALL:** Yes, a challenging level is important, but development comes from much more. The way children improve is through much reading on assignment, but they also have to do reading on their own, reading for recreation, for enjoyment, for imagination. The teacher should suggest books and make children see that they should be reading. Teachers should stimulate children to write about their

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reading. So teaching alone doesn't do it, and the teaching of reading alone doesn't do it. Beginning at Stage Three, it's also the reading and writing that is done in the content subjects—in literature, science, history, health, and so forth.

**MARSHALL:** What or who is interfering with the efforts of good teachers these days, do you think?

**CHALL:** I have always found that teachers know more than they are given credit for. I have sat in classroom after classroom, and I talk with teachers, and they are intelligent and capable. Then sometimes I observe things that do not fit, and usually I find that it's something that the teacher thinks he or she has to do. Teachers are, unfortunately, not consulted when major decisions are made about methods and materials; one hears of a superintendent or a principal buying a reading series without ever consulting teachers.

What I would recommend to teachers is this: always be intelligent, always use your judgment. If the published program you use has too many exercises, use them as you think best. Nobody will tell you that every exercise has to be done, not even the publisher. In *The Great Debate*, I asked teachers to estimate the amount of time it would take to do one lesson

in a primer, and they said from 2¼ to 4¼ hours—which would leave very little time for any other kinds of learning.

That's why I wrote the stages of reading book. I felt that what teachers needed was a structure in their minds of what it is to learn to read, going from the pre-beginnings all the way up to the most advanced, scholarly, artistic reading of the most skilled. If teachers have that structure in their heads, that grasp of reading and how it develops, they could use any materials that anybody gave them—because they would know where they are going.

**MARSHALL:** For students who are having difficulty learning to read, what do you think are the most critical ages of intervention, and what strategies do you think work best?

**CHALL:** The earlier the better, generally. There is some work on prevention through early screening, although that seems to have lost some favor because of the early labeling and separation of children that it led to. I like to see all beginning readers thrown together and taught together. If the child needs extra help, you give it—a little bit of tutoring, a little bit of soft, gentle help, perhaps by somebody coming in, an older person, a golden-age volunteer. If the child continues to struggle, I'd say that child needs to be looked at by a reading or learning disabilities specialist or by a school psychologist.

**MARSHALL:** Are you talking about a full work-up?

**CHALL:** My theory is that you do as little testing as you need to do in order to help the child. Generally I think that you should not make a big to-do, until it comes out in the functioning. If what you are trying in the classroom doesn't work, then you do more testing to find out how the child can learn. There's no need to test more fully if the child makes progress on the basis of the earlier testing and the suggested remediation.

Also, I hasten to add that although help seems to be most effective when given earlier, it is important to know that it is effective at all levels of elementary school, secondary school, college and adult years. If a person has a problem in reading, you should never say that the person can't be helped; it's never too late. ■

*Kim Marshall is a contributing editor for Learning. This year he is on special assignment, working on curriculum in the superintendent's office of the Boston public schools.*