

## Letter from Alexander Graham Bell to Mabel Hubbard Bell, March 17, 1891, with transcript

ALEXANDER GRAHAM BELL TO MABEL (Hubbard) BELL 1336 19th Street, Washington, D. C. March 17th, 1891. My darling Mabel:

I wonder whether you have reached Atlantic City safely and comfortably — and how many things you have left behind! Daisy is all right now I think. Lily and Robbie left for Monec this evening. Aileen and Laurie will help so receive the Literary Society on Saturday. It is very late now and I must close with love to you and Elsie and kind regards to Miss Kinnan. Have been working all night over article for the Annals — of which the following is a copy.

Your loving husband, Alec.

THE NATURAL METHOD A correction to the Editor of the Annals. Dear Sir:

I have read with much interest Mr. Blattner's article upon "The Natural Method" published in the Annals (Vol. XXXVI P.1–11) I am somewhat surprised however that he should accept my premises and yet reject my conclusions.

On page 3 he says! "Dr. Bell is eminently correct in his premise that the natural order is to understand language before using it." Surely then it follows that Reading should precede Writing.

Mr. Blattner however claims (p.3) that this would be reversal of the natural order, "for to read and to memorize is to use language."

I am certain that a little reflection will convince your readers that this is an error. Reading is "understanding the language" and Writing is "using it." If this is so it follows that Mr. Blattner's 2 method is not the Natural Method at all but the reversal of it.

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So far from “losing sight of the very important fact that children come to understand expressions by hearing them constantly applied” (p. 3), I urge that deaf children will come to understand them by seeing them constantly applied. If then the Natural Method is followed it is the teacher — far more than the pupil — who “should be made to write from the very beginning” (P.10) If the teacher communicates by means of writing (or spelling) the pupil will then have a chance of picking up the language in the Natural way — which is always by imitation.

Writing however is a very slow process. The best of us can hardly scribble more than about thirty words in a minute. We cannot even spell with anything like the rapidity with which words are spoken to the ears of hearing children. I think therefore that the teacher should supplement his personal efforts by the language of printed books — and Reading should be made a regular school exercise in every class. Printed words can be read at an enormously greater rate than they could be written or spelled by the hand. I have no doubt that pupils could read more words in an hour than the teacher could write or spell in a day. Hence much valuable time would be saved — and a much greater repetition of words and phrases be obtained than if books were not employed.

I would not have deaf children “worry over pages of printed characters representing things beyond the range of their observation or thought” (p. 3) On the contrary I have advised that the subjects should be those that are of most interest to children of their age. For example — stories like “Jack the Giant Killer” “The Three Bears” and etc., and that those should be acted out after 3 the reading of the story has been completed.

While of course the language employed would necessarily, at first, be beyond the comprehension of the deaf child, the subjects would not, and the subsequent action would give life and interest to what otherwise might be unmeaning words — or words imperfectly or incorrectly understood.

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If the Natural Method is followed our pupils should be required to gather ideas from written language before the converse process is insisted upon to any great extent. However difficult it may be to gather thoughts from unfamiliar words and phrases, it is certainly easier than to express our thoughts in a language that we do not know. We can all read a foreign book with much greater ease than we can speak the foreign tongue. Reading is easier than writing and should therefore come first.

I do not undervalue the importance of writing — and constant writing too — on the part of the deaf child, but surely writing should be secondary to reading in the earlier stages if the natural order is followed.

(signed) Alexander Graham Bell. Washington, D. C. March 17th, 1891.