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An overview of the phonetic approach to reading

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An overview of the phonetic approach to reading

Abstract

As the nation's reading experts debate about the best method to teach reading, our country's "functionally illiterate" stand in the shadow of the conflict. Now numbering about 26 million, our "functionally illiterate" compose a substantial sector of our population. Although there are a variety of available reading programs, the two main approaches are phonics and whole word methods.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE PHONETIC APPROACH
TO READING

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Master of Arts in Education

by
LAWRENCE M. JASKE

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As the nation's reading experts debate about the best method to teach reading, our country's "functionally illiterate" stand in the shadow of the conflict. Now numbering about 26 million, our "functionally illiterate" compose a substantial sector of our population. Although there are a variety of available reading programs, the two main approaches are phonics and whole word methods.

Phonics is the technique of translating parts of visible words into sounds, then using the sound to recognize and pronounce words. This science of speech sounds, as applied to reading, is the central focus of this research paper. First, a history of phonetic instruction is reviewed; from the first phonics primer in the early 1500's to the Reading Reform Foundation's intensive phonics program of the last 25 years. Second, a look at the evaluation of phonetically centered programs defines this approach and points out the rationale of said method. Finally, realistic conclusions are offered in the implementation of phonetically-based programs.

History of Phonics

The historical roots of phonetic instruction can be traced back to the 1500s. A German, Valentin Ickelsomer, wrote a phonics primer in 1527. This book proposed the theory that it was best to teach

beginning readers to isolate speech sounds (phonemes), then to recite, in order, the phonemes represented by the word's letters. This philosophy was unique from the ABC method (children learning to read by naming the letters of the word) that was practiced in this time period.

Contradiction of phonics manifested itself in yet another new reading theory, and so the opposition to phonics began. In 1614, Lubinus offered his proposal for the "whole-word" or "look-and-say" method. Forty-three years later, Comenius (credited with the introduction of the whole-word method) practiced and preached his philosophy. Yet he never abandoned the ABC method. Although clearly stated and widely publicized, neither phonics nor the whole-word method displaced the ABC method. This status remained secure through the eighteenth century. By 1779, an even stronger proponent of the whole-word method existed in Germany. Gedike believed the phonic method neither "necessary nor useful" (Mathews, 1966, p. 39), and that reading the whole-word was more enjoyable and practical.

Jacotot in 1823 suggested pupils first memorize words in the sentence, then learn the letters in each of the words. After this, pupils "could give all the sounds and could assemble them into the entire word. The pupils could do the same for the letters, relating

each into its appropriate sound." (Mathews, p. 46) The whole-word theory was gaining publicity and popularity.

Subsequently, the whole-word method became known in the United States. The distinction of being the first American author to advocate the whole-word method in 1928 belonged to Worcester. Worcester's philosophy was: "Beginning readers first learn to read words by seeing them, hearing them pronounced, having meanings illustrated. Then afterwards they may learn to analyze them or name the letters of which they are composed." (Smith, 1965, p. 65) The whole-word method did concede, however, that phonics should be taught only after beginning readers had first learned to recognize a number of whole words by "sight" (as this form of identification later came to be called). This concept of phonics appropriateness (if delayed) is similar to current whole-word philosophies.

Following the American Revolution the subject of sounds became more important in reading instruction. It was a way of standardizing American speech. Noah Webster, via the renown American Spelling Books, sought to destroy the new nation's dialects by emphasizing (through phonics) common pronunciations of common words.

In the 1800's, the dominance of the "whole-word method" was not attained but only accepted by some writers of basal readers. By 1840, Horace Mann, prominent educational leader, presented his

opinion to teachers and school administrators. He believed it was words, that were "familiar to young children." (Durkin, 1962, p. 512) It was letters and letter sounds that were unfamiliar. Mann and his fellow reformers established the first state-owned and operated teacher college, where the whole-word method was taught as the preferred and superior method of instruction.

Mann's movement remained undaunted for five years until 1844, when a reaction occurred. A group of Boston school masters published a book-length attack on Mann and his reforms. This book represented "the first thorough and detailed critique of the whole-word method ever written." (Blumenfeld, 1982, p. 16) Although the phonetic approach was restored in the primary schools; the whole-word method was nurtured by the training schools as a reasonable alternative.

In the early 1900's, the phonetic method was again contested as Colonel Francis Parker, John Dewey, and G. Stanley Hall revived interest in the whole-word method philosophy. This group perceived a complementary relationship between the whole-word method and progressive education. Included in the progressive's approach was the Gestalt psychology, which emphasized a "wholeness" in the learning process. As the discreditation of the phonetic method increased, so did the interest in finding and securing a simpler and less formal reading method.

However, as early as 1929, educators were warned by prominent physicians that the whole-word method could cause serious reading disabilities. Dr. Samuel T. Orton, a neuropathologist, stated that: "This method may not only prevent the acquisition of academic education of average capacity, but may also give rise to far-reaching damage to their emotional life." (Blumenfeld, p. 17) Orton's research and findings were derived from reading disability studies done in Iowa. Although Orton's findings did not alter the publication of the new whole-word basal reading series, its diagnoses and terminology were used in the identification of reading problems in children.

By 1930, textbooks seemed to exclude the whole phonetic approach. Phonics teachers were viewed as drill instructors commanding students through rote drills in speech sounds. Even the reading classes were viewed as nothing more than memorization exercises with little or no comprehension by the student of the subject involved.

During the 1940's remedial teaching of reading became an educational specialty with its own professional status. Departments and clinics were created to handle the thousands of youngsters with reading problems. The studies and research sought out the cause and causes of this dilemma. A new language was created to define these multiple conditions; alexia, congenital word blindness;

strephosymbolia, binocular imbalance, and more. As the problem increased, probable causes increased; yet, the method of teaching the children to read was never investigated.

Many years passed before Rudolf Flesch, in 1955, authored his book, Why Johnny Can't Read and What You Can Do About It, and the phonics method became a viable alternative to whole-word teaching. Flesch blatantly identified the cause of enormous reading difficulties in primary-school children. He felt the cause was the method used in the U.S. at that time. Flesch also thought that the whole-word method was all wrong and illogical. Greensboro Daily News described the effect of Flesch's book as "the opening barrage of one of the bloodiest philosophical battles ever to fracture the national educational establishment, a bitter protracted war of attrition with professional reputations, research grants, and millions of dollars in textbook sales at stake." (McNulty, 1976)

It was the opinion of phonetic method proponents that the battle was more that one method versus another. It was complicated by two important factors. The first factor involved was teacher training programs dominated by whole-word method professors. The second factor was the lucrative industry of textbook publication, again, dominated by the proponents of whole-word method. Unsurmountable odds existed in this educational debate.

Professional reaction to the Flesch thesis was negative. Educational professors denounced the theory for its "oversimplification, misrepresentation, and superficiality." (Blumenfeld, p. 18) Professional publications contained articles clarifying the whole-word technicians' defensive stand. Mac Millan Publishers presented articles for distribution among parents and teachers. A need for unification of whole-word professionals became evident.

William S. Gray, revered spokesperson for the whole-word method, proceeded to unify the professionals. In 1955, Gray and colleagues combined the National Association for Remedial Teaching and the International Council for the Improvement of Reading Instruction. This merger formed the International Reading Association (IRA), and Gray became the first president. By 1956 it had 7,000 members, published journals, and held conventions.

The phonics camp produced two organizations. In 1958, the Council for Basic Education was formed by professionals favoring a return to the phonetic method. The Reading Reform Foundation was formed in 1961 to promote an intensive phonics approach. Combined, these organizations represented a minority interest at this time.

In 1963, the alternative to whole-word teaching was represented in textbook form by three major book publishers. Lippincott, Open Court, and Economy began producing basal readers based on the

phonetic approach. However, 85% of readers still used the whole-word method; contending that there was no research proving any one method of teaching was superior.

As if spurned by this contention, Dr. Jeanne Chall released her research findings in 1967 with Learning to Read: The Great Debate. A respected IRA member and Harvard professor, Ms. Chall researched beginning reading instruction extensively. She concluded: "Early stress on code (phonetic) learning produces better readers than the whole-word method." (Blumenfeld, p. 18) Although Chall's findings were criticized as biased and inconclusive by the IRA, the phonetic approach was, indeed, on the forefront of consideration once again.

Concurrent to Chall's studies was the psycholinguistic school of whole-word thought. Professor Kenneth Goodman, predecessor of William Gray, authored material introducing linguistics to the whole-word vocabulary. Goodman, in Reading: A Psycholinguistic Guessing Game, referred to reading as a "selective process"... "a psycholinguistic guessing game relying on available language cues selected from perceptual input on the basis of the reader's expectation." (Blumenfeld, p. 19) As the psycholinguistic emphasis debated against the code emphasis, the federal government initiated its action in the reading controversy.

Via the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, the nation spent \$100 billion on a compensatory reading education

program, Title One. Ten years later, results of the program displayed failure, as the reading scores of the nation's students declined. A committee on reading suggested the problem was not the program itself, but the educational establishment; suggestive of methods and techniques initiating reading problems.

As if to reiterate the phonics emphasis in response to the failure of Title One, both Flesch and Chall sequelled their previous works. Flesch entitled his follow-up, Why Johnny Still Can't Read(1981) and Chall's update was entitled, Learning to Read: The Great Debate(1983). Both prominent authors reaffirmed, aided by research in the interim, their belief in the efficiency and necessity of phonics in the schools' reading programs.

With the eighties dawned a new era of phonetic interest and support. In 1985, the United States Department of Education published their report, Becoming A Nation of Readers. The report on classroom research indicated that, on the average, children who were taught phonics received a better beginning in learning than those children who did not. The Secretary of Education, Bennett, recommended teaching children to read by use of the phonetic approach, in his report, What Works: Research About Teaching and Learning. His research included forty one ways to best teach children. Private individuals, as well as, the federal governments, activated their support.

Dr. Rudolf Flesch published Teach Your Child to Read(1986) which supported phonics and discredited the look-say approach energetically. After providing parents with the alphabetic code, the article encouraged parents to employ the code and teach their children to read before formal education begins. Dr. Flesch believes this teaching acts as a safeguard against exposure to look-say programs.

In an effort to search out the best reading programs, the U.S. House of Representatives Subcommittee on Education held a hearing beginning March 20, 1986. This hearing was to gather pertinent information on the creditability of various reading programs. This investigatory activity led to related legislation.

Signed on October 1, 1986, the Zorinsky Bill (so named for the senator from Nebraska who introduced it) orders the Education Department to do the following; "List beginning reading programs, the programs' cost, and whether the programs will present well-designed instruction as recommended in Becoming a Nation of Readers".(Jaeger, 1986, p. 30) This ordering of inventorial research is necessary in the search for the best and most efficient approach. In a nation of a growing number of illiterates, the research and finding of an effective program is pertinent.

Phonetic Approach Defined

"The common thread of all alphabetic languages is the phonetic linkage of symbols to sounds." (Micciche, 1986, p. 7) The most complete list of letters and combinations of letter and sound correlation for English words is about 70 different formats to represent 45 different sounds. "Research isn't needed to tell us that written English is based on a phonetic code," (Micciche, p. 6). Research can tell us something about the nature of the code, how we assimilate it, sort and catalog it in our brains.

There are three stages in the development of word reading ability. "The first stage involves identifying words by visual cues." (Ehri, 1986, p. 21) A very early stage, pre-reading, involves reading words in context; a cereal box, logos of popular toys, and so on. Basing a reading approach on visual cues is ineffective as cues are arbitrary and may change.

"The second stage develops when letters are learned." (Ehri, p. 21) When sufficient knowledge of letters is developed, the visual cues are replaced by phonetic cues. Only using partial cues, the understanding of how to completely segment words into sound is not fully comprehended. It is an intermediate stage according to Dr. Linnea Ehri of UC-Davis.

The third stage occurs when the letter sound system is understood and applied to the decoding of words, processing letters and words and retaining spelling. Piaget would refer to this stage (approximately ages 5 to 6-11 or 12) as the concrete operation period. "Children at these ages are often unaware of thought processes, having difficulty verbalizing physical actions." (Evans and Rosso, 1981, p. 654) In relation to phonetic approaches, the Tovey study of 1980 demonstrated that children at this stage didn't need to know the phonetic terms to apply rules (generalization). Those children studied applied the generalizations, however, were unable to verbalize each rule used. Tovey's conclusions supported studies by Clymer (1963) and Emans (1967) evaluating the necessity of selecting phonetic generalizations for their applicability.

To what importance is the knowledge of phonics then? Dorothy Strickland, professor of education at Columbia University Teachers College, stated (before a House hearing) that "phonics is one of the most important cue systems; one cannot deny the function of letter/sound knowledge in beginning reading." (Groff, 1986, p. 2) Kathleen Clayton in IRA Proceeding said that "phonics is a part of every sound readings program." (Clayton, 1968, p. 55) Mr. Jack Bagford believes "phonics has an extremely important role to play in teaching of reading." (Bagford, 1969, p. 29) Professionals representing varied schools of thought agree that phonics is

important; the degree of which separates the individuals into their favored theories.

Separation of the various methods into their respective philosophical basis has been complicated in the last three decades. Proponents of the phonetic method have intensified. Opponents to intensified phonics have added varying portions of phonics to their approaches. These additions are combinations and are referred to as conventional or gradual phonics.

The phonetic approach encompasses a variety of programs. The synthetic approach is characterized by the fact that the phonetic approach is only one part of many different programs. The phonetic approach is present in materials such as; Economy Company Basic Reading Series, the Carden system, the Hay-Wingo materials, and the Spalding programs.

The Carden system was developed in the mid to late fifties and is centered on phonics. The system begins with exercises on naming/sounding consonants progressing on through vowel sounds and consonant blends. In second grade, phonetic generalizations and letter-sound combinations are learned. Practice on this foundational basis is continued through the 8th grade. Termain and Walcott rated the Carden system as "the best of its kind." (Gates, 1961, p. 175) Critics of the system researched and revealed that

"the system neither helped nor harmed the upper elementary students, and recommended a simpler-less structured program." (Gates, p. 179)

A well-known phonetic system, the Hay-Wingo materials use pictures for sounds of vowels and consonants. Vowels and consonants are joined into syllables, then into words; then stories. This system is synthetic (phonetic) in that it concentrates on parts of words (initially), which are later combined into whole words. Opponents to this and similar methods dislike "the deductive approach used, which promotes memorization exclusive of general understanding and insight." (Durkin, p. 515)

All channels of the mind are utilized with the Spalding method. Students are taught the sound of each letter and combinations of letters as well as a vocabulary of 150 words before reading is begun. This system of reading is based on "a total language arts approach using unified phonics, in hearing, seeing, saying, and writing." (Carroll, 1983) Results from using this program frequently show students testing a grade higher than present level.

Common factors in these phonetic approaches, (differing from the combination/conventional methods represented by American Book, Ginn, Row Peterson, and Scott Foresman) generally include three characteristics. In 1965, the Gurren-Hughes review of 36 studies, (comparing look-say to phonics), suggested these three points. Concerning timing, phonics teaches all main vowel and consonant

sounds from the beginning of reading instruction (1st grade). Concerning emphasis, the phonetic method uses constant phonetic review. Concerning the method of attacking unfamiliar words, the phonetically-trained beginning reader pronounces all the sounds of unfamiliar words in normal order and uses context for confirming the result. These three points were used in categorizing the reading programs for the Gurren and Hughes research review.

A variety of conclusions are available from studies investigating phonetic methods of teaching reading. In the school year of 1964-65, the United States Office of Education sponsored 27 studies in first grade reading. The studies showed that "intensive-phonics groups performed better than the conventional method." (Gurren and Hughes, 1967) Concurrently, a parallel project by Hughes, Smith, and Thomas, (involving nine school systems in eight states), demonstrated that "the intensive-phonics children were significantly superior on all subtests to the conventional (gradual-phonics) children." (Gurren and Hughes, 1967) These studies supported findings of Gurren and Hughes in 1965. The results from that review: "favored teaching all main sound relationships (vowel and consonant) from the beginning of formal reading instruction; showed that this method benefits comprehension as well as vocabulary; and demonstrated that phonetic groups are usually superior in grade three and above." (p. 344) The importance and

degree of phonics stated; early exposure to the phonetic approach to reading seems pertinent.

Implementation of this approach relies, in a large part, on the individual reading instructor. Bagford research (1963) viewed teachers as being actively involved in the determination of the role of phonics in the total reading program. Bagford also believed "the teacher was the determinant to the success of the reading program...the single most important variable."(p. 29) The ability and attitude of a teacher in relation to a specific reading method can be instrumental or detrimental to that reading method.

Teacher training is to provide that knowledge of various methods of teaching. How knowledgeable are reading instructors in the phonetic approach? Spache (1964) concluded "that the average teacher isn't thoroughly trained in phonics in college reading courses."(p. 283) According to a 1982 survey by Froese, approximately sixteen hundred graduate program reading professors were asked which reading authorities wrote the most significant, worthy, and "classic" studies in reading. "The top three names on this list ... were; Frank Smith, Kenneth Goodman, and Edmund Huey,"(Groff, 1983, p. 1) well-known opponents to the intensive teaching of phonics. It is doubtful that teachers are being trained sufficiently in phonics when the present stance is anti-phonics by reading professors. In 1961, Austin's survey contended that "...

the thorough and intensive training of college instructors of teachers of reading...."(Winkley, 1970, p. 17) is the place to begin if the reading skills of children are to improve. Micciche believes the teacher needs to understand the basis of phonics in order to be "... a true professional with a firm psychological grasp of teaching reading."(p. 6) If there is deficiency in the teacher's knowledge of phonics and the method of teaching it, the program, itself, will never reach its full potential.

A Reasonable Choice

Many reports, studies, and surveys suggest certain points to consider for a conscientious phonetic program of reading. The recommendations of Hughes and Gurren research reiterate these points. First, all vowel and consonant sound-symbol relationships should be taught intensively from the beginning of reading instruction. Secondly, schools should provide teachers with intensive-phonetic based texts and inservice training in that discipline. Thirdly, colleges and universities should offer training in necessary techniques of reading. These research-supported recommendations are useful in the implementation of an improved reading program.

Awareness of the illiteracy situation is integral in initiating positive action and support for improved methods. In an effort to

increase public awareness of the illiteracy problem, 1987 has been declared the "Year of the Reader" by the Library of Congress. Accompanying (and, in part, preceding) this is the saturation of the media through PLUS (Project Literacy U.S.). The Public Broadcasting System and the American Broadcasting Company collaborated; investing money and time to: news specials, daytime serials, dramatic programming, and public service announcements dealing with illiteracy. However the problem is addressed, the prevention of that problem seems a logical consideration.

Conclusively, quoting from the report by Mr. William Bennett's First Lessons, the reasonable choice of those concerned with improving reading programs and decreasing illiteracy is summarized. "Research for the past two decades has confirmed what experience and common sense tell us; that children learn to read more effectively when they first learn the relationship between letters and sounds. This is known as phonics." (Hodenfield, 1987)

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