

Introduction

Phonics is the traditional method of teaching reading in the Western world. It is uniquely suited to our alphabetic method of writing.

All the words in any language may be decomposed into a few sounds, called **phonemes**. English uses 44 of these phonemes to make all of the several hundred thousand words in the vocabulary of an educated person.

What is Phonics?

As one can probably already guess, phonics (or phonetics) is the practice of decoding written words by identifying the sounds represented by the letters, and then blending those sounds together to reconstruct the word. For 6,000 years, this method has been the **only** method used to teach reading.

Once the prospective reader has memorized the association between the phonemes and the symbols which represent them he is able to sound out **any** word in his language, whether or not he knows what it means, or has ever seen it before. The memorization requires a few days of effort, but that effort provides a foundation for literacy.

History

The word "phonics" comes from the Phoenician people who first invented an alphabet, roughly 6,000 years ago. Each symbol represented one phoneme, and so the several sounds which made up a word could be encoded by writing down the symbols which stood for those sounds.

Once one knew the symbols for each of the few phonemes in the language, one could read **any** word in that language, including unfamiliar ones.

The Greeks and Romans also used phonetic alphabets, which they borrowed from the Phoenicians. The Greek alphabet looks almost nothing like our present alphabet, but the Roman alphabet was almost identical to ours. All their letters had the shape and meaning of our present letters. Their alphabet lacked the letters "w" and "j".

When the Romans conquered Europe and Britain, they brought their alphabet along. When the Western Roman Empire faded, the Roman

Catholic church remained, and Latin remained the language of religion, science and literature for at least 1,000 years. The alphabet we use today is called the Latin alphabet.

To give some idea of the effectiveness of the phonetic method of reading, in the American Colonies at the time of the revolution, literacy was ubiquitous.

Thomas Paine's pamphlet "Common Sense" sold 600,000 copies to a population of 3,000,000: one in five people bought a copy. This was at a time when 95% of the population were poor farmers. A few years later, in 1830, James Fenimore Cooper's novel "The Last of the Mohicans" sold 5,000,000 copies to a population of fewer than 20,000,000, most of them still farmers.

It has been estimated that by the end of the 19th century, the literacy rate was over 98% in the Northern U.S. Today, the literacy rate is, depending on your definition of "literate", anywhere from 50% to 85%.

Around the turn of the last century, the "Look/Say" method (today, it's called Whole Language) was imposed on American public schools. This method calls for the reader learn the shapes of words: to memorize every word that he would read as if it were a Chinese ideograph. This calls for a great deal of effort, and the effort provides no foundation! No matter how many words are memorized, the reader has no tools for reading new words; no tools for literacy.

The Look/Say method seems to be one of the primary reasons (perhaps the only reason) that full-fledged literacy is becoming rare in the U.S. today. A well-educated person will have a vocabulary of several hundred thousand words. Even if the reader is diligent in memorizing the shapes of words, he will never be able to read every word he knows!

The Chinese require their college graduates to have memorized only about 15,000 ideographs, and they are still working on it during their college years. That time might be better spent on studying subject matter rather than learning to read, but for the Chinese student, or the Western student taught by Look/Say, reading is a life-long struggle instead of a life-long aid to learning.

Consider the comparative levels of difficulty of

phonics and whole language methods: phonics requires that one memorize 44 phonemes and their symbols, and that one practice blending together the sounds they represent. This can be fully mastered in a few months by a small child. Look/Say or whole language, on the other hand, require that one memorize the shape of every word that one reads. This requires a lifetime of non-stop effort! It's not surprising that many children choose not to make the effort, and remain illiterate.

Is Your Child Being Taught Phonics?

Today, in response to demand from parents, most schools claim to be teaching phonics.

Unfortunately, their claim is often more about form than substance.

Schools often teach what they call a "balanced approach" or a "blend" of phonics and whole language (as Look/Say is called today). This means that the children are taught to memorize the shapes of words! The phonics component is usually limited to using the sound of the first letter of the word as an aid to memory.

If some phonics instruction is actually included, it is usually "implicit": the children are expected to figure out the connection between sounds and symbols on their own. Unsurprisingly, many never do, and their reading ability is crippled for life.

Whole language methods rely on memorizing the shapes of words, guessing about the meaning of unfamiliar words from their context, and, maybe, using letter sounds as clues for the guesswork.

If your child is being taught to guess the meanings of unfamiliar words, or has lists of "sight words" (words he should be able to recognize on sight), his school is almost surely using whole language, and he is almost surely not reading as well as he should.

If your child's school is using a program which combines whole language and phonics, your child probably has had **no** explicit exposure to phonics, and is almost surely not reading as well as he should.

Even if the school is explicitly teaching phonics (that's very rare, and should certainly be praised) any time they spend on whole language

instruction is time taken away from phonics instruction, and from reading practice.

Teaching Phonics

Just as phonics provides an easy way to read, it is an easy way to teach others to read. There are three skills which must be learned: one must learn to break words up into their component sounds, one must memorize the symbols for the phonemes, and one must learn to blend together the phonemes to form the words. Even very small children are easily able to learn all of these skills.

Start working on these skills with your child when you think he is far too young to benefit by it. He will almost surely be ready much younger than you believe, and if you keep exposing him to it, then when he is finally ready, the ideas will "click", and he will be reading.

If you are starting this when your child is really a bit too young, you won't expect him to pick it up immediately, and you can keep it a silly game, rather than making it a task at which he must succeed. This keeps the pressure off both of you.

Breaking up words.

You can play games to teach this. For example, say: "Point to the c a t". Don't say the names of the letters, but say their sounds. It should sound like "Kuh Ah Tuh" rather than "See Ay Tee". Older children will catch on very fast, while younger ones may take many tries before they get comfortable with this.

Sound out some of the words in your child's favorite books as you read the book to him. This will help familiarize the child with the process, even though it may not produce any apparent effect.

Memorizing Symbols

You can (and probably should) work on this concurrently with the breaking up words game. Again, especially if you are starting this with a younger child, make it a game, and expect that they won't get it immediately.

To help your child memorize the symbols for the phonemes, make up some flash cards, using the list of phonemes and symbols below.

You should get some 3 by 5 cards, and write the letter(s) on the front, quite large, with a magic marker or crayon. On the back, write the word(s) which show the sound.

My kids like to sit on my lap while we play with the flash cards, so I can't see the "answers". I suppose that one could put the words on the front of the cards; after all, if they can read the answers, that's **good**. I prefer to have the answers on the back, so there is nothing to draw their eyes away from the symbol.

I suggest that you **not** teach the child "B says buh". Avoid using the names of the letters at all. You want them to focus on saying the sound, by reflex, when they see the symbol. In fact, many people don't tell their children the names of the letters until after they've learned to read! Our children seem to have picked up the names of the letters before they learned their sounds.

Small children should start with the phonemes in the list of consonants, since most of these make only one sound.

Notice that the letters "c" and "g" each make two sounds. At this point, I only teach the first one: "guh" for "g" and "kuh" for c. If you think that it makes more sense to give them both sounds at once, by all means try it.

Next when the child is making very few mistakes with the consonants, introduce the vowels, each of which make two sounds. When the child shows some facility with the vowels, he's ready to start reading! Get a book which he enjoys, and help him sound out a few of the simple words, like hop and pop. Dr. Seuss' "Hop on Pop" book is a great choice for this.

Introduce the digraphs and diphthongs next, again, when the child is making few mistakes with the vowels.

When the child has mastered all of the flash cards, he will have the knowledge he needs to read almost any English word!

Blending Phonemes

The object here is to be able to say "Kuh Ah Tuh", and hear "cat". Obviously, the breaking up words games you have been playing will also be a great help here. When the child can

effortlessly look at the symbols and "hear" the word, he's a proficient reader. The only way to make this effortless is through practice.

Get your child to read, whether it takes bribes or threats. It may not be easy to keep your child reading at this stage, when every word must be sounded out; reading is still work. One thing that I've found helps is to take a book the child enjoys and insist that he read the words on one page, then I read the words on the next, and so on.

I have also forced them to read some pages from the McGuffey's first reader. The great advantage here is that it's **not** a favorite book, and they haven't memorized the words on the pages.

Keep them reading!

Once the child begins to read, make sure that he keeps doing it. If you have a TV or a Gameboy, you're fighting an uphill battle, and I'd advise you to put them away for a year or two, so your child can develop good habits. Time spent using a computer may well be counter-productive at this point, also.

Take your child to the library often, and encourage him to check out anything he's willing to read. Keep on reading books with chapters to him, and let him have the book and keep reading after you finish a chapter.

In a few months of practice, your child will be an accomplished reader, and your only problem will be to get him to stop reading.

Consonants

Letter	Sound	Notes
B	Boy	
C	Cat, Cite	1
D	Dog	
F	Fox	
G	Go, aGe	1
H	Hat	
J	Just	
K	Kelp	
L	Limp	
M	Me	
N	Nice	
P	Put	
R	Read	
S	Silly	
T	Tough	
V	Very	
W	We	
X	foX	
Z	Zipper	

Vowels

Letter	Sound	Notes
A	Ate, At	
E	Eat, Egg	
I	kIte, It	
O	cOat, hOp	
U	Use, Up	
Y	Yes, mY, babY	2

Digraphs

Letter	Sounds	Notes
ar	cAR	
ch	CHip	
ck	baCK	
ew	nEW	
kn	KNown	
oo	mOOOn, bOOOk, dOOOr	3
ow	nOW	
ph	Phonic	
sh	SHoe	
th	THin, THE	4
qu	QUeen	
wh	What	
wr	WRite	

Diphthongs

au	hAUI
aw	sAW
oi	bOil
ou	OUt
oy	bOY

Notes

1 These two consonants might be confusing to the very young, since each represents two sounds! I have always taught my children only the first sound listed. Suit yourself on this.

2 The ``yuh" sound (in yes) is only found at the beginning of words, the others only at the end.

3 This digraph is also a diphthong?

4 The difference between these two sounds is that the TH in THin is unvoiced, while the TH in THE is voiced.

Glossary

Consonant \Con"so*nant\, n. [L. consonans, -antis.]

An articulate sound which in utterance is usually combined and sounded with an open sound called a vowel; a member of the spoken alphabet other than a vowel; also, a letter or character representing such a sound.

Note: Consonants are divided into various classes, as mutes, aspirants, sibilants, nasals, semivowels, etc. All of them are sounds uttered through a closer position of the organs than that of a vowel proper, although the most open of them, as the semivowels and nasals, are capable of being used as if vowels, and forming syllables with other closer consonants, as in the English feeble (-b'l), taken (-k'n). All the consonants excepting the mutes may be indefinitely prolonged in utterance without the help of a vowel, and even the mutes may be produced with an aspirate instead of a vocal explosion. Vowels and consonants may be regarded as the two poles in the scale of sounds produced by gradual approximation of the organ of speech from the most open to the closest positions, the vowel being more open, the consonant closer; but there is a territory between them where the sounds produced partake of the qualities of both.

Note: "A consonant is the result of audible friction, squeezing, or stopping of the breath in some part of the mouth (or occasionally of the throat.) The main distinction between vowels and consonants is, that while in the former the mouth configuration merely modifies the vocalized breath, which is therefore an essential element of the vowels, in consonants the narrowing or stopping of the oral passage is the foundation of the sound, and the state of the glottis is something secondary." --H. Sweet.

Digraph \Di"graph\, n. [Gr. di- = di`s- twice + ? a writing, ? to write.]

Two signs or characters combined to express a single articulated sound; as ea in head, or th in bath. [1913 Webster]

Diphthong \Diph"thong\ (?; 115, 277), n. [L. diphthongus, Gr. ?; di- = di`s- twice + ? voice, sound, fr. ? to utter a sound: cf. F. diphthongue.] (Ortho["e]py)

(a) A coalition or union of two vowel sounds pronounced in one syllable; as, ou in out, oi in noise; -- called a {proper diphthong}.

(b) A vowel digraph; a union of two vowels in the same syllable, only one of them being sounded; as, ai in rain, eo in people; -- called an {improper diphthong}.

Phoneme \pho"neme\ (f[=o]"n[-e]m) n. (Linguistics)

One of a small set of speech sounds that are used by and distinguished by the speakers of a particular language. They are combined into morphemes, words, and sentences. [WordNet 1.5 + PJC]

Phonetics \Pho*net"ics\ (f[-o]*n[e^]t"[i^]ks), n.

1. The doctrine or science of sounds; especially those of the human voice; phonology.
2. The art of representing vocal sounds by signs and written characters.

Vowel \Vow"el\, n. [F. voyelle, or an OF. form without y, L. vocalis (sc. littera), from vocalis sounding, from vox, vocis, a voice, sound. See {Vocal}.] (Phon.)

A vocal, or sometimes a whispered, sound modified by resonance in the oral passage, the peculiar resonance in each case giving to each several vowel its distinctive character or quality as a sound of speech; -- distinguished from a consonant in that the latter, whether voiced or unvoiced, derives its character in every case from some kind of obstructive action by the mouth organs. Also, a letter or character which represents such a sound.

The definitions given here are from the 1913 edition of Webster's dictionary, except as noted.