

Are We Hooked on Phonics?

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At the risk of being politically incorrect and antagonizing the phonics police, I feel compelled to critique the prevailing approach to teaching reading.

As a former teacher of the deaf I was occasionally surprised and sometimes annoyed when questioned about when I would start using phonics to teach reading to my students. I found that some think that phonics and reading are synonymous. It was difficult for some to understand that deaf students cannot link sounds to letters of the alphabet because the deaf don't know the sounds. They cannot decode. There are no familiar spoken counterparts of the printed words. Deaf children learn to read by associating the unfamiliar printed words with the meaning of those words. They do this in much the same way that Chinese and Japanese children do when they learn the characters (logographs) that constitute one of the written forms of their languages.

Chinese, Korean, and Japanese are written logographically, and reading logograms has no "sounding out." The whole word or its meaning is called to mind when its form becomes sufficiently familiar. In these languages a logogram is a character that denotes the meaning but not the sound or pronunciation of a word, and each character/logogram (morpheme) fits in the same square frame. This is true whether it consists of one stroke or 64. Phonics has nothing to do with how logographically written

languages are read. Even though English is written alphabetically, deaf children must learn to read each word as a logogram.

Chinese, Korean, and Japanese have logographic scripts. Chinese and Korean also have alphabetic scripts. The Chinese alphabet (pinyin) is phonemically regular because of its recent development. Korean has a phonetic alphabet (hankul) that was designed to be phonetic in the fifteenth century. Both Chinese and South Koreans write in both scripts. Literacy in both is the educational standard. In addition to its logographic form (kanji), Japanese is written in either of two syllabaries (katakana and hiragana). Syllabaries are characters representing a consonant and vowel combination. Remarkably, anything in Japanese can be written in any of the three forms, and any of the three forms may appear in the same sentence. Literacy in the three forms is the educational standard.

In China, Japan, and Korea, each logographic morpheme is a distinct entity and must be stored in a separate unit and recognized by sight. Sight recognition of about 2,400 logograms is considered necessary for basic literacy in China. Korean students learn about 2,000 of their highest frequency logograms. About 3,300 are common to newspaper and magazine writing in Japan. One thousand of the most common logograms cover approximately 90 percent of all occurrences in typical Japanese texts. (In English the most common 1000 words account for about 85 percent of all running words.)

Reading First promoted systematic phonics instruction from kindergarten through sixth grade. Reading First claimed that English writing is largely phonemic. However, languages change over time. It is only when alphabetic spelling has been recently introduced, as in China, or linguistically designed, as in Korea, that an alphabet is phonemic. English spelling was established long ago and so is not phonemic, but

morphophonemic. And several hundred of the very most common words should be regarded as logographs. The pronunciation of the words *of, are, you, some, one, two, does*, etc. can't be predicted by their spelling. They must be memorized. Many more words are best learned logographically (Daniels, 1996). On average it takes 35 repetitions of a new word for the beginning reader to be able to recognize it instantly (Gates, 1930). This is true whether or not the word is phonically regular. A repetition, for a hearing student, is making the connection between the printed word and its familiar spoken form.

Some languages such as Hebrew and Arabic are written in consonant only alphabets, *abjads*. It may surprise some to find that English can be read and understood without vowels using context and consonants:

W cn rd with cnsnts, bt w cn nt rd wth vwls.

Try reading the sentence with context and vowels:

E a ea i ooa, u e a o ea i oe.

Vowels are the most confusing letters in English spelling. However, prominent Reading First proponents: Douglas Carnine, Jerry Silber, Edward Kame'enui, and Sara Tarver place special emphasis on teaching vowel phonics in their book, *Direct Instruction Reading, Fourth Edition* (2004). To my astonishment they assert, "Vowels are the most useful letters (page 61). By my estimate more than half the phonic generalizations presented in the book are for vowels; almost none of which have utility for identifying our common words (Clymer, 1963/1996; Greif, 1980).

Much of the problem with vowel sounds, and fortunately to a lesser extent the consonants, is that over time spoken languages continually change, while writing stays fixed. The original spelling system reflects the earlier stage of the language.

Dialect variation is virtually all due to variation in vowel production. When moving to Tennessee years ago, I was momentarily disconcerted to hear that one of our United States Senators was *Hard Biker*. My confusion was due to the vowels of the speaker, but with the use of a little contextual background knowledge and his consonant sounds, I concluded that the senator being named was *Howard Baker*.

Vowels are difficult in one-syllable words due to change over time and dialect, but they are even more difficult in multi-syllable words. The vowel sound heard in unaccented syllables is weakened and is likely to be schwa no matter the vowel letter in print. I, like Paul McKee (1966), am strongly opposed to the emphasis on teaching vowel sounds to beginning readers.

When readers attain fourth or fifth grade reading level, they will be learning words that they have never spoken nor heard. These are the words that will exist primarily in their reading-only vocabulary. Consider the word *boustrophedon*. This word exists in my reading vocabulary. I have never hear it spoken, and have never attempted to pronounce it aloud. I can read the word because I know what it means. Boustrophedon is a style of writing in which lines of text are read alternatively left to right and then right to left or vice versa. Now that I have defined its meaning, it may now become part of your reading-only vocabulary.

Reading-only vocabulary builds up. It will exceed speaking listening vocabularies at about the eight grade reading level (Durrell, 1969). After the fourth grade reading level learning new words will be by their associated meaning. Approximating the pronunciation of a word doesn't identify it or its meaning. As reading skill matures, it becomes increasingly morphemic. The reader reads the word by its meaning not its

sound. Just because you can approximate the pronunciation of a word does not mean that you are reading the word. Reading is understanding .

Any child can learn to read logographically. We have ample evidence of this through the vast numbers of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean people who are literate in this writing form. I believe that many of our difficulties in teaching reading are attributable to our addiction to phonics. English is alphabetic but not very phonemic. An alphabet is advantageous in the organization of information. It also permits the development of a keyboard. The keyboard encouraged the advance of alphabets. However alphabetic advantage for writing and information processing does not extend into teaching reading in English.

The Reading First Emphasis on systematic phonics for all K-6 students was misguided. A more sight-word approach for some children certainly seems reasonable. The current one-size-fits-all phonics habit needs rehabilitation.

References

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This is where I think Hooked on Phonics has really helped us. Where his teachers might say "ah" for "A" and we say "ay" for "A", he can do the lessons with me and point to letters on the page, making the difference between the names of the letters, and their sounds, more concrete. When he does Hooked on Phonics lessons with me, he knows this is how we see and say the sounds in English. Also, I love that the experience of opening up the kit and progressing is fun for him. He calls it "my reading" and looks forward to pulling out the red box in the evenings after bath. Hooked on Phonics is digital reading program based on the phonics learn to read system. It promotes reading development and is suitable for children 3-7. Early learners enjoy songs, games, and interactive lessons in this literacy app that teaches print concepts, phonological awareness and phonics word recognition. Hooked on Phonics is available to download for iOS (iPhone and iPad) and Android devices and for desktop computers (Windows and Mac). Hooked on Phonics Review. Hooked on Phonics contains 36 progressive lessons featuring leveled learning activities that cover key building blocks of reading. Hooked on Phonics is a commercial brand of educational materials, originally designed for reading education through phonetics. First marketed in 1987, it used systematic phonics and scaffolded stories to teach letter-sound correlations (phonics) as part of children's literacy. The program has since expanded to encompass a wide variety of media, including books, computer games, music, videos, and flash cards in addition to books in its materials, as well as to include other subject areas. The target audience is children aged 3-7. Hooked on Phonics is truly an investment in a child's future. Kids love it! Parents tell us all the time that their kids don't want to stop playing Hooked on Phonics. Children see the fun. Parents see the learning. With music, games, lessons, and stories, Hooked on Phonics Learn to Read is the simplest, most effective and most fun way to learn to read. Award winning digital reading program. We encourage you to download the app and take it for a spin to see if it is a fit for your family. We certainly think it will be, but if at any point in your subscription you're not seeing results, let us know! We also hear daily about great successes using the program with children with a wide variety of learning challenges. You know what's best for your child, so we suggest you try it for yourself and decide.