

How to Tell Real from Phony Phonics

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A lot of parents these days are concerned about how their children are being taught to read in school. And so they ask the teacher, “Are you teaching phonics?” Virtually every primary school teacher in America will say, “Yes, we do teach phonics,” after which the parent will go home satisfied and reassured that his or her child will be taught phonics. But, unfortunately, the parent has asked the wrong question. The question that should be asked is, “Do you teach a sight vocabulary?” And again virtually every teacher will answer yes.

What that answer means is that that teacher’s philosophy of reading instruction is based on a whole-word approach and that when phonics is taught in that context it is taught as “phonetic clues” along with picture clues, configuration clues, and context clues.

A child who is taught real phonics does not need all of those “clues” in order to read. Real phonics helps a child develop a phonetic reflex, an automatic ability to translate letters into sounds and the ability to see the phonetic structure of a word.

However, when a child is taught a sight vocabulary, he or she is being forced to look at printed words as whole configurations, like Chinese characters.

Suppose you were asked to memorize 100 Chinese characters. How would you go about doing it? You would try to remember something about each character’s shape that would remind you of its meaning.

Kids Don’t Discover Phonics When Taught Sight Words

The idea that a child will acquire a knowledge of phonics on his own after having been taught to read holistically is false. It doesn’t happen, because the child has developed a holistic reflex, the automatic habit of looking at all words by their whole configurations. In fact, the holistic reflex is an obstacle to seeing a word’s phonetic structure. And that is why it sometimes takes years to convert a disabled holistic reader into a fluent phonetic reader.

A study was done in Chicago in 1912 to determine what strategies children who have not received phonics instruction use to attempt to read. Here are some of its conclusions:

“The comments and questions, as well as the misreadings, seem to show that children learn to read words by the trial and error method. It may be the length of the word, the initial letter, the final letter, a characteristic letter, the position of the word in the sentence, or even the blackness of the type that serves as the cue. . . . There is no evidence in any of the cases studied that the child works out a system by which he learns to recognize the words. That he does not work out phonics by himself comes out quite clearly in the transposition test. Furthermore, only once did a child divide a word even into its syllables.” (“Learning to Read,” Josephine Bowden, Elem. Sch. Teacher, Vol. 12.)

Phony Phonics = “Clues”

So that’s what children do in trying to memorize sight words. The teacher will teach some letter sounds, generally initial or final consonant sounds, in order to give the child some clue as to what the word means. Thus, if the word begins with an *h* as in *horse*, it couldn’t be *salami* which begins with an *s*. These are phonetic clues, or phonetic information, as opposed to true phonics instruction.

You can’t develop a phonetic reflex with just phonetic information. That information may or may not be used by the student. It is not automatic, and requires effort by the student. That is why so much of the phonetic information children get in whole-word instruction is useless. The reader will prefer to rely on context, for teachers are pleased when a child reads *dad* for *father* or *pony* for *horse*. So much for phonetic clues.

Holistic readers are easy to spot. They generally don’t like to read, but when they do, they leave out words that are there, put in words that aren’t there, truncate words, guess at words, misread words.

Real Phonics, Not Dribs & Drabs

Real phonics is intensive, systematic phonics taught prior to reading whole words. Phony phonics is “phonetic clues,” provided in the context of a whole-word reading program.

If you want to convert a holistic reader into a phonetic reader, use an intensive phonics system such as mine. Teach your child the entire phonetic system: the consonants, the short vowel sounds, digraphs, diphthongs, etc. Then have him apply his new phonetic knowledge to reading text. Have him read aloud to you. Stop him when he makes a typical holistic error, and have him reread the sentence until he becomes aware of the error he has made. Have him write down all of the new words he has learned, dividing them into syllables so that he can see the phonetic structure of the word and can sound it out. In time, your child will replace his holistic habits with a phonetic reflex. With patience and love your child will be able to achieve success.

Note from Internet Publisher: Donald L. Potter

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My Experience: This article by Samuel L. Blumenfeld is desperately needed in this era of Common Core. Every principal and teacher I know claims that their school teaches phonics, yet the tutoring kids I get from those schools do not appear to have been taught much phonics. Their phonics skills are rudimentary at best. They rarely can identify or write all the letters of the alphabet fluently. Their knowledge of the sound-to-symbol relations is scanty.

Phony Phonics = Whole-to-Part Phonics: The best way to describe how reading is being taught in most schools today is whole-to-part phonics. In fact there is a book entitled, *Whole to Part Phonics: How children learn to read and spell*, by Henrietta Dombey, Margaret Moustafa, and the staff of the Center for Language in Primary Education. The book is available from Heinemann, the leading Whole Language publisher. Moustafa wrote a book dedicated to describing and defending whole-to-part phonics: *Beyond Traditional Phonics*. The popular teacher-training manual, *Guided Reading: Good First Teaching for All Children*, by Irene Fountas & Gay Su Pinnell is a popular program based on this type of phonics.

Real Phonics = Part-to-Whole Phonics: Mr. Blumenfeld's *Alpha-Phonics* is a stellar example of part-to-whole phonics. First, the students are taught to recognize and write all 26 letters by name in and out of order. Second, they are taught the sounds represented by the letters in a systematic step-by-step manner. Third, reading and spelling practice leads to automatic word recognition. You can view the program at: <http://blumenfeld.camconstitution.net>

Danger of Sight Words: I have yet to tutor a student from any local public school that was not being taught sight words (Dolch or Fry) by look-say memorization. To teach high frequency words by look-say memorization is counterproductive to good reading because it discourages the use of the letters in word recognition and leads to excessive guessing and faulty reading.

Science of Reading: May I suggest reading the following three books: Stanislas Dehaene's *Reading in the Brain*, Mark Seidenberg's *Language at the Speed of Sight: How We Read, Why So Many Can't, and What Can Be Done About It*, and Daniel T. Willingham's *The Reading Brain: A Cognitive Approach to Understanding How the Mind Reads* for a scientific verification of the validity of part-to-whole phonics (real phonics) over whole-to-part phonics (phony phonics).

Blend Phonics: I published Hazel Loring's 1980 *Reading Made Easy with Blend Phonics for First Grade* on my website thirteen years ago. It will give a good sense of what a true part-to-whole Real Phonics program looks like: www.blendphonics.org. This is the program I currently use the most. It is available in an inexpensive paperback edition from Amazon and Barnes & Nobles. This method features direct instruction "directional guidance," which prevents the development of reversals and other characteristics of dyslexia. I use it in conjunction with the Phonovisual Charts, www.phonovisual.com

Isabel L. Beck in *Making Sense of Phonic the hows and whys* gives some up-to-date background information on Phony and Real Phonics. She calls her method successive blend phonics or cumulative. I consider it essentially the same as Loring's "blend phonics" technique.

A one-volume solution to today's reading problems is Florence Akin's 1913 *Word Mastery: Phonics for the First Three Grades*, which I have republished in paperback.

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<http://www.home-school.com/Articles/how-to-tell-real-from-phony-phonics.php>