

Teaching Reading: *How To*

Contents

Preamble	1
Reading: two camps	2
The people in between	2
The common-sense authority of phonics	3
The shortcomings of phonics	5
A correspondences map?	8
Historical change in English pronunciation	8
The scribes	9
Etymology in modern spelling	10
Spellings to do with meaning	11
The written language and reading: a complex relationship	12
Autobiographical digression	12
The big question	13
Surrounded by, drenched and soaked in meaning	15
The reader's clues – semantic	16
The reader's clues – syntactic	17
The reader's clues – visual and phonetic	18
Three more kinds of reader's clue	19
Recent government interventions in the teaching of reading	21
A chink of light?	22
References	25

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Preamble

Let me begin by stating a fact with which many of my readers will be wearily familiar: the teaching of reading is an area which has been and is being fought over. The main purpose of this piece of writing is to offer my view of the best way to help young children become competent and confident readers. But it won't be possible to do that without referring frequently to ideas and practices which have been taken out of the arena of professional discussion and turned into slogans of popular debate and controversy. I'm sorry about that, but there we are.

Let me also acknowledge that there is little, if anything, new in what I shall say about helping young children to become competent and confident readers. The ideas which will follow have been expressed in different words, often at greater length, by numerous authors over several decades. The justification for yet another publication on the teaching of reading is that worthwhile knowledge can be lost as easily as gained. Much of the worthwhile knowledge which previous writers have put into print, having thought long and carefully, having scrupulously observed children learning to read, has been cast aside in recent years, as successive governments and their advisers have advanced and then imposed an orthodoxy about the teaching of reading which today's teachers of young children dissent from at their professional peril.

A pamphlet, by definition, is brief. I am going to set out my challenge to the government-imposed orthodoxy on the teaching of reading in terms which will claim an hour of the reader's time; not more. And I shall try to see that the hour is enjoyably spent.

UKLA

Reading: two camps

Two camps, two schools of thought and opinion, have long dominated the reading debate. One says that when a child learns to read, he or she relies on a system of symbol-to-sound correspondences. The term popularly used to describe this system is of course *phonics*. Enthusiastic proponents of phonics believe that it is the only means by which children learn to read, and they believe that the system can be taught. There are a number of intellectual sources from which phonics has sprung, of which the most important is probably behaviourist psychology: that school of psychology which says that human behaviour can best be understood as a set of responses to stimuli. In the case of reading, the stimulus is the word (or more usually the part of the word) on the page or the wall or the flash-card or the computer screen, and the response is the child's attempt to say aloud what that word or word-part 'says'.

The other camp says that reading is a predictive, meaning-making activity where the reader brings more to the text than the text brings to the reader. That's not to say that the text brings nothing to the reader. As someone else has wittily remarked, you can't read with the light out. But this camp says that neither can the ability to read be transmitted automatically. It has to be discovered afresh by each new potential reader. Again, there are various intellectual sources for this position, of which the most important is a branch of psycholinguistics which is interested in how the learning brain generalises from information about language which it receives. Psycholinguists of this school recognise that we say, write, think and *understand* things in the course of our lives which go far beyond the mere copying or re-enactment of direct experiences of language we have had. Humans are creative in this area of their activity, as they are in every other area; and this fact has immense implications for readers, including beginning readers.

The people in between

So, two camps; and in between these two camps, the teachers. Teachers are the people (though not necessarily the only people) who actually teach children to read. They are the people who make sure, despite all the gloom-mongering on the part of governments and newspapers, that every year hundreds of thousands of children in schools in the United Kingdom perform this remarkable feat. How do teachers do it? I suggest that, for the

most part, they do it by an eclectic, pragmatic mixture of methods. They use whatever works. They're suspicious of miracle cures and evangelistic enthusiasts guaranteeing success if the teachers will only use the enthusiasts' method, and if they will only use *only* the enthusiasts' method. And they're right to be sceptical in that way.

Also stationed between the two camps are the children. Children are remarkable survivors. They learn to do things, including learning to read, in all sorts of circumstances, having been exposed to all sorts of teaching methods. And a method which a teacher *thinks* has been the key to success in teaching a child to read may not necessarily deserve that accolade. If one could go back and, as it were, run the secret tape which reveals the truth about what was going on in the child's brain at the crucial period of his or her advance towards confidence and control as a reader, some quite other influence might turn out to have been the key.

The common-sense authority of phonics

I'm going to return now to our first camp: to those who believe that phonics holds the key to success in learning to read. There is a common-sense authority underlying their position, based on the fact that our writing system makes use of an alphabet. Alphabets did emerge, it is true, as attempts to match single symbols to single sounds. The Egyptians gave their hieroglyphs to the Phoenicians, who were the first people, so far as we know, to adapt picture symbols in order to construct an alphabet. The Phoenicians had no symbols for vowels. They gave their alphabet to the Greeks, who introduced vowels. One version of the Greek alphabet was the model for the Roman or Latin alphabet, in which, of course, Latin was written. 'The Roman (or Latin) alphabet' is the term still in use in English and in other languages for that group of letters (26 in English; slightly different numbers in the case other languages). The ancient Greek alphabet is the ancestor of the Cyrillic alphabet, which is used today to write Russian and other languages in Eastern Europe and Asia. It is also, in another variation, the ancestor of the modern Greek alphabet.

To return from ancient history to the present day: yes, the cat sat on the mat. Yes, the rain in Spain falls mainly on the plain. Yes, Ned is in his red bed. So, game, set and match to phonics, no? What need we further discussion?

So far as recent UK government policy is concerned, we need no further discussion about the fundamental rightness of phonics. It's true that the detail in the discussion has become more complex; and the approved way to teach phonics has undergone great change. That which was simply called 'phonics' 20 and more years ago is now referred to as 'analytic' or 'analytical phonics'. Analytic phonics emphasises the teaching of symbol-to-sound correspondences within whole words. When a word contains more than one particle, the parts of the word are separately taught and then combined to give the whole word.

Since then, a new approach, called 'synthetic phonics', has challenged and to a large extent supplanted analytic phonics. In response to the problem that English has 26 letters and perhaps 43 (synthetic phonics says slightly more) phonemes, synthetic phonics proposes the progressive initial teaching of the phonemes, which may be represented by one or more than one letter, as separate symbol-to-sound particles. Once a number of these have been taught, they are combined to make words which have been selected in advance to illustrate the synthesis of the phonemes taught. Extreme versions of synthetic phonics deny children access to actual books until they have acquired a good grounding in a certain number of grapho/phonemic correspondences. Non-existent or nonsense words, which however observe a particular grapho/phonemic correspondence, are sometimes introduced to reinforce children's grasp of the correspondence in question.

To complicate the vocabulary a little further, the UK government now uses the phrase 'systematic synthetic phonics' to emphasise that the order in which the phonemes are taught should follow a systematic sequence. ('Systematic analytic phonics' also exists as a phrase, requiring a similar disciplined sequencing of the whole words in which the correspondences are taught within that method.)

Officially, phonics has enjoyed a triumphant success. I'm not aware of any other area of the school curriculum where a matter which would normally be the province of the teaching profession and of those advisers, teacher-educators and academics who have given it close and expert attention has been so comprehensively taken over by politicians; where central policy has driven pedagogy. Later in this pamphlet, I shall say more about the takeover. For now, we need only compare the requirement for the teaching of early reading in section 3 of Part One of the Department

for Education's *Teachers' Standards* document, published in 2012, with the requirement for the teaching of early mathematics:

'A teacher must...

- if teaching early reading, demonstrate a clear understanding of systematic synthetic phonics;
- if teaching early mathematics, demonstrate a clear understanding of appropriate teaching strategies.'

The teaching of mathematics has not been without its controversies, debates and changes of fashion over the years. It remains the case, however, that politicians entrust to professionals the right to decide what are 'appropriate teaching strategies' in that area. No such right is entrusted to professionals in the area of early reading, because here the government is fixated on one and only one methodology, and is determined to impose its will.

The shortcomings of phonics

The reader can tell by now that I intend to stick some spokes in the wheel of the triumphant phonics chariot. But before I do, let me acknowledge without any difficulty that there *are* regular symbol-to-sound correspondences in written English; that there are lots of them; and that we should certainly make use of this convenient fact as we help children to learn to read. But here's my single, central objection to the zealotry with which some people and organisations, and notably the UK government, advance the phonics banner: these people and organisations claim that identifying symbol-to-sound correspondences is the *only* means by which children learn to read. Furthermore, they claim that any other method is not merely useless but damaging. I'm going to show that this zealotry is misguided.

Phonics zealots would have a bit of a problem if they went to China. Here, not just hundreds of thousands but many millions of children every year learn to read using a writing system which has nothing to do with symbol-to-sound correspondences at all. These are the future citizens of the most populous (and, imminently, the most powerful) country in the world. Their numbers dwarf ours. They learn to read using a system of pictographs – symbols standing for whole things or ideas – which has evolved over the last 5,000 years. If they do that, then here's my first spoke in the phonics wheel: whatever the debate we'll have when we come to alphabetic writing systems, nobody can say that symbol-to-sound correspondences are the