The Natural Phonics Primer™

Building an Effective Reading Program from the Sounds Up

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Introduction

I have often puzzled about how one would go about creating a phonics program from the sounds up. It turns out that it can be done by anyone who has a good dictionary with a pronunciation guide. In this brief paper, we are going to follow the great phonics master Rudolf Flesch as he builds a phonics program from the sounds up. The information is adapted from Chapter 2 of Rudolf Flesch's 1955 bestseller *Why Johnny Can't Read and what you can do about it,* in which Flesch describes in detail the steps to building a natural phonics primer from the sounds up: a phonemic based reading program.

To Understand Phonics

Phonics is simplified phonetics for teaching reading. Phonetics is the science dealing with speech sounds. To understand phonics, forget about the whole-word method of teaching reading. The **natural method** will be this: First your teacher will make you aware of the individual sounds of English. Second, he will show you the letter symbols that represent each of those sounds. Third, he will teach you how to write these symbols and combine them into words – and, *at the same time*, how to read them. In a language with a perfectly phonetic alphabet, this is a very short and simple process. World renound literacy expert Dr. Frank C. Laubach informs us that with a perfect alphabet a man of average intelligence can learn to read in one day by following the five steps of the natural method.

The Problem: 23 Letters for 44 Sounds

How many speech sounds are there? There is a simple way to arrive at a *practical* number: Count the items in the pronunciation key of any ordinary desk-size dictionary or handbook of English and see how many different sounds have a special symbol assigned to them. Applying this procedure to the *Thorndike-Barnhart High School Dictionary* and Perrin's *Writer's Guide and Index to English,* we find that there are 44 speech sounds in English, so you would need 44 symbols if you wanted to construct an English phonetic system. As you know, we have not 44 letters but 26. Not only that, 3 of our 26 letters are superfluous, namely, *c, q*, and *x*. (*C* has the sound of either *k* or *s*, *qu* stands for *kw*, and *x* has sounds like *ks* in *six* and like *gz* in *exist*.) This leaves us with 23 letters to represent 44 sounds. And there you have the basic reason for our whole reading problem.

Nevertheless, ridiculous as this setup is, it's the system we've got, so let's see how it can be taught. Let's begin by learning the letters or letter combinations that stand for each of our 44 sounds. Here they are:

25 Consonant Sounds

18 Consonant Pairs: Voiced and Unvoiced

B and p as in *bib* and *pup.*
D and t as in *dad* and *toot.*
G and *k* as in *gag* and *kick.*
V and *f* as in *valve* and *fluff.*
Z and *s* as in *ziz-zag* and *Sis*.
Th ("voiced") and *th* ("unvoiced") as in *that* and *thick*
W and *wh* as in *wayward* and *whistle*.
J and *ch* as in *jam* and *cho-cho-train.*
Zh and *sh* as in *treasure* and *measure*. (*zh* as in A*s*ia, televi*s*ion, ho*s*ier, mea*s*ure, plea*s*ure, u*s*ual, ca*s*ual, and lei*s*ure.)

6 Consonants Called Semivowels

l as in *lull*
m as in *ma'm*
n as in *nun*
r as in *rare*
y as in *yo-yo*
ng as in *singing*, *banging* (*ng* is not a combination of *n* + *g*) .
   (The *ng* sound also occurs before the sound of *k* in words spelled with *nk* – *drink, mink, pink*.)

1 more consonant

h as in *his* or *hers*

We have used 19 letters to write to write our 25 consonants: *b, c, d, f, g, h, j, k, l, m, n, p, r, s, t, v, w, y*, and *z*. In addition, there are two more superfluous letters that also represent consonant combinations: *q* and *x*. In other words, we have used up 21 of the 26 letters to write the consonants, which leaves us exactly 5 – *a, e, i, o, u* – to deal with 19 vowel sounds. And this where English spelling gets really nasty.

19 Vowel Sounds

5 so-called short vowels, as in *bag, beg, big, bog, bug*.

5 so-called long vowels, as in *mate, mete, mite, mote, mute*. All these long vowels are spelled like the short vowels, but with a silent e after the consonant following the vowel. They can also be spelled in a variety of other ways: You can use *ai* and *ay* for the long *a*; *ee* and *ea* for the long *e*; *ie*, *y*, and *ye* for the long *i; oa, oe*, and *ow* for the long *o*; and *ue* and *ew* for the long *u.*

3 diphthongs (combinations of two sounds) each with two different spellings: *au* as in *Paul* and *crawl*, *ou* as in s*pouse* and *cow*, and *oi* as in *noise* and *boy*

2 a long and a short *oo* as in *Rube* and *boob*, and *whoosh* and *push*.

1 the sound a as in *pa* and *ma, bar* and *car*

2 r vowels: *air* as in *Fair heirs dare sware*, and *er* as in *Girls prefer fur*.

1 the all-purpose muttering vowel we used in unaccented syllables regardless of their spelling – *a* as in *drama,* the *e* in *item*, the *i* in *devil*, the *o* in *button*, the *u* in *circus*.

And that's the end of our 44-item list – a highly imperfect system, to be sure, but nevertheless a system that can be explained and taught without throwing up your hands in despair and going back to Chinese word learning.

What's the best way of teaching this system? To find out, Flesch compared the most important methods used during the last 170 years. – Noah Webster's *Blue-Backed Speller,* the McGuffey Readers, the once-famous *Beacon Readers*, today's Hay-Wingo method, Bloomfield method, the Hegge-Kirk-Kirk method, and others. Flesch discovered a great family resemblance among all those methods and a common sequence underlying them all. This is not surprising since it's a **natural sequence** based on our imperfect spelling system.

There are two main things wrong with out alphabet and our system of spelling:

1. We have only about half as many letters as we have sounds which means that half the symbols a child has to learn consist not of one letter but two – like ay, ea, sh, ch, and so on.

2. Some of our most important single letters are used to spell two or more entirely different sounds namely, the five vowels *a, e, i, o, u*, and the consonants *c* and *g*. (also *ch, ea, ei, ie, ey, oo, ou, ow, th, ough*)

Therefore, if you want to teach a child to read without utterly confusing him, you have to start him with single letters that stand for single sounds, then go on to sounds spelled by two-letters or two-letter combinations, and finally teach him that some letters do not spell one sound but two.

The catch in this, however, is that you can't teach a child to read without letting him read words. So you *have* to start with teaching the child the letters *a, e, i, o, u* in spite of the fact that each of them spells a long *and* a short vowel. The only way to solve this problem is to begin by teaching the child only five *short* vowels (which are far more common than the long ones) and postpone the long vowels until a much later stage.

The Natural Sequence of *any* Phonic Method:

Step One: The five short vowels and all consonants spelled by single letters.

Step Two: Consonants and consonant combinations spelled with two or three letters.

Step Three: Vowels and vowel combinations spelled with two or three letters.

Step Four: The five long vowels.

Step Five: Irregular Spellings.

There you have it, the recipe for creating a **natural phonics program** from the sounds up by Rudolf Flesch. I call this method *The Natural Phonics Primer*™ because Flesch explains, "it is the **natural sequence** based on our imperfect spelling system."

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October 30, 2012 UPDATE: I have used Flesch's method continually in my tutoring since 2003. Because of the outstanding success that I have experienced with Flesch's Exercises, it has remained one of my most trusted methods for teaching beginning and remedial reading.

April 13, 2020 NOTICE: I have continued to use Flesch's 72 Exercises in my tutoring with outstanding success with **every student**, beginning or remedial.

Here is the link to my webpage devoted to Flesch's Method. Everything necessary to teach the method is available for free on that webpage.

http://donpotter.net/education_pages/flesch_audio.html

I am using Flesch's 72 Exercises as the foundation for a *Universal Safety Net for Literacy*.