

Notes from  
*Reading: chaos and cure* (1958)  
(by Sibl Terman and Charles C. Walcutt)  
concerning  
Through the Phonics Barrier

Our own system has been used for teaching reading and remedial reading for twenty years. The phonics system presented in the last chapter of this volume is simple, easy to use, and yet so comprehensive that it will teach a five-year-old or solve the reading problem of a college student. We present it here because we have found it the simplest and most effective of many that we have examined. (3)

Tommy A had attended private school for five years (six, including kindergarten) when his mother taught there in the fourth grade. When Tommy had been in her own class through the year, she came to us because she was worried about his reading and had not been able to help him herself as she had hoped to do. On the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Test, he scored an I.Q. of 155, which is attained by one child in 500. His mother was astonished at this score, because she had become convinced that Tommy was a “slow learner.” He tested fifth grade on the “paragraph comprehension” part of the Stanford Achievement Test. Yet when he was asked to read the same paragraphs aloud we found that he was completely unable to pronounce the long, important key words upon which the meaning depended. But he had written down the right answer every time! Reading was a guessing game for Tommy, and with his intelligence he had developed phenomenal skill at it. Early in the year, we had offered to work with the boy and teach him some phonics, but his mother said, “No, he has had so much of phonics that he is sick of it.” At the end of the school year, we gave Tommy four hours of drill with our phonic system. Then Tommy went off to a ranch where he did not look at a book all summer. A week after school opened in the fall, he again took a Stanford Achievement Test; he still tested fifth-grade in reading, but on the geography, history, and word-meaning test he had gone up about four years since spring. After the test he went home and said to his mother, with a broad smile, “That’s the first time I ever knew what the words on the test meant.” In January of that school year, without any further special instruction in reading, Tommy read Well’s *Outline of History*. Less than a year earlier (the previous June), we had to go back to a third-grade reader to find a book that Tommy could read acceptably. Tommy’s mother admitted rather sheepishly that she now could see that he was brighter than other children. (21-22)

Because going through the phonics system takes only a few hours... (163)

The best method of all is to take the child step by step through a complete system of phonics, teaching him, not rules, but all the phonograms (as, at, ite, ine, ime, etc.) of English and letting him start reading whenever he wants to. It can be done with this system in a few hours. This makes for faster progress and far better spelling

It is hardly necessary after the studies we have quoted to defend a “synthetic” phonics system. Such a system is quickest for beginners, and in our experience, the best way to break up bad habits in older ones. It attacks the whole problem from a new angle so that the remedial student can come back to reading later with new and improved habits and fresh courage.

With all the phonics systems on the market, some of which are good, some bad, it is necessary to offer an explanation for producing another one. It is simply that after extensive experience with other systems, we find that this one proves to be faster and more direct.

We skip prolonged analysis of oral words into their component sounds and the learning of the short vowel sounds in isolation, which are difficult to teach. After all, most adults cannot give the sound of short *u* upon demand. But we do teach the vowels in combination with consonants more quickly than other systems do. Practically no rules are required since we find that most literate adults who are not professionals know no rules. Instead we proceed at once to the phonograms that make up English words, arranged so that learning them is easy. The next step is to show the students that he can read one-syllable words at sight without “sounding out.” At the end of a few hours he finds himself reading long words in the same way. The system results not in “sounding out” or “attacking” or “analyzing” or breaking up into syllables, but in instant recognition. The basic process is to form an association between the sounds of the spoken word and the letters representing the sounds and then to connect these two with the meaning. It is the meaning which makes the word a whole, and an easily remembered whole.

The system differs from some others in that it is not limited to regularly spelled words. We show that the so called nonphonetic words also follow regular patterns.

It has been used for twenty years (c. 1938, DP) on beginners of five and a half and middle-aged adults, retarded second-graders and college graduates. It covers the whole of phonics, it will discover the weak spots of every student. It is surprising that the second-graders and college graduates who have had a history of trouble in reading and spelling make the same mistakes and stumble at the same places. It is short enough to be used as a test yet contains enough drill for a cure, it can actually be taught in less time than is taken to administer the elaborate diagnostic tests of some of the clinics. (155-156)

Concerning Glen McCracken’s classrooms (with another system):

[Because the whole class is taught at once, with no break-downs into little groups by interest or ability, there is considerably more total per-student time given to reading: instead of the pandemonium characteristic in schools where a large class is broken up into several disorderly groups which cannot possibly be supervised by the teacher, all the children are paying attention to the projected slides of the days lesson. (134)]

These notes were copied by Donald Potter on 11/15/02. I read *Reading: chaos and cure* for the first time on 11/20/97. *Through the Phonics Barrier* was transcribed into a Word document in November 2002, and prepared for Internet publication in November 2003. Charlie Richardson informs me that Sibyl Terman was Charles Walcutt’s sister.

## Concerning the System: Notes from *Tomorrow's Illiterates*

The system proceeds rapidly from alphabet to basic syllables and phonograms in a graduated approach from the perfectly regular to the so-called phonic irregularities of English. It shows that the so-called phonic irregularities of English spelling can be mastered with considerable ease when they are properly classified, as they are in this system. As with other systems, the child is not taught letters and sounds and then left to sound out words, but is led to read phonograms and then words in easy steps.

Complete instructions for the teacher are available. These instructions convey the basic phonetic equipment necessary for reading with perhaps less drill than some other systems in this group.

Note adapted from *Tomorrows Illiterates*. Edited by Charles Walcutt. (Council for Basic Education, 1961).