

WHEN PHONICS DOESN'T WORK...SMALLER BITES

Understanding Why This Works

A few words from the developer of the original program, Elizabeth Walters, PhD (Walters, 2004)

Most reading methods today are phonetic. Children learn the names of the letters and the phonetic associations usually made for those letters and letter combinations. It sounds logical—and it is for 90% of the children. For the other 10% it is not logical. In fact, for some, it seems impossible. As a teacher of 1st and 2nd grade children, I was always troubled and challenged by those 'other' children, the ones who just couldn't seem to remember the words, or the names of the letters, or how to blend sounds to make words. Even if all of this was done, it was so slow that those decoded words didn't have meaning for the struggling students. If they could blend the sounds, they could not then remember the word and would have to sound it out again. Reading is truly impossible in those situations.

However, if we use the other side of the brain, the right hemisphere, rather than the left for the initial approach to reading it cuts down on the amount of processing that the child must do in order to decode words (Das, Parrilla, & Papadopoulos, 2000). The left hemisphere processes letters, sounds, and other symbols. The right hemisphere processes the gestalt (or the whole) rather than the pieces. It also is the place where we develop concepts, and put meaning to what we have read.

As a reading specialist I learned the importance of having a sight vocabulary in order for the student to use context clues for decoding words. Using context clues, just means that we guess the unknown word by what makes sense in the sentence or paragraph. Even in phonetic based approaches, some words just do not follow the rules. *Said*, is one of those words. Other words follow the rules, but the rules are rather complicated, such as the *tion* in *mention*. Therefore, it seemed that there ought to be a way to learn that first basic sight vocabulary.

There is another problem to be overcome when we start to learn words by sight. That is, they must be over-learned. Brain research has shown us that when new learning takes place, it is in the frontal lobes of the brain. When it is over-learned or automatic, it goes to the cerebellum for processing and frees up the frontal lobes for more new learning. Therefore, our method must make sure that new words are not introduced before the old ones are truly automatic. If we do introduce new material before the earlier material is learned to the automatic level, the earlier material is forgotten or confused with the new. Many of you are familiar with the

problem of having to learn too much too fast.


A third consideration is that for a sight vocabulary to be really functional, it must generalize. That is, the student must be able to recognize the words in whatever context they may be located. When this is working, the student will read the words on signs, cereal boxes, the TV, etc. He will be able to recognize the words even though the style of print varies somewhat. Our method uses experience type stories to help with generalizing.

From Liz and Gloria Walters, 2008:

How Does This Happen in When Phonics Doesn't Work...Smaller Bites?

This program was developed for use with young children with a variety of significant learning problems such as severe attention deficits, speech delays, sensory impairments, visual-spatial disorders, and perceptual difficulties. It was specifically designed to be appropriate for children who function at a lower cognitive level. It can also be used with students with disabilities who are learning English as a second language.

Right Hemisphere for Meaning

When Phonics Doesn't Work...Smaller Bites is a meaning-based approach to reading. That is, instead of looking at each word in terms of letters and phonemes (or sounds of letters), the words are linked to meaning. This is accomplished by using rebus symbols, which have meaning. In some instances, actions are also used to help put meaning to words, which seem to carry little meaning for the student. For example, 'the' has a rebus symbol, . The teacher says, "The, I want *the* one right there, *the*". The teacher points to something as this is said, and has the student point to something and repeat the sentence with emphasis on, *the*. Thus, meaning is associated with a sight word with a motion and a sentence.

Most of the rebus symbols that are used in the program were developed by a company called *American Guidance*. This company made no restrictions on their use. In fact, they encouraged teachers and developers to develop materials with them. In the *American Guidance* materials there were rebus symbols for about 200 of the 220 words in the Dolch sight vocabulary (Clark, Davies, & Woodcock, 1974). Elizabeth Walters drew rebus symbols for the other words.

Sight Vocabulary

The Dolch words (Dolch, 1948) make up 65% of the reading words in the first three grades. Publishers of basal readers generally used this common vocabulary. Naturally, the names

of children and pets, etc. would vary from one book to another. We have incorporated this aspect into our materials. We encourage you to use the student's name, the school's name, the teacher's name in our stories wherever they are appropriate. The student will usually be able to recognize his own name and his school without too much trouble.

In addition, Dolch identified 95 nouns commonly used in children's literature. We have also included 42 of the most frequently used Dolch nouns in our stories. Again, we have used the rebus symbols originally published by American Guidance to teach the nouns.

Why Black and White Symbols?

Learning theory research has examined the influence of irrelevant color distractors. Although children without significant learning problems were not distracted by color, children with significant cognitive problems were (*Zeaman and House, 1963; Klein, Klein, Oskamp, and Pathnode, 1972*). Consequently, many children with reading problems have difficulty fading a color picture to the word. Therefore, *When Phonics Doesn't Work... Smaller Bites* uses black and white rebuses to facilitate the transition from picture to text.

Precision Teaching

In order to assure over-learning we incorporated the principles of precision teaching (Haring, Lovitt, Eaton, & Hansen, 1978). In precision teaching the steps to learning a behavior are:

- 1. identify the behavior** (Our Pretest)
- 2. teach the behavior** (learn the words through direct instruction)
- 3. practice the behavior until it is fast** (through carefully structured teaching games)
- 4. measure or chart the behavior to find out how fast and how accurate** (we use a bar chart so that the student as well as the teacher can see progress) and
- 5. use the behavior** (read the words in stories).

Then and only then is new material introduced.

The Strategic Use of Games for Success

The games are not optional. These games are part of the teaching strategy. Children who are very young or who function at a lower cognitive level do not know how to practice on their own. However, like all children, they learn through play. They will play a game over and over until it is truly mastered.

As teachers, it is our job to find ways our students can practice the tasks we have for them to learn to the automatic level. Most of them have trouble staying on task. Still others may need much repetition before the words are learned. The games accomplish this task. The teacher is always an active participant in these games.

How fast is fast enough?

We asked ourselves, how fast is fast enough?. We had taught many children and knew just how fast or slow they usually read words in context and in lists. When they are in a list, the rate is about 60 – 100 words per minute. Research has demonstrated that if a beginning reader can read words in a list at about 30 -50 words a minute with no more than 3 errors and do this consistently, the reader is ready for some new material (*Haughton, Eric 1972*). Thus, the goals for the bar charts were set according to 'fast enough, and accurate enough'.

We also learned that if we stress accuracy too much, the student will slow down and will not reach the necessary speed. If we stress speed too much, there will be 'guessing.' At these first steps in learning, we do not want guessing. We have incorporated effective strategies for addressing excessive errors and guessing.

Generalization

Most of us can remember learning to drive a car. At first, the steps were learned and practiced with someone sitting beside us in a controlled situation. Then, with a little practice, we ventured out into more challenging situations. We were not allowed to make mistakes if our teacher could help it. That might mean an accident. Finally, after testing to see if we truly were proficient enough, we got a license. The reward was to be allowed to drive without someone sitting beside us. Even then, we needed more practice before it became a truly automatic process.

It is no different with reading. The words are learned and practiced to fluency in a controlled situation. The reward is getting to read stories independently; however, more practice is needed for reading to become a truly automatic process.

A great extra - because the strategy for learning the words is linked to meaning, the student who learns this way does not have a comprehension problem! The whole approach is meaning based.

If you need assistance with implementation of the program or advice with a particular student or students, contact Making the Grade by e-mail (info@makingthegrade.net) or telephone (866-849-7304) for we want to see you and your students succeed.

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