

## DECIPHERING THE UNKNOWN CODE

Gloria Bouschor  
Language Therapy Center  
Duluth, Minnesota

"Leave him alone; he'll grow out of it." "If he tried harder, he could do better." "If he really wants to read, he can; he reads Popular Mechanics and Playboy." "Someday he is going to get it all together and really begin to get motivated." "Sometimes, something just snaps, and all of a sudden they begin to read. He just isn't ready; he just doesn't want to read now."

These statements have been said about every retarded reader. Every parent of a child with reading problems has heard them all several times. Besides all of these descriptions, the student with reading problems has been saddled with labels like "dyslexia," "minimal cerebral disfunction," "learning disabled," "specific learning disability and behavior problem." He was not originally a behavior problem, but after several years of frustration at not being able to read like most of the other students in his class, he indeed may become a behavior problem. Sometimes the student who is unable to achieve in the basic skills of reading, writing and spelling, the main subjects which are taught during the first three years of school, develops a combination of withdrawal, daydreaming and aggression. It is easy to accuse him of inattention, lack of motivation, to call him an "underachiever."

If a student has not mastered the basic skills of reading, writing and spelling by the end of grade three, he often continues through his school

career with little or no progress in those skills. Many graduate from high school with third grade reading and spelling skills, unable to read the newspaper, magazines or job applications. With our policies of passing students through school with sometimes little competency except ability and willingness to fill a chair regularly, this is not surprising.

Many students are appearing in junior and senior high school with a wide range of reading problems from mild to severe. The student may be unable to read anything, or he may have fair decoding ability but very poor comprehension skills. Some of the typical reading errors we may find, when the student reads aloud, are the omission of little words, substitution of words, repeated repetitions, sequencing problems, reading letters in a word or words in a sentence in different order than that in which they are printed, vowel confusions (bid for bed) and reversals (was for saw).

The language is a strange code. If a student has trouble with the basic skills, his native language may be a foreign language. He may have to be taught decoding and encoding as though they were an unknown language, because except for the oral language, it is. There are many different degrees and kinds of reading problems from simple to complex, and solving them is rarely simple.

The teacher who often is called upon to solve these language problems is the English teacher.

In the 1930s phonics as a method of teaching language, reading and spelling was dropped in favor of the whole word, limited vocabulary method. The results of research studies at the time had shown that many students

could learn to read quickly with the whole word, sight method. Since this method was less time consuming to teach, in its initial presentation, most reading programs moved away from phonics to the new sight method. Incidental phonics and a few rules for spelling were still retained and taught. Systematic phonics presentation went out of vogue. Enter the basal reader, sight method of reading. It was faster and was going to speed up the whole educational process.

In fact, over half of the students taught with this method did read at grade level or above by fourth grade. But by the 1960s various studies began to appear that showed that 20% or more of our students were retarded readers, a year or more behind their grade placement level in school. We had a sizable number of reading cripples who by high school were severely retarded in reading. Was the lack of phonics as reading instruction responsible?

Reading programs and curriculums were developed to cure the problem. Most of them were still the whole word, sight method, however. Incidental phonics for spelling was inserted to placate the phonics advocates.

The newer programs were basically simple. The teachers manuals were the guides. In the beginning, present a group of vocabulary words to the class. Teach them to read the words. Drill the class briefly -- not too long; they would get bored. Learn the words in isolation, then present a story containing those words, plus the other words learned in previous lessons. Have the class read the story orally in the lower grades, silently as soon as they have shown reasonable proficiency reading aloud. Answer

some questions at the end of the story for comprehension. If the students did not get the right answers, discuss. Many students were doing well and reading adequately, but there were still a noticeable number who were not reading as one would expect, considering their contributions to other areas of school performance.

Next, the linguistics method of reading presentation began to gain popularity. This is a word pattern program, with more drill and grouping words according to their graphic patterns: day, say, gay, play, gray; cold, bold, mold, fold. This method has merit and is still useful for some aspects of language training, even in a systematic phonics approach. Drill and reinforcement is very necessary for some students. It takes many more repetitions of a new concept for some students than for others. If the necessary reinforcement and review is not employed, mastery is never achieved. Drill is not bad in itself. When more than 90% accuracy is achieved, it should be discontinued, of course.

All during the 1940s and 1950s and into the 1960s the battle raged, not without humor. Some teachers taught their phonics literally behind closed doors and drawn curtains so as not to antagonize administrations who had mandated the "new and better" reading systems.

But many teachers were still aware that in spite of high hopes for some of the new reading methods, there were too many of their students, with average intelligence, who were just not reading very well. English teachers were especially sensitive to this. One of the answers to that was more

lectures, labs and less reading. If it was hard for them to read, don't make them. This is a self fulfilling prophecy of doom. The less a student reads, the less chance he has of improving his reading skills, whatever methods of instruction in reading are used. To improve his reading skills the student must read. In fact, many parents with no skills in teaching reading whatever have helped poor readers improve by just listening to them read aloud and correcting their mistakes.

Studies have been done by all sorts of people -- the psychologists, the administrators, the curriculum developers, the classroom teachers, even parents. Many indicate that phonics must be reintroduced as a staple in every reading program. It must be at least one of the methods employed for those who do not pick up reading quickly.

The reading specialists have long been established in the teaching hierarchy. They take the severe reading problems and now they are getting increasing pressure from mainstream teachers to solve all of the reading problems. But the state and federal guidelines prescribe a limited student load for these specialists, so only the most severe reading problems get attention. There are many minor problem readers who will get nothing unless from the English teacher.

Back to the phonics! If that is what the experts say, let's do it. The only problem with phonics as one of the methods of language instruction and remediation is that many teachers have not learned phonics themselves. The only comprehensive phonics manual is so formidable that it is hardly self



teaching. The text, Remedial Training for Children with Specific Disability in Reading, Spelling, and Penmanship by Anna Gillingham and Bessie W. Stillman is profound in its scope and a bit overwhelming to even the most motivated and intelligent teacher. It is best to use such a text in a practicum course in the multisensory phonics method of language presentation. Demonstrations and supervised practice teaching are almost mandatory.

Gillingham and Stillman did not create a new discipline exactly. They systematized and organized the presentation of language from the simple to the complex. They synthesized language development using phonics. The progress is from the single letter in isolation to the letters synthesized into syllables and words. The units are taught in isolation, put together into syllables or short words and drilled until mastered, in isolation and small units of prefixes, roots and suffixes. Then the parts are put together into more difficult words. Where the authors differ and depart from other phonics approaches is in their multisensory approach and emphasis on multisensory drill from parts to whole, simple to complex.

Learning the structure and rules of the English language requires more than a manual for self teaching. Since phonics has been largely absent from many teacher training courses, even at the elementary level, there are many certified and tenured teachers with little knowledge of it. Colleges and universities involved in training teachers would do well to make sure that their education departments offer at least one course in systematic phonics. It should certainly be included as one of the methods of instruction for

the teaching of reading. Teachers cannot be faulted for not using systematic phonics in their reading, language arts and English classes when it was not part of their education programs during their years of preparation to become a teacher.

One example of the emphasis on multisensory phonics for language remediation, which could be used by the classroom teacher, is more oral reading to insure accuracy of decoding. If decoding is very defective, the student should be referred to the reading specialist, but more of this type of teaching could also be done in English and other subjects. Diagnosis of reading problems could be made by perceptive English teachers and other subject matter teachers, without elaborate testing necessary. Remediation of many of the minor problems can be done in the mainstream with more accurate oral reading by all students. If a student is unable to read orally, this can be very embarrassing; but he can then at least be identified for special help.

Many remedial programs urge the student to follow under the words with his finger or pencil until he becomes an accurate decoder. This employs the kinesthetic modality and helps tracking from left to right, avoids skipping words, inserting words and substituting words. Following with finger or pencil also helps to insure tracking in a smooth fashion without jumping around, which is another typical pattern in poor readers.

Once accuracy of decoding has been achieved, word for word oral reading is not used except occasionally for checking that mastery is still there. The instructor need not fear that following with the finger or pencil will

intrude too long. Studies have shown that students will stop this technique when they no longer need it, but they will be able to use it again on difficult passages in future reading.

Oral reading and following with the finger or pencil combine all of the sensual pathways of learning simultaneously. These are visual, auditory, and kinesthetic-tactile. The student sees the print (visual), hears the oral reading (auditory), and uses the muscles and touch (kinesthetic-tactile). Multisensory learning is thought to be the most efficient and quickest method of learning by many experts in the field of learning.

It is especially helpful to students with language disabilities to be given the multisensory phonics system of spelling remediation. Many students with minimal learning disabilities have mainly spelling problems. Memorizing lists of spelling words may be impossible because the visual memory of the student may not be good enough to maintain the whole word and write it correctly. Also, longer words cannot be maintained except for short periods. After the test, some students will not be able to spell the word correctly the next day, certainly not the next week. But an English teacher or other mainstream teacher can give the poor speller prefixes and roots to be drilled orally and tested in writing for proficiency. Breaking the spelling into small units and putting them together into words will be very helpful for many of those with spelling problems.

Multisensory spelling could be the oral sounding of the units while simultaneously writing the word. Prefixes, roots and suffixes must be taught

after the sound symbol relationship of the individual letters and sounds has been mastered. Breaking the words into smaller units of roots and affixes is an efficient way of teaching spelling for all students. Everyone does not have to learn to read by the phonetic method; however it does not harm anyone.

It seems a valid conclusion that systematic phonics should be one of the methods used in language presentation and remediation. Reading cannot be left only to reading specialists; it must be taught by all of the mainstream teachers, especially the English teachers. The problem is too vast to be cured by the remedial reading teachers or SLD specialists. It would be helpful for all teacher training courses to offer phonics courses for certification and continuing education. Elementary and secondary certification programs should require the study of several of the methods of teaching reading.