

Phokissing on Fonix

[Final chapter from the new edition of Reading Magic © Mem Fox
Sydney: Pan Macmillan, 2005]

My name is an example of easy phonics: *M-e-m F-o-x*. But *bough*, *cough*, *through*, *tough* and *though* are a phonics nightmare — each ‘identical’ ending has a different pronunciation.

But what is phonics, exactly? In order to avoid misunderstandings as our children move into school we need to be able to define the terms associated with various methods in the teaching of reading (although research tells us it’s not the method so much as the teacher that makes the difference).

Phonics is the ability to translate the print on the page into sound: for example, seeing the word *cat* on the page and saying *cat*; or being able to break it up into sounds and saying: *kuh-a-tuh*.

Some languages are more phonically simple than others: Finnish and Bahasa Indonesian for instance, are easier to ‘read’ than French or English. Only 50 percent of English words are phonically simple, that is only 50 percent can be sounded out easily. For instance, neither of these ordinary words: *you* or *beautiful* can be sounded out phonically. And why isn’t *beautiful* spelt *b-you-tiful*? After all it would make sense. The problem is that English spelling doesn’t make sense.

Phonics is often confused with ‘phonetics’ which is a totally different branch of language study. It has nothing to do with reading. Phonetics is a method of interpreting the various sounds of language, such as the broad Australian *loyt* for *light*, into weird written symbols.

* * *

Occasionally we may hear the term ‘whole word’ in relation to the teaching of reading. When this method was in vogue more than 40 years ago it was called the ‘look and say’ method: children looked at individual, disconnected words on charts or cards and chanted them out after the teacher.

In this minefield of different terms ‘whole word’ is often confused with the more recent ‘whole language’ method.

‘Whole language’ teaching was so named in the early eighties for several reasons. The teaching of reading began by engaging children in ‘whole’ stories read aloud by the teacher, real stories that children heard again and again and learnt to love. These stories captured children’s hearts and minds and made them eager to learn to read. From whole stories teachers then focused on sentences within those stories, then words within in those sentences, and finally on the parts of those words: the phonics. But always the phonics, the words, and the sentences made sense since they related back to something that had meaning to the children: a story they loved.

Whole language was also ‘whole’ in that the teaching of reading happened at the same time as children learnt to read and write. The whole of literacy was taught simultaneously: reading, writing, speaking, listening and viewing.

Over the years the term ‘whole language’ became so misunderstood by both teachers and the public that it’s now more often called ‘balanced literacy’. This method, currently in use in the most successful classrooms in Canada, Australia and New Zealand has meant that these three countries now have the highest literacy rates in the world after Finland.

* * *

My neighbourhood wonder-girl Josephine, who can read anything at the age of three, did not learn to read with phonics.

She came round to see me one day, with her mother, to say how much she loved my book, *Koala Lou*. She read me the whole book, self-correcting when she needed to. A couple of days later she read to me perfectly, sight unseen, from an adult book on dream interpretation.

Josephine's dad is an accountant and her mother is in human resources. Neither has been an educator. They told me they didn't know how it had happened. When I asked if they had read aloud to her, they both said: 'Of course. All the time! Ever since she was born.'

Josephine was read the same stories repeatedly, many hundreds of times. Her mother told me that Josie taught herself to read using whole words. She did not use phonics to learn new words and is very confused if this method is thrust upon her. When someone tells her that *hot* is made up of the sounds *huh-o-tuh*, Josie quite rightly hears *her otter* instead of *hot*. When she doesn't know a word she asks what it is, and remembers it the next time she sees it. From the words she already knows she applies logic to extrapolate what other words will be in the sentence she's reading.

* * *

This is exactly how Chloë learnt to read, two weeks after she started school, aged four and a half. She'd heard the same favourite books read time and time again, and watched the print, and joined in. And then, like the *prima donna* she was, she demanded that she be allowed to read them herself, preferably on audio-tape so she could listen to herself later! When she didn't know a word I told her what it was

immediately so she could keep the story going, storming ahead with blind courage.

‘You will *tell* me the difficult words, won’t you, Mummy?’ she’d say as she launched, pell-mell and fearlessly, into reading a story she loved. I remember two words in particular at which she hesitated: *cosy* and *investigation*. I told her what they were. A few pages later, when the same words reappeared, she read them without any hesitation whatsoever.

* * *

Looking back on all the print and language and books and love that surrounded Chloë, it would have been remarkable if she *hadn’t* learnt to read at four. The fact that she did no longer surprises me.

Three-year-old Josie doesn’t surprise me either. She’s developed an understanding of what the text should say when she encounters a new word. She’s listened to literary and spoken language so regularly, from being read aloud to so much, that she has an innate sense of what’s appropriate. She takes into account what she’s reading and applies commonsense as to what a word will probably be, and then looks at the print to confirm her hunch. That’s what all competent readers do: you’re doing it right now as you read this sentence.

When children learn to read before school without any lessons, they do so because they’ve been looking at the same print as they’ve listened to the same language in the same stories, which have been read again and again. Not only does the print become familiar, language becomes familiar. Learning to read is more about learning language than it is about making sounds from the letters on a page.

* * *

Let’s assume that learning to read is like driving a car. Most adults can drive, but only a tiny proportion of us would be able to take a car

to pieces, lay all the pieces out along a road and then put the car together again so that it worked well enough to drive us to our required destination. Teaching children to read through a phonics-only program is asking them to take reading to pieces and then put it together again. Not only is that difficult and horribly confusing, it's unnecessary.

* * *

If Josie didn't learn to read through phonics, is phonics essential to reading? The answer is: sometimes. But a capability in phonics doesn't necessarily mean a child (or an adult) can read, or is reading. Getting the sound right proves nothing: *the meaning is on the page not in the sound.*

It is possible to 'read' with all the right phonics in place but not make any sense out of what we're reading aloud. I can correctly read aloud an Indonesian sentence from my picture book *Shoes from Grandpa* without having a clue as to its meaning, and so can you:

'Terima kasih banyak, kakek!' kata Jessie. ('Thanks a lot, Grandpa,' said Jesse.) If I understood Bahasa I could *really* read the sentence because I'd be able to make the right sounds and make sense out of it as well.

* * *

Now the big problem is that many politicians, media commentators, writers of expensive reading-schemes and quick-fix cures for reading, and even a few teachers and university academics, think that sounding out *is* reading. But if that's the case, I ask again, why do most of us read successfully, in silence? We manage it because *the meaning is on the page, not in the sound.*

* * *

English is a wickedly confusing language since so many words look exactly the same, like c-l-o-s-e in: *Close the door*, and: *Wow, that was close!* We need to grab the meaning and the pronunciation by knowing the context, or seeing the word in a sentence, since *close* on its own isn't enough. Dozens of similar examples litter the English language, thereby confusing not only foreigners learning English, but also young children learning to read.

* * *

Phonics doesn't take account of different English accents either. In Australia I'm an *ortha* (author), but in America I'm an *arthurrrrr*. Whose phonics is correct? Does *au* sound like *or*? Or does it sound like *ar*? The sound *au* is also problematic in the words *author* and *laugh*. Which is correct? How can we know until we see the *au* in a word?

Once when I was in the southern United States I made a dreadful mistake at a book signing. I signed a book, as instructed, to 'Terror'. I must admit I thought it an odd name. The owner of the book was devastated.

'No, no,' she said. 'I meant *Terror*.'

'Well, that's what I've written!' I said.

'No, like this.' And on a piece of paper she wrote 'Tara', which I pronounce as *Tah-ra*. **The meaning was on the page, not in the sound.**

I had to buy her a new book.

More recently I signed a book for another Tara, this time in Minnesota, in the mid-west of the United States. I was surprised to find that in Minnesota *Tara* was pronounced just as I pronounce it: *Tah-ra*. Once again I realised that phonics is not a single stable entity: it moves. It changes from state to state and from English-speaking country to English-speaking country. Because it varies for speakers of different

dialects or accents, it's crazy to assume that one phonics program is appropriate for every speaker or reader wherever English is spoken.

* * *

If phonics is so fundamental to our ability to make meaning from text, as so many claim, why can we read and understand the next two paragraphs so easily and quickly?

Aoccdrnig to rscheearch at an Elingsh uinervtisy, it deosn't mtttaer in waht oredr the ltteers in a wrod are, the olny iprmoetnt tihng is that the frist and lsat ltteers are in the rghit pclae: the rset can be a toatl mses but you can still raed it wouthit a porbelm. This is bcuseae we don't raed ervey lteter but the word as a wlohe.

So, hey, waht does this say abuoet the improtnace of phnoics in raeidng? Prorbalby that phonics ins't very imoptrnat at all. How apcoltapyic is *that*, in the cuerrnt licetary wars!

* * *

As if that weren't proof enough that phonics is useful but not essential, here's more: how can it be possible that the billions of people in China, Japan, Korea and Taiwan learn to read when there is no phonics possible in their written language, which is displayed, instead, in picture symbols called 'pictographs'?

I posed this question to Jürgen Kracht, a close friend who teaches Chinese at a private school in Adelaide. He told me that children in China have to be told what a word is, and then learn to recognise it and memorise it.

* * *

It transpires that children like Josephine who learn to read before school without any lessons *never sound out words phonically as they learn to read*. In other words, advanced readers don't use phonics,

even at the age of three! They use phonics only *after* they have learnt to read, when they meet difficult, multi-syllabic words that they can't make sense of by the usual logical means: through print, or grammar, or context, or a prior understanding of what they have just read, or through general knowledge.

We do need phonics, of course, as soon as we learn to write, aged about four or five, when we struggle to make meaning by matching the sounds of language to the letters we scrawl across a page. It's during this complex struggle that we learn our phonics and then our spelling.

In effective classrooms children are learning to write at the same time as they are being read to from 'big books' (so they can all see the print as they hear the story), that is, at the same time as they are learning to read on their own. If learning to read and learning to write go hand in hand, children's literacy advances enormously.

Here are a few sentences from letters to me written by children in their first year at school. We can 'hear' the southern United States accent in the first example and the Canadian accent in the second — and we can observe their gorgeously clever struggle with phonics:

** I hop you are down fan. (I hope you are doing fine.)*

** Dare mem fox I love your books and you are good raider and you are a nis girl. (Dear Mem Fox I love your books and you are a good writer and you are a nice girl.)*

I lict yur books. (I liked your books.)

* * *

As adults we use phonics whenever we encounter an unfamiliar, multi-syllabic word, or we spell a word incorrectly. For instance, I can never spell Wollongong. The first time I type it I get too many o's or l's in it: *Wollongongong*. I have to break it up phonically, saying it aloud, to get it right.

* * *

'Synthetic' phonics is being able to read meaningless words like *vit*, *rog*, or *jat*. But how does it help a child or an adult reader to be able to read purely phonic words such as these if there's no meaning in them? Synthetic phonics takes the meaning out of reading, which is another way of saying that it takes the *reading* out of reading. All that's left is the empty ability to make sounds from symbols on a page.

* * *

When we force children, usually struggling readers, to sound out words they don't know instead of simply telling them the word, these little kids read so slowly that they make almost no sense out of the print they are 'de-coding'. Children who are reluctant, remedial readers may be able, tortuously, to complete a little book phonically, but there's no joy in it, no excitement or passion or emotion of any kind, and ultimately no reward,

'If that's reading', they seem to be saying to themselves, 'then who needs it?' Ironically teachers tend to teach phonics heavily to the very children who need phonics least: the ones who can't yet read, the ones who have never 'had a ride in the literacy car' but are still trying to put the pieces of the car together, in mind-numbing boredom.

* * *

If children are exposed to books, print, pictures, page-turning, and gorgeous stories that lighten up their lives; and fabulous crazy-wild-happy teachers who switch them on to loving books, they will long to learn to read. A phonics-only approach can never, in its wildest dreams, achieve this goal.

Do we want children who have lacked books and happy read-alouds in their first five years to arrive at school and be resurrected into life-long

literacy, or do we want these keen little kids to be crucified on the cross of meaningless phonics?

We all know the answer to that question.
