Whole Word: Whole Word

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Whole Word

There are several Whole Word methods of teaching reading, but all are based on the idea that reading should be taught by teaching whole words - usually called Sight Words. One assumption on which these methods are based is that English is such a mess that the only way to read many words is to learn them by sight.

But Whole Word methods are based on false assumptions. One of these false assumptions is that literacy is a natural skill.

Literacy is not a natural skill

Speaking is a natural skill, but it's a mistake to assume that 'speech written down' - literacy - is also a natural skill.

There is no part of the brain that specifically deals with reading and writing skills. So in order to become literate, students have to repurpose parts of the brain that deal with other activities, as well as linking those separate parts together.

Why is the Whole Word method a bad idea?

The use of the Whole Word method has resulted in thousands of people not making the connection between the sounds of English and the letters that represent those sounds.

The Whole Word method is also based on the assumption that since we speak in whole words, and because we speak entire words at a time - we should teach literacy as whole words –usually called sight words.

But when we speak, we articulate one sound at a time. Try saying any word that is made up of more than one sound, and you'll end up saying several sounds, one after the other – rather than saying all the sounds together. Try saying these words: cat, chimp, cabbage.

Even though each of those words names a single item, those names are not made of single sounds – and so they are not written as single "shapes"; the letters in the words represent the sounds spoken*:

- /c/ /a/ /t/;
- /ch/ /i/ /m/ /p/;
- /c/ /a/ /b/ /ae/ /j/

Why shouldn't we use sight words to teach literacy?

Written English is an alphabetic language. That means it was designed so that there was one sign (letter) for each of the (approximately) 44 sounds we speak.

This means that originally children only had to be aware of the individual sounds they spoke (Phonemic Awareness), and be taught the letter for each sound. Then they could read and write!

That's how it was originally designed to be. And in an ideal world, that's how it still would be. Unfortunately, we don't live in an ideal world. But the underlying principle still applies, and is easy to teach and easy to learn.

To learn to read the phonics way, students have to learn about 300 items:
- the upper and lowercase alphabet letters;
- the sound/letter combinations for:
  - those individual alphabet letters
  - the multiple letter teams;
  - the ways we use letters in old words;
  - the ways we use letters according to rules;
  - the ways we use letters in foreign words; and
- the punctuation signs.

* When I'm speaking of a sound, I represent the most common letter (or letter team) used to represent that sound between slash marks. When I'm speaking about a letter, I'll write letter in front of the letter: e.g. letter m.

Then they are ready to begin reading.

To learn the Whole Word way, students have to learn every single word by sight.

But English is an alphabetic language. To learn each word individually defeats the whole purpose of having an alphabet. The purpose of having an alphabet is to represent each spoken sound in the language with one written symbol (letter).

To write a word, you write the letter that represents each sound in the word in the order in which it is spoken. To read a word, you say the sound for each letter in the written word in the order in which you come to it as you read along the line.

English should be taught as an alphabetical language

When students are taught to read an alphabetic language using a Whole Word method, they are being trained to read each word as a whole word – as though there is no relationship between the letters in the word and the sounds in the word.

When we learn something new, our brains tackle the new information in one of two ways - analytically or holistically. When we learn something analytically, we learn about the separate parts, and then we learn how the parts work together. When we learn something holistically, we learn about the size and shape of the item.

Literacy in an alphabetic language should be taught so the brain can process it analytically, because readers and writers have to assemble and disassemble the 300 items listed above.

Instead, Whole Word teaches students to process written words holistically, by teaching them to commit words to memory according to their shapes (pictures). This is why many Whole Word-trained students develop the habit of moving their eyes back and forth over a word - because that's how we process pictures. This way of reading turns *was* into *saw,* and turns *quite* into *quiet.*

I've even been asked,

"I've got all the right letters there. The word has the right shape, so that's good enough - isn't it?"

No, it wasn't good enough, especially as the document in question was a legal document, and the way the word had been "rearranged" was a totally different word from the one intended, which changed the meaning of the sentence completely!

Whole Word trains students to read Dyslexically

In many cases, people who read by: guessing, rearranging the order of letters within words, and reading and writing words backwards, are labeled as Dyslexics. But often the reason they display these symptoms is because this is the way they've been taught to read and write. There's nothing wrong with them; the error is in the way they were taught!

Yes, they've been taught to guess. They've been told to look at the shape of the word. In their minds, they move the letters around and flip them sideways – because doing that might help them work out what the word is.

The 'artistic' and 'engineering' types people go even further, and in their heads they invert letters (so the top of the letter is at the bottom) and then in their heads they look at the letters from the above or underneath.

After doing a few of those things, the student no longer has the slightest clue as to which way is up for that letter, or which way it should face. But when you're thinking about pictures, those things don't matter.

Whole Word methods teach "pseudo reading"

One of the reasons Whole Word was invented was so students could avoid having to go through the tedious business of rote learning about 160 sound/letter combinations, some rules, and a couple of dozen Weird Words before beginning to read.

But it's backfired badly, because with Whole Word ways of reading, students have to learn **thousands** of individual words by heart. Yes, they only have to learn a few of these words before they can start reading. But the reading they are able to do then is what I call "pseudo reading".

What's pseudo reading? It's when someone appears to be reading, but isn't. Reading is understanding the written material in front of you. It's not guessing, and it's not pretending that the written material says something it doesn't (e.g. "reading" *horse* instead of what the book says - *pony*!). But these are the very things Whole Word teaches - guessing, and "constructing your own meaning" from the material you read!

I don't need to prop a book in front of me to construct my own meaning. I'm reading a book because I'm interested in the meaning the author is trying to convey!

It can take years before parents realise that their child isn't really reading. But by then, the guessing habit is very difficult to break.

Whole Word and Phonics don't mix

Whole Word and Phonics work in opposite ways, so it's best not to mix them. Many Whole Word methods include a small amount of phonics, but a written English word is either a picture, or it's a series of signs showing the order of sounds in the word.
When students are taught only a small amount of phonics, they only know enough to sound out a small percentage of words. This means that students' efforts to use phonics consistently, fail - so they give up sounding out, because "partial" phonics hasn't helped them.

The reason we're given for this (small amount) of phonics not working is that English is so unpredictable – so there's no point learning the sound/letter combinations and rules - because so many words break the rules.

But if you know the 160 most common sound/letter combinations, the most common rules, - you can read over 85% of English words. Any other far less common sound/letter combinations can be learnt as the students come across them in their reading.

Whole Word overloads students' brains

When literacy is taught incorrectly, as though English words were pictures, the wrong parts of the brain are used for reading and spelling.

That might sound like nit-picking, but it makes a lot of difference to a brain - because pictures and sounds are processed in different parts of the brain. In fact, they're processed on different sides of the brain.

If literacy is taught as 'this sound is represented by that letter', then the part of the analytical left brain that works with individual sounds turns on when it sees a written word, links the letter to the relevant sound - and the brain builds the word, blends it, checks it with its internal dictionary - and there you have the word and its meaning ready to go!

With practice, students automate that process so it becomes effortless.

But when students are taught to read a whole word e.g. *infant*, the information is given to the right brain - which looks at the word as a picture, and students might mentally do lots of things with that letter (e.g. spin it so it's back to front or upside down). And, in their mental picture dictionary, they might have hooked the word *infant* to a picture of a baby, so when they see *infant*, they might say *baby* - because they're working from a picture, rather than what is written on the page.

Does it matter which part of the brain does the job?

You may well feel that it doesn't matter which part of the brain does the job, as long as the job gets done! But you'd be wrong.

It matters which part of the brain does the job because when we pretend that the important thing about words is their shape, students make a huge number of errors - because too many words have a similar shape.

This means students 'read' the wrong word, and use up massive amounts of energy trying to make sense of something that doesn't make sense because it's a lie. And because it's a lie, it doesn't work - and they end up thinking they're the stupid ones!

What now?

Relying on schools to teach real Phonics is often a waste of time. Why should your children or students have to fall through the cracks while the people who should be helping them spend time fighting out the Whole Word versus Phonics wars? Why should students have to fail, while you're told they're being taught phonics, when they come home with the current list of Sight Words to learn for homework?

Although it can be confusing to the student to learn Whole Word at school, and Phonics at home, it's an improvement on being illiterate.

There is no need for your students to be illiterate. And they don't have to spend years committing thousands of words to memory. Just teach them to read using Phonics!

And don't assume that because someone can't read that they have a major problem. Most illiteracy is purely due to ignorance of the basics – so teach those basics!

Whole Word: Sight Words

The idea behind sight words was that some English words were so weird that there was no way they could be sounded out, so they had to be learnt by sight.

If we'd stuck to the idea that the truly weird words were sight words, and everything else was sounded out, we would have been OK. But we didn't.

The trouble was that some people decided it was easier to teach words by sight (the Whole Word method) than to take the time to teach:

- the sound-to-letter combinations of the 40+ sounds in English;
- the rules (or patterns) of English (the Phonics method);
- the ways we spelt words that were still spelt the old-fashioned way; and
- the ways we showed which words had come from other languages.

This meant that less and less sounding out was taught. After a couple of generations of Whole Word, so few teachers knew the sound/letter combinations and Phonics, that the only method known to teach reading was Whole Word.

And learning English words by sight is very difficult because there are so many words to learn - adults can read more than 20,000 words, and can often read between 50,000 and 100,000 words.

Let's have a look at the different ways a Sight Words student and a Phonics student would learn the 52 Dolch Sight Words for Kindergarten. These words are:

all am are at ate be black brown but came did do eat

four get good have he into like must new no now on

our out please pretty ran ride saw say she so soon

that there they this too under want was well went

what with white who will yes

Whole Word students would learn each word individually, by sight - that's 52 things to learn.

Full Phonics

Now, before we look at what the Phonics student would have to learn, I'd just like to clarify what I mean by Phonics. There are two different sorts of Phonics; one is 'incidental' Phonics - it's not taught in an organised manner, and what's taught is not comprehensive. Students are taught a sound for each alphabet letter, but the other 16+ sounds aren't taught.

The other sort of Phonics is what I call **full** Phonics - a full Phonics course is comprehensive, and is organised so that it that equips students with all the knowledge and skills necessary to become independent readers.

This information includes:

- the 40+ sounds;
- the most common way each sound is represented in writing;
- knowledge of the rules of written English;
- basic knowledge of the history of English so students can recognise the 'old' ways of writing sounds (e.g. /n/ in **kn**ife and /r/ in **wr**iting);
- very basic knowledge of the history of English so students can recognise the way we write sounds in foreign words (e.g. ball**et**, **Eu**ro); and
- sufficient practice, so they can apply their knowledge automatically.

That looks like a lot to learn. And it is, but if it's taught in a way that makes sense, students can learn all those things in **weeks**.

It doesn't take years to learn to read the full phonics way, because there is a limited amount of information to be learnt and it's taught in a way that makes sense – so it's easier to remember.

But it does take years to learn the Whole Word way, because each word has to be taught individually. All 20,000+ of them!

I'm writing this article to show you just how few real "Sight Words" there are, and so you can see that nothing is gained by taking the Whole Word 'shortcut'!

In the list of words below, I've coloured the words so you can see at what stage full Phonics students would be able to read each one:

- plain black words are the basic 40+ sound-to-letter words that can be sounded out;
- <u>single underlined red</u> words are words where rules are applied (think red because rule-breaking is <u>Dangerous</u> – ask any police officer);
- <u>double underlined green</u> words are words using 'old-fashioned' letter combinations (think green for <u>Sherwood Forest</u> and Robin Hood, long ago);
- <u>thickly underlined blue</u> words are words using 'foreign' letter combinations (think blue because these countries are over the <u>Ocean</u>);
- **bold pink** words are have at least one letter breaking the rules (think too much pink is just **Wrong**). (I've underlined the rule breaking letter/s.)

all am **ar_e_** at ate **be black** brown but came did <u>do</u>

<u>eat</u> <u>four</u> get good **have he** <u>into</u> like must <u>into</u> like

must <u>new</u> **no** now on our out **pleas_e_ pr_e_tty** ran ride

<u>saw</u> <u>say</u> **she so** soon that <u>there</u> <u>they</u> this too under

<u>want</u> <u>was</u> well went <u>what</u> with white **<u>who</u>** will yes

Of these 52 words, how many have: (They add up to 101%)

Sound out spellings?   **28 = 54%**

Rule spellings?   **8 = 15%**

Old spellings?   **7 = 14%**

Foreign spellings?   **5 = 10%**

Weird spellings?   **4 = 8%**

So if we took the time to teach students:

- the sound/letter combinations;
- the rules;
- the (alternative) ways to spell sounds in old words; and
- the (alternative) ways to spell sounds in foreign words

they would be able to read 93% (48) of these 52 words.

It wouldn't take long for students to learn the "non-compliant" word parts: **ar_e_**, **pleas_e_**, **pr_e_tty**, and **<u>who</u>**.

Conclusion

For the sake of your students' brains, Written English needs to be taught using full phonics because learning the sound/letter combinations is essential for reading; that's the way English was designed to be written and read.

To learn more about how to teach reading at home, go to:

www.teachreadingathome.com