

Why Johnny Can't Read

Chapter 6—Phonics vs. No Phonics
By RUDOLF FLESCH

In every single research study ever made phonics was shown to be superior to the word method; conversely, there is not a single research study that shows the word method superior to phonics.

I know this seems an unbelievable claim. Let me explain why I feel justified in making it. Every researcher in every field of science begins his work by surveying the previous research literature in the field. Consequently, almost all research reports are equipped with footnotes and bibliographical references that cover everything that has been done up to that point.

A few hours in a library, working back from the latest studies in a given area, are therefore usually enough to check the sum total of research done to solve a given problem.

Goes to the Records
I spent two days in the library of Teachers College, Columbia University, tracking down every single reference to a study of "phonics vs. no phonics." I carefully read each one of those papers and monographs. Naturally, it is possible that some item or items in the bibliography have escaped me; but I honestly don't think so. I covered the ground as diligently as I possibly could, looking for scientific evidence in favor of the word method.

There was none. (Editors note: In his book, Dr. Flesch gives the results of research done by several persons. Only two of the latest ones are reported on in this series.)

Sister M. Dorothy Browne, of St. Joseph's College, Adrian, Mich., writes her doctor's dissertation on "Phonics as a Basis for Improvement in Reading" (Catholic University of America, 1938).

How about using phonics for remedial reading? she says. Let's see what phonics can do for sixth-graders. So she gives a 10-minute phonic drill to 160 sixth-graders in six parochial schools in Chicago, Detroit and Washington, D. C. Another 160 students form a control group with no phonic drill. After nine months the two groups are tested.

Eight Months Ahead
The "reading age" of the control group is 154.9 (that is, the norm for a child of 12 years and 11 months); that of the phonic-drill group 162.73 (13 years and 7 months).

Ten-minutes-a-day of phonics for nine months has put them eight months of "reading age" ahead of their fellow students. On the basis of her findings, Sister M. Dorothy Browne comes to this conclusion: "The study of phonics is helpful not only to the pupil who is deficient in reading, but is even more effective in stimulating the better reader to further growth."

Now we have arrived at 1939, the publication date of the most extensive and conclusive study of them all. It is the dissertation of Donald C. Agnew, taking his doctor's degree at Duke University.

Mr. Agnew wants to settle the old controversy once and for all. Those limited experiments with experimental and control groups of first-graders are inconclusive, he feels. Let's take all the children in all the schools in a city, he says, and find out where they stand at the end of third grade when the effect of reading instruction can really be effectively measured. So one spring he gives tests to all the third-graders in all the schools in Raleigh, N. C.

Before he does that, he gives

to all teachers who ever taught these children an elaborate questionnaire; from the answers he figures for each teacher the exact degree to which she uses phonics in her teaching. Then he works out the statistical relationship between the children's test scores and the amount of phonics they presumably got from their teachers.

The results are a terrific disappointment. They hardly show any differences. Mr. Agnew, in danger of not getting his Ph. D. degree, goes home and ponders.

What went wrong? He comes to the conclusion that his basic assumption was wrong, namely, that a little phonics would go a long way. After all, the supervisors of the Raleigh schools are word-method people; they frown on phonics, and there is not one among their teachers who would dare to do a real job of phonics in her class. The value of phonics can only be proven when it is taken seriously and taught systematically.

Fortunately, there is the city of Durham, N. C., whose superintendent of schools is a pro-phonics man. All teachers in Durham schools have to teach phonics whether they like it or not.

So Mr. Agnew gives another series of tests to some 300 third-graders in Durham. Their teachers have all been teaching more phonics than even the most phonic-minded teacher in Raleigh. (Mr. Agnew has established that fact again with questionnaires.)

Conclusive Comparison
Nothing could be more conclusive than a comparison of those third-grade test scores in Raleigh and Durham.

Here is the lineup of Mr. Agnew's average test results (score of children):

Name of test (Word method)	Durham (Phonics)
Gates A 5	29.50
Gates B 5	29.17
Gates C 5	29.17
Gates D 5	29.17
Gates E 5	29.17
Gates F 5	29.17
Gates G 5	29.17
Gates H 5	29.17
Gates I 5	29.17
Gates J 5	29.17
Gates K 5	29.17
Gates L 5	29.17
Gates M 5	29.17
Gates N 5	29.17
Gates O 5	29.17
Gates P 5	29.17
Gates Q 5	29.17
Gates R 5	29.17
Gates S 5	29.17
Gates T 5	29.17
Gates U 5	29.17
Gates V 5	29.17
Gates W 5	29.17
Gates X 5	29.17
Gates Y 5	29.17
Gates Z 5	29.17

As you can see, the Durham children scored higher in every one of these tests except Type B, where the scores were even.

In addition, Mr. Agnew also gave them the "Gray Oral Reading Check Test," Set II and Set III. This is a test where the results are measured by the number of errors made in reading.

On Set II, the Durham children made on the average 2.35 errors, the Raleigh children made 8.79. On set III the Durham children made 7.05 errors, the Raleigh children 17.50.

The time scores on these tests showed that the phonics-trained Durham children took a little over a minute to read each set, while the Raleigh word guessers took considerably less than one

minute to make two to four times as many errors.

Reading vs. Feeling Good
Mr. Agnew's conclusions were clear and emphatic:

"Should phonetic methods be employed in the teaching of primary reading?"

"The answer to this question can be given only when the purposes for teaching primary reading have been agreed upon. If the basic purpose in the teaching of primary reading is the establishment of skills measured in this study (namely: independence in word recognition, ability to work out the sounds of new words, efficiency in word pronunciation, accuracy in oral reading, certain abilities in silent reading and the ability to recognize a large vocabulary of written words), the investigations would support a policy of large amounts of phonic training."

"If, on the other hand, the purposes of teaching primary reading are concerned with 'joy in reading,' 'social experience,' 'the pursuit of interests,' etc., the investigations reported offer no data as to the usefulness of phonic training."

I can fully understand Mr. Agnew's outburst of sarcasm, since I worked my way through the same literature. It's exactly as he says: If you want to teach children how to read, you need phonics; if you just want to make them feel good, you don't.

Sunday—The Myth of Reading
Is it true that a child isn't ready to learn to read until he is 6 or 7? Do children learn to read earlier in other countries? Why are our children usually one or two years behind children of the same school age in other countries?

(From the book "Why Johnny Can't Read" by Rudolf Flesch, copyright 1955, by Harper Brothers. Distributed by The Register and Tribune Syndicate.)

Red Chinese Reported Getting 'Valued' Gear
HONG KONG, May 27 (AP)—Two large freighters believed to be Polish are unloading cargoes of apparent importance to the Reds at the Communist island of Laysan, 20 miles west of Hong Kong, reports from Portuguese Macao said today.

Fishermen returning to Macao from waters surrounding the area said the Communists sent two patrol launches to the area to keep fishermen away before unloading began Monday.

Top Coffee Revenue
At prevailing coffee prices, Costa Rica expects record revenue of \$40 million to \$45 million from its 1954-55 coffee crop, San Jose learns.

Here are additional letters from The Star's readers on Dr. Flesch's book:

Tragic Bluffing
To the Editor:
... I was taught Dr. Flesch's way to pronounce each letter.

Flesch Book Assailed As Distorting Truths

A National Education Association official today indicted Dr. Rudolf Flesch's book, "Why Johnny Can't Read," on four specific counts.

Dr. Frank W. Hubbard, director of the research division of the NEA, said generally that the book "contains so many false allegations and half-truths that it would take a text of equal length to refute many of his statements."

Dr. Hubbard is secretary-treasurer of the American Educational Research Association in addition to his NEA post. His specific replies to the Flesch book are:

"It is not true that 30 or 40 years ago pupils made more progress in reading than they do today in the schools. Such standard tests as are available for comparable children and conditions show that decade by decade there has been steady improvement in reading. Teachers of long experience know that today's child reads many more books on a greater variety of subjects and with greater understanding than the typical child of a few decades past."

"It is not true that all children learned to read without difficulties by the heavily-saturated-with-phonics methods of the past. Many of them failed again and again in the earlier grades and later dropped out of school. Today, fewer of them fall in reading and many others re-spond to remedial methods which makes it possible for them to continue in school. The phonic method is recognized today as a useful tool in the teacher's instructional kit but it is not worshipped as a cure-all."

"It is not true that the phonic method was thrown out of the schools because of inadequate research. Even when scientific studies were in their infancy, classroom teachers had noted the weaknesses of the phonic method. Educational and psychological research helped teachers to discover many of the blocks to learning and accelerated the movement toward more interesting and sensible textbooks."

"Modern teaching and modern textbooks continue to use phonics, although not to the extent which Mr. Flesch recommends. When Mr. Flesch contends that the phonic method was thrown out bodily he is merely setting up a straw man which he can attack."

"It is not true that there is some educational ogre that dominates education today and prevents teachers from using the so-called 'phonic' method of teaching reading. Never before have there been so many different kinds of books. Teachers are continuously seeking textbooks that make for better reading skills through a higher quality of reading content and more efficient methods."

I studied German and I can now read any German book with perfect pronunciation and not understand many of the words because there is only one way to pronounce the letters, with known changes for the sound of vowels with the umlaut, and set pronunciations for "ei" and "ie," etc. Anybody who knows the first principles of that language can read, just as Flesch

My daughter was taught to see the whole word and to remember the look of the whole word as a picture. On her schoolroom wall was a picture of a dog; underneath, in capital letters, DOG; a picture of a mother with two children; underneath, the word MOTHER. Hence, for years, any word beginning MO she would call "Mother." It might be monkey or mountain, but to her it looked like mother.

Her teacher exclaimed to me, "Isn't it wonderful the way they are learning to read whole words without knowing a single letter?" My feeling was, "Isn't it tragic the way they are learning to bluff?"

Moreover, it was years before my daughter could look up a name in the telephone book because she had no idea in what order initial letters came. If she wanted "Wilson" she had to start with "Abbott" and skip along through the whole book.

It seems evident that the old-fashioned way of spelling phonetically is much the better way, even for English with all its exceptions and idiosyncracies.

Ona Winants,
(Mrs. F. W. Haverkamp),
Arlington, Va.

Sides With Dr. Flesch
To the Editor:

What's the matter with reverting to a little of the basic mechanics of reading, along with Dr. Flesch?

It would seem that reading should be just what he says it should.

The educators who, so far, have criticized his contentions seem to involve reading with everything else in the curriculum, history, science, zoology, mathematics and sociology; everything except spelling, which could be related.

Anyway, it would seem that given the mechanics of reading, word sounding by phonetics, the pupil should achieve vocabulary building, with good semantic evaluations, through the other courses as time went along. I'll string along with Dr. Flesch.

Earl (Scoop) Shutz,
2325 Fifteenth street N.W.

Sides With Burr
To the Editor:

I want to express my thanks for Mr. Samuel Enle Burr, Jr.'s article in "The Star" on reading. He picks flaws in Flesch's theory that not showing up, English is not a phonetic language, and German and some other languages are:

I studied German and I can now read any German book with perfect pronunciation and not understand many of the words because there is only one way to pronounce the letters, with known changes for the sound of vowels with the umlaut, and set pronunciations for "ei" and "ie," etc. Anybody who knows the first principles of that language can read, just as Flesch

did with a Czech book. English is entirely different.

Alexandria, Va.

Frustrated Parents
To the Editor:

The Star is performing a most outstanding service by printing "Why Johnny Can't Read" by Rudolf Flesch. The subject of "modernized" teaching methods, particularly in reading and spelling, is one about which I have long been indignant. It is fast becoming a rarity to find a young person, even among university graduates, who can write an entire sentence without misspelling several simple words. And it is just as unusual to meet anyone younger than 40 or 50 who enjoys reading anything more advanced than the comic pages or a sexy murder mystery.

Most frustrating of all is the fact that when a parent, completely out of patience with the schools, begins to teach his children to read and spell correctly, and to enjoy good reading, the teacher's reaction is an indignant note or a parental interview requesting immediate cessation of such activities as being "not in accordance with modern methods" and as "interfering with their teaching." The more "interference" of this type on the part of intelligent parents who are genuinely concerned about their children's welfare, the better it will be for the children.

David L. Jones,
Kensington, Md.

Why Take It Seriously?
To the Editor:

Your May 18 editorial headed "Why Johnny Can't Read" and your May 19 publisher's blurb endorsing the book, "Why Johnny Can't Read," by Rudolf Flesch confirms Barnum's well-known remark that one gullible person is born every minute.

Why is The Washington Star so firmly convinced that this is a highly commendable book? What are the qualifications of this Rudolf Flesch that make him so great an authority on the subject of how to teach children how to read?

According to his advertising, Flesch had a lawyer's training in Austria, wrote a doctoral dissertation on the so-called art of plain talk, followed that up with a spate of books telling writers how to write and thinkers how to make sense, tutored a certain 12-year-old "Johnny" who somehow had arrived in sixth grade without being able to read and then conducted a one-man investigation of methods used throughout the United States for teaching children how to read.

That is the background that now permits him to write: The teaching of reading—all over the United States, in all schools,

Flush Doors 4.45
We Can Cut to Any Size
General Millwork Co.
1300 Knowles Ave., Kensington, Md.
ED. 6-3231
OPEN SAT. & SUN. 9-6
OPEN MON. (MEMORIAL DAY)

in all textbooks—is absolutely wrong and flies in the face of all logic and common sense.

Is it the "man-bites-dog theory of what makes news" that leads The Star to take Flesch so seriously? ...

Lois M. Rettie,
Arlington, Va.

They Read in 6 Weeks
To the Editor:

I am very much interested in the articles appearing in The Star by Mr. Flesch, author of "Why Johnny Can't Read."

Why is it that we Americans must be informed by those foreigners who have been granted a "refugee scholarship" (which we can't obtain for our own sons and daughters) just what is wrong with our public school system?

Long before Mr. Flesch was born a new system was introduced in our teaching by a man by the name of Pollard. Many of the older teachers will recall that this new system was not very popular with the teaching force as it entailed a great deal of hard work as well as study, on the part of the teachers. But may it be said to their credit that many of the best teachers embraced it and taught the children the sounds of all the consonants as well as the sounds of the vowels, in the alphabet. I think this system was intro-

THE EVENING STAR A-11
Washington, D. C.
FRIDAY, MAY 27, 1955

duced about the year 1900, or possibly before. When I started teaching in 1903 I used it and I would have been ashamed if I could not have a class of beginners reading in six weeks' time or less after entering school. (Mrs.) B. H. Morton,
3149 Mt. Pleasant street N.W.

ADVERTISEMENT.

Do European women make better wives?

Every month 250 of our service-men marry European girls. Why? What qualities do these women bring to courtship, marriage, family life that the girls at home lack? To find out, an American wife went to Europe, questioned the GI's themselves.

Now, in June Reader's Digest, she brings you their frank, thought-provoking answers. Get June Reader's Digest today: 43 articles of lasting interest, including the best from leading magazines and current books, in condensed form.

"THE ACTIVATED CHARCOAL FILTER DRAWS SO EASY!"

"YOU CAN TASTE THE FINE TOBACCO FLAVOR!"

HERBERT TAREYTON CIGARETTES

Filter Tip MODERN SIZE

Only **FILTER TIP TAREYTON** gives you Activated Charcoal filtration

PRODUCT OF The American Tobacco Company

Comb'n Doors
Screen doors: Louvre doors
RUCKER LUMBER
1320 Wilson Blvd. JACKSON 4-1234

Breath-taking
IT'S TRULY A
MASTERPIECE
See Page B-9 Saturday Star

HOT? This Will **COOL** You Off
AN EMERSON

ELECTRIC ATTIC FAN

For All Types of Homes

Ask for Free Estimate

Phone EM. 2-8300

GENERAL ELECTRONICS
INCORPORATED
SERVICE 4513 WISCONSIN AVENUE N.W. SALES

The easiest homework you ever did!

Dramex for cracked plaster...
Just one coat of DRAMEX eliminates cracks and blemishes as it decorates... doesn't drip or streak. Dries in 4 hours.

for wallboard... DRAMEX makes wallboard look like expensive painted plaster... covers taped seams and blemishes. In 12 decorator shades and white.

Bondex Heavy Duty for wet basement walls...
BONDEX HEAVY DUTY is a heavy aggregate material, made with the double waterproofed formula. It forms a hard "moisture barrier" that stops water. Use on all porous masonry surfaces.

Levels and fills in one coat. 50 lb. bag only \$8.50

ST. LOUIS 14, MISSOURI
THE REARDON COMPANY

GOOD-BYE DIRT, STAINS, ODORS, GERMS!
says Mary Jo Foster, R. N.

New Sanitized process used in hospitals makes
1st Choice Used Cars safe and antiseptically clean!

1st CHOICE Sanitized USED CARS

Never before such cleanliness and spotlessness, such safe, sure protection in the used car you buy!

Dodge dealers take the worry and wonder out of used car buying with 1st Choice SANITIZED Used Cars!

Seats, carpeting, upholstery, armrests are vacuumed and laundered to remove dirt and stains, restore beauty.

The complete interior is deodorized and disinfected—SANITIZED by methods used in hospitals. Seats are protected with special sanitary plastic covers like the new cars.

1st Choice SANITIZED Used Cars are late model beauties in the finest mechanical condition. And they cost no more than "ordinary" used cars.

See the Classified Section for 1st Choice Used Car Specials!

only at your Dependable **DODGE DEALER**