P.S. to the NEWS
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PHONY-PHONICS VERSUS PHONICS-FIRST

If there ever was a man entitled to say "I told you so," it is Rudolf Flesch, author of a best-selling book 25 years ago called "Why Johnny Can't Read," which presented a depressing picture of the faulty methods used to teach reading in most schools. He showed that the then-popular method, called look-and-say (or whole word or sight reading), was a cheat on the child because it failed to teach him to read.

Flesch's words fell largely on deaf ears. Three out of four schools still stick to the discredited look-and-say methods. The result, as discovered by Opinion Research Corporation, the respected survey firm of Princeton, N.J., is that 21 percent of adults over age 18 can't read a want ad, a job application form, a label on a medicine bottle, or a safety sign at their place of work.

Look-and-say pretends that letters, sounds and syllables don't exist, and it starts the first-grader memorizing a few whole words over and over again until he builds up a limited sight vocabulary. Phonics-first, the method advocated by Flesch, is a system of studying the mechanics of reading by learning the building blocks of words: the 26 letters of the alphabet, the 44 sounds of the English language, and the syllables.

Just compare the achievement of the two methods and you will see the difference. At the end of the first grade, the look-and-say child can recognize 349 words; at the end of the second grade 1,094; at the end of the third grade 1,216; and at the end of the fourth grade 1,554.

With phonics, by the end of one semester of the first grade, the child can read his entire speaking vocabulary and need seldom be taught another word. By the end of the fourth grade, his reading vocabulary should be 20,000 words.

The idiocy of look-and-say has now been confessed by one of the leading publishers of look-and-say readers in an eighth grade teachers' manual which gives "remedial reading" instruction exercises on how to teach eighth graders to read. Here is how the word "brake" is to be taught.

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"Context: 'The car began to roll down the hill. Thinking quickly, Sally jumped into the car and put her foot on the brake.' Questions: 'How do you know the word is not pedal? How do you know the word is not broom?'"

So now it's official. The leading look-and-say publishers admit that millions of junior high school students, who were taught by look-and-say, can't distinguish the words brake, pedal, and broom. It would serve no useful purpose to identify the publisher from whom the examples in this column are taken, because all the look-and-say publishers are just as bad.

Many look-and-say schools have been confronted by parents whose consciousness has been raised by Flesch's book, or by the pro-phonics work of the Reading Reform Foundation of Scottsdale, Arizona, or by other phonics advocates. Many schools respond with phony-phonics instead of real phonics (phonics-first).

Here are some of the slippery semantics used by those who want parents to think their children are being taught phonics when they are not: phonetic analysis, reading for meaning, meaning emphasis, analytic phonics, intrinsic phonics, and gradual phonics. The dead-end learning sequence used in phony phonics is: (1) learning the shape of the word, (2) using context or pictures as a clue to word recognition, (3) using stories which repeat the same tiresome words over and over again.

Another technique of phony-phonics is consonant substitution: borrowing a consonant from the beginning or end of another known word to make a new word. Thus, if a child has memorized the words bat and run, and the teacher wants to introduce bun, the child is told "it starts like bat, but ends like run, so it must be bun."

Phonics-first, on the other hand, teaches all the consonant and vowel sounds immediately, then synthesizes sounds into words, and teaches the child to get meaning from the sequence and structure of these sounds before whole words are taught. Phonics-first teaches the child to pronounce the sounds of unfamiliar words in the normal order from left to right.

Test your own child. If your Johnny or Mary can't read the newspaper by the middle of the first grade, he is probably getting look-and-say or phony-phonics rather than phonics-first. In that case, start your own remedial program.

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