



Written by [Sam Blumenfeld](#) on December 10, 2014

Intensive Phonics: The Magic Bullet

According to the Random House Dictionary, a magic bullet is “something that cures or remedies by attacking a specific disease without causing harmful side effects.” But what are we trying to cure with intensive phonics? In November 2007, the National Endowment for the Arts described the problem in an alarming report on the decline of literacy in America with the somber title *Reading at Risk*.



According to the report, the number of 17-year-olds who never read for pleasure increased from nine percent in 1984 to 19 percent in 2004. Almost half of Americans between the ages of 18 and 24 never read books for pleasure. Why? Because reading has become a painful, torturous exercise that they wish to avoid. The survey states:

For the first time in modern history, less than half of the adult population now reads literature, and these trends reflect a larger decline in other sorts of reading. Anyone who loves literature or values the cultural, intellectual, and political importance of active and engaged literacy in American society will respond to this report with grave concern.

Dana Gioia, chairman of the endowment at the time, told a reporter: “This is a massive social problem. We are losing the majority of the new generation. They will not achieve anything close to their potential because of poor reading.”

But while the report sounded the alarm, it offered no specific solution. But we’ve known the solution since 1955 when Dr. Rudolf Flesch wrote his famous bestseller *Why Johnny Can’t Read*. In it he said:

The teaching of reading — all over the United States, in all the schools, in all the textbooks — is totally wrong and flies in the face of all logic and common sense.

He then explained how the professors of education changed the way reading is taught in American schools. They threw out the traditional phonics method and replaced it with a new look-say or sight method that teaches children to read English as if it were an ideological writing system like Chinese. The result has been massive reading disability among students. Flesch’s solution? Return to intensive phonics instruction. But that never happened, although many parents who read Flesch’s book took matters into their own hands and taught their children to read by phonics at home.

But here we are, 59 years later, and none of our educators seems to know how to solve the reading problem. Most of our reading teachers today have never heard of Rudolf Flesch. As for phonics, they’ve been told that it doesn’t work. They’ve been brainwashed by their professors of education and believe what they’ve been told.

But intensive phonics is the magic bullet, and the latest scientific evidence proves it. But I’ve known it ever since I wrote my reading program, *Alpha-Phonics*, in 1983. Actually, *Alpha-Phonics* was a further development from the first phonics program I created as an appendix to my book on the reading problem, *The New Illiterates*, published in 1973. I then fleshed out that program in my next book, *How to Tutor*, also published in 1973. And so, I’ve been at this business of promoting phonics for over 40



years.

But what has surprised me is how successful that approach to teaching phonics has been. The reason for that success? I had invented a new and easy way to teach reading quite different from those other programs which used lots of pictures. Its success has been phenomenal. One user, a pastor in Maylasia, said:

I write to thank you for the great help your book *Alpha-Phonics* has given us. With that book we have trained all our children to read proficiently by the age of 4. At the back cover of your book, it says “This book can solve America’s reading problem.” I suggest that it should read “This book can solve the world’s reading problem.”

The success of *Alpha-Phonics* has a lot to do with how the brain learns to read phonetically. The brain is divided into two hemispheres. The left hemisphere houses our language faculty. The right hemisphere deals with space, image, perspective, and art. In infants, the left lobe helps them learn language — that is, to use sound symbols in the voice to stand for objects and actions, and to define reality. The right brain helps the child recognize parents’ and relatives’ faces, and their physical surroundings. In short, both sides of the brain work in harmony with each other.

But the sight method forces children to use the right brain to perform the functions of the left brain, and that is what causes reading problems. On the other hand, learning to read with pure intensive phonics enhances the child’s use of language by expanding vocabulary and teaching to spell. The child also learns grammar, the logic of language, and how to use language to analyze reality.

The simple but highly effective way to teach every child to read is with intensive phonics, the one method of teaching that expands the use of language and logic. When children find reading easy and enjoyable, the school curriculum will have to be changed to accommodate their enhanced language capability. In short, intensive phonics is the road to high literacy — the magic bullet — which will reverse the negative trends noted by the National Endowment for the Arts.



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