

Getting Action Into Phonics

By Shirani de Alwis

Action Phonics is phonics with a difference. It incorporates the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains *simultaneously* to link the visual, auditory, and tactile senses.

Decoding is done in small steps, with initial emphasis on letter perception. Gradually the child's perception span increases to encompass syllable perception. Lastly, the child perceives the whole word, after syllable recognition has become automatic.

This minimizes failure and maximizes successful decoding. It also helps motivate students to learn to read, for they realize that success is within their grasp. Learning to read thus helps improve their self-image.

Music, rhythm, and movement are incorporated into the decoding process to enhance memory. Bertrand Russell, writing on education, fittingly stated that "love of play is the most obvious distinguishing mark of young animals whether human or otherwise."¹

Action Phonics also incorporates humor into the learning experience. As the teacher exaggerates the vowel and consonant sounds using facial grimaces, the young readers will be delighted to see the teacher's face contort.

A major feature of Action Phonics is independent decoding, with self-sufficiency as the goal. The teacher gives verbal clues for the letter being taught, but processing must be done by the reader, using the clue given. This makes the reader a more responsible participant in the learning process.

As a means of reinforcement, each child signs a pledge indicating his or her desire to learn Action Phonics. This pledge is read prior to each reading lesson (see page 34).

Music, rhythm, and movement are incorporated into the decoding process in order to enhance memory.

Essential Features of Action Phonics

Action Phonics utilizes six specific techniques: Breath Control, Pointer Control, Verbal Cues, Exaggerated Articulation, Vowel Flash Cards, and Trade-a-Syllable.

Breath Control

Breath Control means sounding out a word with one *unbroken* stream of sound, just as it is heard in oral language. This method resembles children's early experiences in learning to talk.

During regular phonics instruction, recognizing a word is a two-step process. The word *mat*, for instance, is first sounded out in separate, jerky sounds—"muh'ah'tuh". This does not sound like the real word, however fast the child may say it. The child then pronounces the word.

In Action Phonics, word recognition is a one-step process. The child uses simple motor responses to get from letter to letter with *one stream of air*. Thus the reader can hear the sound of the word as it actually occurs in oral speech the *first* time the word is sounded. The child learns that a word is a stream of vowel

sounds broken up by consonants.

Pointer Control

In many cases, young readers' eyes do not glide across the page from left to right, nor do they perceive all the letters of a word. Instead, the child's eyes jump erratically. This forces the child to make wild guesses. Pointer control helps eradicate this problem.

The teacher uses a pointer (usually a sharpened, pencil-length dowel) to point to each letter. The children learn that "Mr. Pointer is your boss," and do not proceed until the signal is given. Slow pointer control teaches the student to hold a mouth position and the stream of sound for a letter. This reinforces the association between each grapheme (written symbol) and its associated phoneme (sound).

Smith indicates that the brain requires at least one second to make perceptual decisions.² Psychologists say that while one second's attention suffices for short-term memory, five seconds' attention is needed for long-term memory. The pointer provides the necessary time for the child to retain the information in long-term memory.

Pointer Control also helps the child with an attention problem. Such children are stimulus bound and may be hyperactive. Only a very strong stimulus can override distractions and capture the child's undivided attention.³ The pointer acts as the overriding stimulus, helping the reader become goal-directed, as he focuses on the elements of a word.

Verbal Cues

Initially, the teacher provides frequent verbal cues for consonants and vowels in order to compensate for the child's

weak auditory memory. For example, the verbal cue for the letter "f" would be to bite the lower lip and let air leak out. Humming with the lips is the verbal cue for the letter "m."

In giving a verbal cue, the teacher has the student process the sound for each letter, instead of giving the sound each time the student forgets. A verbal cue is given when the student isn't sure of a

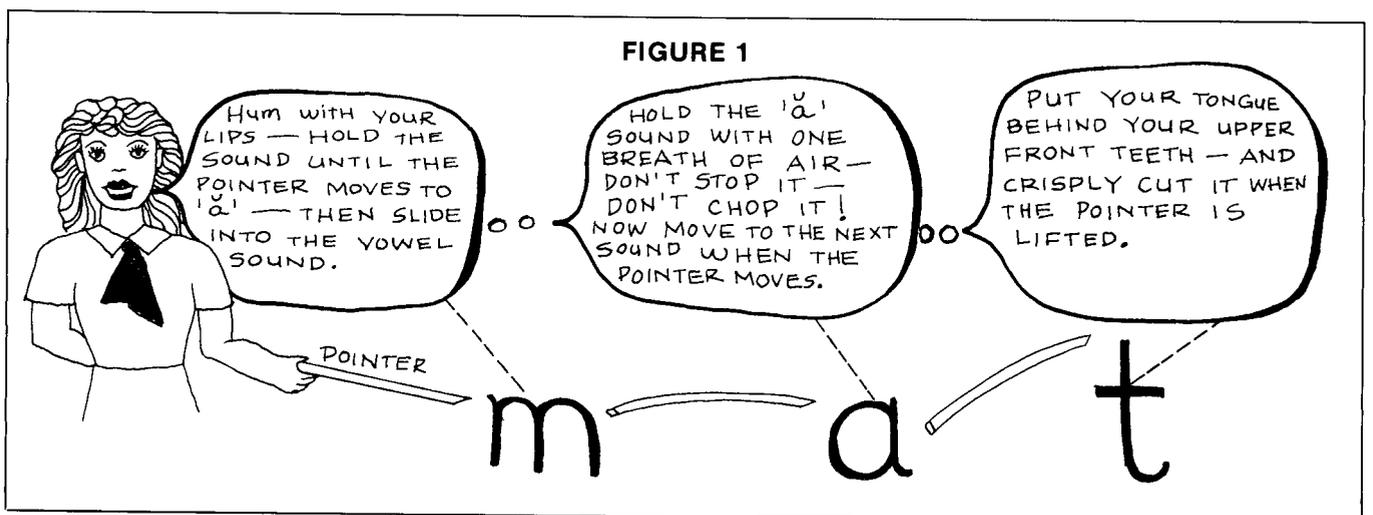
letter. This minimizes failure and reduces uncertainty. Figure 1 illustrates the use of Breath Control, Pointer Control, and Verbal Cues.

Exaggerated Articulation

One cause of reading difficulties, according to Brown, is interference with speech production. This could be caused by cluttered speech. Such speech is usu-

ally rapid, jumbled, and difficult to understand because of mushy pronunciation by either the teacher or the student. To eliminate this problem, the student is told to intensify and exaggerate articulation of both consonant and vowel sounds. This makes a better neurological impression on the brain and aids memory.

The students are also given diagrams



of mouth positions for each vowel or vowel combination, together with a mirror (Figure 2). Benton discusses the remarkable human ability to recognize and remember facial patterns years after even a single partial glimpse.⁴

The student makes the sound of the vowel using the mouth position diagrams. Mirrors allow the child to see whether the tongue, mouth, and facial muscles are positioned properly for good articulation of phonemes. Self-correction is vital for language learning and literacy acquisition, as pointed out by Charles and Patricia Lindamood.⁵

Vowel Flash Cards

Vowel flash cards serve as reinforcement for the 55 vowel sounds in the Action Phonics program. These cards help students recognize which sounds belong in specific positions. They do this by relating the sounds to adjacent letters.

On the cards, a square (□) precedes or follows the vowels. These squares are position cues that represent consonants. The cards also offer hints to the correct pronunciation of the vowel. For example, the short *ă* sound could be represented by either a □ a □ for the word *hat*, or □ a □ e, for the word *batter*. The long *ā* sound is written as □ a □ e, or it could have an □ ay pattern.

After the student conquers Breath Control, Pointer Control, Verbal Cues, Exaggerated Articulation, and Vowel Flash Cards, a technique called Trade-a-Syllable is used to sequence syllables.

Action Phonics also incorporates humor into the learning experience.

Trade-a-Syllable

In Trade-a-Syllable the student and a partner take turns reading the syllables of a word one at a time. One pronounces while the other observes. This provides adequate perception time, reduces anxiety, and encourages the students to perceive each syllable as a unit. It also helps the student decode long words without having to guess.⁶

Psychologists refer to this process of storing the largest meaningful unit in short-term memory as "chunking." Figure 3 shows two students using the Trade-a-Syllable technique for the word *polarization*.

Pointer Control helps the child who has an attention problem.

Trade-a-Syllable promotes cooperative learning. Johnson *et al.*, in reviewing many research reports, found that both academic achievement and attitude toward learning improve when students must work together toward a common goal.⁷ According to Glasser, successful learning through teamwork makes poor readers feel more positive about learning to read.⁸

Other Features

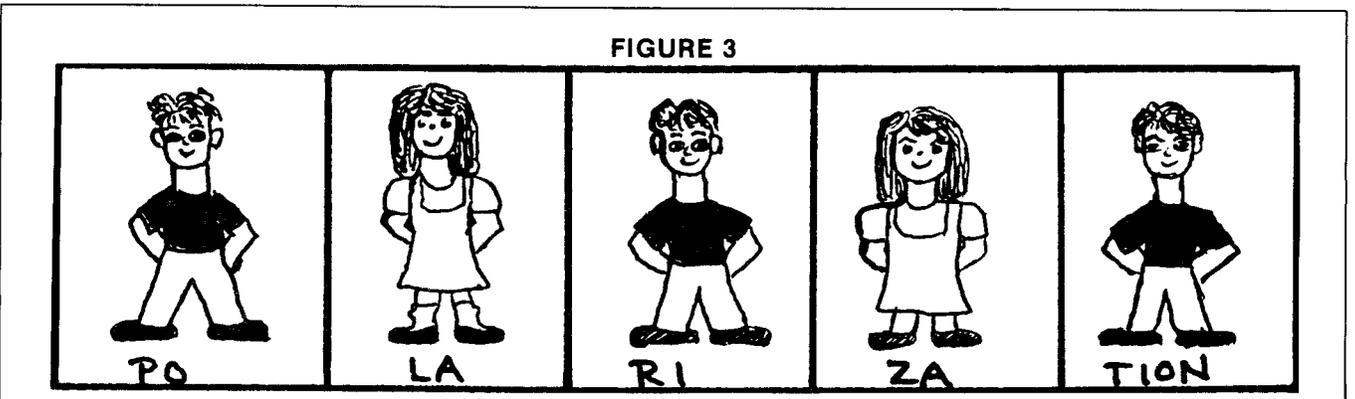
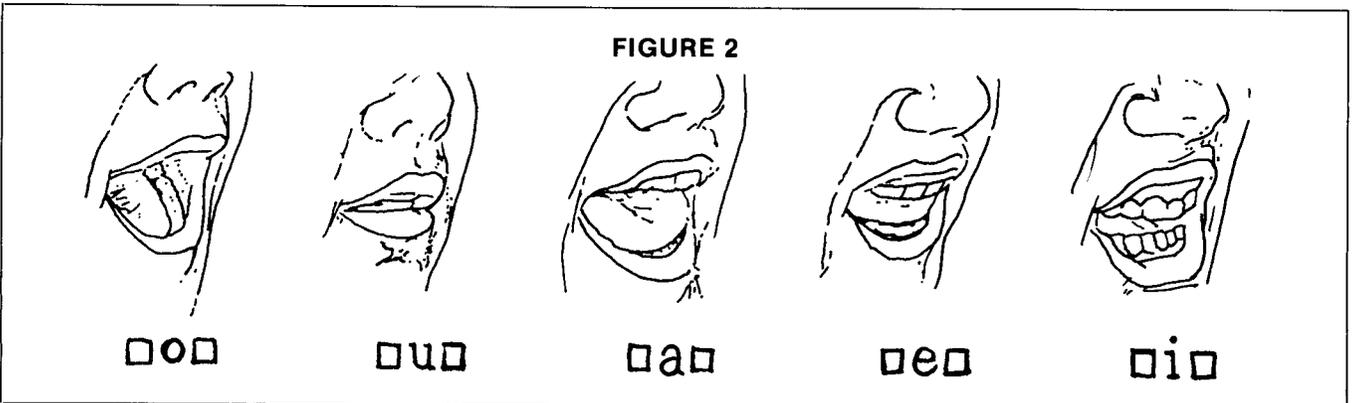
In many cases poor readers think that they cannot learn to read well, and thus become discouraged. Methods that dramatize improvement will improve their self-image.

Action Phonics requires each student to chart his or her progress in a specially designed file folder. The folder contains lists of Action Phonics Vowel and Skill cards mastered, books read, and student contracts describing the next Action Phonics lesson. This fits in with Brown's assertion that, to become independent learners, students must learn to direct their own work. The teacher only provides guidance.⁹

Games, puzzles, and other skill reinforcement activities make it fun for pupils to reinforce their skills. The best activities use the whole body and incorporate music and movement. Students sing the Action Phonics theme song before each reading lesson.

Action Phonics Theme Song

Action Phonics makes reading easier
Whether you're big or small—



MY READING CAMP PLEDGE

I, _____ want to
improve my reading
skills, and I will try
my very best to learn
Action Phonics

Signature



Let's get started as soon as we can
Come join in one and all.

Action Phonics is words and games,
Animal sounds and funny names,
With all the fun we have in it
We learn to read and become fit.

Action Phonics is here again,
It makes our reading fun,
Hurrah! To Action Phonics' name
Come join in every one!

Research Results on Action Phonics

Since the 1960s many methods, therapies, and strategies have been developed to alleviate reading disabilities.¹⁰ However, each one required treatment over an extended time period. A minimum of 50 hours was necessary to ensure long-term gains.¹¹ When dealing with readers who have lower average IQs or those from lower socio-economic levels, the period of remediation tended to be even longer.¹² Action Phonics seems to require much less time to produce positive results.

In the Regular American Classroom

Research on Action Phonics' effectiveness with American students began with a 1978 study by Millie Youngberg, then director of the Andrews University Reading Center in Berrien Springs, Michigan. Seventy-four percent of the students in the experimental classroom improved their word recognition skills by at least one-year's level after 20 hours of Action Phonics instruction. Only five percent of the students in the control classroom achieved a comparable improvement.

Dyslexic Children in Michigan

De Alwis studied the effects of Action Phonics on 83 third- and fourth-grade Title I students with reading disabilities. The study measured the results of the program on word recognition and silent reading comprehension.¹³

Two experimental treatments were employed—Action Phonics and Attention Control. The Action Phonics treatment group received 16-18 hours of Action Phonics, while the Attention Control group received only regular Title I services. Classes for each group were organized in clusters of four to six students.

The Action Phonics group reading levels increased by seven months, whereas the Attention Control group increased by only one month in word recognition skills. In reading comprehension, the Action Phonics group scores increased by nine months, whereas reading comprehension scores for the Attention Control group increased by only three months.

Normal and Slow/Under- achievers in Pune, India

Action Phonics was used at India's first Reading Camp in 1988. Participants included normal readers and slow/underachiever readers. In addition to 18-20 hours of Action Phonics treatment over a period of seven days, activities at the reading camp included morning exercise, motivational talks, crafts, campfire and talent programs as well as outdoor games and hiking.

The 48 campers first learned together in one large group, with the researcher leading out in Action Phonics instruction. They were then divided into 10 smaller groups of three to six readers

each for individual drill and review. Each small group received instruction from a trained teacher or volunteer.

The campers collectively increased their word recognition skills by 2 years and 3 months, with the normal readers showing an increase of 2 years and 7 months, and the slow/underachiever readers increasing word recognition skills by 1 year and 8 months after 18-20 hours of Action Phonics.

As shown by the above studies, Action Phonics clearly provides a viable method for improving the reading skills of children in our schools. □

(Teachers who desire additional information about Action Phonics may contact the author at Atlantic Union College, South Lancaster, MA 01561, U.S.A.)

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