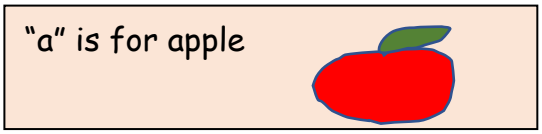
Teach a Caveperson to Read – Netta Goldman

"A is for Apple", as a teaching tool, does not work. It sounds catchy, but nothing in the shape of the "A" makes us conjure up the taste of a crisp apple, nor the sound "a". Nothing in the fruit sends us careening to the shape of the letter "A". The two are not meaningfully connected, when one considers visual cues. They are phonologically connected, and phonological abilities are crucial for reading acquisition, but the apples are not helpful for the emerging reader. The ever-present cards and pages in our classrooms, with those A's surrounded by a crowd of accordions, avocadoes, ants, alligators, and other "A" words may give our students a framework to visualize the "A". Or perhaps they are a distraction?

Do those drawings help connect the "A" to its sound in any meaningful way? Do they contribute to, or hinder, the acquisition of reading? How do we as teachers connect the grapheme to its corresponding sound? How do we help our students remember the correspondence?

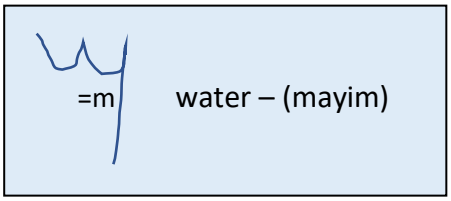


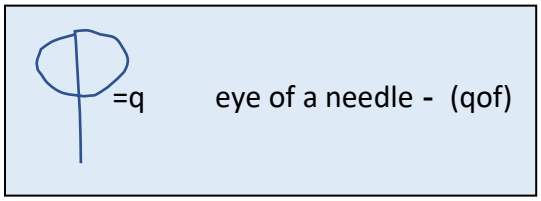
We are seeing an increasing number of false starters, children experiencing difficulties, or LD students, and we must ask ourselves, if many cannot read, perhaps we may be going about it the wrong way, and should find an easier, more efficient method to teach this necessary skill. I firmly feel that the responsibility lies on us, we are the teachers.

Let us go back in time for a minute, to see how reading and writing developed.

Writing came first. One can only read something that has been written down, a form of drawing. Cavepeople drew on the walls and the extended family/tribe could understand the drawings, because all were part of the same cultural milieu. The drawings became richer and more complex. People from other cultures tried to write elaborate tales using pictures and symbols, further developing this artistic tendency, as can be seen in Babylon and Egypt. The dry climate helped to preserve huge walls of drawing/writing, long beyond the time we could decipher or decode the meaning. There are hundreds of symbols in the ancient Egyptian Hieroglyphics. The Egyptians did not lack for space, if their writing was inefficient and space consuming, they could build another few meters of wall. Their writing was not meant to be read by passersby, only by the scribes of the noble class. It is no wonder that archeologists took so long to decipher them. It probably took scribes years to learn to write. The same system of writing was then transferred to be used on a new material, papyrus, the forerunner of our paper. Those documents were also geared to be read by scribes. Even today, the Hebrew word for Hieroglyphics means illegible. Written Chinese is plagued (no pun intended) with similar difficulties. We do not want our students to be faced with unnecessary difficulties.

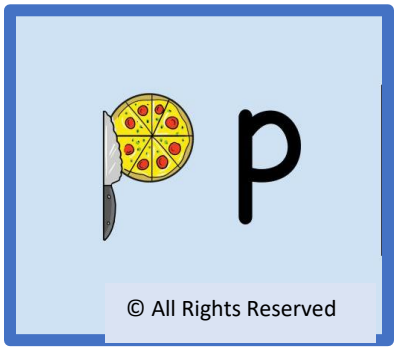
We must appreciate the great step creating an alphabet really was. The alphabet as we know it was likely begun somewhere in the Middle East, likely in the Sinai Peninsula, and adapted and spread by the Phoenicians, a sea-faring trader people. The 22 consonant Phoenician alphabet uses simple pictograms to stand for sounds, each picture eliciting the first sound in the name of the object, sounds that can then be strung together to make words. The alphabet worked, because the sound corresponded to the picture and recognition was automatic. The trader and the representative of the buyer at the port of call had to be able to identify a pre-agreed symbol easily and quickly. It had to be efficient and concise, because boats were not all that big, and nobody could afford a specialist scribe on board. Amphoras were piled into the hull of the boat, and if a label was pressed into the clay, it needed to fit on the top. The Phoenician system of words composed of sounds represented by simple symbols was quickly adopted and it spread wherever those traders reached. Note the two examples below to illustrate the ingenious and practical idea:





Knowledge could then be written down and imparted to others by using this revolutionary system. Early Hebrew and other Semitic languages followed the use of this type of alphabet, where the sound of the letter and its shape are associative. The alphabet was then adapted for use in Greek, Latin, and other languages, where it slowly lost its grapheme-sound correspondence, because the original word used in the symbol was different in the target language. Letters were added for sounds which do not appear in Phoenician. Today, English and other languages use some form of alphabet developed from the Phoenician. The problem lies in the lack of correspondence between the pictogram, or grapheme, through what it represents, and the sound it is to elicit. In the examples above, water does not begin with the sound of “m” in English, Russian, etc., nor does eye of the needle begin with a “q” sound. Therefore, in these languages, the learning of the sounds which correspond to the written letter is memory intensive. **What would happen, if we could return the associative sound to the picture, and lessen the effort we require of our students?** Could we make the teaching of English letters as simple as they originally were in Phoenician?

The program for teaching decoding which I have invented and prepared for use, does exactly that.



As you see here, in this example, the grapheme has been turned into an associative picture which staples the sound onto the

shape of the letter, in a way that makes remembering it a piece of cake, or a piece of pizza in this case. Each letter receives its own treatment. The program comes with a guide to enable teachers or parents to begin implementing it, as well as all the materials needed. It can be printed out, or used on screen.

“Teach a Caveperson to Read” will return the skill acquisition to the level of simplicity that cavepeople encountered when looking at the work of their artist, or traders at ports of call saw on early alphabet labels. Watch your students acquire the skill of reading quickly and easily! Remedial teaching is success oriented, to motivate learners by ease of acquisition of 5-6 letters in each session.

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