

PHONICS APPROACH IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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Abstract

The article concentrates on the historical evolution of the Phonics approach in the United States of America. The objective of the paper is to evaluate and elucidate the primary distinctions between Systematic and Non-Systematic Phonics through a comparative analysis. The qualitative approach delineates clear differences and facilitates an understanding of the methodology of English language instruction within a native context. The findings are advantageous for educators and linguists engaged in English literacy development.

Key words

Phonics, The United States of America, reading literacy, comparative analysis

Introduction

The term "Phonics" is frequently regarded as a method, approach, or even instructional strategy. In this document, it is interpreted as an overarching approach from which numerous methods, each with its own distinctive characteristics, have developed. The subsequent sections will examine the two primary approaches—Systematic and Non-systematic Phonics—through a comparative analysis. Additionally, the evolution of these methods throughout history will be discussed, along with their current standing within the United States educational framework.

Evolution of the Phonics Approach and Its Influence on Educational Policy

The Phonics method, which focuses on teaching the relationship between letters and related sounds, has a rich history in American education. The study of phonics, as a structured method of reading, and its ability to break down words into manageable phonemes, has increased attention to this approach. It made it easier for the children to decode unfamiliar words, and interest in teaching phonics grew steadily. From a historical point of view, the reading methods in the USA went through different phases in terms of development, where the Phonics method played a key role. Reading methods in the U.S. have their roots in alphabetic methods. They were inspired by ancient Greek and Phoenician systems to learn letters and their names. This was subsequently transformed into different forms of reading instruction depending on the need and context (Reinking et al., 2023). The Phoenicians also used the phonetic alphabet as a tool for traders. At the time of the founding of the United States, notable figures such as Benjamin Franklin and Noah Webster attempted to reform the spelling system. Their effort was patriotic. They were attempting to eliminate spelling irregularities, create a standardized language, and unify the English language in America, which would politically, culturally, and linguistically unite this young nation. Although their efforts did not yield significant success, their vision marked a substantial step forward in identity building (Cothran, 2017).

After the American Revolution in the 18th century until the 19th century, emphasis was placed on recognizing letters and reading biblical texts. This model had its roots in traditional alphabetic methods derived from the ancient Phoenician alphabet. As in Europe, in the USA, they first focused on learning the alphabet and then on decoding texts, which was helped by letter recognition. The first educational tools began to appear, such as the hornbook, which served as an instructional aid and usually contained the alphabet, words, and sometimes basic syllables. These materials were a

signal that marked the transition from purely alphabetic approaches to methods that focused on sounds and their combinations (Lewis & Ellis, 2006).

In the mid-19th century, the first disputes emerged. Horace Mann, inspired by the European pedagogical approaches of Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi and Friedrich Froebel, established a whole-word approach that challenged the traditional phonics method. Mann's ideas focused on learning whole words instead of letters and sounds. Here, it could be said that the long-term conflict between phonics and whole-word methods has begun (Cothran, 2017).

Although the first decades of the 20th century belonged to an era of reading focused on word recognition, it was during this period that increasing appeals were made to adopt phonics methods. These were regarded as highly effective in teaching reading because they enabled learners to recognize and pronounce new words based on their phonetic structure. The introduction of phonetic methods in the USA was largely linked to educational reforms and new approaches to teaching reading that began to spread after World War II. Interest in phonics also grew due to government reports and educational studies highlighting that phonics offered a practical solution to reading difficulties, even though materials at this time presented systematic teaching as a means to address the high levels of illiteracy among school graduates. Consequently, phonics methods have proven to be the most effective for both basic students and children with inadequate language preparation (Lewis & Ellis, 2006).

At the start of the 20th century, phonics was often taught in a non-systematic and inconsistent manner. This led to confusion for many students, especially those with reading difficulties. They found it hard to decode texts effectively and found reading more stressful than enjoyable. The mid-20th century marked a turning point. As Lewis and Ellis (2006) noted, the foundations of modern phonics teaching were laid when educators and researchers began to focus on systematic phonics instruction. It provided a simpler, more structured, and sequential approach to teaching the relationship between letters and sounds. The rise of systematic phonics, which allowed children to decode words by breaking them into phonemes and blending them into recognizable patterns, was a significant milestone. It created the basis for a structured curriculum that later spread across all schools. The middle of the 20th century was further enhanced by the publication of American author Robert Flesch's book "Why Johnny Can't Read" in 1955. Flesch criticized the adoption of word recognition methods and strongly supported the phonics approach, considering it a vital tool for tackling literacy issues. His work sparked public debate and renewed interest in systematic reading instruction. Even educators and parents endorsed his arguments, leading to a renewed emphasis on phonics in schools and influencing educational methods for decades (Reinking et al., 2023).

Disputes over the best approach to teaching reading reached a peak in the 1980s and 1990s. This became known as "reading wars" between two participants. On the one hand, promoters of the Phonics method argued for its relevance in developing basic literacy abilities. On the other hand, there were supporters of the whole language method, who defended its focus on meaningful texts and learning to read through context and comprehension. These debates had a significant impact on reading pedagogy. Many schools have begun to use hybrid approaches, thus balancing the Phonics method in combination with other strategies. Despite the tensions, this period strengthened the importance of the Phonics method as a key component in teaching reading (Reinking et al., 2023).

The turning point happened when Jeanne Chall documented the growing evidence supporting the systematic phonics method in her book "Learning to Read: The Great Debate" in 1967. Thanks to her scientific approach, the National Reading Panel in 2000 confirmed that phonics is the most effective way to teach reading. Although this news did not silence all critics of phonics, it was an important step that secured a strong place for phonics in American schools (Cothran, 2017).

Nowadays, the Phonics method is widely recognized and considered a crucial component of early literacy education. However, pedagogues emphasize the importance of using balanced approaches that incorporate the Phonics method, comprehension strategies, vocabulary development, and work with individual texts. The Phonics method evolves and improves to meet the different requirements of learners, with a focus on understanding how children develop literacy skills. Historical development emphasizes the significance of this method as a basis for reading instruction, while also recognizing the importance of flexibility and stability in modern classrooms (Reinking et al., 2023).

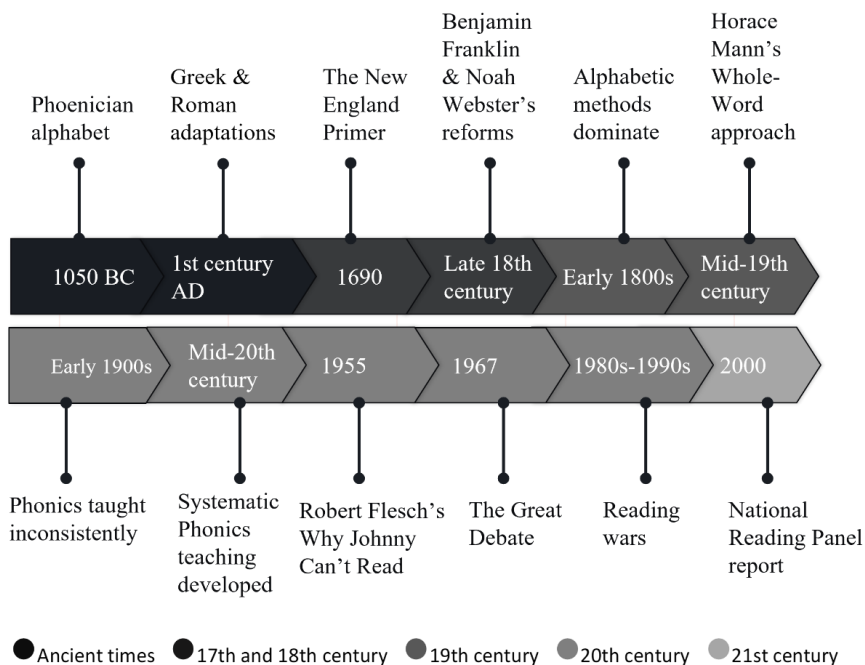


Fig. 1 Timeline of key milestones in the history of the Phonics method in the USA

The historical development of the Phonics method in the United States enhanced classroom practice and significantly influenced decisions in educational policy. As discussions about the most effective reading strategies evolved, they also manifested in legislative measures and national curriculum standards. Understanding this connection provides essential context for examining how education policies have been crafted to tackle literacy challenges.

Phonics has been a fundamental part of U.S. education policy. Political influences, ideological debates, and legislative actions have significantly shaped it. A key turning point occurred with President George W. Bush's support for phonics through the Reading First program of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002. This initiative aimed to tackle the nation's reading deficit by emphasizing a systematic phonics approach, reflecting Bush's dedication to improving literacy (Waters, 2021). Despite his efforts, national reading scores have not changed substantially, demonstrating the complexity of education policy.

The debate over phonics in U.S. education policy is deeply rooted in ideological divides between phonics-first advocates and supporters of balanced literacy.

Prioritizing the phonics method emphasizes explicit teaching of phonemic awareness and phonics, viewing them as foundational skills necessary for decoding and reading fluency. However, critics argue that mandated phonics programs restrict teacher flexibility and fail to address the diverse needs of students. Research indicates that the phonics method is most effective when part of a comprehensive program that allows for adaptation to individual learners (Reinking et al., 2023).

The "Science of Reading" movement has made promising strides by advocating for evidence-based literacy instruction. Driven by cognitive science and neuroscience research, this initiative emphasises systematic phonics instruction as essential for developing decoding skills. Consequently, many states have opted to enact legislation requiring a phonics curriculum along with professional teacher training. Mississippi's "Mississippi Miracle" validated the effectiveness of this approach and has inspired other states (Luscombe, 2022). Nevertheless, legislative pressure often oversimplifies the complexities of reading development, resulting in a polarized debate between phonics and balanced literacy.

This ongoing controversy was also seen in Oakland, California, where a phonics-based curriculum improved reading scores but was replaced due to teacher opposition. Civil rights and education advocates drove the return to phonics. They argued that abandoning phonics lowered literacy rates, particularly among marginalized communities (Luscombe, 2022). This highlights the social justice issues in reading instruction, as well as the difficulties of balancing effective teaching methods with ideological and cultural considerations.

Despite strong evidence supporting phonics, its implementation remains controversial due to the politicization of education. Many political figures and activists continue to influence phonics legislation, sometimes using polemical arguments that distort the research findings. This politicization risks oversimplifying reading and undermining teachers' professional judgment (Reinking et al., 2023).

In summary, the debate about phonics in education policy not only concerns teaching methods but also reflects more profound ideological, cultural, and political influences. Effective literacy education requires a balanced approach that treats phonics as a valuable tool within a flexible curriculum tailored to student needs. As various states continue to work towards implementing phonics, it is vital to maintain a balanced outlook that supports evidence-based practices while acknowledging the diverse needs of students.

Comparison of the Systematic and Non-Systematic Phonics in the United States of America

The following lines aim to compare systematic and non-systematic phonics approaches in a chosen English-speaking country, the United States of America, through a comparative analysis.

By employing comparative analysis, a set of items will be examined and compared. We will gain deep insights into the distinct characteristics of systematic and non-systematic phonics, enabling us to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the given approaches clearly.

Phonics instruction is vital for literacy development and lays the groundwork for decoding, reading fluency, and comprehension (Ehri et al., 2001). When teaching reading, the question is not just "what to teach," but "how to teach it." Systematic and non-systematic phonics represent two different approaches, each with its philosophy, strengths, and challenges.

However, within these two main approaches we come across other types of phonics instructions that vary in many ways, such as based on the unit of analysis or how sound and letter combinations are presented to the student. There are various types of phonics methods, each designed to enhance literacy skills in a unique way.

1. Synthetic phonics

2. Analytic phonics
3. Analogy phonics
4. Embedded phonics.

The table below provides a brief overview of the main differences.

Table 1: Types of phonics methods

Type	Definition	Pros	Cons
Synthetic Phonics	Teaches individual sounds (phonemes) explicitly and blends them to form words.	Systematic, effective for beginners, research-supported.	Can feel mechanical; less contextual.
Analytic Phonics	Starts with whole words, breaking them into patterns (onset and rime).	Builds on known words; promotes pattern recognition.	Less structured; relies on existing vocabulary.
Analogy Phonics	Uses known words and patterns to decode unfamiliar ones.	Expands vocabulary; intuitive for word families.	May encourage guessing; limited by known words.
Embedded Phonics	Integrates phonics into real reading activities.	Contextual, engaging, and promotes comprehension.	Lacks structure; may skip key phonics rules.

A classroom where every child confidently decodes new words, understanding the precise link between letters and sounds, is promised by the systematic phonics approach. Systematic phonics refers to a structured method of teaching reading. The goal is to equip students with tools to decode unfamiliar words by emphasizing the relationship between phonemes and graphemes. Systematic phonics is also known as explicit phonics. Phonics concepts are taught in a specific order. The teaching is planned step by step, starting with simpler rules and progressing to more complex ones. Students apply their knowledge through blending, connecting individual sounds to form words. They use a segmentation process, breaking words into basic sounds. Learners begin with simple one-syllable consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC) words and eventually advance to more difficult patterns such as consonant blends or diphthongs (De Graaff et al., 2009). This sequence is important because it allows students to gradually develop their understanding of phonemes and graphemes. Lessons follow a structured plan that emphasizes covering all fundamental phoneme and grapheme relationships. Students learn explicitly how to accurately convert sounds into letters and then apply this knowledge when reading words. Another key feature is the use of decodable texts, carefully created to include only phonics patterns that students already know and have mastered. As a result, their skills are reinforced, particularly in a practical and meaningful context (Ehri et al., 2001). Many systematic phonics programs also incorporate kinesthetic and auditory activities, offering a pleasant enrichment to children's learning (Mesmer & Griffith, 2005). Systematic phonics provides children with tools for reading, but especially the gift of understanding—a step-by-step guide through a maze of letters and sounds.

Consequently, many of the most famous educational programs have built on systematic phonics as a cornerstone. For example, the Orton-Gillingham Approach applies a highly structured multisensory technique to teach phonics. It focuses first on individual phonemes and then on complex syllable patterns. Furthermore, Jolly Phonics presents sounds in a specific order as well. It also includes songs and stories that are interesting for students. These programs make full use of systematic phonics

in order to give young readers self-confidence and joy in reading. It is a proven recipe for success that shows that structure and a clear method can lead to freedom in reading.

Conversely, not every approach to teaching reading follows a clearly defined path. Sometimes, learning is more about discovery than structure, and non-systematic phonics embodies that idea exactly. The rules are not revealed step by step but emerge naturally when needed. Non-systematic phonics does not adhere to a structured plan for teaching phoneme and grapheme connections. Instead, it adopts an approach that emphasizes more implicit, random methods of introducing phonics concepts. These methods prioritize context and meaning over explicit skill instruction. Phonics terms are introduced here only when necessary, mainly for specific reading tasks. This approach is less prescriptive. Phonics skills are taught within the context of whole texts, focusing on helping students decode words. The teacher may utilize the phonics rule when a student encounters a particular problem with a word during reading (Bowers, 2020). A key feature of non-systematic phonics is its flexibility. Teachers have the freedom to address phonics concepts according to their students' needs. Learning can therefore feel more natural and engaging. However, if some concepts are overlooked, negative outcomes such as gaps in phonics knowledge may result (Intarakulchai et al., 2017).

Although non-systematic phonics is not based on a fixed structure, many methods and approaches adopt it as part of their philosophy. The best known is the Whole Language approach. This approach integrates phonics teaching within wider literacy activities. It focuses mainly on the communicative function of language, using meaningful texts to teach reading. Phonics skills are taught as students read and write, but they use children's literature instead of structured phonics programs. This approach concentrates on developing literacy skills and encourages students to explore language holistically (Stahl et al., 1989). Implicit phonics is a very similar approach that bases teaching on the understanding and experience of entire texts. Non-systematic phonics offers flexibility, but implicit phonics takes it one step further. It mainly relies on children's intuition to derive phonics rules by analyzing words they already know. Students can identify patterns in a group of words, such as 'cat', 'hat', and 'bat', to derive a common phonics pattern. This differs from explicit phonics, where phonics rules are taught directly (Intarakulchai et al., 2017).

In the history of American education, non-systematic phonics has held a consistent place, often as part of broader approaches that focus on understanding and meaning in texts. The Whole Language approach was particularly influential during the 80s and 90s of the 20th century. It supported a theory that emphasized how reading relevant materials naturally helps people develop their literacy skills. Phonics instruction was provided when necessary, but student-led language exploration was encouraged (Stahl et al., 1989). However, there are ongoing debates about the effectiveness of non-systematic phonics due to its widespread use. Research shows that its methods may foster a love of reading and improve comprehension, but might not equip students with the systematic skills needed to decode unfamiliar words. Consequently, some educators have advocated for combining non-systematic methods with more structured phonics programs to enhance literacy development (Intarakulchai et al., 2017).

Non-systematic phonics offers a flexible student-centered approach to teaching reading. This approach can be effective in creating a love of reading and promoting reading comprehension, but its limited structure can present challenges for the development of decoding skills. Considering the strengths and limitations, some educators believe that the best choice would be to combine systematic and non-systematic approaches. By integrating both strategies, teachers can offer a more comprehensive path for students to become competent and confident readers. (Bowers, 2020).

When comparing the two main approaches to phonics, systematic and non-systematic phonics offer significant advantages and limitations. Each method addresses different student needs and reflects distinct pedagogical philosophies, influencing how children learn fundamental reading skills. Systematic phonics features a structured approach that ensures comprehensive coverage of phonics concepts (Nelson, 2021). The benefit of this method is its effectiveness for struggling readers, such as those with dyslexia, because explicit and repetitive instructions help them build a solid foundation. By incorporating systematic review and cumulative learning, it fosters long-term retention and mastery of phonics skills (De Graaff et al., 2009). However, an intense focus on decoding can limit the development of broader understanding and diminish the reading experience (Bowers, 2020). Conversely, the non-systematic approach is characterized by flexibility and promotes a more integrated way of teaching literacy. It also supports a holistic understanding of language by embedding phonics concepts into meaningful activities such as reading and writing in authentic contexts. As a result, students become actively engaged, which helps foster a love for reading (Holsted, 2015). Furthermore, teachers can adapt their teaching to meet individual student needs, providing a more personalized learning experience. Nonetheless, a lack of structure can create gaps in phonics knowledge, as it does not systematically address all concepts. The success of this approach often depends on the teacher's expertise, which can lead to variability in student outcomes (Intarakulchai et al., 2017). Additionally, it is less suitable for students who prefer explicit and consistent phonics instruction, such as those who struggle with reading (Engel-Wood, 2023). Systematic phonics has been widely implemented, particularly in the United States, where structured phonics programs such as "Letters and Sounds" and "Jolly Phonics" are commonly used. These programs emphasize gradual, step-by-step instruction, making them extremely effective for early learners and at-risk populations (Nelson, 2021). Although less prevalent as a stand-alone approach, non-systematic phonics continues to influence literacy education using methods such as the whole language movement. This approach favors meaningful contextual learning and the integration of phonics instruction into broader reading and writing tasks. As already mentioned, although it helps to build a positive attitude towards reading, its effectiveness depends on the skills of the teacher (Stahl et al., 1989).

To sum up, the following table presents and summarizes a comparison between systematic and non-systematic phonics across various aspects.

Table 2 Main differences of Systematic and Non-systematic Phonics in various aspects

Aspect	Systematic Phonics	Non-systematic Phonics
Approach	Structured and sequential.	Flexible and less structured.
Instruction	Explicit teaching with a predetermined plan, progressing from simple to complex phonics patterns.	Integrated into broader literacy activities, phonics concepts are introduced as they arise..
Text type used	Decodable texts that reinforce learned phonics patterns.	Authentic literature that emphasizes understanding and meaning.
Focus	Enhances word reading, spelling, and comprehension.	Promotes a love of reading and improves comprehension.
Suitability	Effective for struggling readers, including those with dyslexia.	More suitable for students who engage with literacy in a holistic way.
Retention & mastery	Promotes long-term retention through systematic review.	Can lead to gaps in phonics knowledge due to a lack of structure.

Limitations	Heavy focus on decoding may weaken broader reading comprehension.	Effectiveness depends on teacher expertise and may result in inconsistent student outcomes.
Implementation	Widely implemented in structured phonics programs like "Letters and Sounds" and "Jolly Phonics".	Influences literacy education through methods like the whole language.
Pedagogical perspective	Ensures comprehensive phonics coverage and helps prevent early reading failure.	Encourages a love for reading but lacks the necessary structure for phonics mastery.

Conclusion

In conclusion, a comparative analysis shows the strengths and weaknesses of both approaches. Systematic phonics offers a structured way to develop basic reading skills, especially for young and struggling readers. In contrast, non-systematic phonics emphasizes contextual reading that helps build the joy of reading but lacks the necessary structure to ensure comprehensive phonics teaching. That is why many teachers believe that the solution lies in a balanced approach that combines the strengths of both methods, providing the most effective framework for literacy education (De Graaff et al., 2009). Conversely, many teachers and states are pushing for the return of systematic and structured methods, such as phonics, to the educational curriculum, as it has been proven effective even for learners with diverse needs and helps prevent failure before it occurs.

This paper emphasizes the importance of systematic phonics in literacy education while recognizing the role of flexible, integrated approaches. The historical development and policy changes reinforce phonics as a fundamental reading method, and current trends indicate its growing adoption across U.S. schools. However, effective implementation requires proper teacher training, structured curriculum support, and a balanced perspective that promotes both decoding and comprehension skills. The findings imply that a hybrid approach, combining the strengths of systematic phonics with contextual literacy strategies, might be the most effective way to support diverse student needs. Future research should continue investigating the best practices for integrating phonics instruction with broader literacy development strategies to improve reading outcomes at all levels of education.

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