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July, 2004

Teaching Reading to Speakers of Non-Romanized Languages

Scott Alkire, *Open Society Fund Sarajevo*



Available at: <https://works.bepress.com/scott-alkire/8/>

Teaching Reading to Speakers of Non-Romanized Languages

AS ANY EFL TEACHER WHO HAS TAUGHT IN ASIA OR THE MIDDLE EAST KNOWS, speakers of non-Romanized languages face special challenges in learning to read English: a new alphabet, the left-to-right direction of English text (new to many of these learners), and, most significantly, the letter-sound correspondences of English, which are relatively complex among Romanized languages. What many EFL teachers may not know, however, is that these challenges are addressed in a text by the famous linguist Leonard Bloomfield and the lexicographer Clarence Barnhart (*Let's read: A linguistic approach*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1961). Though Bloomfield and Barnhart's text is designed for teaching native English-speaking children to read, with minor modifications it

can be turned into a reader that specifically helps speakers of non-Romanized languages learn to read English.

This article discusses Bloomfield and Barnhart's two preparatory steps to their lessons, their first 36 lessons, and suggested modifications for the EFL classroom. The preparatory steps and first 36 lessons were selected as a point of focus because they address the initial challenges faced by speakers of non-Romanized languages when learning to read English, and because Bloomfield (1961, 57) calls them "the foundation" of the learner's reading.

Link letters to sounds

Bloomfield and Barnhart's first preparatory step is to teach the alphabet. Learning the alphabet should not be a difficult task for learners; most learners already know the sound of many letters because of worldwide use of British and American acronyms (BBC, IBM, PC, TV, USA, etc.).

The teacher should write the alphabet in uppercase letters, left-to-right, across the blackboard and model the pronunciation of each letter. After the learners have recited the alphabet and have a grasp of each letter, the teacher should write common acronyms on the board. The acronyms will illustrate that the left-to-right order of symbols corresponds to the sooner-to-later order of spoken sounds in words. The learners should be encouraged to offer acronyms of their own. To reinforce the acquisition of the letters and their sounds, the teacher can present various dictations, such as the alphabet, other acronyms, or random series of letters.

After the students have learned the uppercase forms of the alphabet, the teacher should teach the lowercase forms. Again, various dictations should be given.

The relative ease of this step can serve as an early confidence builder—important to second language learning success.

Establish a single phonetic value for each letter

The second preparatory step is to teach each letter as having a single *phonetic* value. These values are different from each letter's *alphabetic* value (with the exception of *x*). Bloomfield and Barnhart recommend the following values, which Bloomfield calls "regu-

lar" (1961, 57) and "the best" (1961, 40) for the first materials for reading.

<i>a</i> as in <i>hat</i>	<i>n</i> as in <i>net</i>
<i>b</i> as in <i>big</i>	<i>o</i> as in <i>hot</i>
<i>c</i> as in <i>cat</i> ¹	<i>p</i> as in <i>pen</i>
<i>d</i> as in <i>dog</i>	<i>q</i> as in <i>quit</i> ²
<i>e</i> as in <i>pet</i>	<i>r</i> as in <i>red</i>
<i>f</i> as in <i>fan</i>	<i>s</i> as in <i>sad</i>
<i>g</i> as in <i>get</i>	<i>t</i> as in <i>tan</i>
<i>h</i> as in <i>hen</i>	<i>u</i> as in <i>cut</i>
<i>i</i> as in <i>pin</i>	<i>v</i> as in <i>van</i>
<i>j</i> as in <i>jet</i>	<i>w</i> as in <i>wet</i>
<i>k</i> as in <i>kid</i> ¹	<i>x</i> as in <i>exit</i> ²
<i>l</i> as in <i>let</i>	<i>y</i> as in <i>yes</i>
<i>m</i> as in <i>man</i>	<i>z</i> as in <i>zip</i>

The teacher should lead the learners in the pronunciation of these words to reinforce the acquisition of the phonetic values they represent. The teacher should also give word dictations to reinforce the sound-spelling correlations of the words.

Focus on vowels

Bloomfield and Barnhart's first 36 lessons ("Part I: First Reading") consist of two- and three-letter words using the phonetic values given above (except *q* and *x*). Since the vowels *a*, *e*, *i*, *o*, *u* are the letters which, later on, will present the greatest difficulty to learners, Bloomfield and Barnhart divide the 36 lessons into the following five groups according to the vowel in each word:

Lessons 1–8	<i>a</i> as in <i>hat</i>
Lessons 9–16	<i>i</i> as in <i>pin</i>
Lessons 17–24	<i>u</i> as in <i>cut</i>
Lessons 25–30	<i>e</i> as in <i>pet</i>
Lessons 31–36	<i>o</i> as in <i>hot</i>

Within each of these five groups, it is possible to form groups by final consonant (e.g., *bat*, *cat*, *fat*) or by initial consonant (e.g., *bad*, *bag*, *bat*). Bloomfield and Barnhart (1961, 41) begin with the former because "it is easier to watch the first letter than the last, and because rhyme is familiar to the student."³

Each lesson consists of three parts. On the first line of the lesson, there is a list of phonetically similar words to be studied and read. Bloomfield (1961, 57) calls these words "well-known" and "part of the spoken vocabulary of almost every preschool child." It is not clear

how he came to this conclusion because in the first seven lessons alone there are words such as *gap, sap, gag, nag, sag, dam, dab, jab, nab*, which are not widely known by preschool children or beginning learners of English. It is recommended that these and other low frequency words be eliminated because learners may not be able to “tolerate incomprehensible vocabulary items” (Ur 1996, 148). Indeed, learners may stop “to look every one up in a dictionary” and/or “feel discouraged from trying to comprehend the text as a whole” (Ur 1996, 148).

Nonsense words are used in each lesson for their phonemic value. However, Bloomfield and Barnhart allow that reading success can be achieved without them, and it is recommended that the EFL teacher omit them, for the reasons given in the preceding paragraph.

Bloomfield and Barnhart suggest the following for Lesson 1:

The teacher writes the word *can* on the blackboard and tells the learners to read off the letters in order: /see/ /aye/ /en. The teacher then tells the learners to say *can*.

The teacher writes another word with the same vowel and final consonant, but with a different initial consonant, for instance, *Dan*.

The teacher asks the learners to read off the letters in order: /dee/ /aye/ /en. The teacher then tells the learners to say *Dan*. Now the teacher must work with the learners until they can distinguish between *can* and *Dan*—that is, until the learners can read each correctly when it is shown by itself and with the other.

After this has been achieved, the teacher adds two or three more words of the same group; for example, *fan, man, and Nan*. The drill should continue until the learners can correctly read any one of the words when the teacher points to it. Then the words should be shown in various orders, and separately, until the learners can easily read all of them.

The teacher presents, in the same way as the first five, the other words of the group: *pan, ran, tan, an, ban, van*.

The teacher then presents the words with articles; for example:

a can a fan a pan
a man a van
a tan van a tan fan

The next step would be short sentences, such as these:

Dan ran. Van ran.
A man ran. Nan ran.

Once the *-an* group of words has been learned, both in isolation and in short sentences, the teacher proceeds to another final consonant group, such as the *-at* group. (Lesson 2). The teacher then follows the same procedure as in Lesson 1, except this time, at the end of the lesson, the teacher presents minimal pairs, such as the following.

Bat cat fat mat Nat pat
ban can fan man Nan pan

These pairs are important for attuning the learners’ ears to the subtle sound-meaning correlations of English.

In this fashion, Bloomfield and Barnhart present their initial 36 lessons, the last several of which consist of complete English sentences, such as these:

Dad got on a bus.
Don had a nap on a cot.
A man had a bed in a van.

The lessons avoid orthographic or phonetic exceptions: none have words with silent letters (as in *knit, gnat*) or double letters, either in the pronunciation of single sounds (as in *add, bell*) or in special values (that is, as in the tense vowel sounds in *see* and *too*). No lessons have words with combinations of letters having a special value (as *th* in *thin* or *ea* in *bean*). This is essential to Bloomfield’s ideal of getting learners to a plateau of phonetic understanding of written English from which all future reading can extend.

Completion of these lessons is enough to launch learners into reading. Bloomfield (1961, 57) calls the mastery of the initial 36 lessons “perhaps the most important part of [a child’s] entire formal education.”

Remaining lessons

Bloomfield and Barnhart’s text consists of five more parts, comprising 245 lessons: Part II, “Easy Reading;” Part III, “More Easy Reading;” Part IV, “The Commonest Irregular Words;” Part V, “The Commonest Irregular Spelling of Vowel Sounds;” and Part VI, “The Commonest Irregular Spellings of Consonant Sounds.” Depending on the length of the course, the

EFL teacher may wish to adapt and use some or all of them in the manner of the first 36 lessons. However, it is Bloomfield and Barnhart's two preparatory steps and first 36 lessons that address the basic obstacles faced by speakers of non-Romanized languages when learning to read English.

Conclusion

Over 100 years ago, Henry Sweet (1899, 35), the leading British philologist of his day, wrote that, "...the greatest help in learning an alphabet is to establish definite associations between the symbol and its sound." His claim has never been seriously challenged, and Bloomfield and Barnhart's text, still in print after 43 years, establishes those definite associations—associations which happen to be the major obstacle faced by learners whose L1 is a non-Romanized language. With the minor modifications suggested above, teachers can use Bloomfield and Barnhart's two preparatory steps and first 36 lessons to successfully teach reading to these learners.

Notes

1. In these examples, *c* and *k* both designate the same English phoneme [k]. This will be a difficulty later, when the student learns to

write (and discovers that /*c*/ can also have the sound /*s*/), but is not a problem now.

2. *q* and *x* should not be used in initial lessons—*q* because it occurs in connection with an unusual value of the letter *u* (for *w*), and *x* because it represents two phonemes (*ks* or *gz*).
3. It is curious that rhyme is a common linguistic feature in readers for children but is only rarely used in EFL readers. Bloomfield and Barnhart's use of rhyme helps EFL learners master and distinguish English phonemic values, a particularly difficult task for adult learners.

References

- Bloomfield, L. and C. L. Barnhart. 1961. *Let's read: A linguistic approach*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.
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SCOTT ALKIRE has taught English as a Foreign Language for the Open Society Fund in the Czech Republic and Bosnia-Herzegovina. He is currently researching polyglots in Central Europe.