Orthography & Phonics: 1st & 2nd Grades

Orthography is the study of the elementary sounds, letters, and syllables of our language. Therefore phonics is a branch of orthography, as is penmanship. Spelling is also considered a part of orthography. The teaching of penmanship is considered in the article, Writing in the Grammar Stage, therefore for our purposes we will discuss phonics and spelling here. In our homeschool, we teach orthography in 1st and 2nd grades. We teach spelling throughout the grammar stage, from 1st through 6th grades.

It is imperative that children learn to read through phonics instruction. There are several reasons for this. The first is the most obvious: the English language is a phonetic language. In other words, unlike the Chinese, whose language is a pictoral one, with every word taken in its totality to mean something unique, our language is based on a set of characters, called letters, each with specific sounds associated with them. It is only common sense that phonetic languages are learned phonetically, and that pictoral languages like Chinese are learned by a look-say or some other method.

The second reason has to do with the importance of training a child’s mind in expecting something to progress according to its rules. English has for a long time had the reputation of being one of the least regular of the phonetic languages; however this reputation is undeserved. The problem arises in that English is a Germanic language with Latin and other influences. Therefore English displays both Germanic phonetic rules when dealing with Germanic words, roots, and suffixes; and Latin phonetic rules when dealing with Latin words, roots, and suffixes. When Germanic rules are applied to English words of Latin origin, the phonics of English seems to break down. But when Latin rules are applied to those same English words of Latin origin, the phonics remains as regular as in any other phonetic language. So English can be expected to operate according to its phonics, and our job in the first two years of grammar instruction is to instill that phonics knowledge in our children, through drill and lots of reading practice.

Because of the love affair our educational system has had with teaching children to read using as little phonics as possible, there are many phonics programs out there that are actually quite diluted with look-say influences and “rules” that are not true phonics rules. One example is the “in a single syllable word containing two vowels, the first vowel is long and the second vowel is silent” rule. This bogus phonics rule is only accurate about 50% of the time. If you find this rule espoused in a phonics or spelling program that you are using, my opinion is to keep looking. Our search must be for the most unadulterated, scientific approach to phonics as possible to use in teaching our children. They are out there. The best that I am familiar with are listed in the Grammar Curriculum page.

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