

# Phoneme Reader

Software designed to help early readers



**This article is written by Malcolm Litten of the BDA New Technology Committee. The committee independently looks at technology related to dyslexia and their insights are not an endorsement of any product by the British Dyslexia Association.**

**Phoneme Reader is available free for anyone to use. It can be used on Windows, Android and Mac iOS devices.**

The thinking behind the development of this program comes from my experience of working in schools in India, where I've had the immense good fortune to help with the introduction of text-to-speech software. There are schools in Goa, Mumbai and Pune who use the software. At 5, the children are being taught to read in English. This is not their mother tongue. Most will only learn to read in their first language later. So they learn to read in a different script, in a language they do not speak at home and that uses possibly the most opaque orthography in the world.

We have been providing help in one school through the use of text-to-speech software.

This school approaches the teaching of reading entirely through a look-and-say approach. Phonics are not mentioned. The software is employed to allow learners to reinforce their learning of sight words through regular practice. They work independently, able to repeat items as often as they choose and working at their own pace. This intervention is introduced as soon as the teachers detect any signs of struggle. The support continues when the learners begin to read passages and, later, whole books.

The outcome has been staggeringly good. The school reports that by the end of their third year all children are able to read independently well enough to no longer require the support of the software. There has been a single exception to this amongst 200 students over three years. What is equally striking is that the teachers talk as much about the impact this has had on their pupils' self-confidence as on their reading success.

Clearly, it is never possible to attribute an outcome achieved over a long period of time to any single intervention, but the

teachers' enthusiasm for continuing to use the software with pupils in the future does suggest they see real value in its impact.

In the UK, teaching of reading is dominated by an emphasis on phonics. It was necessary to come up with a different piece of software to replicate the aspects of this intervention that I consider significant in helping early readers. So the Phoneme Reader has been designed to enable learners to reinforce their current learning in class by repetition of this learning on the computer.

The software provides feedback on the link between graphemes (letters) and phonemes (sounds). Any word in the 10,000 word dictionary can be typed or copied in, then the word will be displayed as a whole word and a second version split into its constituent graphemes. Clicking on the play button means you will hear each phoneme as you see the relevant grapheme(s) highlighted to reinforce the connection. Then you will hear the whole word spoken. Importantly, the user is working on their own, in control of the pace at which they work on words, the speed at which each phoneme is read to them and how many times they choose to repeat the reading of each word. Users are encouraged to voice the sounds and word as they hear them.

The words being worked on are provided by the teacher so there is a direct link between

learning in class and the reinforcement through this program. The frequency of use is subject to opportunity. In India, each learner spends 15 minutes working on the software twice a week. I am planning to undertake some research in English schools in the 2019-20 school year to explore the impact of working in this way and to discover what factors are important in achieving improved learning.

My hope is that the provision of a multisensory method of reinforcing learning at the earliest stage of learning to read might enable many of the strugglers to escape the sense of failure that can so quickly undermine self-confidence.

From my experience of working in these schools in India, I believe it will also be important to provide text-to-speech support when reading text. This should happen from the very beginning as well, not just when the learner has experienced failure and has lost faith in their ability to succeed.

Phoneme Reader can be found at [www.clarospeakweb.com/phoneme](http://www.clarospeakweb.com/phoneme). It is free. Further information and guidance are all to be found in the User Guide. There is a link to this on the same webpage. This includes instructions on how to install the software so that it can be used offline.

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