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Dave Krupke

What Exactly is Visual Phonics?

Judy Montgomery

Dave Krupke recently retired after 37 years as a speech-language pathologist in the public schools in the Davenport, Iowa area. Beyond graduate work in speech pathology, special education, and instructional design, he received training in numerous educational-related topics, including literacy development, collaboration/consultation, progress monitoring, evidence-based practice, and response to intervention. During his career, he served children with communication disorders and language-learning disorders from age 3 through 21, provided early intervention services to children 0 through 3 as a part of a multidisciplinary team, and collaborated in or cotaught in early childhood special education, learning disabilities (elementary and secondary), behavior disorders, and cognitive disabilities programs. I met Dave a few years ago at a workshop and discovered his enthusiasm and unique skill set for using Visual Phonics for struggling readers. The methodology had a special appeal for students with communication disabilities.

What is Visual Phonics, how did it originate, and why should we know more about it?

First of all, Visual Phonics is a shortened version of the actual name—See The Sound/Visual Phonics. See The Sound/Visual Phonics should not be confused with a growing number of commercially available products and privately-produced materials/programs on the market that use the name “Visual Phonics.” What distinguishes See The Sound/Visual Phonics from these other “Visual Phonics” products is that it is a multisensory strategy that represents all of the sounds of English with a hand-shape cue and a corresponding written symbol. It is not a program or a curriculum, but rather a strategy for representing sound in a visible, concrete way.

The parent of a deaf child created the basic framework of what became known as Visual Phonics in the late 1970s. After initial success using created hand-shape cues (linked to the production of sound) with her son and his classmates in a classroom for deaf/hearing impaired

students, a collaboration with Millie Snow, administrator for the Osmond Foundation for the Children of the World (now known at the Children’s Miracle Network), resulted in the Visual Phonics system (with a few modifications) as we know it today. Recognizing Visual Phonics as a highly effective and innovative strategy to represent sound, a group of educational and business professionals, headed by Millie Snow, founded ICLI (International Communication Learning Institute) in 1982. ICLI, a nonprofit organization located in Webster, Wisconsin, oversees a network of Visual Phonics resource specialists/trainers in the US and Canada. “See The Sound” was added to Visual Phonics early on in order to distinguish it from other programs and materials using the name Visual Phonics.

It is important for professionals to know several facts about Visual Phonics. It can be used with literacy skill development and with individuals who have communication disorders. It is a very flexible system that serves to make sound concrete and representable via its multi-sensory nature—you only use the hand-shape cues and/or written symbols that the student needs to make sound-to-print connections or to make sound-production connections. A distinct difference between See The Sound/ Visual Phonics and other programs for phonics or reading series is that Visual Phonics’ hand-shape cues are tied kinesthetically to the production of the sounds of English—what actually happens in the mouth. The written symbols strongly associate with the position of the hand or the movement of the hand in a specific hand shape, or cue. For example, flicking the index finger off of the thumb emulates the release of the tongue from the alveolar ridge when producing /t/—the sound represented by the letter *t*. Another hand-shape cue example for /s/, the sound represented by the letter *s* and *c* (as in center), involves moving the index finger in a horizontal *s* pattern (as in a sine wave).

Interestingly, there are a number of commercially available phonics programs, as well as some reading series which have actions that are associated with pictures

featuring a specific sound. While the attempt to make their materials multi-sensory is a good one, the associative movements (for example, moving each arm forward and backward while saying “ch, ch, ch”, pretending to be an old train) don’t make enough of a “connection” to establish the Alphabetic Principle for all learners. It has been my experience, as well as the experience of many educators, that See The Sound/Visual Phonics provides the connecting piece, the link that bridges the gap between letters and sounds.

How did you get interested in Visual Phonics?

I was working in a junior high setting and shared workspace with an itinerant teacher of the hearing impaired. We had a deaf student in common on our caseloads and I was sitting in on the session so I could work in concert with what she was doing. I noticed that she was doing something with her hands and using written symbols that I didn’t recognize, so I asked her what it was . . . her reply was “Visual Phonics.” I was quickly intrigued by the observable results with our deaf student, and attended an in-service on Visual Phonics. I saw immediate and innumerable applications for not only speech, but also for literacy skills. I took the Visual Phonics training as soon as I could and began using the system. Results were immediate with students with whom I had previously tried everything I knew with limited results. The younger students enthusiastically imitated my hand-shape cues without being asked, as if the movements were instinctive, and they began to produce sounds with less “verbiage” and examples from me. Whenever the students used the hand-shapes cues as they produced their target sounds, sound accuracy was noticeably higher than when they didn’t use hand-shape cues. When I cued with hand-shapes (and the students didn’t follow suit), their accuracy was still higher than when no hand shapes were used. While I wasn’t a skeptic about what I was seeing, I was cautious, and tried Visual Phonics with as many students as I could. It didn’t take long to realize that Visual Phonics was a highly effective “tool,” unlike anything I had ever seen or tried. I shared information with interested preschool, Kindergarten, and reading teachers, and we saw students make sound-print connections more quickly and retain them. Rhyming skills became visual and kinesthetic for struggling learners, and they no longer had to rely on the auditory input which was not successful. (I knew at that point that I had to become a trainer so I could spread the word to other professionals!) I felt this would make a difference in the efficiency and efficacy of our work with students with communication disabilities, and had far-reaching

implications for literacy skill development with students in both regular education and special education

How do you see it as a component of reading instruction? Are SLPs especially well suited to teach it?

As stated earlier, Visual Phonics can be woven into any literacy activity where sound awareness or sound/letter connections are being taught or reinforced. The kinesthetic feature of the hand-shape cues resonates with children, in whom “muscle memory” is powerful. For younger students, Visual Phonics makes rhyming, word “beginning-ness” “ending-ness” and “middle-ness” *visual* and *kinesthetic*, and not just auditory. Being able to see and feel these phonological concepts serves to establish, enhance, or reinforce the literacy foundation provided by phonological awareness. Visual Phonics fits very well with the literacy principle that “letters *represent* sounds” versus a commonly accepted belief that “letters *have* sounds.” Phonemic awareness and phonics skills are facilitated due to a stronger sound/letter connection that is based in sound, not letters. Syllable sense and recognition of meaningful chunks in words are stronger for many students. When phonemic awareness skills, especially sound blending and segmentation, are well established, students read, spell, and write with greater skill and confidence.

SLPs are very well suited to use and teach Visual Phonics, because we “think in sounds” just by the nature of our profession. When the SLP uses Visual Phonics, they can become a more integral part of the literacy efforts in a school setting!

Do you think it has value for the deaf and hard of hearing population?

Based on my conversations with fellow Visual Phonics Trainers through the past four years, the consensus is yes! A compilation of information provided by two Visual Phonics colleagues, Katie Ulwelling, an itinerant teacher of the hearing impaired in Minnesota, and Beverly Trezek, an assistant professor at DePaul University in Chicago, Illinois, addresses this question.

Ulwelling (K. Ulwelling, Personal Communication, August, 2007) stated, “Visual Phonics is a critical addition to the acquisition of phonemic awareness, phonics, writing and spelling for my hard of hearing students.” The use of the hand shape (also known as a hand cue) and the written symbol help them discriminate initial, medial, and/or ending sounds, especially if two sounds are similar (such as /t/ and /d/). Using the hand shapes, they can SEE any target sound, and, as they make each

handshape, they can FEEL that the sounds are different. Ulwelling added that the use of the written Visual Phonics symbols is highly valuable because it gives the teacher and the students a concrete and common tool to dissect the structure of words. It allows the students to DISCOVER and manipulate rules that previously could only be talked and written about in traditional English print. Bottom line—it helps hard of hearing students SEE and FEEL the sound in a concrete way that is based on the way the sound is produced . . . an additional multisensory key to help them conceptualize sound as they develop their literacy skills.

Trezek offered more on the subject. Students who are deaf or hard of hearing have historically struggled to acquire reading skills. One explanation for these difficulties lies in the foundation of English. English is an alphabetic language and in all alphabetic languages, print encodes spoken language. To learn to read, children must learn to associate written letters (graphemes) with spoken sounds (phonemes). Since many deaf and hard-of-hearing students lack access to sounds due to their hearing loss, teaching letter-sound correspondences or phonics skills has been difficult to facilitate with this population of students.

Trezek stated that Visual Phonics provides students who are deaf or hard of hearing with visual, tactile and kinesthetic information about the phonemes of the English language. She has conducted several recently published studies that demonstrate the success of using Visual Phonics to supplement instruction for students with varying degrees of hearing loss from mild to profound. It is important to note that all of these studies involved the use of a systematic, explicit, scripted phonics-based reading curriculum. Since Visual Phonics is a tool to supplement instruction, these studies represent an assessment of an intervention package which included both the curriculum and Visual Phonics. Further research by Trezek and others is ongoing.

What is involved in becoming a Visual Phonics trainer?

There are four steps to becoming a Visual Phonics Resource Specialist/Trainer.

1. Complete a Visual Phonics training workshop. Trainings are held in various locations in the United States and Canada. Specific dates and locations are available from ICLI (715-866-7453, www.icli.org). Most trainings involve 2 days in order to develop a basic proficiency of recognizing and producing the Visual Phonics hand-shape cues and written symbols.
2. Use the Visual Phonics system with students for one year.

3. Apply to ICLI to become a trainer and complete an interview process.
4. If approved, pay a fee to become an approved trainer, and mentor with the ICLI National Training Director.

Many of us are interested in the new Response to Intervention (RTI) approaches in our schools. Do you see Visual Phonics as a tiered intervention?

Fuchs and Fuchs (2006), in describing the multitiered characteristics of Response To Intervention (RTI), state that “the nature of the academic intervention changes at each tier, becoming more intensive as the student moves across the tiers.” They go on to explain that increasing intensity occurs in a number of ways, including (a) using more teacher-centered, systematic, and explicit instruction; (b) conducting it more frequently; (c) adding to its duration; (d) creating smaller and more homogeneous student groupings; or (e) relying on instructors with greater expertise.

While Visual Phonics is not a stand-alone intervention, it can function as a tiered intervention. Visual Phonics can be “woven” into tiered interventions and function within the framework of the tiered progression of RTI.

See The Sound/Visual Phonics is by its very nature a flexible literacy tool or strategy, and can be utilized in each of the three tiers of RTI. It is a system of sound-gesture-symbol relations that links speech sounds to our other senses in a natural progression, beginning with an awareness of how the mouth moves to form sounds. This strategy represents sound in a visible, concrete way, can be blended or woven into any level of a tiered intervention, and is easily intensified or faded (based on ongoing dynamic assessment). The ability to cue students with “just what they need” to process print more meaningfully is a powerful aspect, and allows the instructor to choose the type, frequency, and intensity of multisensory cues. An initial concern of some educators is that the hand-shape cues and written symbols will confuse or further confuse struggling readers due to introducing more visual stimuli, but that is not the case. Because Visual Phonics is connected naturally and logically to the production of sound, the alphabet becomes less arbitrary, abstract, and inconsistent in the sounds that the letters represent, and the cognitive load of establishing and retrieving sound-print associational pathways is actually lessened. Confusions that already exist for struggling readers are often reduced or eliminated. In addition, due to the fact that Visual Phonics is highly compatible with brain-based learning, the result is less guess work for students in processing print.

The greatest impact of embedding the Visual Phonics strategy into an intervention protocol comes in establishing and/or strengthening phonemic awareness and phonics

instruction, two of the five areas identified in *Put Reading First* (Armbruster & Osborn, 2001). However, the visual and kinesthetic cues provided by Visual Phonics hand-shape cues and written symbols can also be used to facilitate skills in the remaining three target intervention areas: vocabulary, reading fluency, and text comprehension.

With that said, I want to describe what the presence of the Visual Phonics strategies could look like as a prevention aspect in Tier 1 and 2, and as an intervention piece in a Tier 3 program, such as START—IN (Montgomery & Moore-Brown, 2006), a response to intervention (RTI) program for reading. In the three-tier approach in general education described by Montgomery and Moore-Brown, Tier 1 is General Education Instruction. In the LinguiSystems Guide to RTI (LinguiSystems, 2007), the first tier is referred to as a core instruction. Since Visual Phonics is an multi-sensory strategy that is used in regular education, use of hand-shape cues and written symbols can be used to establish or strengthen sound-letter connections, reinforce important phonological awareness, and to skill-build critical phonemic awareness skills.

Tier 2 represents classroom modifications and accommodations (Montgomery & Moore-Brown 2006). The LinguiSystems Guide to RTI labels this tier as targeted group intervention. Instruction is carried out by the classroom teacher or a specialist with small, same-ability groups. These students need “specific supports to make adequate progress . . . provided with targeted intensive prevention and or remediation services plus Tier 1 instruction” (LinguiSystems, 2007). In this setting, Visual Phonics hand-shape cues are used by the teacher to cue sound-letter connections, as well as by the students to “cue themselves.” Daily routines of sound-letter connection activities help to build student confidence and familiarity, and strengthen literacy skill foundations that will facilitate moving on to more challenging work. The written symbols associate strongly with the hand-shape cues, and are utilized with print to make critical sound-letter connections, to help students move past processing print as individual letters, and to begin to recognize chunks to which a morphological connection can be made. The combination of Visual Phonics hand-shape cues and written symbols and the duration and intensity of their use is fluid and is determined by individual and group needs that become evident via frequent progress monitoring.

Tier 3 is a potential proving ground for determining whether students are instructionally disabled (Vellutino et al., 1996) or reading disabled. The interventionist at this level is usually a specialist, such as a reading specialist, SLP or behavior specialist. Tier 3, termed Systematic Intensive Instruction by Montgomery and Moore-Brown (2006), and labeled as Intensive,

Individual Intervention in the LinguiSystems Guide to RTI, is where the use of Visual Phonics hand-shape cues may decrease and the frequency and intensity of use of the written symbols likely increases. The use of hand cues facilitates a decrease in “instructional verbiage,” and the written symbols facilitate student independence in processing print. The use of Visual Phonics strategies resonates with a viewpoint expressed by Alan E. Farstrup, executive director of the International Reading Association (IRA). Farstrup (2007) stated that “excellent teachers using a proven and rich array of instructional approaches and quality reading materials can help all students to become good readers.”

RTI—and all effective interventions—involve progress monitoring to determine if the intervention is working, so you can make needed adjustments. Would you describe a method to monitor progress in Visual Phonics programs?

Since See The Sound/Visual Phonics is not a stand-alone program, but is woven into existing instructional methods, progress monitoring procedures that are already in place will be sufficient to reflect the impact on literacy or communication skills. We know that the use of dynamic assessment will allow us to monitor changes in students’ level or rate of learning (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006), and that the information gained will help to determine changes in materials and instructional procedures (including the mix of strategies and their intensity and duration).

While progress monitoring will provide data-based evidence of improved literacy skills, teacher observations also provide important evidence of improvements in connections between sound and print. So, how do we know the students are internalizing the Visual Phonics strategies and making them their own? The ownership of the Visual Phonics tool becomes evident in students’ use of hand-shape cues during large group, small group, individual activities (such as centers), as they “figure out” new words, and when the “a-ha” comes for the first time and then they remember a letter sound or the sound certain letter combinations make. It shows in their increase in speed of recognition of CVC words, word families, or words when letters are changed or taken off, and in their rapid naming. We know students are learning to use Visual Phonics as a strategy when they are able to write more of what is in their heads . . . not only the struggling students, but the smart students. Independent use of Visual Phonics strategies shows as we see students self-cuing when they are engaged in a center activity, when reading a book independently, or when helping a classmate.

Visual Phonics is a very flexible tool. While it is comprehensive in that it represents all of the sounds of

English in a visible, concrete way, it would be counter-intuitive to use a large body of hand-shape cues and/or written symbols all at once. That would certainly bring cognitive overload! A logical question, then, would be: “Do you continue to use it with all students . . . or is there a time when you should stop and try another approach?”

Depending on the grade level, Visual Phonics can be used with all students in general education instruction, but the “what,” “how much,” and “how” changes depending on curriculum and student learning needs. Since Visual Phonics is highly brain-based learning compatible, students with different learning styles respond to and utilize it in varying amounts and varying degrees. Students will fade self-use instinctively, but it is typical for the kinesthetic learners to continue to use the hand-shape cues longer because the movement/motor muscle memory is a strong link for them to recall that sound-letter connection. The key impact of Visual Phonics is that you use only what you need (or what any particular student needs), so it is always fluid.

Generally speaking, I would say that use with all students in a regular education classroom is highest in preschool and Kindergarten, and then gradually lessens through grades 1 and 2. In 3rd grade and beyond, use in general education classrooms is limited, but Visual Phonics can be a regular part of the menu of “sense-making” teaching and learning strategies utilized in reading and special education settings in upper elementary and into secondary settings.

I think it fair to say that no one method or strategy will work with every learning challenge. I’ve yet to see the “one size fits all” philosophy play out well across the board. We also know that the best teaching strategy, highly researched and evidence-based, is only as good as the expertise and creativity of the user! In instances where evidence would indicate limited impact of Visual Phonics, it would only be reasonable to investigate other strategies.

Does the program work with older children or adolescents? Why or why not?

Yes! Visual Phonics appears to unlock the code of English that has eluded students through traditional instructional methods and strategies. It makes the sounds of vowels and vowel combinations recognizable and predictable and aids in the recognition and processing of consonant digraphs. Istatic recognition of the vowel and consonant combinations facilitates syllable recognition, along with recognition of meaningful chunks embedded as syllables, allowing older students to read longer and more complex words. So often, the vowel piece eludes older, struggling readers, and Visual Phonics can take the

mystery and guesswork out of that part of the overall process of learning to read.

Are you doing any research or data collection on classrooms or schools who have implemented Visual Phonics? Do you have any preliminary results you can share?

I am currently working with a number of individual schools and school districts to gather data on regular education students’ achievement following the introduction of Visual Phonics into their classroom activities and curricula. While plans are in place to gather data over a several year period to show the impact across grade levels, data from the 2006–07 school year shows that Kindergarten students are making noticeable gains on literacy skill assessments in terms of both rate of acquisition and skill stability. Three examples support this: (1) Kindergarten students are demonstrating stable knowledge of all letters and sounds by November (as compared to the end of the 1st semester or later prior to the introduction of Visual Phonics); (2) Kindergarten students are demonstrating a noticeable decrease in “summer drop-off” in reading skills when assessed at the beginning of 1st grade; and (3) Kindergarten end-of-the-year literacy assessment scores in a low a SES school were 10 percentage points higher (on average) in several literacy sub-skill areas than in any of the previous 4 years. Research projects are ongoing, and results will continue to be published as these projects and studies conclude.

Trezek and her colleagues have conducted several studies over the past three years evaluating the effectiveness of the Visual Phonics supplement with students who are deaf or hard of hearing. Drawing upon the success of these studies, additional research is currently in progress to begin to evaluate the use of this intervention package with students who are hearing. In addition, a component analysis study is planned that will compare the use of the curriculum with and without the Visual Phonics supplement.

What is your vision for Visual Phonics in the next five years?

One of the questions I get during trainings is “Why haven’t I heard of this before?” My answer is always the same—knowing about Visual Phonics only happens when people who become trained, use it, and tell their friends and colleagues. There is no commercial presence or advertising.

Awareness of Visual Phonics is growing. The number of Visual Phonics trainers in the United States and Canada is on the rise, resulting in more workshop trainings being

available. We are also seeing an increase in data gathering, research studies, and published research. In addition, Visual Phonics is beginning to be used internationally in American schools in Europe, Asia, and South America. As more educators and parents become aware of Visual Phonics, become trained, and use it with their children and students, the word will continue to spread and more students will benefit.

One of the impacts on teachers who use Visual Phonics is that they begin to move away from thinking in “letterness” and move toward thinking in “soundness.” We know that the foundation of language is not the alphabet . . . it is sound! The alphabet is an arbitrary, abstract representation of sound, while the sounds of our language are the consistent, concrete foundation of language.

As Wayne Dyer (2004) often says, “When you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change.” Visual Phonics is indeed changing the literacy landscape and the way we look at connecting sound and print.

Thank you, Dave Krupke, for this comprehensive description and the following references so we can continue learning.

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