A literacy method for Stoney

The two-hour introduction

by Warren Harbeck

Mary Anna Harbeck

Originally published as:

Harbeck, Warren, and Mary Anna Harbeck. 1970. "A literacy method for Stoney: The two-hour introduction." *Notes on Literacy* 11:8–11. See also: Harbeck and Harbeck 1970 (in *Bibliography (Literacy)*)

[Topics: North and Central America: Canada: Stoney, transition from LWC literacy programs]

This article describes an approach to literacy in Stoney (a North American Indian language). It is probably not unique, and certainly not perfect, but it is providing us with good results in many ways.

This method is geared for the Stoney speaker who has had at least grade three schooling, and has had somewhat of a phonics approach to the learning of reading English. Its aim is to provide a quick, one-lesson introduction to the entire reading and writing system of Stoney for such an individual. Further, in an attempt to fit it into the Stoney view of education, which values the ability to learn by oneself, we present the introduction so that the student will develop and use the writing system in a way that will give him the satisfaction of saying "I learned it by myself."

Since the consonants we use in the Stoney alphabet are quite similar to English in their pronunciation, and are the symbols which the Stoneys themselves suggested through lengthy testing, we do not emphasize them in the introduction, although in some arbitrary cases we might give an explanation of the use of a consonant (such as *k* versus *c).* What is emphasized, however, is the vowel system—its representation, its function in syllables, and its function in rhyming sets for spelling purposes.

The Stoney vowel system consists of five oral vowels (/a, e, i, o, u/) and three nasalized vowels (/ ą, į, ų/). We represent them respectively as: *a, e, i, o, u,* and *â, î, û.* So far, in the use of the system, we use blackboards almost entirely, except for the last half hour, at which time we use a small story book about a man who goes out in the woods and sees various animals, and finally meets a bear. The two-hour introductory lesson goes as follows:

1. Vowel symbolization

Briefly I illustrate how, in Stoney, there are five main (oral) vowels by using them in words. Then I tell the students that they are going to make an accurate writing system to represent these five vowels. If the student knows what the vowel letters are in English, I ask him to name them for me—they usually can—*a, e, i, o, u.* I write them on the board (if a board is not available, a piece of paper works fine). I mention that these five letters are not only used in English to write vowels, but are used in most of the languages of the world to write vowels.

I then refer to a few really long Stoney words as "proof" that if we want to write them, we must use the least number of letters possible to keep the words as short as possible. The students indicate their assent. I mention that, since there are five main Stoney vowels, and five letters of the alphabet that can be used to write vowels, then all we have to do is match the letters up with the sounds, and we have the main part of the Stoney writing system developed. I tell them that I will say five words in Stoney, each word requiring the use of a different vowel, and thus a different letter. The students are to choose one of the five vowel symbols to complete the blank in each word I say, but once they have used a letter, that letter may not be used in another word in the set. To this point, the board looks like this:

a e i o u

1. k ____
2. k ____
3. t ____
4. ____ kt (a)
5. t ____

I say the first word /ko/ and ask them to choose the most appropriate letter to fill the blank. They choose the letter *o.*

I say the second word /ku/ and ask them to choose one of the remaining four letters to fill the blank. They choose *u.* (Although some might have chosen *a,* it was no longer available to choose because it was used in the first word for a different sound.)

I say the third word /ta/ and ask them to choose one of the remaining three letters. They choose *a.*

I say the fourth word /ekta/ and write in the *a* at the end of the word. I ask them which of the remaining two letters (e or i) would be best to use for the blank. Since at this point the vowel sound in /ekta/ is quite similar to that in the English word *egg*, they usually choose *e*.

With only the letter *i* left to choose, I say the word /ti/ and they say to use the *i*.

Thus they have, by themselves, determined the vowel representation system for Stoney. The programming of the presentation is quite important. If the sounds are presented in any other order, confusion results.

2. The vowels as the main part of the syllable

Next we discuss what a syllable is. If no one can define a syllable, I explain that it is a part of a word that lasts one beat ("There are as many syllables in a word as there are 'beats'.") After beating out a few words orally, we write some words on the board, and the students divide them into syllables. They then observe that there is one vowel per syllable, and that except for the last syllable in a word, the vowel is always at the end of a syllable. (Since we have not talked about stressed syllables, there is no confusion here in the use of the word "beat.")

3. Pattern word drill for vowel memorization

Having discussed the syllable, we now proceed to place the five main vowel letters, widely spaced across the top of the board. Then starting with the letter *a*, I write immediately under the letter the word *ha*, and say it. I then put another word *pa* under *ha*, and say it. I point out that these two words **rhyme,** that they sound alike at the end. I explain that if two words end in the same vowel letter, then they rhyme. (Up to this point, I use *word* instead of *syllable.* But as soon as we enter into polysyllabic words, I use *syllable.)* I then explain that if two words/syllables rhyme when you say them, they use the same vowel letter. Thus, I say the next word / ša/, and the students suggest the spelling *sa.* I again point out that, since it rhymed with *ha* and *pa*, it would be spelled with the same vowel letter. Thus, we proceed through as many one-, two-, and three-syllable words as necessary to give the student confidence in his reading and writing. We establish the first word in the column as a "pattern word/syllable" to be memorized as an example of the proper use of a vowel letter. This procedure is followed for each of the other remaining four columns, *e, i, a, u,* one column at a time, with review of all the previous columns of words before proceeding to the next column. Finally, after all five columns are filled in, and I am fairly confident that the students grasp the use of the "pattern syllable" and rhyming, I point to various words on the board at random, not sticking within any one column, to see if I can catch them. Usually I cannot. If a student does suggest the wrong pronunciation of such as a word ending in *e*, I provide extra drills before moving on. When they can read any syllable thus far introduced at random with no difficulty, we proceed to the next phase.

Nasalized vowels—I ask the students how to spell /hi/. They all say *hi.* Then I ask if /hi/ 'blade of knife' and /hi/ 'fur' mean the same thing, or are different words. They say they are different words. I then write on the board below *hi* the word *hî*, and explain that we show the difference by putting a "little nose" over the vowel letter. We drill some words illustrating this letter, memorize a "pattern syllable" for the

letter, and discuss some peculiar phenomena pertaining to nasalized vowels. I may also demonstrate, by pinching my nose, why we call these vowels "nasalized" (or "through the nose").

I then ask the students how to spell the word /ha/ 'skin', and they suggest *ha.* I then say the word /ha/ 'yes' and ask them to spell it. If I have done a good job in the explanation of *î,* they almost always suggest *hâ,* indicating carefully that the "little mark" must be put over the letter. We drill this letter as we did the *î,* introduce the last of the nasalized vowels, and drill it the same way, and then review all our "pattern syllables" again.

4. Reading and writing long words with help of rhyming method

Now, drawing on the student's knowledge of syllables, "pattern syllables," and rhyming, we proceed to read and write long words of up to eight syllables. I say the word /hna/, and ask the students how to spell it. We decide that it rhymes with *ha* and, therefore, ends in the vowel *a,* but the beginning of the word, because of the non-English consonant cluster, poses a little problem. I explain briefly about it, and we write the word on the board *hna.* (I choose this rather difficult consonant cluster because it occurs frequently, and the sooner it is introduced, the better.) I gradually expand the word /hna/ 'go home', and the students spell each new form. At any point where they meet difficulty, we review the pattern syllables, and they spell the word correctly. The expansion list would look like this at the end of the first set:

hna	'go home' (English here for your benefit only)
hnach	'he went home'
wahnach	'I went home'
awahnach	'I am taking him home'
achihnach	'I am taking you (sg.) home'
achihnabich	'I am taking you (pl.) home'
achihnabiktach	'I will take you (pl.) home'

awichahnabiktach ‘They will take them home’

and so forth, up to eight syllables

After going through a number of such examples, and reading other, equally complex progressions, we review once more the pattern syllables.

5. Reading short Stoney story

After I am fairly confident that the students have a workable control of the writing system, I distribute a little book entitled “Ozîia cha hûyagechîhâ,” which contains 13 sentences, half of which are complex; the other half [are] simple sentences. The average length of each sentence is five words. Aside from the fact that the sentences are considerably shorter than in most narratives, and the sentences used in the book are all of basically the same tagmemic pattern, the book represents full-blown Stoney, with words ranging from one to five syllables. The students now proceed to read through the book, usually with almost no difficulty. And after the first two pages (through which they read by syllables first, and then go back and put the syllables together into sentences), they read the rest of the pages by sight with quite good fluency.

Thus, at the end of the two-hour lesson, the average student can handle almost any material on familiar topics. He sees how the system works. In the days and weeks that follow, however, it is necessary to help the student change his general grasp of the system into **habit.** I do not have a carefully worked out plan for that part yet. Any ideas?