



SPACE Shuttle

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Typhoon Signal Number English

Pauline Bunce

NET Teacher Scheme

Sometimes Hong Kong students' errors in written and spoken English are so bizarre that they almost jump up and beg for further investigation. Take, for example, the strange title of this article. These words were recently "copied" from the blackboard by no less than five of my Form Two students.

Wildly erroneous jottings like this can provide a window into the ways in which our students learn English. It is my belief that these five students just did not recognise the word *eight* when its initial letter was capitalised - *Eight*. Instead, they wrote the visually similar, capitalised word, *English*, possibly the only word that they know which begins with the capital letter 'E' and has a 'g' in the middle.

Can't these young learners see that their writing makes no sense at all? I am afraid not, because they, like thousands of other Hong Kong students, seem to have learned their English in a mostly visual, whole-word fashion. Such learners can be easily deceived by English words that happen to look alike.

Alphabetic literacy

These sight-learners of English are likely to come to a complete standstill when they are asked to pronounce a word that they have not encountered before. As teachers, we have all seen this phenomenon. More disturbing is a report from a lawyer-friend of mine who found that a number of

university law students were also displaying this tendency.

Research at City University has found that significant numbers of undergraduates display poor "word attack" skills. Almost anyone who totally "stops in their tracks" when faced with a new word can be said to be lacking in alphabetic *literacy* skills.

Despite their progression through the SAR's education system, such readers rely far too much on their visual memories, rather than the skill of alphabetic decoding. They have failed to grasp the fundamental principle that the letters of an alphabetic language (the graphemes) serve to capture the basic sounds (the phonemes) of that language.

Anyone who cannot read the following "pseudowords" can be said to lack this fundamental understanding: pob, feg, bim, seef, mondle, trinch, bristrom, haddelfid.

Alphabetic languages "work" in an entirely different way from non-alphabetic languages. Even the non-romanised, scripted languages such as Hindi and Arabic still operate on the basis of letter-sound correspondence. Reading, in any language, is not an inborn human skill. If it were, there would be no nonliterate people in the world today. Literacy requires training, and it does not necessarily come easily or quickly to a significant proportion of the population.

Kindergarten scholars

In Hong Kong, almost any three-year-old can sing the Alphabet Song. These tiny kindergarten scholars will often arrive home

each afternoon with lists of English words to learn for tomorrow's "dictation" (spelling test). Never mind the fact that these words may not be a part of the toddlers' daily experience, or that they will never be called upon to use them in a conversation. To these tiny students, and to most of their minimally-trained instructors, English is there to be learned as a "subject".

Dictation

At an age when even manipulating a pencil is highly challenging, Hong Kong's toddlers are being forced to meet the highly conflicting demands of early literacy development in both English and Chinese at the same time. Here in Hong Kong, the centuries-old practice of Chinese-style dictation is directly applied to the early learning of English as well. Words? Characters? What's the difference when you are three years old?

The weekly ritual of "seen" English dictation is an absurdity that is deeply entrenched in Hong Kong parents' and teachers' mindsets. It is almost as if the teacher only needs to say, "Go", and the students will write out the pre-selected passage, without listening to the teacher's reading at all. Indeed, many students finish writing ahead of their teacher's reading!

How to spell?

Hong Kong students know their alphabet inside-out, and they are

exceptionally good at spelling. But, when asked to report an answer in class, far too many will merely spell it out for the teacher, rather than attempt its pronunciation. When one of my Form Six students proudly offered, "v-i-c-t-i-m" as her answer one day, I acknowledged its correctness and then asked her to say the word. Silence. No "vvvv...vic...tim". Nothing. Even though this word's pronunciation is entirely predictable from its component letters, this bright student was absolutely stumped. "But, I don't know this word," was her only response.

Teaching our students to sight-learn an alphabetic language deprives them of any insight into the sheer magic of how these languages actually "work". Instead, it condemns our youngsters to a lifetime of memorisation. No wonder they complain about having "alphabet headaches".

Decline in secondary school

Research has shown that mother-tongue readers of English who have learned to sight-read, tend to come to an abrupt, overloaded halt in their reading development in their middle primary-school years. Many Hong Kong youngsters, learning English as a largely "foreign" language, run into a similar "brick wall" in junior secondary school. Indeed, many Hong Kong teachers have observed a noticeable decline in the English levels of students after they complete Form One.

Such students can be put "back on track" with individualised remedial instruction, but this is almost impossible in the 40-strong-classroom situations which prevail at present.

Ramifications

What happens when students without this alphabetic insight manage to make it through the system and enter university or teacher training courses?

Research with students from

non-alphabetic backgrounds at Queensland University in Australia, has found that Hong Kong students are their weakest readers of English. Students from Mainland China have a grounding in Hanyu Pinyin, the alphabetic writing system used in introductory literacy training. Students from Taiwan have a background in Zhu-Yin-Fu-Hau, a script based on sound, and Japanese students can draw on their working knowledge of two types of writing systems, one of which is based on sound.

University students who operate with a sight-learned English vocabulary, and who are studying in the medium of English, will have difficulty making the connections between the terms that they see in their reading and the same terms when spoken by their lecturers. No wonder Hong Kong university students absolutely crave textbooks, printed handouts and Powerpoint presentations!

The inordinately high local usage of facsimile transmissions is another giveaway signal, as is the common, usually telephone-mediated request, "How to spell?"

An inability to detect or to manipulate the English letter-sound system, as captured by combinations of the twenty-six letters, also has ramifications for the clarity of spoken English. Second-language speech that is not "informed" by alphabetic literacy, tends to drift and slur further and further away from the original model. Without alphabetic literacy, speakers are unable to reconstruct for themselves the original sounds of words by mentally consulting their spelling patterns.

Whichever way you look at it, learning English without alphabetic literacy is like pushing a car without petrol. It is extremely hard work. You may get from A to B, but you'll see and learn virtually nothing along the way.

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