

Hong Kong's English learners are missing the Alphabetic Principle

Hong Kong

Since 1997, the Hong Kong SAR Government has adopted a **biliterate and trilingual language policy** - to enable Hong Kong people to become biliterate in written Chinese and English, and trilingual in Cantonese, Putonghua and spoken English.

Hong Kong's secondary schools are "banded" (or streamed) by the Primary 6 Test results of their intake. Band One is the highest band. (Now there are only three bands.)

Band One Schools - Spelling -

nab, lop, rid, huff, weg, seep, mare, jest, flain, plode, grime, thress, refute, strickle, blender, discount, pentadrome, ventilate, monograph, supertronic.

Cohort 1: responses
134 students
42% correct
57% incorrect
1% non-response

Cohort 2: responses
135 students
40% correct
58% incorrect
2% non-response

Dr Pauline Bunce
Australia

ugly worms
chicken guts
alphabet headaches

The alphabetic principle

refers to the fact that the letters that comprise written alphabetic languages stand for the individual sounds that these languages use.

"Children will not, for the most part, make this discovery unaided, and the consequences for literacy growth of not discovering the alphabetic principle are serious."

"We consider the alphabetic principle to be in place in children who can decode novel print sequences, exemplified by non-words like *sut* and *yilt*."

(Byrne, 1998)

Band Five Schools - Reading -

feg, rit, mub, gof, pid, sim, fep, dap, fim, pob, tad, bek, seef, kug, doif, rean, kibe, wope, boosh, chuj.

School A: responses
70 students
13% correct
36% incorrect
51% non-response

School B: responses
160 students
15% correct
52% incorrect
33% non-response

For further information:



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Band One: Summer School Reflections

- *I never looked inside a word before. I just recite them many, many times for my memory.* (7)
- *I didn't know what is vowel or consonant before.* (74)
- *In Chinese you cannot write the word by sound, but in English you have!!* (41)
- *I learnt that words with similar spelling may have the same sound.* (32)
- *There are 26 alphabets, but 44 noises in English.* (39)

Consequences

- difficulties completing forms
- problems reading maps, detailed signs and lists of instructions
- difficulties taking notes in class
- problems pronouncing new words and specialised terminology
- "How to spell?" on the phone
- slow, laboured reading
- minimal reading for pleasure
- reduced opportunities for growth in general knowledge and vocabulary

Recommendations

- Stop the practice of "seen dictation"
- Stop the use of word flashcards in day-care
- Stop relying on secondary schools to teach phonics – start in the early primary years
 - ❖ English can't be taught "Chinese style"
 - ❖ Two languages need two different methods
- Train all teachers in phonological skills
- Devise appropriate teaching materials
- Reinforce phonological awareness in all lessons that use the medium of English

Reference:

Byrne, B. (1998). *The Foundation of Literacy: The Child's Acquisition of the Alphabetic Principle*. Hove, UK: Psychology Press.

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ALPHABET HEADACHES: Action Research in Hong Kong Schools

Early Observations:

As a NET (Native English-speaking Teacher) in two Band Five Hong Kong schools in 1998-2001, I frequently noticed my students' difficulties in reading English texts aloud. I also noticed their slow, letter-by-letter method of copying from the board and their tendency to mix up the question words, *when, where, what, who* and *why*. There were frequent requests of *How to spell?* and *How to say?* One student owned a Furby doll but could not read the Furbish words, such as *kah, boo, noo-loo* or *may-may*, in the toy's dictionary. Students undertook weekly "seen dictation" tests in which they wrote out passages from memory, while the teacher appeared to be dictating it to them. My suggestions of "unseen dictation" exercises were viewed as "far too hard for our students".

Action taken:

In 2000, I enrolled in a programme at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK), entitled "The Processes of Reading and its Disorders", taught by Dr Che Kan Leong. The results of a small project and the huge insights that I gained in this course led me to undertake doctoral studies in this field.

Further observations and advocacy:

I continued to conduct further informal observations and testing. I began running workshops in phonemic awareness and phonics for other NET teachers. I also secured a regular column in *The South China Morning Post*, in which I was able to draw city-wide attention to this crucial educational issue. Fundamental change is difficult, however, and the need for 'phonics' was not well understood by school authorities. At best, some NET teachers in secondary schools (myself included) were permitted one lesson per week in which to conduct 'phonics lessons'.

Action taken:

I continued to write newspaper articles and conduct workshops in the fundamentals of reading, and I moved to an international school in 2001. This school ran an annual Summer School for gifted, local Band One students, and I was able to tailor-make a "Word Wizards" component of the English-language enhancement programme that they offered. This then gave me access to some of Hong Kong's highest achievers, and it was with them that I conducted my formal doctoral research over several years.

The research:

The formal research project spanned three successive Summer Schools, during which I was able to investigate the phonological skills of several hundred applicants for places in the programme. The final research group of 135 participated in formal pre- and post-testing and an intensive three-week word-study programme. These highly articulate students were also able to provide extensive written feedback on their insights into their own learning.

The results:

Over many years, I have been able to assess the phonological skills of 778 Hong Kong high-school students, in both formal and informal situations. These students spanned the full range of school Bands and achievement levels, and included some who topped the city's highly competitive examinations.

- ALL were found to be wanting in their phonological awareness and word-building skills.

Continued action:

Now that I am based in Australia, I am continuing to publish and speak widely about "alphabet headaches" among newly arrived immigrants and overseas fee-paying students who have come from different scriptal backgrounds. The advent of large numbers of Chinese-background students in Australian university courses has prompted increased instructional interest in their biscriptal challenges.

Recommendations:

Clearly, the Hong Kong education authorities need to make phonological awareness an early childhood educational priority in the light of the government's *biliterate and trilingual* language policy objectives. Pre-primary educators need far higher levels of training than is the case at present. Children's fundamental ideas about literacy are sown in their early encounters with print. They need to be aware from their very first literacy experiences that Chinese and English scripts operate in vastly different ways. In the meantime, both in Hong Kong and overseas, there is a growing need for age-appropriate "catch-up" teaching programmes and resources in this field.

Conclusion:

Without the *alphabetic principle* in place, far too many Hong Kong learners of English are operating in circumstances that might even be described as a kind of "instructionally induced dyslexia" (Byrne, 1998).

Dr Pauline Bunce

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Chinese University of Hong Kong – my return to where it all began, 13 years ago