

# Teaching Tommy and Taro to Read: Understanding the Alphabetic Code (An English as a Foreign Language teacher's perspective)

## **Why Our Children Can't Read (And What We Can Do About It)**

Diane McGuinness, Ph.D. The Free Press, 1997 also in paperback by Touchstone

Kousuke had never been to my classroom before, so we were both a little nervous as he faced me across the table. As his mother watched from the couch behind him, he answered questions about an animal scene I had placed between us, and I began to get a sense of his ability with English. For a lower elementary grade student, his responses were remarkable-alert, expressive, and confident. I reached into his bag and pulled out one of the books he had brought to show me, opened it to a random page, and asked him to read it for me. Without hesitation, he read through two paragraphs of the Frog and Toad story, as his mother beamed from the couch. It was astounding, especially for a child who hadn't yet stepped foot outside of Japan.

But something bothered me. He was going through the story almost too fast, as if he was reciting a familiar tale, and he wasn't giving himself time to look closely at the words printed on the page. It was obvious that he knew the story, but it wasn't clear if he knew what he was looking at.

Stepping to the large white board next to the table, I wrote the letters t-o-b, and asked him how he would read what I had written. Instantly, he announced 'dot'. Okay, I responded, trying not to convey any disapproval or praise in my voice, and wrote d-o-s. 'That's dog' he almost shouted, perhaps a little impatient with such simple words. After I wrote s-o-d, he suddenly hesitated, gazed curiously at those three letters, and then said simply; 'I don't know'. I was stunned.

In ten more minutes, I was certain of five things: Kousuke was a motivated student with a strong interest in English. He could memorize whole words, sentences, and even stories. He could not read. Neither could he write. And that told me that his previous teacher hadn't read Diane McGuinness's book *Why Our Children Can't Read*.

When McGuinness examines the development of print going back 5,000 years, and contrasts the types of writing systems with their companion languages, some essential principles become clear: Written text is a code of the spoken language. The way a language is spoken determines the type of coding system that develops for that language. English, with its abundant vowel sounds, consonant clusters, and over 50,000 possible syllables, is written in an alphabetic code, simply because there is no other reasonable way to go about the task.

Throughout the book, McGuinness remains focused on understanding this alphabetic code, and simply follows the logical conclusions, like a scientist pursuing a trail of discoveries. Her writing style is consistently clear, logical, and humorous, deepened by the insightful perceptions of the child psychologist, researcher, classroom teacher, and parent that she is.

Her analysis takes us to a position that not only is easy to grasp, but stands apart from the battlegrounds of the the phonics-vs-whole language reading wars of recent decades. If English text is an alphabetic code for English speech sounds, the method of instruction must follow the way the code was designed: beginning with the sounds of speech. Most phonics methods employ a text-to-sound approach, and many begin with breaking whole words into their component sounds. Logically, if print is a phonic code, instruction should begin with identifying those phonemes (there's only about 43) and then introducing the corresponding symbols.

She writes on page 72:

'If you teach a child that abstract squiggles on the page (letters) are 'real', and that these squiggles 'have' arbitrary noises (sounds), she won't understand what you're talking about. By contrast, if you tell her that letters on the page stand

for specific sounds in her own speech, the process of matching letters to sounds will make sense.'

McGuinness concludes at one point: 'if what you've got is a sound code, you've got to teach it as a sound code'. Children like Kousuke (a real boy, but not his real name) have been trained to perceive print first as a meaning code, just like kanji, so he guesses at the word identity based on context and image memory. Teaching a sound code as a meaning code is like trying to play  $E=MC^2$  on the piano- firstly it can't be done, and secondly attempting it results in code dissonance. Code conflict in software results in a systems crash. In a student's brain, it results in reading failure, which is often disguised as a vague medical condition called 'dyslexia'. Perhaps the most controversial statement in the book is that there is no valid diagnosis or evidence for a specific brain disorder called 'dyslexia'. There is, however, ample evidence that poor reading instruction results in poor readers, and McGuinness dutifully examines and references it.

My new friend Kousuke needs what is called 'remedial reading training'. He needs to change his perception of English print so that he looks first for the phonic information conveyed, and as he reconstructs the sounds revealed by the print, is able to identify the words in the text, then consider the context of the passage, to finally comprehend the meaning of the message. This is precisely the reverse of what he does now: he is attempting to grasp the meaning of the passage first, and uses only partial phonic information to verify his guesses. As a result, he constantly corrects himself as he stumbles across a line of unfamiliar text. If this poor reading habit is not firmly established, such a change of initial perception is possible, although not easy.

Understanding that the alphabetic code is built on a sound-to-text sequence has profound implications that reach all the way to teaching English as a foreign language (EFL). The way the English alphabetic code functions does not change depending on the nationality of the fingers holding the page. There are of course unique challenges because of the different sound structures of the languages, but the direction of the code instruction should remain the same: from sound to print. This sequence applied to EFL requires the additional step of first establishing the ability to discriminate and produce the English speech sounds, which teachers in English speaking countries are fortunate that their first graders generally arrive with. Although the vocabulary for an EFL class curriculum would be more carefully selected, the general approach of reading instruction for either Tommy or Taro would remain the same.

As my Japanese students develop an understanding of spoken English, and the ability to produce and identify the unique English sounds, they can be introduced to the code, and can then discover its reliability and reversibility in actual practice, just like their peers overseas. Reading is a process of blending encoded sounds together to produce a familiar spoken word. Writing is a process of mentally segmenting a spoken word into its individual phonic components, and then encoding those phonemes with the corresponding text symbols. When these skills are taught in a systematic, structured way, children actively discover how to read and write, accurately and independently. It's a thrilling process that can empower the student for life, and transform the classroom experience.

When this book was first published in 1997, there wasn't even a name for such an approach. McGuinness simply called it 'the prototype' of ideal instruction. When she later wrote the more technical volume *Early Reading Instruction* (MIT Press) in 2004, she had a name: Linguistic Phonics, which is very similar to the method promoted as Synthetic Phonics in the UK. McGuinness has been a tireless researcher and prolific author, and has added over six volumes to the theoretical and practical understanding of how to teach literacy. *Why Our Children Can't Read* (now also available in paperback) remains in my mind as the best single resource to understand how to teach children to read and write.

This is not a teacher's manual- but for a creative teacher, it gives all the background and guidance necessary to develop a classroom literacy curriculum. The structure is actually quite simple, in fact, and she explains it clearly. There are about 43 English sounds to isolate and identify. An initial 'Basic Code' of about 100 graphemes (letter or letter groups) for those

sounds is introduced and learned. On that secure framework, further code symbols can be continuously attached, building a structure that gradually encompasses most of written English. (The Complete Code includes the Greek and Latin layers, and only requires an additional 136 encoding variations, which would probably not enter into children's EFL.) Writing based on phoneme and grapheme understanding (not copying words, but saying and encoding them) verifies the student's understanding as they advance through the stages. A sound-driven approach hangs the entire process on just those 43 sounds, keeping the instruction manageable and clear.

A teaching curriculum following the McGuinness prototype balances and coordinates the development in reading and writing. As Tommy is learning to read the digraphs /sh/ /ch/ and /th/, he would also be writing words like branch, shell, and math. Applied to EFL teaching, it becomes obvious that each skill (hearing and speaking, reading and writing) reinforces the others, and furthermore that coordinating and balancing them in classroom activities allows children of different interests and talents to keep interest in their English studies.

In a linguistic phonics curriculum, writing is done from inner sound awareness. Almost immediately, students can write words and sentences of selected vocabulary simply by utilizing their grasp of the code. This eliminates copying from the board or textbooks, and also eliminates spelling lessons. Most importantly, it reveals to the teacher at a glance what the student actually hears, and this becomes especially valuable in an EFL setting. If Taro looks at an image of a dog on a bed and writes 'The doks onsa bet', just having him clearly enunciate a correct description is usually enough to allow him to see his own mistakes and then make the needed corrections himself. In the process, he has improved his awareness of what he's saying, and how to write it. This will help him discriminate what he hears, and relate accurately to what he reads. If he hadn't written out those initial errors, his misunderstanding might never have been revealed. It's hard to overstate how valuable this is for both student and teacher.

Included in this volume are charts, guidelines, word lists and even tests that might not be useful in an EFL classroom. With the understanding gained from the analysis she carefully explains, all that a creative teacher really needs to get their students started reading and writing accurately is a blackboard and blank lined pieces of paper. Once the method is on the right path, the supporting materials can follow later.

Seeing a picture of a mouse drawn on the board, children will announce 'That's a mouse!'. Ask them for just the very first sound, and eventually they will all be going 'mmmm' with their lips pressed together and faces straining. As they continue producing that sound, draw the letter 'm' next to the mouse. Introducing the English graphemes in this sound-to-text sequence conveys the fundamental message without explanation- this symbol corresponds to the sound you are producing. (The common reverse approach, telling children 'see says kuh' is both illogical and misleading.) Later, announce a sound like 'ssssss' and have the children write it across their lined paper. Working from just the sounds, not 'letter names', students quickly understand how the alphabetic code works, and how it is used. Colorful picture flash cards (without text) and other carefully selected materials can add to this kind of activity, but they aren't essential. Starting on a clear phonic foundation is.

There are many giants in the history of literacy. Samuel Johnson and Noah Webster are respected names to many educators, and the name Diane McGuinness should be included among them. Her pioneering work and the insights she offers deserve to be considered by every literacy educator, and this book is the best place to begin becoming familiar with the scientific revolution in literacy teaching called linguistic phonics. I heartily encourage every teacher of English to read it.

With best wishes for your classes, Peter Warner.