Snakes&Ladders

The First Principle of Reading

by Peter Warner

Effective teaching begins with a clear understanding of the fundamental principles of the subject matter; for example, a person who did not understand addition would be unable to help students struggling to understand multiplication. In the same way, teaching (English) reading should begin with understanding the Alphabetic Principle.

The Roman alphabet was designed to represent the sounds of speech; alphabetic letters are a phonic code. Consider the English word for the Indo-Arabic number 10: it's written by the letters t-e-n, precisely because those three code symbols (graphemes) represent the three speech sounds (phonemes) in the spoken word 'ten'. Furthermore, those three code symbols are arranged carefully in a left to right sequence, so that when they are processed as phonic code from left to right, that processing produces the sound of the spoken word. The Alphabetic Principle is very simple: Letters are a phonic code of human speech sounds.

Every advanced code is taught directly and explicitly: music notation code is taught as music code, math numerals are taught as a math code, and computer code is taught explicitly as a computer code. A phonic code is a phonic code: just as the phonic code of hiragana is taught in Japanese literacy instruction, English alphabetic letters should be taught explicitly as a phonic code for English speech sounds. Teaching a sound-based code as a sound-based code is a remarkably simple process once the teacher himself understands this fundamental design and function of alphabetic print:

Teacher (T): What is this ? (showing a picture of a mouse)
Students (Ss): A mouse.

The first step of Linguistic Phonics: students are introduced to the Basic Level alphabetic code by anchor card images: they say the common noun ('tiger'), isolate and produce the initial sound (/ t /), then repeat the sound while looking at the letter on the reverse side of the card (t). This process introduces a symbol for the sound, which is the reverse of teaching 'the sound of the letter'.

T: Okay, what's the first sound in 'mouse' ?
S: Ahhh...(thinking) mmmm.
T: Yes, and here is the symbol for that sound: (showing the letter m).

When students understand the alphabetic letters in this way, as representations of individual phonemes, they can begin converting written alphabetic symbols into spoken sounds (de-coding), and then blending written symbols into spoken words (reading); they can also begin encoding spoken sounds and words into written letters (writing), with accuracy and confidence. Clear presentation of logical principles leads to clear understanding and effective lessons. There are several stages of logic and complexity in the English alphabetic code; introducing them carefully in a logical and practical manner allows the students to discover by experience that the code is both reliable and reversible. This is something that

Students practicing decoding and blending random Basic Code (1-to-1 mapping) patterns. Working with random (but 'legal') patterns allows students to focus simply on producing the sounds, which helps develop a phonic perception and response to alphabetic text. Working with consonant clusters is very challenging, and helpful for developing oral muscle ability.

even most teachers are not aware of.

Once Tommy (or Taro) has learned an initial set of basic 1-sound-to-1-symbol (1-to-1) code correspondences ('sssss' = s, 'nnnnn' = n), they can read with comprehension ('six cups on a big red bag') and also write with accuracy (it is a mop). (Writing on blank paper, not copying.) They can be guided to personal discovery and victory, reading and writing independently, simply by applying their growing understanding of the alphabetic phonic code. As their discovery and ability grows, so does their confidence and accomplishment, providing motivation to learn and use more and more of the code system.

Students who are actively learning and gaining ability are less likely to cause discipline problems. One remarkable aspect of providing clear systematic instruction of the alphabetic code is how well boys tend to respond once they realize that these strange letters are simply a code that can be used and solved, just like a puzzle. Children are desperate to make sense of their growing world, and respond eagerly when their lessons produce personal success instead of frustration.

Clear understanding of fundamental principles also leads to clear distinctions, which are just as valuable. Part of knowing what 'dog' is, is being able to identify what is 'not dog'. As teachers, understanding the Alphabetic Principle also helps us understand what is not the Alphabetic Principle, and therefore helps us avoid confusing and misleading our students.

Written words are not pictures of words, like some kanji are. Kanji are usually presented as complete units, and students strain to memorize each as completed stroke patterns. Since many kanji (□) are indeed logographs (pictures of spoken words), that's a logical teaching and learning approach.

Presenting alphabetic print (mountain) as a word picture, and training students to memorize it as a complete letter pattern for the spoken word 'mountain' ignores the Alphabetic Principle, and discourages Taro and Hanako from working with the alphabetic code as a phonic code. This leads to confusion with similar appearing words (mitten), and frustration as whole word memory capacity becomes overburdened. Even when some 'phonics' instruction is given elsewhere, whenever students are forced to deal with whole words that contain graphemes beyond their phonic understanding, their decoding effort is frustrated (and therefore discouraged), and they are encouraged to simply memorize the

entire pattern as a word. Presented with an abundance of whole words in print (as in the case of a story book), students generally develop a strategy of guessing at the printed word based on the first letter and story context. All of these are poor habits that do not build confidence; guessing is not understanding.

A careful look at almost every published beginning EFL curriculum quickly reveals that the Alphabetic Principle is ignored or treated as an after-thought. New vocabulary is introduced in full text without regard for its spelling patterns and code complexity (red, black, blue, orange) and gorgeous color pictures are shown alongside to encourage guessing. This is presenting printed words just as if they were logographic kanji, and forces the beginning student to look at them as if they were word pictures. In almost every published EFL curriculum, words are taught according to subject themes, without consideration of the beginning students' decoding ability: hat and blouse, bag and pencil, bus and unicycle. Such material interferes with a logical introduction of the alphabetic code, and prevents many students from gaining one.

Adding a separate 'phonics' activity workbook cannot compensate for the whole word guessing habits that are compelled by the main text. Mixing conflicting methodologies at the initial learning stages is not a 'balanced' approach; conflict breeds confusion. In actual application, the whole word guessing and memorizing habit is initially less demanding and therefore easily dominates, preventing a decoding effort from being the initial response. A child can memorize words and even sentences, but this image of success is only misleading both the student and teacher. Memorizing by first letter and overall visual image is not processing a phonic code.

Most teachers readily accept that spoken language in classroom lessons should be 'comprehensible' (within or almost all within spoken language understanding) for students to progress in understanding and learning. When we understand the Alphabetic Principle, it becomes equally apparent that the written language that students are asked to process should be 'decodable', that is, within the margins of their code instruction and understanding.

Of course teaching the alphabetic code in a logical and gradual curriculum requires more understanding and work by the teacher; it involves careful selection and design of materials, as well as careful arrangement of class activities. Even so, we should not be discouraged from the effort. Surprisingly, Japanese children actually

The first step in writing: calling out a phoneme ('/ k /'), modeling the Basic Code grapheme for that phoneme (c), then having the students practice writing that letter in their notebooks. This develops kinesthetic memory for the sound and its symbol, which assists student recall for later writing. This is like a penmanship lesson, but the letter names are not used, only the code phonemes.

have an advantage over their English-speaking cousins: their first experience with written text is with hiragana, which they learn as a pure phonic code. They can quickly develop an initial phonic perception and response to alphabetic text as well, if they are provided with explicit, logical and systematic instruction of the alphabetic code as a phonic code of English speech phonemes. It is not unusual to see second and third grade Japanese children reading and writing independently and accurately within twenty hours of their first English lessons. For effective lessons and comprehensible instruction, teaching reading should begin with understanding, and applying, the Alphabetic Principle.

Best wishes for your classes, Peter Warner.

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