

# The Case for a Sensible Alphabet

Kenneth C. Anderson

“The ease of teaching reading and of learning to read a language is dependent upon the degree of sound-symbol correspondence.”<sup>1</sup>

## FACT:

A child learns to read by matching his speech sounds to symbol that represent them.

## EXAMPLES:

Italian and Turkish students have an alphabet with 27 letter combinations and a total of 27 sounds used in their speech, for a 100% correspondence.

The German language has 38 letter combinations and 36 sounds, for a sound-symbol correspondence of nearly 95%.

The Russian language has 36 letter combinations and 34 sounds, for a sound-symbol correspondence of 94%.

The English language has 379 letter combinations and uses 40 sounds in speech. English sound-symbol correspondence is a dismal 10%.

In Italy, Turkey, Germany and Russia children learn to read in three months. They can write any word they can say. There is no need for spelling classes.

Italians, Turks, Spaniards, Germans—indeed, students in some 70 other countries with a phonemic alphabet—learn to read and write their mother tongue in three months or less. They simply start with a sensible alphabet..

## FACT:

In more than 70 countries, where there is one symbol for each spoken sound, a child learns *in three months or less* to read and write any word he can say.

In English-speaking countries a typical child knows 10,000 words or more when he enters first grade. It takes him a year to read and write 250 of those words—less than 3% of his vocabulary. He may be 10 to 12 years old before his reading ability comes close to his speech capacity.<sup>2</sup> He will probably never learn to spell his mother tongue correctly. That represents a senseless alphabet—indeed, by definition no alphabet at all.

Honestly, after all your years of study, can you spell correctly everything you write?

---

<sup>1</sup> Alan R. Burns, “Learning to Read: The Potential of an Isomorphic Alphabet,” in *Elementary English*, September, 1973, p. 911.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 912.

FACT:

“English departs from the alphabetic principle.”<sup>1</sup>

Does that statement bring comfort to you, coming as it does from a specialist in remedial reading and special education? What did Mr. Burns mean by this statement? Let’s take just two examples from our English speech. See if they help you to understand why a child might be confused by such lunacy as the following.

In English one symbol (one to three letters) can represent many different sounds. For example, here are six ways to pronounce the “ea” letter combination: break, head, seat, earth, fear, heart. Most children entering first grade in the year 2007 will include all of these words in his spoken vocabulary. But it will take him several years to learn how to read them; he may never learn to spell some of them correctly. This is one example; there are many others. All are confusing and cause depression in a child struggling to read.

In English one phoneme (an element of speech) may be spelled many different ways. Here are 15 different ways to spell the single sound “I” in English: cry, high, die, buy, island, eye, aisle, kayak, stein, height, geyser, find, ice (i\_e), coyote, type (y\_e). Again, most of these words will be in the child’s spoken arsenal upon entering first grade. He may *never* learn to spell some of them correctly. This is just one of many possible such examples. They all confuse and depress a child struggling to read.

FACT:

Blockades to reading success are eliminated by achieving a one-to-one (“isomorphic”) relationship between sounds and symbols in the alphabet.

An isomorphic alphabet has one sound for each symbol and one symbol for each sound.

How do we achieve this? First, consonants that are always used in predictable ways should be retained. These include B, D, F, G, H, L, M, N, P, R, T, V and W. Of the 40 sounds we make, these 13 would already be familiar when the child moves to traditional spelling. Each of these letters are pronounced the same way more than 92 percent of the time.

Second, we follow the same consistency rule for vowels. Even though we have only five letters to represent 16 sounds, we select the sounds most consistently matched to the five familiar letters. When A, E, I, O and U occur in traditional spelling, they represent consistent sounds ranging from 72 percent to 26 percent of the time. We attach the five most consistent phonemes to the five vowels we already have in our alphabet.

Including the 13 consonants and 5 vowels that are retained from traditional English letters, 18 letters remain the same and are used in predictable ways. The other 11 vowel sounds must have new symbols to represent them in order to have only one sound per symbol and one symbol per sound.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p 911.

To be successful as a teaching resource, this single sound-symbol alphabet must satisfy two conditions.

First, there must be a one-to-one correspondence between each sound and the symbol that represents it in print.

Second, the symbol chosen must retain all it can of whatever is consistent in the traditional alphabet. We need this because children must abandon the teaching alphabet for the working alphabet. The transition is easy if they can recognize basic vowel shapes.

Many phonemic alphabets have been proposed for English. Benjamin Franklin created a 40-character font for a phonemic English alphabet. George Bernard Shaw left provisions in his will to create a 40-character “Shavian” alphabet. Sir John Pitman devised a phonemic teaching alphabet called the Initial Teaching Alphabet (ITA). John R. Malone devised a teaching alphabet called Unifon. Only Unifon managed to meet both the conditions mentioned above, and more.

**FACT:**

In order to make the transition to traditional spelling easier Unifon retains all symbols that already have a high degree of consistency in English.

In test projects, children who started with Unifon and ITA learned the code rapidly, while the alphabets Franklin and Shaw proposed never got off the ground. Unifon was, in fact, universally successful where it was used. ITA was less successful because it relied too heavily on the teaching alphabet and did not stress transition soon enough. As a result, children could read quite well in ITA, but had great difficulty making the transition to traditional spelling. In the end, ITA students could not read standard English any better than their peers after several years of instruction.

The Unifon approach was unique in many respects, and its success as a learning accelerator was a result of all the design elements working together. Burns noted, in his 1973 article, that children who start with an isomorphic alphabet like Unifon can achieve code literacy in about 120 days.<sup>1</sup> By then they can read and write any word they can say, without spelling lessons, since each word is spelled exactly as it sounds.

**FACT:**

Unifon, like any isomorphic alphabet, is a dictionary key. It shows you how to pronounce a word in the dictionary.

A standard dictionary key for English could be used to teach reading and writing at the early stages except that children would have trouble drawing the letters. That is a third condition met by John R. Malone with his design of Unifon. It is easy for children to learn how to draw the symbols. Thus it is easy for them to learn to write what they can say. The other phonemic alphabets fall short in this regard.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 916.

A fourth condition is met by all isomorphic alphabets. Because every word is spelled as it sounds, there is no need for spelling lessons. Think of all the time now spent learning to spell that could be used instead to learn something important. Spelling, after all, is largely a wasted effort. In spite of years of study, few people ever learn to spell English properly. One child each year is a champion speller—the rest of us cannot spell our own mother tongue accurately.

A fifth condition—unexpected, but perhaps the most important in the long run—was met by both Unifon and ITA. Burns wrote, “...The rapid acquisition of the phonemic code may have a great motivational impact on the learner.”<sup>1</sup> This was borne out in the projects, where teachers credited Unifon for giving their students early success, with a corresponding high degree of self-confidence. A few teachers confessed that they were even thinking about dropping out of the educational field until they began teaching Unifon.

Look around at your children. Are they depressed? Are they distracted? Are they afraid of going to school? Are you often frustrated or depressed about the failures of the educational system to meet your expectations? You are not alone.

Schools today face many problems that stem from lack of motivation on the part of both their teachers and their students. High dropout rates, high suicide rates, rampant drug culture, terrorism in the school systems, unethical (and illegal) teacher-student relationships, and many other obstacles to learning prevail and grow worse. Indeed, it seems that our educational system is out of control. Yet the federal government has declared that it is illegal for your child not to attend school!

In spite of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) nothing has really changed for the better. Foundations provide millions of dollars to market the latest commercial applications. School systems in a panic spend exorbitant amounts of money to acquire what they are told will help their students achieve, yet an uncertain status quo is generally the best result.

Our research indicates a consistently different scenario where Unifon was used to introduce children to reading and writing. From 1960 through the mid-1980s, first graders who started reading with Unifon gained an almost immediate sense of achievement, of accomplishment, of success. In so doing, an exciting world was opened to them in ways no other discipline could achieve. Today we can look back on the achievements of schools where Unifon was taught in first grade. Many Unifon students graduated from high school two years early.

The sources for information about Unifon projects have generally been teachers or documentation rather than students. To be honest, it is difficult to find Unifon students because most of them do not have vivid memories of their first three months of school, much less know the name of the special alphabet code they learned at that time. Those we have located include a psychiatrist, a jewelry designer, a city planner and two teachers.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 918.

They all speak highly of their experience with Unifon; a few have even saved the Unifon books and lessons they were given.

There is nearly a 70 percent overlap of letters between Unifon and our standard 26 letters, giving Unifon a decided edge when it comes to making the transition to what the children jokingly regard as “the old folks’ spelling.” Even the new characters bear some resemblance to their traditional counterparts. Here is a chart to illustrate the correspondence and consistency found in Unifon.

single sound consonants	B, D, F, H, L, M, N, P, R, T, V, W, Y, Z	= 14
	S and J = soft only. K and G = hard only	= 4
short vowels	A, E, I, O, U	= 5
long vowels	Δ, E, ±, Q, U	= 5
other vowels	Λ <u>all</u> R <u>her</u> O <u>book</u>	
	⊙ <u>out</u> ⊙ <u>boy</u> U <u>spoon</u>	= 6
special sounds	Š = sh    Ç = ch    Σ = zh	
	∅ = ng    H = <u>thin</u> ĩ = <u>then</u>	= 6
		<hr/> = 40

Please note that all the Unifon vowels have a consistent relationship with something familiar, making it easier for a child to transfer from Unifon to standard English. All three A sounds have a tent-like appearance. The three E sounds each have three horizontal lines. Five O sounds are all round and three U sounds have a curved bottom. These consistent shapes help children make the transition to standard spelling.

To read and write Unifon, a child only needs to master 40 letters. Even in standard English, because many letters appear somewhat different in upper and lower case, the child must learn to draw 43 unique shapes. Unifon has only upper case. (There is a lower case Unifon, simply a smaller version of the some letters. It was not functional because children do not stay with Unifon long enough to make it useful.)

Without starting in Unifon, in order to master the traditional English spelling a child is required to understand some 379 different letter combinations for our 40 basic sounds, and more than 3,000 sound-symbol pairs. 40 consistent symbols or 3,000 combinations—which do you think is easier to master?

Burns compared learning conventional English to learning to understand music symbols or numbers. Both our music and numeric notation is consistent. If we had not mastered Arabic numerals, we would be multiplying Roman numbers like XVII by CMI. Can you do that? Of course not. Yet we insist on trying to read and write using an alphabet with the same senseless code barriers. Worse, we force our children to struggle with it.

The reason children can transfer easily to traditional spelling after a short time with Unifon can be illustrated by looking at a set of common words with the vowels missing. The first set will be written in standard English; the second set in Unifon. The vowels are

replaced in both by an underline. Note that when the vowels are missing the sample words are spelled essentially alike. Thus the important part of the code often remains intact when the transition takes place.

English Word	Consonants in TradSpel	Consonants in Unifon
heart	H _ _ R T	H _ R T
make	M _ K _	M _ K
lemon	L _ M _ N	L _ M _ N
sorted	S _ R T _ D	S _ R T _ D
provide	P R _ V _ D _	P R _ V _ D

One problem that was foreseen by ITA and Unifon skeptics occurred when a student moved to a new school before he made the transition to standard spelling. As it turned out, parents who moved before the transition to the standard alphabet did report that their children had problems making the transfer.

ITA students stayed with that alphabet for several years of elementary school before they made the transition. Time hindered the transition from ITA to standard English in two ways. First, they stayed with the alphabet too long. Second, because students worked with ITA for several years, there was greater length of time when a child could move to a non-ITA school.

By way of comparison, the Unifon alphabet was only used for three months. In addition, when students learned Unifon, they were given a “code breaker” book. If their parents moved, they could take the book with them to help make the transition. Unifon projects generally required parents to participate, so they could help the child transfer reading skills if they needed to move from a Unifon school. Moving from a traditional class to a Unifon class simply was not done because the new students were put in traditional classes rather than be exposed to Unifon.

While Unifon managed to minimize the trauma when a student moved away, it was not a 100 percent solution. There were, however, fewer such problems with Unifon than with ITA. These two were the only isomorphic alphabets tested in school systems.

Opponents of Unifon and ITA suggested that a second negative factor was the cost of the teaching materials. It is true that the early Unifon and ITA experience required massive amounts of funding for each project—millions of dollars paid for the resources used in the test projects in these two alphabets. Because ITA resources were prepared for several years, their cost was much higher. Western Publishing Company alone invested \$1.5 million to print Unifon textbooks for first graders.

Currently, Unifon materials are freely available to use in any classroom setting, and more are being introduced as time permits. The cost to implement Unifon in a classroom is negligible—paper to copy books, flash cards and other resources. Many of the books and

resources are free to download. There are four fonts, free for anyone who wants to type in Unifon, along with a Unifon keyboard layout you can tape near the keyboard. There is an on-line converter for short stories or lessons you create. We can convert books of any length as long as we have permission from the copyright owner. And there are people at [www.unifon.org](http://www.unifon.org) who will work to provide whatever resources you may need in the future, at your request.

Another intentional design element is the fact that Unifon only appears in upper case. Every child learns early that important things are written in big letters. Signs, headlines on TV or in the newspapers, banners—all use primarily upper case lettering.

In the Sunday comics and in all comic books the text balloons are printed in upper case lettering. One of the most brilliant teaching aids in the Unifon projects was a serendipitous discovery. After learning Unifon, a child one day picked up the Sunday comics and was excited to realize he could read them. His teacher adopted this means of helping children in her class make the transfer to standard spelling in a fun way. For subsequent Unifon projects, teachers simply placed Sunday comics on a stack along with other reading material. When a child discovered for himself that he could read, the teacher became simply a coach.

During the Unifon process, faster students will grasp the concept within a couple of weeks. A few will understand and use the alphabet in a day or two. The slower students will require most of the three months to be able to read and write with confidence, but most—about 90%—will achieve amazing results in a short period of time. For all the Unifon projects, the faster students were encouraged to help the slower ones.

**FACT:**

Unifon is easy to learn and easy to teach. There is no acceptable excuse to avoid using it.

The first Unifon student was John's son, Will Malone, at age five. When he complained to his father that he had been going to school—kindergarten—for weeks without learning how to read, John taught him to read Unifon. The second teacher was also Will Malone, at age five—he taught the rest of his kindergarten class his “secret code.”

There is no excuse for avoiding Unifon. Anyone can learn it—even teachers. Anyone can teach it—even children.

There is every reason to learn and use Unifon in our school systems. Documentation exists to prove that Unifon has been universally effective as a learning accelerator. Especially in today's hostile educational environment, we need something to restore the fun and excitement of learning.

In closing, let us review some basic facts.

**FACT:**

A child learns to read by matching his speech sounds to symbol that represent them.

FACT:

In more than 70 countries, where there is one symbol for each spoken sound, a child learns *in three months or less* to read and write any word he can say.

FACT:

“English departs from the alphabetic principle.”

FACT:

Blockades to reading success are eliminated by achieving a one-to-one (“isomorphic”) relationship between sounds and symbols in the alphabet.

FACT:

In order to make the transition to traditional spelling easier we must keep all symbols that already have a high degree of consistency in English.

FACT:

Unifon, like any isomorphic alphabet, is a dictionary key. It shows you how to pronounce a word in the dictionary.

FACT:

Unifon is easy to learn and easy to teach. There is no acceptable excuse to avoid using it.