



We are often asked about children's difficulty in learning to read. Although English is an extremely simple language with respect to its syntax (and therefore very easy to learn), it is a very difficult language to learn to read for the very simple reason that there are far fewer letters (26) than there are phonemes (40+!). In some languages (e.g., Serbo-Croatian), there is one letter for each sound (almost, anyway). This means that if a child knows the alphabet, he can read! Not so in English. About 20 years ago I came across this brilliant poem in Paris. I think it nicely illustrates that English has either far too few letters or far too many phonemes!

ENGLISH IS TOUGH STUFF

Multi-national personnel at N. A. T. O. Headquarters, near Paris found English an easy language until they tried to pronounce it. To help them discard an array of accents, the verses below were devised. After trying them, a Frenchman said he'd prefer six months of hard labor to reading six lines aloud. Try them yourself.

Dearest creature in Creation,

Study English pronunciation;

I will teach you in my verses

Sounds like corpse, corps, horse and worse.

I will keep you, Susy, busy,

Make your head with heat grow dizzy;

Tear in eye, your dress will tear,

So shall I!! Oh, hear my prayer,

Just compare heart, beard, and heard,

Dies and diet, lord and word,

Sword and sward, retain and Britain

(Mind the latter, how it's written).

Now I surely will not plague you

With such words as vague and ague,

But be careful how you speak,

Say break, steak, bleak, and streak,

Cloven, oven; how and low.

Script, receipt; shoe, poem, toe,

Hear me say, devoid of trickery,

Daughter, laughter, and Terpsichore

Typhoid, measles, topsails, aisles,

Exiles, similes, reviles;

Scholar, vicar, cigar

Solar, mica, war and far;

One, anemone; Balmoral,

Kitchen, lichen, laundry, laurel;

Gertrude, German, wind and mind:

Scene, Melpomene, mankind,

Billet does not sound like ballet,

Bouquet, wallet, mallet, chalet,

Blood and flood are not like food,

Nor is mould like should and would.

Viscous, viscount,; load and broad;

Toward, to forward, to reward,

And your pronunciations OK,

When you correctly say croquet.

Rounded, wound; grieve and sleeve,

Friend and fiend; alive and live;

Liberty, library,; heave and heaven;

Rachel, ache; mustache, eleven;

We say hallowed but allowed,

People, leopard; towed but vowed.

Mark the difference moreover,

Between mover, plover, Dover;

Leeches, breeches; wise, precise,

Chalice, but police and lice;

Camel, constable, unstable,

Principle, disciple, label;

Petal, penal, and canal,

Wait, surprise, plait, promise, pal;

Worm and storm; chaise, chaos, chair,

Senator spectator, mayor;

Ivy privy; famous, clamor;

And enamour rhymes with "hammer";

River, rival, tomb, bomb, comb,

Doll and roll and some and home;

Stranger does not rhyme with anger,

Neither does devour with clangour;

Soul but foul, and gaunt but aunt,

Font, front, wont; want, grand and grant;

Shoes, goes, does; now first say finger,

And then: singer, ginger, linger;

Real, zeal, mauve, gauze and gauge,

Marriage, foliage, mirage, age.

Query does not rhyme with very,

Nor does fury sound like bury,

Dost, lost, post and doth, cloth, loth,

Job, job, bosom, oath:

Though the difference seems little,

We say actual but victual;

Refer does not rhyme with "deaf",

Foeffer does, and zephyr, heifer,

Dull, bull; and gauge, ate, late,

Mint, pint; senate and sedate.

Scenic, Arabic, pacific,

Science, conscience, scientific;

Tour but our and succour, four,

Gas and alas and Arkansas!

Sea, guinea, idea, area,

Psalm, Maria, but malaria;

Youth, south, southern, cleanse and clean.

Doctrine, turpentine, marine;

Compare alien with Italian,

Dandelion and battalion;

Sally with ally; yea, ye,

Eye, I, aye, whey, key, quay!

Say aver but ever, fever,

Neither, leisure, skein, deceiver;

Heron, granary, canary,

Crevice and device and eyrie;

Face but preface, but efface,

Phlegm, phlegmatic; ass, glass, bass;

Barge, but target; gin, give, verging,

Ought, out, joust and scour, but scourging,

Ear but earn and wear and tear,

Do not rhyme with "here" but "ere";

Seven is right bus so is even,

Hyphen, roughen, nephew, Stephen;

Monkey, donkey, clerk and jerk,

Asp, grasp, wasp; and cork and work;

Pronunciation--think of psyche!

Is a paling stout and spiky?

Won't it make you lose your wits,

Writing "groats" and saying "grits";

It's a dark abyss or tunnel,

Strewn with stones, like rowlock, gunwale;

Islington, and Isle of Wight,

Housewife, verdict, and indict!

Finally, which rhymes with "enough",

Though, through, plough, cough or tough?

Hiccough has the sound of "cup"

My advice is: GIVE IT UP!!!

- February 5, 1972

(edited and revised, 2/91; S. Wagner)