

Can Teaching English Like Spanish Close the

Achievement Gap?

By Zachary Silverzweig

(1) If you have even a passing knowledge of Spanish, you know the *ns* in *montaña* are different. You can see it. But English isn't like that. The *as* in *car* and *care* and *race* look the same, but sound different. But what if we fix that? Several schools in the US are trying a new approach to teaching reading that directly addresses the biggest challenge of learning to read English—English itself.

(2) Many a third-grade English teacher will have a mug on their desk that reads "I before E except after C, unless it's my feisty neighbor Keith who lifts weights. Weird." That last word sums it up nicely. English, as a language, is truly weird. The impact is devastating.

(3) English stands alone as the hardest major language to learn to read. The relationship between letters and sounds is just too inconsistent. There are too many exceptions. Every rule can be broken and is broken, often, by the most common words.

(4) This is science. Languages have innate characteristics, and graphed on any scale, English stands alone. Dr. David Share, one of the most cited authors in the science of reading and cross-linguistic research, calls it an "outlier" orthography. It's so different, and in such wide use, that it wildly distorts the very understanding of how the other 95% of humanity learns to read. English's complexity drags scholars into an all-out war over how to teach it. It's an important war, but overall progress against the real enemy is at a stalemate: literacy scores in the US in the last 30 years have not improved. In 2019, before the pandemic and despite all the advances we have made, they declined.

(5) This is a uniquely English problem.

(6) Not a single empirical study has found that English is learned faster and more easily than any other alphabetic language. We spend far more to teach it, with worse results. For English readers in first grade, studies consistently show pseudo-word reading error rates of 40–80%. Corresponding studies in Finnish, Turkish, Italian, Greek, German, Dutch, and Portuguese samples show error rates below 25%.

(7)In the classroom, the conclusion couldn't be more obvious. A student that spends equal time learning to read English and Spanish will universally achieve faster oral reading proficiency in Spanish. Emma Garcia, a former dual language teacher from Virginia, sums it up: "I had countless hours of instruction and guidance on how to teach my kids to read in English. I had just about none in Spanish, but all of my students could sound out words more easily and accurately in Spanish. It came naturally to them. It's really easy to teach. It is just a much easier language."

(8)Even more telling: if you take an L1 English speaker (whose first language is English) and introduce them to L2 Hebrew, *L2 reading accuracy will be higher in first grade than L1 reading accuracy in English in fourth grade*. To state it simply, an average American kid in a dual language program is more likely to read the foreign language out loud with better accuracy in a single year of instruction than they can English, their native language, after four years of schooling.

(9)This is all the more remarkable because dual language studies control for socioeconomics. The systemic challenges of low-income communities don't impact the findings above, since the same exact student is learning both their L1 and L2 language.

(10)It is easy to understand that languages like Spanish are easier to learn. But what about languages without alphabets? What about Mandarin Chinese?

(11)English is not alone in having a complex relationship between the written and spoken word. Chinese and the related orthographies of Asia are graphic. Chinese characters are used to represent a word or part of a word. If a student doesn't know a particular character, they can't read that word aloud. There is no phonetic information the reader can draw on. They are stuck.

(12)In 1958, this problem was fixed. Zhou Youguang invented Pinyin, a romanized alphabet for "spelling" Chinese words. This has completely transformed how billions of students, native and foreign, have learned Chinese. Pinyin includes six simple vowels, 29 compound vowels, 23 consonants, and the four tones. It's a comprehensive, alternate way to write words so they can be sounded out and taught to every single language learner, kid or adult. It is structured, systematic, regular, and, as a result, extremely powerful. Armed with this arsenal, a student can attack and successfully sound out every word they see.

(13)Why does this matter? In Spanish (which is regular) or in Chinese languages (which have Pinyin as a support), the language, with a bit of practice

blending, enables every single word to be decoded. If a word is already known by the student, the decoded word will match it. If the word is not in their vocabulary, the student can be confident in their pronunciation of the new word and perhaps learn the meaning from the context.

(14) Contrast this to English. Virtually any passage of English will include numerous nondecodable words. Knowing simple letter sounds does not suffice. “The dog was not afraid” would be sounded out “T-h-eh d-ah-g w-ah-ss n-ah-t ae-f-r-aeih-d.” When students attempt to decode in English, the sounds can’t be easily mapped to the correct word, even if this word is known to them aurally. If the word is not in their vocabulary, the likelihood of correct pronunciation on first attempt by the novice reader is minuscule. This is the heart of what makes English so hard to teach and so hard to learn.

(15) The success of Pinyin and these ideas on writing systems sparked similar approaches across the world, including for English. One of the most important efforts here was the Initial Teaching Alphabet (i.t.a.). Similar to Pinyin, the i.t.a. created a simplified, regular teaching alphabet and used this alphabet to write words so that they were easy to read. It accepted the difficulty of English spelling and met the challenge. And the results were extremely promising.

(16) Under timed tests, students were reading 336% more words with the i.t.a. With a few years of study, students were reading books three grade levels higher than the non-i.t.a. control groups. The system was so successful it was deployed for 70,000 students across the US.

(17) Whether looking at the rates of progress for kids learning Spanish, examining the mechanisms used to learn Chinese, or resurfacing early English experiments with alternate orthography, a critical maxim of language learning becomes clear—how a language is written is the primary factor to how easily we can learn to read it.

(18) But the i.t.a. ultimately failed. There was a problem. It didn’t transfer.

(19) Kids who learned to read with the i.t.a. could read in that system extremely well, but when it came to transition back to “regular” reading, the results didn’t stick. The i.t.a. was too different from standard English. The approach of using a simplified, regular alphabet was correct, but the particular implementation failed because it didn’t prepare students for success with English as it is currently written.

(20) Ultimately, when pressed, English readers have chosen to keep things as they are. Among all the systemic challenges that face our country, none seems

more obvious than this. The English-reading world, dominated by those with the education and resources to master such a challenging language, has chosen to preserve etymology and the status quo at the direct expense of making the language easier to learn.

**Kingsborough Learning Center
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**“Teaching English Like Spanish” Article Reading Comprehension
Level 3 Implication/Inference, Evaluation, and Cross-Textual Connections Questions**

Directions: After reading carefully the “Teaching English Like Spanish” article by Zachary Silverzweig, answer, in complete sentences, the following five questions below. The first two focus on implications/inferences throughout the article, the next two focus on text evaluation, and the last one- on cross textual connections:

A. Implications/Inferences

- 1. When the author states that often there is little connection between letters and sounds in English (using car, care and race as examples), what does he imply about the challenges a Spanish-speaking student might face when learning English?**

- 2. Based on the author’s overall argument, what types of solutions to the challenges of teaching English would he support, given that the I.T.A. system did not work? What features of teaching English can we infer he would emphasize if he were a policy maker?**

B. Text Evaluation

- 1. What effect does the author’s comparison of I.T.A. to Pinyin have on the reader? How does this comparison relate to the author’s discussion of the ultimate failure of the I.T.A. as a way of teaching students to read?**

- 2. How do the seemingly contradictory statements about the role of the written word in a language made in paragraph twenty-two (“spelling is set in stone” and “Stones erode over time”) strengthen or weaken the argument that it is impossible to teach English like a science?**

C. Cross-Textual Connections

- 1. Throughout the article, the author discusses and compares other languages in addition to English. Think of any text you have had to read in a foreign language (or, in English) and share your experience with it. What particular words did you find difficult to de-code and why? What strategies did you use to grasp their pronunciation? Finally, how does your experience relate to the author’s analysis of the problems with learning to read English?**