

Wuns upon a tiem

Many school children are learning to read in phonetic alphabets, the value of which are in doubt.

by Patricia McBroom

The English language has never offered a very good fit between its written and spoken forms. For reasons reaching into the misty past, English is burdened with such spelling vagaries as silo, sight, psychology, cyclone, cider—all for a single sound. Then there are true, do, lou, brew, through, zoo and shoe. On the other hand, a single spelling stands for cough, furlough, ought, plough and thorough.

One can only sympathize with youngsters learning to read and write.

To give them more concrete help, educators have periodically come up with new alphabets for use in the early grades as an introduction to English.

Such "extended" alphabets have been around for at least a century. They were tried and discarded in New England in the 1850's, then again in the '70's. Now the 1960's have seen a revival.

Of the several modified alphabets in existence, the 44-letter Initial Teaching Alphabet is by far the most widespread and its impact seems to be growing—a circumstance that is distressing some educators who point out that the evidence fails to establish any advantage for ITA, as it is called.

Developed by an Englishman, Sir James Pitman (his grandfather Sir Isaac developed shorthand as well as the first ITA-like alphabet) ITA retains 24 Roman letters and adds 20 new ones, thus providing a separate symbol for each supposedly distinct sound in English. The result is phonetic spelling: wuns for once, siks for six and wimen for women. Many of the new symbols are diphthongs, giving ITA script a slightly archaic appearance (see cover). First-graders using the system must have all their materials in ITA, not just reading texts, since they are not usually introduced to traditional written English until the second grade.

Though the system sounds cumbersome, ITA has generated considerable enthusiasm and at first blush does appear to make better readers.

But a Johns Hopkins University education professor, Dr. William B. Gillooly, who has been evaluating the ITA studies, thinks otherwise. Not only has no "carefully designed study ever supported the claims" for ITA, he says, but "ITA-taught children have been shown to be inferior spellers, at least at the end of the first grade."

Perhaps more important, there has been no careful study of the possible

emotional side-effects as children switch from ITA to the traditional alphabet.

Nevertheless, ITA is being accepted in an increasing number of school districts throughout the country. Last September, 110,000 first graders began with ITA—roughly three percent of all U.S. first graders. In New York State, 20 percent of the schools are using ITA "in one fashion or another." And by next September, Dr. Albert J. Mazurkiewicz of Newark State College estimates the number of children using ITA will double nationally.

According to the usual pattern, a district tries ITA experimentally in two classes, then institutes it system-wide, beginning with one-third of the schools, two-thirds and finally all. No district he knows of has dropped the program, says Dr. Mazurkiewicz, who has been a leader in the U.S. ITA movement since it was introduced here in 1963.

Enhancing the educational drive is private industry. Currently 83 commercial organizations are involved in producing, selling or distributing ITA ma-

ITA's effectiveness, supported by the U.S. Office of Education, failed to produce a shred of evidence that ITA is superior to the traditional alphabet in teaching children to read and write.

One characteristic of new alphabets, which perhaps explains some of the enthusiasm for ITA, is their novelty effect. When children know they are part of an experiment, receive special attention and visits, they learn quicker. Naturally, the ITA-taught children compare favorably to those in less exciting, normal classrooms.

But, giving the same attention to a class reading with traditional English will produce the same good results, as shown by a recent evaluation study of ITA, says Dr. Gillooly.

Echoing his criticism is Dr. Arthur Gates, reading authority and member of the elite National Academy of Education. "The expanded alphabet is artificial, cumbersome, expensive (because of the cost of additional printed material) and often perplexing. . . . It is unsuitable to the many children who can

One day chicken-licken went to the woods for food.	wun dæ ʧicken-licken went tɔ ðe wudz fɔ fʊd.
While she was there an acorn fell on her poor little head, "O! O!" said chicken-licken.	whiel ðhee wɔz ðær an æcorn fell on her pʊər littl hed. "œ! œ!" sed ʧicken-licken.
"The sky fell on my head. I must go and tell the king."	"ðhe skie fell on mie hed. ie must gœ and tell ðe kiŋ."

terial, and some 700 ITA books or titles are now available. Remington Rand and Imperial have both put out ITA typewriters, while IBM offers an ITA ball with its new Selectric machine.

Viewing these developments with some alarm, Dr. Gillooly says the optimistic belief that ITA is a boon to young readers is not, in his opinion, justified. He says a rash of popular articles held out hope and promise for ITA about two years ago, but they were written before the evidence was in.

The schools and teachers using ITA are above reproach; some are the best in the field and their enthusiasm is sincere, Dr. Gillooly emphasizes. But he notes that at least six investigations into

learn to read easily without it," he states in a new National Education Association pamphlet on reading. ITA is justified only if it proves clearly superior to other methods, says Dr. Gates. In his opinion, linguistics research offers more promise in handling reading problems.

Extended alphabets were widely used with no great enthusiasm between 1850 and 1925, then petered out, Dr. Gates says. Though no explanation for dropping them was ever given, one old-time supervisor from the last century left a clue. A child sees enough novelty in school, Samuel Eliot of Boston wrote, without a strange new alphabet where unfamiliar characters "stare at him out of nearly every line."