

The Day They Changed the Alphabet by Akio Inoue Edited by Kenneth C. Anderson [In 1974, Unifon was featured in this short article from the March issue of a Japanese publication called The Study of Current English. The following is a rough translation (from Japanese to English) of that article. Errors and inaccuracies remain, though they are few, to show that our language confuses foreigners, as well as natives.] On November, 1973, CBS TV channel of Chicago aired a one hour special program titled "The Day They Changed the Alphabet." The program talked about the origin of history of English and explained why English has become complicated and irrational. An [f] sound (as is shock), for example, has 13 different spellings, concluding that English is easy to speak but not easy to read or write. In usual English conversation there are 40 sounds, however, there are only 26 letters in the alphabet. This is the fundamental problem. John Malone noticed this problem and decided to find a way to solve it. He is a newsprint specialist and technical consultant of printing processor. Malone says, "When my son became a first grader, he had a tendency of spelling English words as they were pronounced. This made me think." He also says, "The English spellings are so complicated that even the computer cannot read them." The result is a new phonetic alphabet, which Malone calls "Unifon." The Unifon consists of 16 vowels and 24 consonants, totaling 40 symbols. In the experiments of Unifon method, Dr. Margaret Rat[z?], a reading specialist, was chosen as a leader of the experiments. Under Dr. Ratz, Unifon system was applied to the English Education system at some of the grade schools in Hammond, Indiana. This new method has been showing favorite results. The teacher training has been partially completed and the experimental classes are showing remarkable progress in reading. When the new school year began, games were played for about one month and a half. The games are made in such a way as Unifon symbols and their sounds are simultaneously taught. In some games, the children put together some Unifon symbols that they have already learned, and try to pronounce them. When the children have sufficiently accustomed to the Unifon alphabets, they are taught Unifon spellings, which are appended with traditional English spellings. The following is the summary of opinions that were expressed by the eight teachers who have participated in this new teaching method. 1. I have never seen such enthusiastic children, who enjoyed and gained confidence, as this new experimental class in my ten years of teaching career. 2. The students showed an unusually amount of interest in writing. 3. Now (as of the third month of the first grade) the children can write all the words that they can say. 4. The children have satisfaction with what they have accomplished since they can read and write with ease. The application of Unifon system reminds me of the Japanese disputes that fiercely fought over whether the Hepbourn system, in which English alphabets are used as phonetic symbols, should replace the traditional Japanese writing (in characters and letters). The merits and demerits appear to be the ones of Unifon system. But, since Unifon makes it easier for the American children to read and write English (as easy as speaking English), and thus drastically reduces the burden off the children in their studies, the Japanese students, who are generally weak in hearing and writing, might be benefited by Unifon, especially in the English education for the beginners. The possibilities of benefits of Unifon and its inherent problems, which cannot be discussed here for the lack of space, should be left to the imaginations of the readers.