

Endeavouring to learn Morse*

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During the Second World War, my (late) father served in Burma (now known as Myanmar) as a member of ‘the Forgotten Fourteenth’ army. He was a wireless operator in a tank corps and had to learn to become proficient in sending and receiving Morse code because radio voice communication frequently became tricky or impossible. The wireless signals of the dots and dashes of Morse code were apparently more reliable in penetrating thick jungle areas. (Apparently, they also overlaid a second code to confuse any listening enemy by sending apparent nonsense such as “I have lost a shoe” instead of referring to a dislocated tank track.)

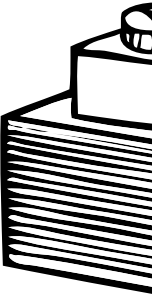
I remember him telling me that after a while, and a great deal of training and experience, the messages in Morse began to sound, to him, “like music”, as familiar strings/sequences of dots and dashes, coding frequently used words, began to be heard by him as wholes. This is not surprising, in a way, because my dad had a very good, if untaught, ear for music. He taught himself to play ‘pub piano’. The only drawback, as I subsequently found when I tried to play along with him on guitar, was that he played everything in F#, mainly using all the black keys. Thank goodness for capos! But I digress ...

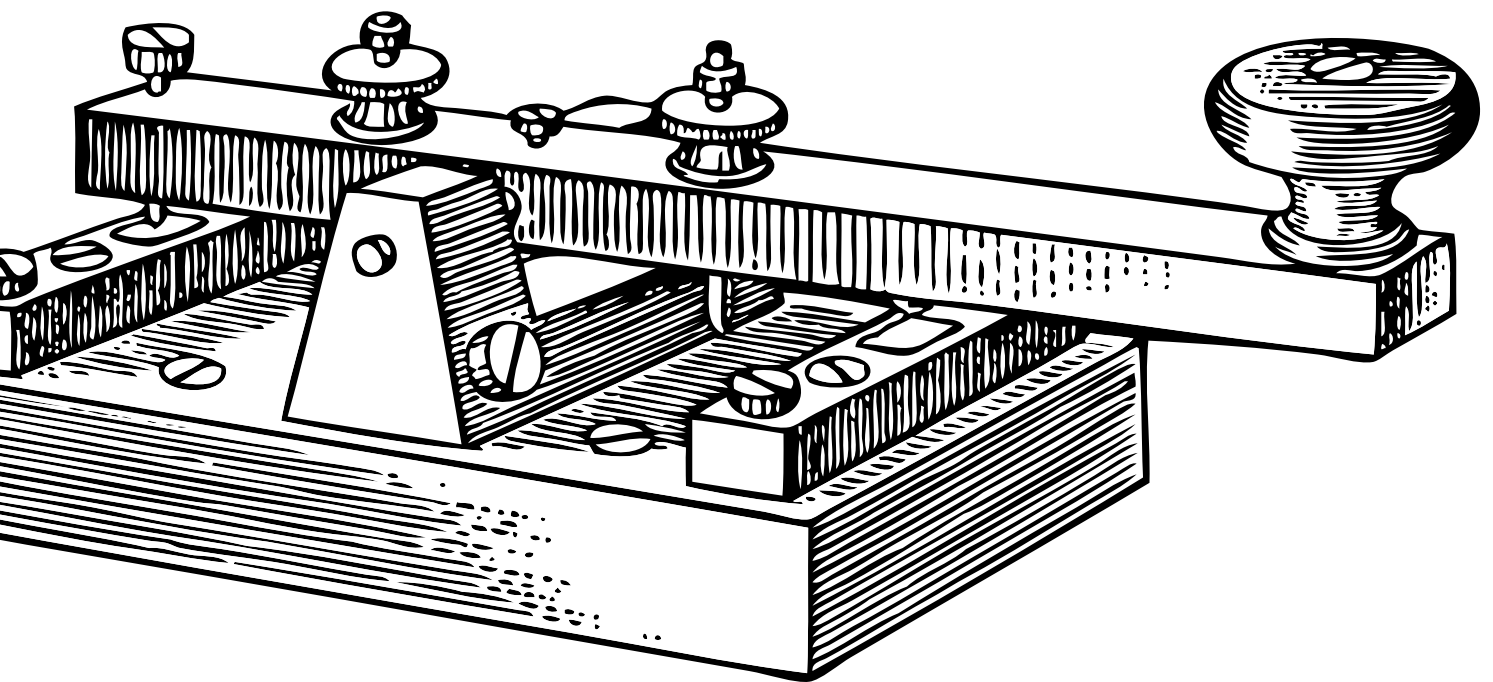
Learning to read is like learning Morse code. You would not get very far if you simply listened to Morse transmissions on the radio and nothing else. You need to learn the code, bit by bit, systematically. It would be some time before you would be able to hear any words or before “dot dot dot, dash dash dash, dot dot dot” registered automatically to you as SOS (Save Our Souls), the international distress signal. (SOS was the only bit of Morse I learned as a child, assuming it might well be needed in my adventures, just like in the Famous Five; sadly, it never was ...)

‘Picking things up as you go’ is no substitute for specific, sequenced instruction. It is unreliable. In the wonderful film *Starman*, Jeff Bridges plays an alien inhabiting a human body; the humour lies in his ineffective and inefficient ‘discovery learning’ of earthly rules simply by observation of others. When learning to drive, he frightens the life out of his passenger by accelerating at ‘g force’ when the traffic lights turn orange. Because he had seen others try to beat the lights, he had surmised that the rule must be ‘when the light turns to orange, go very fast’!

These little stories illustrate the key essentials of effective reading instruction:

- When learning any complex skill, whether it be reading, Morse, or driving, highly specific, sequenced, accurate instruction is vital.
- In the case of reading, this applies to phonological recoding.
- Learning ‘on the run’ is too error-prone; witness *Starman*.
- But this instruction needs to allow considerable time for practice (‘heaps’ of practice, as my son would say) and in different contexts. Reading words in context as well as word lists is essential. (Learning Morse takes intensive training and driving should probably require more, for public safety reasons.)





- Instruction needs to have a heavy focus on fluency, without which reading comprehension will be significantly impaired. Timing is all important. Just as in Morse where the time delay between individual letters and words needs to be very accurate, so it is with reading, with the added need for prosody to make sense of the flow of words. Pausing and emphasis in all the right places. To cite Malcolm X, try saying “What have you done?” four times, and hear the meaning of the sentence changing with the emphasised word changing successively: “WHAT have you done?”, “What HAVE you done?”, “What have YOU done?”, What have you DONE?”.

- Frequently used words are learned more quickly, as in Morse.
- Good reading comprehension relies on background knowledge and vocabulary; knowing that ‘I have lost a shoe’ is not to be taken literally.

*I hope someone gets this pun!

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