



ARTICLE 45

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LEARNING THE ALPHABET



“Singing” the alphabet doesn’t mean you “know” the alphabet!

“HE KNOWS HIS ALPHABET!”

I was chatting to a parent about how her son was struggling with the basics of literacy. It was Term Three in the child’s first year of schooling and still this child wasn’t able to independently attempt any writing or reading. His teacher had called me into the school for an assessment.

“He knows his alphabet - there’s no problems with that,” the child’s mother said and the teacher nodded. “Come and look.”

Using the alphabet chart at the front of the room, the mother proceeded to touch each letter as the boy recited each letter’s name. As he reached the letter L, her fingers sped up to tap quickly as he spurted out “alermenopy”.

The child zipped through the whole alphabet quickly, the names spilling out in a sing-song fashion and he finished by naming the letter Z “zee”. His mother grinned at me.

“See? So it’s not his alphabet. He knows his alphabet.”

Later, as I sat with the same child for some assessment tasks, I used the same chart and again asked the child to say the names of the letters. I began, however, at the letter L. He shrugged his shoulders. This was too difficult. I told him we’d start at the beginning like usual, but this time I asked *him* to point to the letters as he said each name.

Out came the names. He wasn’t singing, but his words reflected the alphabet song. His fingers moved along the chart, but there was little correspondence to what he was saying.

This child did not **know the alphabet**.

CONTINUED OVER ...

Did this child “know” the alphabet?

No.

Did he know the alphabet song?

Yes.

Was knowing the alphabet song going to help him learn to read and write?

A little. But at this stage probably not, if this knowledge didn’t evolve into something more meaningful,

WHAT IS “KNOWING THE ALPHABET”?

1. Knowing Letter Names

Knowing the names of the letters in the alphabet is useful so we can talk about spelling and about sounds. Knowing the names helps us learn the associated sounds. This is because when we can name something, we can talk about it. When we talk about something, we can think and therefore understand more about it.

For example, in Year One we might hear a child saying “The letter C (see) can say two sounds... /k/ and /s/ but when it’s with the letter H, it says /ch/.

Knowing the name of a letter helps children learn the sound that most commonly goes with that letter.

Learning this letter-sound link is vital for early reading and writing.

2. Knowing each Letter’s Sound

Knowing the sounds of each letter is actually a lot more useful than knowing its name as this knowledge can be used to sound out words. It is a vital part of PHONICS which is one of the keys to early success in learning to read and write.*

* Of course we don’t spend our whole lives sounding-out words but being able to do this helps us learn to recognise bigger and bigger chunks of written words. This leads on to the reading of whole words quickly and easily. *

By the end of Foundation (the first year of schooling in Australia) students are expected to know the most common sound that goes with each letter of the alphabet. This knowledge needs to be automatic and accurate.

Some students become VERY stuck at this stage and may need extra individualised intervention to help them with their learning. It is VITAL to identify these students who are at risk EARLY and TO PUT IN PLACE APPROPRIATE INTERVENTION.

3. Knowing How to Write each Letter

The other part to “knowing the alphabet” is being able to form each of the 26 letters easily using correct formation (this includes the correct starting point and direction of the pencil when the child forms the letter). Note that this is the domain of an occupational therapist, but we will touch on this again later.

By the end of Foundation, a student should know how to form the 26 letters of the alphabet (capital and lower-case) correctly. If students are struggling with writing individual letters, they may need extra individualised intervention (and possibly a referral to an occupational therapist). It is VITAL to identify these students who are struggling with this EARLY and TO PUT IN PLACE APPROPRIATE INTERVENTION.

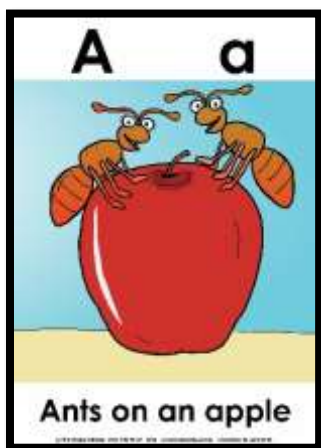
4. Knowing Capital (Upper-case) and Lower-case Letters

Children are usually exposed to more capital letters in their preschool years. Capital letters appear more on preschoolers’ toys and capital letters, most of which are easier to form than lower-case, are included in more preschool activities.

In their first year of schooling, however, children need to learn about lower-case letters. Lower-case letters make up the most of the text they will be seeing in their books, and lower-case letters are what they will need to be using for most of their writing.

*If a preschooler knows the name of the capital letter, they are 16% more likely to also know the lower-case letter name.

In each of these four areas of learning, mastery is when this knowledge can be accessed quickly and easily. This is necessary for reading and writing. Remember students may need extra time and extra input when acquiring the knowledge in one or more areas.

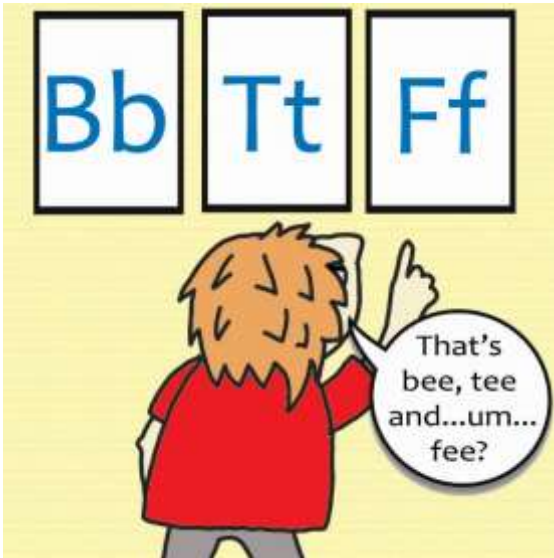


5. A is for APPLE. Learning that “A is for Apple”, may also be classed as alphabetic knowledge, but what we are really talking about here is PHONOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE. To make the jump that A makes the first sound of “apple” means that children can isolate the start of the given word. Many students do not have this awareness at the start of school. Teaching a child to learn A is for APPLE, B is for BALL and so on, may just become another rote exercise for some students that is somewhat meaningless. It does not necessarily mean they will learn that the letter goes with a particular sound.

Love and Reilly’s Singing Alphabet program (left) available from www.pelicanstalk.com helps children explore the letters, the sound and a word link. It also encourages children to write the letter.

*Please note, the Itchy Indian character in this resource has been replaced by Itchy Insect. The pictures are available to anyone who has purchased the program in the past. Please email lucia@pelicanstalk.com

LETTER NAMES and THEIR SOUNDS



Some letters have names that start with the sound the letter usually makes.

B ("Bee" makes the /b/ sound) **D J K P T V Z**
For this reason, the sound that goes with these letters can be easier to learn.

Another set have names that *end* in the sound they usually make.

F ("Eff" makes the /f/ sound) **L M N S X**

Some have names that have nothing to do with the sound. **W Y**

WHY DO CHILDREN LEARN SOME LETTER NAMES MORE EASILY THAN OTHERS?

Some interesting findings:

A group of researchers studied a large number of 4 year olds (Justice et al. 2006). They found:

- 1) If the letter was in the child's name, they were more likely to know its name – particularly for the initial letter.
- 2) Letters in the first half of the alphabet were recognised at a slightly higher rate than those in the second half.
- 3) Letter names that **BEGAN** with the letter's sound (Eg. T) were **NOT** more easily learnt than those that **ENDED** in the letter's sound (Eg. F), but both of these groups were learnt more readily than letters whose names did **NOT** contain the sound at all (Eg. W).

They also found: 50 % of the children knew the names for B, X, O and A (the most commonly known letters).
The least known letters were V, U, N and G.

BXO

Further to this, another group of researchers (Turnbull et al. 2010) looked at how students went on to learn lower-case letters. They considered how often the lower-case letters occurred in print and whether the letters occurred in the child's own name. They also considered similarity between the capital and lower-case letter's shape. **The BIGGEST advantage of learning lower-case letter names was when the lower-case letter looked like the capital letter.** (Letters such as. O, o S, s C, c)

Oo

Ss

Cc

Xx

HOW DO I TEACH LETTERS AND SOUNDS?

There are many products out there that focus on introducing letters and sounds. The most important thing to consider is this: your main goal in teaching is for the knowledge of the letter to be meaningful and that means it needs to be linked to a sound (and ultimately, this sound needs to be linked to a word).

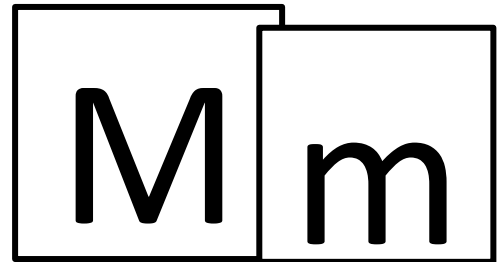
The knowledge also needs to be CEMENTED and access to this knowledge must be AUTOMATIC.

Easy right?!

As a speech pathologist, I start with the sound. I like to talk about a particular speech sound – and I link it to its most common letter. That is, first I hold up a character picture (for example, Munching Mama) and I work through all the features of her sound. This includes the mouthshape, production tips, auditory features and semantic links (Munching Mama is eating a biscuit saying /mmmmmm/). I also say some words that start with these sounds. I then very explicitly link the sound to the most common letter that goes with the sound. I show a picture (included in the resource) and I write the word, highlighting the initial letter.

*I use Pelican Talk's resource, THE SPEECH SOUND SET to do all this (For the first year of schooling THE SPEECH SOUND SET – SCHOOL SET 1 is required). See

www.pelican-talk.com/THE-SPEECH-SOUND-SET.php). There is a manual that steps you through the whole process and you can download it free from the website to have a look.*



I also include instruction about correct letter formation (as in starting point and order of strokes) early. Bad habits are difficult to undo and can really interfere with fluent writing later on.

Above: Letter writing resources available from Pelican Talk's Online Store

The reverse of this process is to present a letter and then link it to the sound. It simply means you hold up a letter and focus on its shape and so on, then link it to a sound and explore the sound.

All of this teaching works in with the 8 tips considered BEST PRACTICE that I have listed over the next three pages...

EIGHT TIPS TO CONSIDER WHEN LEARNING ABOUT THE ALPHABET (IN THE FIRST YEAR OF SCHOOL)

1. Be intentional and systematic

Approaches that intentionally and systematically introduce all letter names and their sounds lead to better results in literacy than those that rely on indirect or incidental learning. (Mind you, systematically does not mean starting at A and moving through the alphabet... see Point 6 below).

2. Give opportunities for lots of exposure and practice. Repeat in varied contexts but STOP explicit teaching when the knowledge is mastered. Give lots of opportunities for follow-up. Tell the sports teacher, the art teacher, the music teacher about the current letters in focus. Pop them in the newsletter and explain ways to practise writing and recognising these letters at home. Don't forget to include the importance of the sound link!

*Be sure that all adults involved know the difference between a sound and a letter name. There is a misunderstanding that the capital letter says the name and the lower-case says the sound. THIS IS NOT THE CASE!!!! (Excuse the pun). *

3. Small group work is best. This doesn't mean that some whole-class teaching or individual assistance is not warranted, however small groups tailored to different children's current knowledge was found to be more effective in a large study by Piasta and Wagner (2010).

4. Pair learning with phonological awareness training. Learning about a letter and its sound is vital, but it becomes meaningful when children understand how this knowledge links to something useful. That "something useful" is a word that can be written or read. Children benefit from seeing and hearing that the letter/sound they are learning about is related to spelling and reading. Begin by demonstrating with lots of words that begin with the first letter/sound that you are studying.

5. Pair learning with letter formation. Letters are constructed with lines, curves and intersections. Some have some very distinctive shapes (X,O) some share features with others (p,b,d). Writing letters helps children recognise them (Hayes, 1982).

6. Consider the order of teaching letters and sounds

One of the most common questions I am asked by teachers is relating to how many letters to introduce at one time and in which order. Let's first consider the order...

There are a number of different ways to think about order and there is no evidence to say one single order is better than another. See over the page.

Order to Introduce Letters and their Sound Links

- Letters in a child's own name will be easier to learn as they are more familiar (however the letters don't always reinforce the most common letter link. Take for example, S for Sean).
- Letters that have names that contain their corresponding sound (T) will be easier to learn than ones that don't (W).
- Some letters are very easy to recognise VISUALLY and thus easier to remember.
- Some letters are quite distinct from others, so are not often confused.
- Some letters occur more frequently in words so will be seen more often and will be more familiar. When looking at lower-case letters the most to least frequent consonants are:

rtnslcdpmbfvghkwxyzjqy

- If students are to use their knowledge for reading and writing, they will need to know some vowels too. I usually start with the letter **a** and then do **i** and **o**. **e** and **u** come last. This is because **a** and **e** are often confused as are **a** and **u**, and **e** and **i**.
- Some sounds are easier to say and the oral and auditory features are more distinct. The sound /m/ for example is an easy one for students to say. Speech pathologists will often recommend introducing sounds that are quite different from one another to begin with (for example, **p** and **b** are very similar sounds and the letters look very similar so they are better to separate in early learning. It is recommended that one is mastered first and then the other can follow later.
- Some phonics programs recommend the order **satpin** as many words can be read and spelt after learning these. Learning can be put into practice!
- The Speech Sound Set uses the order **msatpin**.

Wow! That's a lot to think about. Carnine et al (2006) summed it up nicely taking into account most of the above.

The Carnine Order

1. Introduce initially only the most common sound for each letter.
2. Separate the learning of visually similar letters (b,p,d.... h,n) or letters that have sounds that sound similar (f,v ... m,n)
3. Introduce lower-case letters first but include the capital if it is the same as the lower-case.
4. Introduce more useful letters before least useful (for reading and writing).

The order therefore is:

a m t s l f d r o g l h u c b n k v e w j p y T L M F D I N A R E H G B x q z J Q Y

7. Pace of Introducing Letters

Again there is no magic answer here, but it is better to introduce letters/sounds quickly and then cycle back to review letters previously learnt. Jones, Clark and Reutzel (2012) proposed an effective method of introducing 26 letters over five weeks. They presented one letter each day and then after they were all learnt reviewed them again, cycling through in a different order each time. Six cycles were completed by the end of the year. (26 letters, each one studied 6 times throughout the year).

8. Accommodating for different learners

Children come to school with different knowledge and different children will have different abilities to learn.

When it comes to different learners, consider:

- Whole-class presentation can occur, but smaller group work that takes into account each individual's needs should be the focus for learning
- When a child "knows" the letter quickly and automatically in both upper-case and lower-case, STOP the instruction for that letter! Continued instruction is a waste of time. (Remember "knowing" = how to name it, its most common sound, how to write it and how to recognise it) they should not continue with instruction in this learning. It will be a waste of time.
- Carefully assess what is affecting a child's learning if they are struggling. Is it something to do with the actual letter or sound? Is it being confused with a similar letter or sound? Does the child have fine motor/ letter construction issues? Assess and intervene early.
- Extra intervention does not always take a LONG time. Brookfield et al (2013) worked with individuals and pairs for 2.5 mins to 4 mins for 13 sessions on troublesome letters. This resulted in mastery.

Above all, keep learning about the alphabet FUN!!!!

Although most of the above covers explicit, systematic teaching, incidental learning still has an important place. Make classrooms rich in print. Label cupboards, demonstrate writing of words during tasks, give children name tags and so on.

Further Reading

""No More Teaching A Letter A Week"" by Rebecca Mckay & William H. Teale published by Heinemann, 2015

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By Lucia Smith, Speech Pathologist. www.pelicanstalk.com February 2018