



LINKING SOUNDS AND LETTERS

How regular is English?

When teaching young children to make sense of the written form of English in early reading and spelling, it is important to focus on consistencies. There are three broad areas of regularity in English spelling – alphabetic, patterns and meaning.

1. Alphabetic:

The Alphabetic principle is the understanding that the written letters represent the sounds of the spoken language. The area of alphabetic regularity addresses sound-letter knowledge in all positions of the word, including the sounds within blends in phonically regular words, for example the ‘t’ sound in the word stop or the ‘n’ sound in the word sand. This mapping in English is not always a strict one to one but there is a high degree of consistency and an early mastery in this area enables children to gain confidence with their spelling and reading of simple words.

2. Patterns:

Of course not all words are phonically regular and so beyond the individual sound-letter mapping, students must learn to focus on larger “chunks” or groups of letters that match up consistently with “chunks” of sounds. For example, the regular letter and sound pattern of the rime ‘ain’ in words such as pain, main, stain, or the regularity of long vowel digraphs such as ‘ee’ in words such as feet, feed.

3. Meaning:

The third area of regularity is reflected in the way we can add parts of words to change word meaning as in the following examples – report (noun), reports (verb), reporter, reporting, reportable. This area is often referred to as morphology and includes the understanding and use of both the meaning and the spelling patterns of prefixes and suffixes.

Knowledge in all of the three areas of regularity in the English language is important.

This knowledge will enable students to apply their knowledge to new situations (analogy) and become independent learners. Whilst this article will focus mainly on Alphabetic Knowledge, you can read more about pattern regularity in Newsletter No. 9 *Let’s talk about rhyme, rime and analogy* (June 2004). The important area of Meaning will be the subject of a newsletter article in the near future.

Alphabet Knowledge

A preschooler’s Letter Name knowledge has been shown to be a consistently strong predictor of a child’s success with learning to read in Preparatory through to Yr 2. Some young children may learn the alphabet by heart but fail to develop sufficient confidence and flexibility to consistently recognise, name or write the individual letters of the alphabet. Students do need to be taught “the alphabet” but they also need to be taught the relationship between sounds and letters.

A multi sensory approach is best for teaching the links between sounds and letters. The use of all of the senses – hearing and saying the sounds and looking at and writing the letters - gives maximum reinforcement and practice.

For each letter students should learn

1. its name
2. how the letter looks – developing a visual memory or template
3. how the letter is written – developing a ‘motor program’ or memory for the movement
4. the sound the letter most commonly represents

“Two baskets” of knowledge

Establishing the link between sounds and letters is essential when learning to read and spell an alphabetic language such as English. There are “two baskets” of knowledge to be built up – **the sound basket** (Phonological awareness - see newsletter No. 21. Phonological Awareness – preparing for literacy) and **the letter basket**.

It is important to consolidate knowledge in each of these baskets for two reasons.

1. the sound-letter link will be easier to learn
2. there will be less confusion between the sounds and letter names.

1. THE LETTER NAME

Letter names are important. If something has a name it is easier to recall both what it looks like and how it is formed. Letter names are often initially learned as a rote sequence of the alphabet. Gradually children learn to identify individual letters, pointing to the one that is named or naming it themselves. Remember that the names of the letters are arbitrary and some students will need much practice before they can name individual letters automatically. Be sure to be clear in your own language that you are doing an activity about the *names of the letters* as distinct from *the sounds* that they represent.

For some students, who are really struggling to learn letter names, it may be considered appropriate to focus on learning the sound that goes with the letter and how to write the letter, rather than trying to learn the letter names. Although letter names comprise a set of teachable skills, *teaching letter names does not lead directly to improvements in student reading outcomes in the ways characterized by the foundational skills of early literacy.* ([Adams, 1990](#)).

Concertina alphabet. Write the letters of the alphabet, evenly spaced, in sequence on a long strip of cardboard. Then fold the card between the letters, alternating backwards and forwards, to form a “concertina”. Children will enjoy opening the concertina and reciting the alphabet or randomly opening it to name a letter or short sequence of letters. Some children will need the support of the whole sequence of the alphabet for some time, before they are confident in naming individual letters. For example, if they open the sequence at P, they may need to go back to a familiar sequence such as - l m n o... before being able to name the letter P and continue. Encourage children to touch or point to the letters as they say the letter names.

Taking Turns. Children recite the alphabet with a partner, taking turns to point to and name alternate letters.

Missing letters. a) Write out the alphabet in sequence and use sticky “post it” notes to conceal some letters. Children recite the letter names in sequence pointing to and saying the name for each “post it” note letter as well as the visible letters. **b)** Use the “post it” notes to cover some letters and ask the

children to identify which letters have been covered. Lift up the “post it” note to check if the letter names are correct.

2. THE VISUAL TEMPLATE

When we hear or read the name of someone we know well, we can bring to mind the facial appearance of the person. Similarly this process of visualization can be applied to letters so that when we think of, or hear the name of a particular letter, we can “see” it in our mind – that is, we can recall its visual pattern or template. We need strong and reliable visual templates for letters and words, to build our orthographic knowledge of how words should look. This will greatly assist both word recognition and spelling.

Letter T.V. Set the scene by explaining to the students that they each have their own special T.V. for seeing letters. They can practise turning the on/off button or use the remote control! The colour and size of writing on each person’s T.V. will vary. Name and then show a particular letter for 3 seconds (after practice you can eventually just name the letter). Ask the children to ‘tune in’ on their own T.V. It can be helpful to ask the children to shut their eyes in order to ‘see’ the letter in their mind. Select some children to name and describe the shape, size and colour of their letter.

Word T.V. This is an extension of the above activity. Using a small sight word e.g. the or another familiar word such as stop, ask the students to view it on their own T.V.. The letters of the word can be named forwards and even backwards. Again ask students about the letter colour and size on their T.V.

3. THE MOTOR PROGRAM

The motor pattern of how we write a letter needs to become automatic. This then frees attention for the tasks of spelling and effective expression. Knowledge of how a letter is written is very much linked to the visual template of the letter. The child is more likely to be able to recall how to write the letter if its picture can be brought to mind. The motor program for a letter should be activated by either its letter name or by the sound it commonly represents.

Talk and Write. Use verbal reminders to encourage the correct writing of each letter. For example for the letter ‘h’ - ‘go down the road (stick) and up and over the hill (hump).’

Tracing Letters. Reinforce the motor program by asking children to trace letters in the air, on sandpaper, or in sand or shaving cream spread on the table surface.

Guess the letter. Children sit with a partner and take turns to close their eyes as the partner traces a letter on their hand. Can they name the letter?

4. THE SOUND-LETTER LINK/LETTER-SOUND LINK

Establishing the link **between sounds and letters is fundamental to early reading and writing success.** Students will make this link more easily if they already have some degree of **phonological awareness.** Although many students appear to learn the sound-letter links easily, many others will need explicit teaching and consistent practice to learn which sounds and letters go together. We need to remember that isolating an individual sound within a spoken word and associating it with a particular shape or letter, is an abstract task. We need to explain the tasks in simple terms and provide ‘hands-on’ activities, so that children will learn without confusion.

Triggers. Many children, particularly in the early stages of learning, will benefit from some kind of trigger to remind them of the sound for a particular letter. Young children will often learn the sound letter link for their 'own' letter – that is the first letter in their name. Names can be very irregular though and may cause confusion. Consider C for Charlotte, Cody and Celine!

Teachers may reinforce strong sound-letter links through association with rhyme, song or alliteration. In the **Oxford Essential Reading Series, Sound Starters (Love and Reilly 1999)**, the trigger is a colourful and amusing character, for example **Hairy Horse**. These books use an alliterative phrase within the context of an amusing story told in the pictures, to reinforce the sound - in this case '**h**' - and teach the letter. The **Singing Alphabet (Love and Reilly, 1994)** uses a similar premise.

Wall charts can be useful but are often used only for reference rather than as a teaching aid. It is best to avoid those charts that show unusual sound-letter associations eg. 'g' for 'giraffe' rather than as in 'goat'. Also note the vowels as many charts choose a long vowel eg. 'a' for 'ape' rather than 'apple'. We recommend that the short vowels (a as in apple, e as in egg, i as in itch, o as in orange, and u as in ugly) rather than the long vowels, be tackled first in teaching, as they show more consistency in the match. Lastly, try to avoid charts that use the sound in a blend at the beginning of the word eg. 'f' for 'frog', because young children have difficulty isolating initial consonants occurring in blends.

Multi-sensory Learning

Comprehensive, reliable and automatic knowledge of a sound-letter link involves developing many sensory channels and connections.

Practical activities must involve – looking, saying, listening and writing,

- * saying the sound or the name of the letter and writing the letter,
- * visualizing the letter and writing the letter,
- * visualizing the letter and saying the sound
- * saying the name of the letter and visualizing the letter
- * writing the letter and saying the sound

The principle of "Look, say, cover, write, check" can be applied to this early stage of establishing reliable sound letter links. However be sure to reinforce the sound not just the letter name.

Charting Sound-letter Knowledge

The growth of reliable and automatic sound-letter knowledge should be documented systematically for the beginner reader. You can create your own grid or use the one provided in the **Oxford Essential Reading - Sound Starters and Sound Stories Teacher Resource Books**.

Can the student -

- Name the letters randomly?
- Say the sound when shown or told the name of the letter?
- Write the letter when given the sound/letter name?
- Choose/select the letter from a small group when given a sound/letter?
- Provide a word that begins with a certain sound/letter?

When children have reliable knowledge of a sound - letter link, write the letter on a small cardboard square or tile and add it to their own "box" or envelope. In this way children can further practise the links as they handle their own tiles and later on use these to make and read words simple words. They will gain a sense of mastery and appreciation of their own progress in learning to read and spell. Non-word reading and spelling will provide information about children's development of sound-letter knowledge. When the word is nonsense, children must rely on their own phonological awareness and letter knowledge. For example, in the spelling of the words **zog** or **shemp** or the reading of the words **tem** or **stip**. "Invented" spelling and reading attempts will reflect the children's growing grasp of the English alphabetic principle.

Why do children confuse some letters of the alphabet?

There is not always a transparent relationship between the letter names and the sounds.

- **b d j k p t v** – for this group the sound occurs as the first sound of the letter name – e.g. 'b' in "Bee"
- **l f m n r s** - for this group the sound occurs as the last sound of the letter name – e.g. 's' in "eS"
- **c g h q w x y** – this is the most easily confused group. The sound does not occur in the letter name – in fact the name is misleading as it highlights other sounds – e.g. "Y" – 'why' - which falsely suggests that "Y" says 'w'.

Considerations for teaching.

Which sound–letter links first?

- Choose those sounds that are easier to see on the face as well as simpler to articulate such as – p, m, s, b, t, f
- Choose familiar, frequently occurring sounds/letters (n, p, s, d) rather than less common ones (x, q, z)
- Consider the developmental sequence that children master these sounds in their own speech - don't start with r, or th, as these are later developing sounds.
- Separate the introduction of sounds/letters that sound/look similar. E.g. m/n, p/b, w/r
- Choose letters that have name with sound in initial position e.g. B, T (but make sure children don't get stuck on this pattern for all letters).

How to get started?

We suggest the teaching of 5 consonants and 2 short vowels, choosing those that fit the criteria above. A further consideration when choosing teaching of letters is how useful the particular combination of letters will be in enabling the children to create, read and spell real words.

f s t p m a i These letters could generate the following words

fat sat pat mat fit sit pit mit tap sap map tip sip pip Tim Sam Pam mats pats fits pits tips stamp

A suggested order for additional consonants and short vowels is:

* **b c h r j sh o**

* **d n g l v w ch e u**

* **x y k q z th**

Summing up

Linking sounds and letters is one of the first and most vital building blocks for learning to read and spell English words. We must ensure that we are thorough in our approach to teaching young children about both spoken sounds and the letters that represent them. Our goal is that children will develop accurate and reliable sound-letter links so that they will become confident 'decoders' of both familiar and unfamiliar words.

References

Adams, M.J. (1990). *Beginning to read: Thinking and learning about print*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Resources

From Pelican Talk www.pelicantalk.com

The Singing Alphabet by Love and Reilly/Pelican Talk

The Speech Sound Set by Pelican Talk

Oxford Essential Reading -Sound Starters. (1999) Love, E. & Reilly, S. Oxford University Press. Melbourne.

A Sound Way – Phonological Awareness Activities for early literacy. (1995) Love, E. & Reilly, S. Pearson Education. Melbourne.

This newsletter was originally written and published by Sue Reilly and Elizabeth Love in November 2007. It was re-formatted with slight changes by Lucia Smith in May 2012.