Correctly identifying all of the letters of the alphabet is one of the first steps in learning to read. Although most students experience little difficulty mastering this task, many students with learning problems encounter failure and frustration when presented with this seemingly simple step in the reading process. This article provides teachers with a proven step-by-step technique for teaching letter recognition to children who are struggling with this task.

Learning to read is a daunting task for many children, and it becomes a monumental obstacle for many children with special needs. The various subtasks in the reading process are numerous, and mastering all of them requires that the teacher possess an in-depth understanding of the skills involved and an array of strategies to teach these skills to a diverse body of students. Letter recognition has long been regarded as one of the crucial components of the reading process, and recent studies support the contention that identifying the letters of the alphabet is perhaps the single best predictor of subsequent reading success for children (Adams, 1990; Bishop, 2003; Hammill, 2004).

As a reading specialist for children with learning disabilities and mild mental retardation for many years prior to becoming a teacher educator, I developed a structured procedure for teaching the names of alphabet letters to children who could not learn their letters by traditional large-group or small-group instruction. This intervention is designed for one-on-one instruction and tends to be labor intensive. However, results have proven to be extremely successful. Those who intend to use the approach are encouraged to use it as described here, with little or no deviation from the format or materials employed previously by the authors.

Establish a Baseline

The procedure is designed to be a very effective and efficient approach to teaching alphabet letters. As such, it is imperative that you do not duplicate efforts by spending time teaching letters to a child who already knows them. A suggested approach is to obtain a set of alphabet cards that include both upper and lower case letters. These are readily purchased at discount stores and may come packaged like a deck of playing cards. However, it is recommended that the teacher use a set of large alphabet letters, approximately $6 \times 6$ inches, in bold print, and free of any pictures or other distractions. Seat the child across from you at a table that is of suitable height for the student so that he or she is not looking up at an angle. Shuffle the alphabet cards so that they are in random order. Have a piece of paper at hand so that you will be able to record the student’s responses.

What Works for Me

Joyce Anderson Downing and Theresa Earles-Vollrath, Dept. Editors

Alphabet Recognition Made Simple

Jerry Neal and Dennis Ehlert

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Say to the student, “I want to find out how many letters that you know. We may go pretty fast, so as soon as you can tell me what the letter is, say it for me. OK?” Begin presenting the letters to the student at the rate of about one every 3 seconds. If a letter is known by the child (e.g., when shown the lower case /g/ the student says “g”), place it in the “known pile.” If the child does not know the letter, place it in the “unknown pile.” Provide encouragement and praise during this process, but do not coach the student by stating, “You know this one. It says ‘Buh’ like in baby” or similar statements.

A baseline is just that, establishing what the child knows to plan subsequent instruction. Do not provide any other assistance to the student. Go through the entire set of letters, making sure that all upper and lower case letters have been shown to the child.

After the student has completed this initial task, give considerable praise and encouragement. A good way to do this is to show the student the various letters that have been accumulated in the “known pile” and say, “Look at all the letters you know!” One might also confirm that the student actually knows those particular letters at this point by holding each one up and having the student once again tell you what it is and giving praise after each one if the student knows it. After the student leaves the table, the teacher should then record the letters that the student possesses in his or her alphabet recognition repertoire. You should make note whether the letter is upper- or lower-case. For example, the student may know the upper case form of “R” but may not recognize its lower case “r” counterpart. Typically, students in kindergarten and first grade who may not know all alphabet letters, may be very adept at identifying the exact letters found in their particular names. Thus, a child may “know” the letters S, u, z, i, and e, but will be unable to tell you that “E” is also the upper case version of “e.”

Determining which letters the student knows is key to the entire process that follows. As such, keeping accurate, detailed, chronological records of what transpires in the teaching sessions that follow baseline is crucial. If the student knows the letter, there is no need to teach it.

**Determine Which Letters to Teach**

Let’s say that upon obtaining a baseline, Robert, a first grader, knows the following letters: B, o, b, O. Obviously, he knows how to spell his name, but in essence he knows only 3 of 52 letters, 4 if we count that he also knows that upper and lower case “O” are nearly identical. Robert has a long way to go. So we start the process by recording what he knows on a particular date. An example would look like this:

8/11 B, o, b, O

From this point on, the selection of letters for the child to learn is more or less up to the teacher. We would want to teach the letter “X” soon, because in typical directions given by the teacher, “Put an X on …” is used in daily instruction and is needed by the student to mark answers on worksheets, books, and other materials. Most students will already know that to “mark” something means to use an “X,” even if they do not actually know the name of that letter. If the student is in a classroom where his or her peers are also working on specific letters, the teacher should attempt to teach the letters to those students as well. Using letters of the student’s full name is also recommended.
Begin Daily Routine of Selecting and Teaching Letters

Keeping an accurate record of which letters the student has been exposed to and which ones he or she has mastered is part of the daily routine in this process. The typical daily routine would have a number of very specific steps. It is recommended that the teacher provide the student with considerable verbal reinforcement at the various stages of the daily process. Tangible rewards, such as nutritious edibles that the student is not allergic to (raisons, cereal, nuts) in small quantities has worked well. But be sure not to reach a saturation point as they will cease to be effective.

The daily routine follows:

1. Select the next letter to be learned from the deck of letter cards, and place it in front of the child, stating the letter name as it is presented (e.g., “Today we are going to work on a really important letter. This is the letter “D,” and it starts all kind of words like dog and duck and door and dippy-doodle, and lots and lots of other words that we say every day”). Point to the letter and ask the student, “What’s this letter?” If the student responds correctly, offer verbal praise, and reinforce the response by stating, “Right! This is a “D” and it starts words like dog and dirt. . . . Can you tell me another word it starts?”

2. Present the student with the letter recognition page that contains the letter that is being learned for that day (see Figure 1). One can make them on a word processor or simply write the letters on the page manually. Say to the student, “Let’s see if we can find more (letter of the day) “Ds” on this page.” This is where a rather rapid questioning and responding takes place between the teacher and the student. The student will either be hearing the letter of the day from the teacher or will be stating the letter in response to a teacher question. No other letter will be stated by the teacher other than the selected daily letter. A typical exchange would look like this:

   T: Is this a D? (pointing to a D)
   S: Yes
   T: Is this a D? (pointing to a D)
   S: Yes
   T: Is this a D (pointing to a D)
   S: Yes
   T: What’s this letter? (pointing to a D)
   S: D
   T: What’s this letter? (pointing to a D)
   S: D
   T: Is this a D? (pointing to letter OTHER than D)
   S: No
   T: Right, that’s not a D! Is this a D? (pointing to letter OTHER than D)

   S: No
   T: Right again! What’s this letter? (pointing to a D)
   S: D

   Continue this dialogue process for about 1 minute.

3. Provide the student with a crayon or pencil and have him or her circle ONLY the Ds on the work page, reinforcing the student several times by stating, “You are finding lots of (letter of the day) Ds for me.” The student should be taught to say the letter as it is being marked such as, “Here is a D. . . . and here is another D. . . . I found another D. . . .” This provides the student with both a visual stimulus as well as an auditory counterpart to that which is being seen on the page. Allow the student to take the complete page home.

4. When the letter page has been completed, we move to a letter-sorting activity. This involves providing the student with a number of letters such as the ones seen in the demonstration. These are readily purchased from several educational materials companies and are not expensive. You should provide the student with about 10 to 15 target letters and about 4 to 5 distracters (i.e., letters other than the specific daily letter that has been selected for a particular day). Give the student two small containers (e.g., coffee cans covered with contact paper works well), one of which has the letter of the day placed on it, to sort the letters. Velcro works well for this, or simply place one of the letters from the student’s sorting pile on the can with a small piece of tape. This can be used as a short independent practice activity after the student has learned the daily routine. Have the student look at each letter and say, “This is a (letter of the day) D,” while placing each letter into the can. The teacher is easily able to check the student’s work when completed by sitting down with the student, emptying the contents of the target letter can, and saying, “How many (letters of the day) did you find? Let’s look at them.” The teacher then says each letter as they are picked up or asks the student again what each letter is, reinforcing correct responses throughout the process.

5. A picture/sound sort comes next. This involves providing the student with a number of small pictures that begin with the target letter for the day, as well as a number of distracters. These pictures can be obtained by clip-art programs found on most computers, pictures in old/discarded phonics books, or stickers that can be purchased at some discount stores or teacher supply outlets. Laminate these pictures for durability and ease of handling. The student uses these in the same manner as the letter-sort activity. Place one picture on or next to the container that has the letter of the day on it. Students use this
as both a stimulus and a comparison for selecting which pictures contain the target sound. Initial practice can be done with teacher supervision, thus ensuring the student understands the target letter and the procedure. Checking the student’s work is done similarly to the method used in the letter-sort activity.
Record Student Progress

Each day the teacher must record which letter was targeted and which letters the student retained from previous lessons. Using Robert, again, as an example, a simple process for this follows:

1. After the initial baseline session determining which letters the student has in his or her sight-letter repertoire, the teacher should place the letters that the student knows in a separate pile from the rest of the unknown letters. Each day, this pile of “knowns” is presented to the student quickly to make sure that the student has mastered the letters and to provide periodic review. If the student knows all of the letters presented up to that point, the daily record would look like this:

   3/11 B, o, b, O

   During the first training session, record the date and all letters known from review, then write the selected target letter and place a set of parentheses around it. Because the letter “D” was introduced as a target letter for the first session, that day’s record would appear as

   3/12 B, o, b, O, (D), (d)

   If the student does not know a letter from a previous lesson, draw a line under it, indicating a need to provide additional training on that letter. For example, if the student forgot or was hesitant on the lower case “d,” that daily record would appear as 3/13 B, o, b, O, D, d.

2. Introduce only one new letter each day. If the student is hesitant or has not mastered more than one letter, as indicated by the daily review, do not introduce a new letter. This indicates that the student needs further instruction on those letters. The introduction of additional learning material would result in frustration and labored learning by the student.

3. Provide ample opportunity for the child to locate targeted letters that have not been mastered by finding the letters in printed materials or by having the student hold the letter while walking about in the room finding other similar letters saying, “This is a D, and HERE is a D . . . I have D, and HERE is a D . . . ”

4. Each day, show the student how the stack of “knowns” is getting bigger and the stack of “unknowns” is shrinking. Provide ample feedback to parents along the way, and encourage them to reinforce the targeted letters at home by going over the letter pages that the student brings home after completion in class.

A Reason to Celebrate

Acquiring all of the letters is indeed a time for celebration. It means that the child is now well on the way to learning to read and has worked hard in this accomplishment. How does one really know that the child has learned all of the letters now and that the training process has been successful? The best indicator that the student has truly mastered the alphabet is through a demonstration of immediacy of response. This can be done by requiring the student to identify orally all 52 letters presented within a specified short span of time. To do this, simply set a kitchen timer for a short time period, typically 2 to 3 minutes, and present the student with the letter cards, having him or her tell you the letter names as they are presented. When they can do this for 3 consecutive days, it indicates that the training procedure has accomplished its mission. Be patient but persistent. Expect daily results. Reward the students for performance and let them know that they are making steady progress toward an achievable goal.

When the student can provide immediate responses to all letters for 3 days, have the entire class celebrate and share in this accomplishment. Provide the student with a small party; present the student with a plaque; have treats for everyone; have parents come to the school for the celebration.

The process works. The key is consistency and determination on the part of the student and the teacher. The entire daily process requires only about 10 to 15 minutes and can easily be directed by a paraprofessional if the teacher cannot provide the daily instruction.

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