

Letter and Letter Sound Identification: Implications for Instruction

Teaching Identification Unknown Letters.

One reason some students have difficulty learning letters is because they do not know how to look at the distinctive features that make up a letter (Ehri, 1994). Therefore, when teaching unknown letters student's need more than just seeing them printed on a card with the teacher saying, "This is "d." What is it?" Clay (1995) says that seeing letters in print is an important part of letter learning, but she prefers instruction that incorporates *Three Ways of Remembering* unknown letters. (Note these three areas should also be used to help children learn unknown words.)

- Seeing letters in print (Printing the letter on a card)
- Talking about what the letter looks like (As the letter is written on a board or a white board, the teacher names the letter and talks about its salient features. For example, the letter "t" is 'straight line down, put on its hat.)
- Learning the unknown letters using movement. Writing the unknown letters in various ways saying the letter name, stroking pattern, or sound as it is written. In fact, over learning and massed practice is necessary for a student to master unknown information. Therefore, asking students to do the following will aid learning:
 1. Write the unknown letter once saying its name,
 2. Write it again saying the stroking pattern (e.g. manuscript "a" is "circle starting at the top, line down touching circle.)
 3. Write the letter again saying the sound that goes with the letter.

Teaching Identification of Unknown Sounds of Letters

Most schools use some sort of program to teach letter/sound identification. But, in order for this learning to transfer to reading and writing Bransford (1999) states that teaching must meet the following criteria:

1. Teaching must occur in multiple contexts.
2. The new learning should be presented through "what if" problem solving.
3. The new learning should be presented in a way that it requires children to invent solutions to a broad class of problems rather than simply to attempt to solve a single problem.

Teachers should ask themselves, is my letter/sound identification program meeting all these criteria. For example, *Word Their Way* (Bear, et. al., 2008) teaches letter/sound identification in a systematized way that meets criteria #2 beautifully. The sorting activities in this program require students to solve the problem of matching a letter/sound relationship in the correct category.

But, this knowledge must be presented in other contexts, and students need to view letter/sound identification as a way to solve a broad class of problems. This can be accomplished by teachers stressing letter/sound identification in all components of balanced literacy. For example, before a small group lesson with student reading Levels C or D, a teacher could say, "We are going to read a story about a family who goes to the beach. I'm going to write a letter or some letters on this white board, and you tell me

something that you would find or do at the beach that begins with that letter.” Teacher writes the letter “w” on the white board. Students say the letter, its sound then predict the word that goes with the letter would be “water.” Teacher asks them to explain how they came up with that answer. After congratulating the student on his good thinking, she moves on by writing another letter (s) or (sp) on the white board.

Notice how the activity suggested above meets Bransford’s criteria. First, it takes the letter/sound learning from the phonics program being used into a new context. Second, the activity is presented in a problem-solving format. Finally, students are learning that attaching a sound to a letter is not done for letter sound matching only. They learn that learning letter sound relationships will help them to read a tricky word if they think about what is going on in the story. Notice how interactive writing activities that follow this format would enable students to apply letter/sound learning in another context that they can eventually transfer to help them in writing.

It is also critical that each classroom provide students with an alphabet chart that has upper and lower case forms of a letter and a picture that has the sound of that letter at the beginning. A daily activity in some classrooms for beginning readers is the reading of this chart in a shared reading format. For example, the teacher and the students would chant while she points to each letter or picture, “’A’ (as teacher points to upper case A and says the name of the letter), ‘a’ (as teacher points to lower case a and says the name of the letter), ‘apple’ (as the teacher points to the picture that goes with ‘Aa’ and says the name of the object with the students), /a/ (everyone says the sound of the letter). Eventually students would do the pointing and leading of the chant.

Another important suggestion is that the alphabet chart and key picture for each set of letters should remain the same in Kindergarten, Grade 1, and even Grade 2 in schools that have many strugglers or ELL students. This also assists with the multiple context principle in transfer of learning. (“Gee, /a/ was the sound for ‘apple,’ and it’s the same here in first grade!”)

Teaching Identification of Lower and Upper Case Forms of Letters

Many times a student will know a letter in its lower case form (j), but the same letter in its upper case form (J) is unknown. Therefore, it is important that we teach students to learn the name and sound of the letter in both upper and lower case format.

- Use the *Three Ways of Remembering* described above to teach upper case forms of letters.
- Create matching games in which a student must match the upper and lower case forms of letters.
- Make a letter book with those having most difficulty learning letters, placing known letters known in upper and lower case form on a page in the book.
 1. Upper and lower case forms of the known letters are placed on pages in alphabetical order.
 2. Leave a blank page (in the alphabetical sequence) for unknown letters.
 3. Ask the student to select a picture of an object that has the beginning sound of the known letter and place it the page.

4. When a student learns the name and sound of both the upper case and lower case forms of a new letter, celebrate by writing the letters on the appropriate page, and allow the student to select a picture to go with the page.
5. Students read their letter book during Reader's Workshop saying the letters name (both upper and lower case forms), the name of the object in the picture, listening for the beginning sound, and then the sound of the letter on that page.

Expanding the Student's Preferred Mode of Identifying Letters

During the letter assessment, a student might respond with one of the following:

1. The name of the letter.
2. The sound of the letter (but he/she may not know the name of the letter).
3. A word in which the letter appears (but he/she does not know the name of the letter).

It is important that all of these characteristics of a letter are automatically recognized and used when necessary. First, knowing the name of the letter assists the student in communication with the teacher and others about letters and their letter/sound relationship. Think of the student who does not know the name of the letter "J," but does know the lower case "j" name and sound for the letter. How could he ever link his knowledge of lower case j name and sound if he has not associated that letter/sound with the upper case form of the letter.

A key word for each sound assists in searching for and using first letter and later last letter to predict a word that makes sense in the story. Even later students begin moving across a word to identify something that makes with what is happening or what is being discussed in the text. At this point the student must attend to vowel teams or irregular spelling patterns. For example, "ea" can represent the "short-e sound" or a "long-e sound." Students must be prepared to use this type of letter knowledge.

Many times a student can recall the sound of a letter by remembering a word in which it appears. The "M" in McDonald's would assist the student in drawing out the initial letter /M-m-m-m/ to attach the /m/ sound to the letter "m."

Thus, linking multiple pieces of knowledge about letters gives students a way to understand and develop strategies that will assist them in reading and writing. Teachers can foster this knowledge by designing activities during the various components of balanced literacy that teaches (1). the name of the letter, (2). the sound of the letter, and (3). a word in which the letter appears.

Suggestions for Teaching the Letters a Student Confuses.

For example, if a student confuses "b" and "d" it is recommended that one be taught to mastery before introducing the confused letter. Thus, confused letters are kept apart in the teaching program. Remember students who are struggling and confusing letter identification may not be observing all the salient features of the letter. Often we feel if we are showing a letter to a student, he is observing all aspects of the letter, when in fact he/she may just be looking at one part of a letter (e.g. the straight line in b or d).

- Earlier Clay's (1995) *Three Ways of Remembering* was presented to assist with teaching students to hone in on the salient features in letters. Using these practices confused letters are often sorted out.
- Another powerful activity to accomplish attention to salient features in letters is letter sorting.
 1. Get a set of magnetic letters.
 2. Create three columns on a piece of chart paper and place it on a table or rug.
 3. At the top of each column draw three shapes: a straight line, a curved line, and a straight and curved line touching each other.
 4. Tell students, "*We are going to sort the letters so that we put those that are made with only straight lines in the first column; those that are formed by using only curved lines go in the middle column; and those that are formed with both curved and straight lines go into the third column.*"
 5. Model this sort for them describing why you are placing a particular letter in its proper column.
 6. Then have students assist you in placing letters.
 7. When it seems as if they are catching on to the rules of the sort, you might ask one student to place a letter in its proper column with the other students looking on and evaluating the student's choice.
 8. After you do this activity with them a few times, it can be something students do alone or with partners during word study.

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