

Improving Literacy Brief

THE ALPHABETIC PRINCIPLE

From Phonological Awareness to Reading Words

WHAT IS THE ALPHABETIC PRINCIPLE?

Connecting letters with their sounds to read and write is called the “alphabetic principle.” For example, a child who knows that the written letter “m” makes the /mmm/ sound is demonstrating the alphabetic principle.

Letters in words tell us how to correctly “sound out” (i.e., read) and write words. To master the alphabetic principle, readers must have phonological awareness skills and be able to recognize individual sounds in spoken words. Learning to read and write becomes easier when sounds associated with letters are recognized automatically.

The alphabetic principle has two parts:

1. **Alphabetic understanding** is knowing that words are made up of letters that represent the sounds of speech.
2. **Phonological recoding** is knowing how to translate the letters in printed words into the sounds they make to read and pronounce the words accurately.

The alphabetic principle is critical in reading and understanding the meaning of text. In typical reading development, children learn to use the alphabetic principle fluently and automatically. This allows them to focus their attention on understanding the meaning of the text, which is the primary purpose of reading.

Learning and applying the alphabetic principle takes time and is difficult for most children. There are many letters to learn the sounds of, and there are many ways to arrange the letters to produce the vast number of different words used in print. Also, in English, the same letter can represent more than one sound, depending on the word (e.g., the /a/ sounds are different in the words “mat” and “mate”). In Spanish, by contrast, which also includes the vowel “a” in its alphabet, the /a/ sound is always pronounced the same way (e.g., the /a/ in “casa”) regardless what word it is in.

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IRREGULAR WORDS

Some words, called irregular words, cannot be read accurately using the alphabetic principle to “sound them out” (e.g., the words “was,” “is,” and “know” are not accurately pronounced using phonics rules). Irregular words require a different teaching approach than teaching how to read words that follow a rule-based, letter-sound structure.

Despite the presence of irregular words, learning the alphabetic principle thoroughly and using it to read unfamiliar words, is a much better strategy than trying to memorize how to accurately read each word as a whole word, or guessing what the word might be based on its first letter and the words before or after it in the text.

EXPLICIT PHONICS INSTRUCTION

Explicit phonics instruction—i.e., how the alphabetic principle works, step by step—and extensive practice enables most children to learn the alphabetic principle. Below are effective strategies for teaching the alphabetic principle. These same strategies can be used with children who struggle learning to read, including children with reading disabilities or dyslexia. For students who struggle, highly systematic and explicit instruction plus lots of accuracy practice will be necessary for them to learn the alphabetic principle thoroughly.

All alphabetic languages can be taught using phonics and the alphabetic principle to guide instruction. However, alphabetic languages—English, Spanish, French, Turkish, Vietnamese, and many others—differ dramatically in their alphabetic principle complexity. For example, English is quite complex—there are many rules and exceptions to those rules that need to be learned to read and write correctly. Spanish is much less complex. Letters typically make only one sound regardless of the word they are in and rule exceptions are very few compared to English. For example, Spanish vowels only make one sound. In some cases, the vowel is silent as the letter “u” is in the word, “que.”

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TEACH STUDENTS TO CONNECT LETTERS TO THEIR MOST COMMON SOUND OR SOUNDS

All 26 letters in English make at least one predictable or common sound depending on the other letters in the word. For example, each of the three letters in the word “mat” makes its most common sound. In the word “meat” the “m” and “t” make the same sound as they do in “mat” and the “ea” letter combination makes its most common sound when these letters are together in a word. Notice that in the word “meat,” there is only one sound for “ea” even though there are two letters. Teachers can sequence and deliver instruction in a way that helps students efficiently learn the “rules” for the different sounds that letters and letter combinations make.

TEACH STUDENTS TO READ WORDS USING WHAT THEY KNOW ABOUT THE SOUNDS THAT LETTERS AND LETTER COMBINATIONS MAKE

In using the alphabetic principle, students “blend” the sounds made by individual letters into a whole word. For example, the sounds /m/ /a/ /t/ made by the letters “m,” “a,” and “t” are blended together seamlessly to make the word “mat.” Students should begin learning to read by producing the individual sounds in words and blending the sounds together quickly to produce the whole word with simple CVC words (consonant-vowel-consonant) before progressing to more complex word types that follow other important phonics rules. During instruction, teachers can use a strategy such as “I Do, We Do, You Do” to show students what to do (how to blend), practice with them (students do it with the teacher), and then the students do it on their own to show their teacher they know how to do it. Teaching several of the most common sounds for a few individual letters allows students to read many different words depending on letter order. Teaching other rule types (e.g., letter combinations such as “ea” and “th,” the “Bossy E” rule when “e” comes at the end of a CVC word, and so forth) enables students to accurately read a vast number of words they have never encountered in text.

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HAVE STUDENTS BEGIN READING TEXTS THAT CONTAIN A HIGH PERCENTAGE OF DECODABLE WORDS

Early in learning to read, students can begin reading simple books that contain words they can read on their own using the rules of the alphabetic principle. These decodable texts have a high percentage of words that follow common alphabetic principle rules. Students can practice reading these books to build their reading fluency, which helps them focus their attention on understanding the meaning of the text.

Many common words such as “was,” “said” and “of” are irregular words—i.e., they do not follow common alphabetic principle rules. The most common irregular words should be taught early in reading development so that students will be able to read more expanded and interesting texts that are otherwise highly decodable.

SUGGESTED CITATION

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From Phonological Awareness to Reading Words: The Critical Role of the Alphabetic Principle

Connecting letters with their sounds to read and write is called the “alphabetic principle.” The alphabetic principle has two parts:

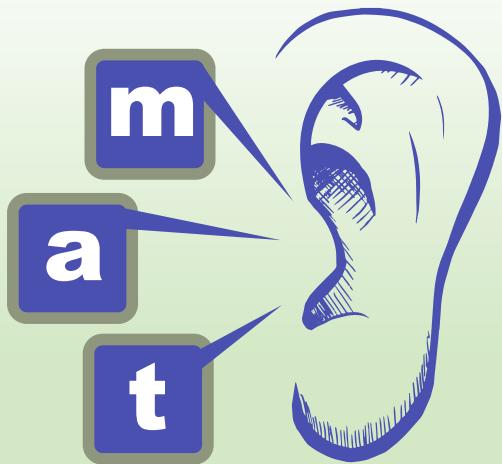
- 1) Alphabetic understanding is knowing that words are made up of letters that represent the sounds of speech.
- 2) Phonological recoding is knowing how to translate the letters in printed words into the sounds they make.

Progression of Regular Word Reading

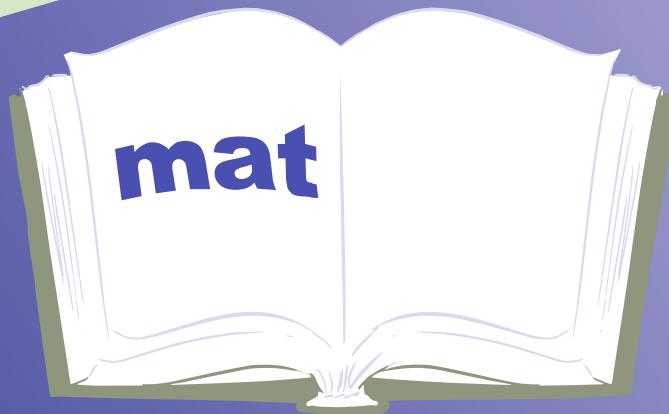


Effective Strategies for Teaching the Alphabetic Principle

Explicit phonics instruction and extensive practice enable most children to learn the alphabetic principle. Effective strategies for teaching the alphabetic principle include:



Teach students to connect letters to their most common sound or sounds



Teach students to read words using what they know about the sounds that letters and letter combinations make

Have students begin reading texts that contain a high percentage of decodable words



For students who struggle learning to read, highly systematic and explicit instruction plus lots of accuracy practice will be necessary for them to learn the alphabetic principle thoroughly.