

The Importance of Teaching Letter Names

The knowledge of letter names has been found to be the best predictor of future reading and spelling abilities for children as they enter school even when consideration is given to factors of phonological awareness and intelligence. Because of this research, it is often assumed that adequate focus is given to this important aspect of early literacy development. However, the importance of teaching letter-sound knowledge is sometimes seen as more important than letter-name instruction. Three current articles express why teaching letter naming should remain an important instructional focus.

The basis of English literacy instruction is knowledge of the alphabet. While it is true that decoding instruction is based on letter-sound instruction, the knowledge of letter names provides a common language to discuss letters. Many letters have more than one sound that they produce and many sounds are produced by more than one letter. Without a consistent language surrounding the symbols of the alphabet, it is more difficult for students and teachers to discuss these letters consistently. This is particularly important when considering spelling instruction because sounds have to be mapped to letters. Letter names also provide a connection between upper and lowercase letters of the alphabet. Teaching the letter name “A” provides a bridge between the symbols of A and *a*. These connections are critical to build memory networks in the brain for the alphabet.

Many letter names also provide clues to the most common sound that the letter makes. For instance, the letter name “B” includes the sound /b/ within the name of this letter. In these instances, the letter name provides important background information for children to learn letter-sound correspondences more rapidly. Unfortunately, this does not apply to all 26 letters of the alphabet. Letters such as “W” do not include their most common sound. In fact, young children sometimes confuse letters because the name does not include the sound from a different letter such as the letter name “Y” beginning with the /w/ sound. This potential confusion is often sighted as justification for not teaching letter names. However, even with these confusions possible, a study by Piasta and Wagner (2009) found that students who were taught letter names and letter sounds together actually had better letter sound knowledge than students who were only taught letter sounds. This finding indicates that potential confusions of names and sounds is not a valid reason to not teach letter names, but rather that letter names actually support letter sound acquisition.

It is clear that letter name instruction should not be overlooked in favor of letter sound knowledge, but it is also important to remember that the basis of decoding instruction relies on letter sound knowledge. With this in mind, letter naming instruction should not be belabored to the detriment of letter sound instruction. Jones and Reutzel (2012) developed an instructional technique called Enhanced Alphabet Knowledge (EAK) Instruction. This instructional format teaches letter names and sounds along with the written form for each letter in a quick and efficient format with consistent distributed review cycles. Within an EAK format, all 26 letter and sounds are taught within the first 26 days of school and then reinforcement lessons are taught consistently for students who need more time or on frequently confused letters. This study demonstrated significant increases in students performing at benchmark on measures of letter name fluency and a dramatic decrease in at-risk students after

receiving EAK instruction. An example EAK lesson can be found within the article by Jones and Reutzel (2012) and can be accessed through your local library.

The articles reviewed here provide a brief overview of the importance of including letter name instruction in early literacy instruction. While it may be possible to learn to read by only teaching letter sounds, research indicates that letter name instruction will actually strengthen letter sound knowledge. Most early literacy programs include this aspect of alphabetic knowledge within the curriculum and this should not be overlooked. If your selected program does not include a letter naming component, a structure such as EAK could be used in coordination with the current program being used. An additional alphabetic knowledge reference is *ABC Foundations for Young Children, A Classroom Curriculum* by Marilyn Jager Adams.

References:

Foulin, J.N. (2005). Why is letter-name knowledge such a good predictor of learning to read? *Reading and Writing*. 18, 129-155.

Jones, C. & Reutzel, D. R. (2012). Enhanced alphabet knowledge instruction: Exploring a change of frequency, focus, and distributed cycles of review. *Reading Psychology*, 33, 448-464.

Piasta, S. & Wagner, R. (2010). Learning letter names and sounds: Effects of instruction, letter type, and phonological processing skill. *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*, 105, 324-344.