

The Alphabetic Principle, Grade K

Introduction

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This course is concerned with the components of good instruction that contribute to students' acquisition of the alphabetic principle. The course demonstrates how effective instruction is presented in *Open Court Reading* and *SRA Imagine It!* and how that instruction enables students to become fluent readers.

For most children, formal reading instruction begins in kindergarten. Acquiring the necessary skills for mapping spoken to written language—the alphabetic principle—is not easy for many children. Research shows, however, that carefully designed, explicit, and systematic instruction can provide children with a strong foundation upon which they can become successful readers and writers.

In this course, you will visit the classroom of kindergarten teacher Wendy Martinez. Mrs. Martinez guides her students through carefully sequenced lessons to build their understanding and use of the alphabetic principle.

Although, as Mrs. Martinez notes, some of her students come to kindergarten already knowing the names and shapes of the letters of the alphabet, many do not. By starting her lesson with engaging activities that involve both the *Alphabet Sound Cards* and the *Alphabet Big Book*, Mrs. Martinez ensures that all of her students will develop this essential alphabetic knowledge.

To prepare her class to make the all-important connection between the sounds of spoken language and the symbols of written language, Mrs. Martinez also engages them in rhyming and wordplay activities from the beginning of the year.

Next, Mrs. Martinez begins to systematically introduce students to sound/letter correspondences, explicitly teaching them and allowing opportunities to practice each one. She begins with /s/ spelled Ss. As part of this introduction, she also familiarizes students with the instructional routine that will be used for each sound/letter introduction.

Teaching Example 1

In Teaching Example 1, Mrs. Martinez demonstrates how she helps her students begin to link what they have learned about letters—alphabetic knowledge—to what they have learned about spoken sounds—phonological and phonemic awareness. These activities are not intended to teach specific sound/letter connections; they simply introduce students to the idea that written letters and spoken sounds work together in a systematic way to make words.

I Can Spell Anything

By this point in the school year, children have had a great deal of practice working with the letters of the alphabet. They have learned to name and write all of the letters. The goal of the "I Can Spell Anything" activity, as well as the "Make a Word" activity that follows in Teaching Example 2, is to help children begin to connect what they have already learned about the letters of the alphabet with what they are now learning about the sounds of spoken English.

Mrs. Martinez uses the activity to help students understand the following points:

- The 26 letters of the alphabet combine in various ways to make all of the words that we write.
- Words are composed of sounds, and letters represent those sounds.

It's important to note that Mrs. Martinez has students use letter *names* and not letter *sounds* as they spell words. Pay particular attention to how she uses the *Alphabet Sound Cards* to demonstrate the connection between sounds and

letters. In addition, she uses the occasion to help students begin to distinguish between consonants and vowels (vowels are printed in red on the cards). She also uses a student's word—*guinea pig*—as an opportunity to spell words and to help her students begin to notice what a word is and that written words are separated by spaces.

Teaching Example 2

In Teaching Example 2, Mrs. Martinez builds on the "I Can Spell Anything" activity by helping her students understand that:

- When letters in a word change, the word changes, and so does its meaning.
- We can figure out a word's meaning by using its letters and sounds.

During the "I'm a Letter Expert" activity, she shows her students how the same set of letters can be used to make many different words; the order in which students say and write letters makes a difference in a word's meaning.

Letter Order

In the "I'm a Letter Expert" activities, students become "experts" of a particular letter. The students work only with a set of consonants at a time, while the teacher becomes the vowel expert. This allows students to focus on learning the more consistent spellings of the consonants. Once they learn how these common letters work, they will understand how all the others will too. They learn about each letter's shape, name, and, eventually, its sound. Notice how Mrs. Martinez has assigned letters that the students are not likely to already know well—for instance, she would not give a student the first letter of his or her own name.

You will see that Mrs. Martinez takes time to remind the class how to hold the **Letter Cards**. This lets the students know that the position of the cards is important; it also helps them focus on their particular letters.

Mrs. Martinez takes care as she writes each word on the board. Observe that she writes large, easy-to-identify letters in the same format as on the **Letter Cards**.

Mrs. Martinez moves the activities along at a brisk pace that keeps the students actively involved. She does not expect them to master sound/letter correspondences at this point, nor does she have them use letter sounds or blend sounds as they make words.

Teaching Example 3

In Teaching Example 3, Mrs. Martinez introduces the students to the first of the sound/letter correspondences that they will learn. To do this, she uses an **Alphabet Sound Card**.

The **Alphabet Sound Cards** remind students about the sounds of language and their corresponding letters. The name of the picture on each card contains the target correspondence (at the beginning of the word for consonants and in the middle of the word for short vowels). In addition, the picture associates a sound with an action. This sound-action association is introduced through an interactive story, in which the pictured object or character "makes" the sound of the letter. Once a sound/letter correspondence has been introduced, students can refer to the card as they read and write.

Effective instruction introduces sound/letter correspondences in a logical sequence that begins with one or two single consonant sounds, such as /s/ and /m/, and a short-vowel sound, with /a/ being the most productive choice. Several more single consonants and an additional short-vowel sound are then quickly added. The idea is that the sequence of introduction should permit the students to work with words as soon as possible. For example, when students have learned the sound/letter correspondences for /s/, /m/, /a/, /h/, /p/, /t/, /n/, and /i/, they can blend the sounds of the

letters together to read all of these words: *am, Sam, sat, map, mat, ham, hat, pat, Pam, pan, tan, tap, man, it, in, sit, sip, hit, hip, pit, tip, Tim, tin.*

Introducing the Sound for Ss

Mrs. Martinez starts the introduction of the sound for *s* by calling the students' attention to the **Alphabet Sound Card** for *Ss*. Throughout the introduction of the sound/letter correspondences, Mrs. Martinez will introduce these cards by following an instructional routine. By using the routine, Mrs. Martinez leaves nothing to chance and makes no assumptions about what the students know. She introduces each sound/letter correspondence in the same way, thus ensuring that students have been given the information they need to go on. As the year progresses, they have many opportunities to practice these correspondences and become comfortable and efficient with them.

Mrs. Martinez begins her introduction with the picture on the card facing the wall. Up to this point in the year, the cards have been used as simple alphabet cards. As each new sound/letter correspondence is introduced, the card is turned over with the picture and the letters facing out. Notice that after the initial introduction, the students first listen for the target sound, and then they practice it by saying words that include the target sound. Notice as well that Mrs. Martinez involves each student in the activity; by asking for individual responses, she can determine each student's understanding.

Teaching Example 4

Teaching Example 4 continues with the introduction of */s/* spelled *Ss*. Because learning the sound/letter correspondences is the single most critical aspect in learning the alphabetic principle, the initial introduction of each of these correspondences is systematic, explicit, and thorough.

Linking the Sound to the Letter to Read Words

Watch as Mrs. Martinez leads the students through a thorough practice of the target sound/letter correspondence. After the initial introduction, the students listen for and say words with the target sound, and identify the letter for the sound in written words.

Mrs. Martinez has employed an effective method for helping students correct their own mistakes. When a student misidentifies the letter *s* for *c* in the written word *see*, Mrs. Martinez does not correct her—she helps the student think about what was said and figure out the correct answer by using the **Alphabet Sound Cards**.

Teaching Example 5

Teaching Example 5 continues with the introduction of */s/* spelled *Ss*. In this example, the students practice writing the letter that represents the sound.

Linking the Sound to the Letter to Read Words (continued)

Watch as Mrs. Martinez leads the students through a review of the sound/letter correspondence they have been learning. After the review, she provides students with opportunities to practice what they have learned by:

- Writing the capital and small letter *Ss* in their workbook.
- Identifying words that begin with the sound/letter correspondence, using picture cues.

It is important to note that the workbook activity is not independent practice or busy work. It is an integral part of the teacher-directed lesson.

Notice how Mrs. Martinez circulates among the students as they are working and makes a point of checking each child's work, quietly helping those children who need assistance.