Promoting Knowledge of Letters and Words

Children use "strategies of comparison" when learning how to read (Clay, 1991). When children learn how to look a print, they construct a personal classification system that is organized around the differences and similarities that they perceive in the printed word. This system of organized information has generative value for children. They learn "strategies of comparison" for linking known information to new items. In reading, *a letter can only exist through its relationship to another letter, sound or word*. Thus an important feature of visual perception is the role of interrelationships and the use of "strategies of comparison" for analyzing these connections.

Children must acquire fluent and flexible knowledge of letters and knowledge of words. However, *children do not have to know all the letters or words in order to begin reading*. Knowledge of a few letters and words provide children with a basis for acquiring more visual information as they engage in reading and writing activities (Clay, 1991;Smith 1986). *Children need to acquire "strategies of comparison"*(Clay, 1991*) for relating what they know to what they do not know*.

For example*, when a child learns how to construct his name, he is acquiring an important organizational system*. He is learning much more than just recognizing his name: he is learning that if these particular letters (that I know) are my name, then these other letters (that I do not know) can not be my name. In other words, *the child is acquiring 'strategies of comparison" for checking, confirming, and rejecting letter features based on existing knowledge.*

It is important to understand that readers do not learn to recognize letters by memorizing the shape of the letters. As Clay (1991) says, "The eye does not photograph the details of the print and transfer it to the brain.*" The child has to learn how to attend to the details of the print*. Yet, the traditional view in classrooms is that children need lots of practice with "a" before moving on to 'b," then on to "c." From a strategic point of view, the child's rapid recognition of a letter is based on the knowledge that the letter could <u>not</u> be one of the other 25 letters of the alphabet. Through past experiences with print language, the brain acquires a networking system for organizing visual information based on strategies of comparison. In order to identify any letter, the child must see what the alternatives to that letter are. For example, the child can not recognize "m" until he or she can compare it with every other letter that is not "m." The comparison of the letter "m" with groups of other letters presents the child with a visual model for discovering very quickly what the distinctive features of letters are (Smith, 1986).

The spontaneous recognition of letters is based on the significant differences that exist among the letters. As a child learns how to distinguish each letter of the alphabet from other letters, the child acquires knowledge about what constitutes significant differences among the letters of the alphabet. Clay (1991) discusses how children find it easier to distinguish letters with maximum contrasts. She describes visual perception as important learning;

> Learning to apply visual perception skills to print is more complicated than mere looking and snapping the image into the brain like a photograph . . . the child's visual scanning of letter forms and his manner of labeling or categorizing each one to establish its identity as different from all other is important learning (Clay, 1991, p. 261).

To promote flexible learning of letters, children must acquire knowledge of letters in many different ways. A simple rule is to begin with the easiest letters- those letters with maximum contrast (for example, m, b, f, s, r) - and promote overlearning with these letters. The idea is to provide children with a systematic way of learning how to learn letters. As children acquire knowledge of letters, they are prompted to search for known letters that are embedded within words. *To encourage this type of processing, teachers should emphasize letter learning in multiple ways:*

- The name of the letter
- The way the letter looks
- The sound the letter makes
- The feel of the letter in the mouth
- The movement of the letter as it is written
- A word associated with the letter
- The way the letter looks embedded within a word

As soon as children have acquired strategies for perceiving letters, the same types of strategies can be applied to analyzing the visual features of words. At the direction of the brain, the eyes search the word for distinguishable feature - or known word parts - which may or may not be associated with the unknown word. Instead of searching for individual letter/sound categories (which is a slow process), the brain searches among its collection of logical word parts that can be used for problem-solving on the unknown word.

Research indicates that good readers read in chunks as they attach sounds to a group of letters, rather than individual letters. In order to promote analytical processing for the visual organization of word parts into related categories, the child's attention is directed to the largest chunks within words. Through many reading and writing experiences, children learn how to integrate visual knowledge with meaning and structure cues. Letter and word building activities enable children to develop flexible management systems for promoting fast responding to printed language.

How Do I Do It?

A variety of materials can be used to help children develop print knowledge. Some examples include the following:

- Colorful magnetic letters
- Letter cards
- Sandpaper letters
- Salt trays
- Chalkboards
- Stencil letters
- Dry erase boards

Magnetic letters provide children with an easy-to-manipulate form that calls attention to letter features. Some examples of activities with magnetic letters are:

<u>Visual Discrimination of Features of Known Letter From Features of Unknown Letters</u>

Place 4-5 magnetic forms for a known letter on a magnetic board. Place a few distinctly different unknown letters next to the known letter. Draw a circle and instruct the child to put all the magnetic forms for the known letter inside the circle.

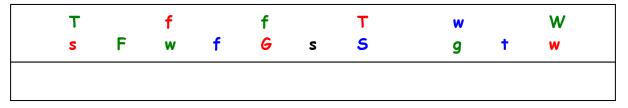<u>Sort Known Letters by Categories</u>
- by color
- by upper-case and lower-case forms
- by letter name

<u>Fluent Recognition of Known Letters</u>
Place several different known letters outside a circle. Instruct the child to pull the known letters into the circle as the child simultaneously identifies the letter name.

Promote **Fast** Recognition of Known Letters

Place known letters across the top of the magnetic board. Instruct the child to pull the letters downward using both hands as he/she simultaneously names the letter.

T	f	f	T		w	W
s	F	w	f	G	s	S	g	t	w

As soon as the child acquires knowledge of some letters, these words should be put together to form some high frequency words. For example, if the child knows the letters t-h-e, the child should be taught the word "the." *High frequency words should be located in text, written fluently on different planes, located on the word wall, and used in journal writing.* The following activity can be used with magnetic letters to promote fast and fluent assembly of high frequency words.

The teacher displays magnetic letters for some known words. The teacher gives the verbal model of several known words and instructs the children to make the words a fast as they can.

Children are given dry erase boards and the teacher calls out several known high frequency words. The children write these words as fast as they can.

> *It is important to note that all word building activities are based on known words. The goal is to promote rapid and flexible recognition of visual stimuli, so that children can process this information quickly during text reading.*

Sources:
Clay, M. (1991). *Becoming Literate*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann
Smith, F. (1986). *Understanding Reading*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates

Ways of Learning Letters

Build fast visual processing systems
Building sensory systems

➢ The name of the letter

➢ The way the letter looks

➢ The sound the letter makes

➢ The feel of the letter in the mouth

➢ The movement of the letter as it is written

➢ A word associated with the letter

   (the anchor activates association)

➢ The way the letter looks embedded

   within a word

Source: <u>Apprenticeship in Literacy</u>, Dorn, et al, p. 93.