Triple R Teaching

Hello, Anna Geiger here from Reach All Readers, and welcome to Episode 73 of Triple

The alphabetic principle is this idea that print is a code for sounds. In other words, we use graphemes to represent phonemes, a letter or group of letters to represent a single sound. For example, the letter D represents the sound /d/. The letter F represents the sound /f/. The alphabetic principle is something that we as teachers might take for granted, but as it turns out, a lot of our students don't acquire this as naturally as we might think.

A great definition of the alphabetic principle comes from Rollanda E. O'Connor in her fantastic book, Teaching Word Recognition, and she writes, "The alphabetic principle can be understood in this way. Any word that we say can be broken into speech sounds. Any speech sound can be represented with a letter or collection of letters from the alphabet." Also in her book, O'Connor reminds us that the alphabetic principle should be established as early as possible, definitely by the end of kindergarten.

So how do we do that? How do we make sure that our students have the alphabetic principle? Today I want to share five things that you can do.

Number one, when you introduce letters of the alphabet, consider starting with the letter's sound. Now I'm actually not of the camp that says we should start only with letter sounds and wait to learn letter names. Instead, I think we should teach them together, but consider starting with the sound.

Here's what I mean. Instead of saying, "This is the letter S and it says /s/," consider starting with the sound itself.

So you could say something like this, "Today, we're going to learn how to spell the sound /s/. Watch me as I make the sound /s/. Let me hear you make that sound, /s/. What is your mouth doing? Yes, your tongue is up by the roof of your mouth. One way we spell the sound /s/ is with the letter S." Then I would display the letter S on a card,

and I would say, "The letter S represents /s/. S is the letter, /s/ is the sound."

Something else you can do to build the alphabetic principle is to include letters as much as possible, even in phonological awareness activities. So we're learning that we shouldn't spend a ton of time on phonological sensitivity skills - like rhyming syllables and onset/rime - once kids get to kindergarten, but I still think there's value there, especially in preschool.

Let's say I'm teaching children in preschool to break words apart into their onset and rime. Remember that the onset is the part of the word right before the first vowel, and then the rime is the rest of the word, and this is in one-syllable words. So in the word "milk," the onset is /m/ and the rime is /ilk/. And by the way, rime in this case is spelled R-I-M-E.

If I'm doing this with my preschoolers, I'm teaching them to break the word apart into the onset and the rime, I can represent each of those parts with a block. Once we've done this a lot of times and they understand the process, I could say, "Can you break the word "sack" into two parts?" You would have them push one block forward for /s/ and one block forward for /ack/, and then since I've already taught them, that S says /s/, I could remove that first block and put an S in its place. Then we could point to the letter and the second block and say the word again, "sack," "sack."

Something else you can do, even with very young learners, is have them build words using letter tiles. This is something that Marnie Ginsberg from Reading Simplified talks about a lot. I'll link to her video about this in the show notes. What you would do is you would have letter tiles for a three letter word, a CVC word, and you would help the child spell the word by first breaking it apart, and then pulling down the tiles and putting them in the proper order. Marnie recommends not calling those tiles by their letter names, but referring to them by their sounds.

For example, if I had the letters S-A-T and I mixed them up, I would say, "Today, we're going to spell the word "sat." What's the first sound? /s/." Then I would say, "Okay, where's the /s/?" Instead of saying where's the S, I could say where's the /s/, snd they would pull down the S, and if not, I would show them which one they needed. "Okay. What's the middle sound? /ă/. Yes. Pull down the, /ă/" and they would pull down the A. Then finally, "What's the final sound? /t/. Yes, pull down the /t/," and they would pull down the T. Then you could read the word with them.

As students start to do writing, we move on to tip number four, which is to encourage students to use invented spelling. This simply means that you encourage them to spell words as best they can using the phonics knowledge they have, even though their

phonics knowledge is incomplete. So a preschooler may write the word hat with an H and a T, because they don't necessarily understand how to break it apart into all of its sounds. Or they might spell the word "is" as I-Z because they don't know yet that the word "is" uses an S to represent /z/. This is all actually very useful.

In her book, Teaching Word Recognition, O'Connor tells us this,

"Invented spelling requires children to devote conscious attention to how they might represent the sounds in words logically, even when they have not been taught particular spelling and written word pairings. The logic children use to invent spellings for words is an internal and temporary logic, which can be replaced over time as they become more aware of the letter sound possibilities in their language."

Of course, over time, invented spelling is slowly replaced by conventional spelling.

Finally, my last tip for you is to help your students develop the alphabetic principle by practicing segment to spell, even in preschool. What I like to do for segment to spell is actually count the sounds in the word first and draw a small line for each sound, so we can represent each sound in each blank.

For example, if we're spelling the word "pig," I would say, "Today, we're going to spell the word 'pig.' Let's break it apart and count the sounds. /p/ /ĭ/ /g/. How many? Three sounds, so let's draw three blanks."

Something else you could do if you think this would be fun for your students is to put down three sticky notes, then on each sticky note, they'll write the spelling for the sound. So let's say we're using the sticky notes, I could say, "On the first sticky note, we're going to spell the sound /p/. What letter represents /p/?" Or you could say what letter says /p/, even though that's not technically correct, but I don't think it's a big deal. All right, so then they would write a P on the line. Then for the second one, "What is the second sound in the word pig? That's right /ĭ/, what letter represents, /ĭ/? Yes an I, let's put an I on the middle sticky," and so on.

Now this works even if you're doing harder words that include digraphs for example. Let's say you want to spell the word "chat." Again you would break the word apart into its sounds, /ch/ /ă/ /t/. We still only have three stickies or three lines because there were only three sounds in "chat." When you point to the first sticky, you would say, "Okay, what's the first sound in 'chat?' That's right, /ch/. What did you learn represents /ch/?"

Segment to spell is actually really useful, even for older kids who are struggling to spell a really long, tough word. I shared before that when my daughter had to spell a hard word in second grade, the word "physical," we actually broke it apart into its sounds and drew a line for each sound. After we did that, it was much more clear to her how many letters she actually needed to spell the word.

So there you go. Those are five ways to build the alphabetic principle. Just as a quick recap, consider when you're teaching letters to introduce them by starting with the sound, and then naming the letter that represents the sound. Use letters in phonological awareness activities as much as possible. Build words using letter tiles. Allow and encourage your students to use invented spelling, and practice segment to spell, where when they spell a word, you first break it apart into its sounds and then spell each individual sound on a line or a sticky note.

You can find the show notes for this episode at reachallreaders.com/episode73. See