

## PD 4 THE ALPHABET

You cannot talk about phonics and not begin with your building blocks - the alphabet.

### The code

That amazing system, first developed by the Greeks 4,800 years ago<sup>1</sup>, and then passed on to us by the Romans, is one of the most wonderful inventions of humankind.

Α α Alpha	Β β Beta	Γ γ Gamma	Δ δ Delta	Ε ε Epsilon	Ζ ζ Zeta
Η η Eta	Θ θ Theta	Ι ι Iota	Κ κ Kappa	Λ λ Lambda	Μ μ Mu
Ν ν Nu	Ξ ξ Xi	Ο ο Omicron	Π π Pi	Ρ ρ Rho	Σ σ,ς Sigma
Τ τ Tau	Υ υ Upsilon	Φ φ Phi	Χ χ Chi	Ψ ψ Psi	Ω ω Omega

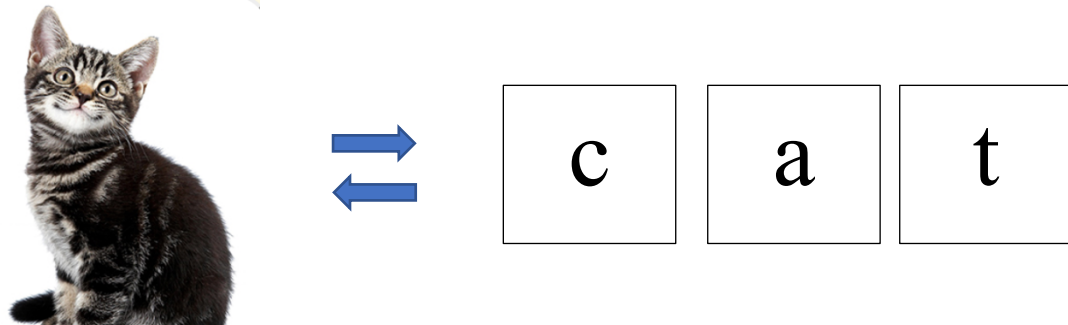
A B C D E F G H  
I K L M N O P Q  
R S T V X Y Z

<sup>1</sup> The Greeks were in fact building on earlier forms of the “alphabetic” code but their version was the one that became widely known and, with later modifications by the Romans, eventually the standard in the Western world.

Its premise is astonishingly simple. Take a **sound** and represent it with a **symbol**. Do this with enough sounds and you have a code that can be used to encompass all language.

We take it for granted that sounds can be represented by little symbols on paper (or onscreen).

Every child has to learn their ABCs; and it is a wonderfully complex thing that we ask them to do.



A concept ... a sound (“cat”) ... three little written symbols (of the 26 available in the code) that together make up a “word”.

Impressive. More exacting than a child learning to walk, and to talk – because those skills come naturally.

Here they are using their brains to link language not to sounds but to man-made abstract symbols.

Needless to say, this takes time.

## **The stages of learning the alphabet**

Scholars tell us that there are four stages<sup>2</sup>.

### **1. The pre-alphabet phase**

In this phase, children form connections between visual features of the word in print and its pronunciation and meaning.

When they recognise logos such as McDonald's or Coca-Cola by the shape of the logo design they are using pre alphabetic strategies.

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<sup>2</sup> *A Closer Look at the Five Essential Components of Effective Reading Instruction: A Review of Scientifically Based Reading Research for Teachers*, (2004) Learning Point Associates

## **2. The partial alphabet phase**

In this phase, children make a connection between *some* of the letters within the word as it appears in print and the meaning and pronunciation stored in the child's oral vocabulary. An example might be seeing their name (eg Sam) and noticing that the letters are always the same. Or recognising the 'E' in a picture book with an elephant.

## **3. The full alphabet phase**

In this phase, children make connections between the full sequence of letters (eg cat, dog) of the word and connect them with its pronunciation and meaning. Phonemic awareness is incredibly important. It not only allows them to decode the words presented in class, but to use the same strategies to unpack other words they encounter in books or signs.

Learning the alphabet means mastering the difference between capitals and lower case letters. It also means careful instruction in the difference between the "name" of the letter (eg A to rhyme with mate) and the sound the letter makes (eg a to rhyme with cat).

## **4. The consolidated alphabet phase**

In this phase, children have moved on to a more sophisticated grasp on how letters can be used, including some understanding of morphemes (clusters of letters with a known meaning like -tion, -ake, un-, pre-, micro-, -ness, -less) and can begin to manipulate letters according to these patterns.

Typically Stages 1 and 2 will be managed in kindergarten and preschool, and the full alphabet phase (3) will be achieved in Grades 1 and 2. The consolidated phase (4) may come later, depending on the child and the instruction program.

How do teachers navigate these different stages?

"In the United States, early alphabet instruction has often focused on letter names rather than sounds and followed a letter-of-the-week approach. Research, however, suggests such practices may not be the most effective. Children's letter sound knowledge is critical for successful reading and writing, and young people readily learn letter sounds when taught. Moreover, children benefit from teaching letter names and sounds simultaneously, [even] when these are introduced at a faster pace (eg three per week). ... Explicit alphabet instruction - in which the teacher shows the letter and provides the corresponding name and sound - is most impactful for letter sound learning."<sup>3</sup>

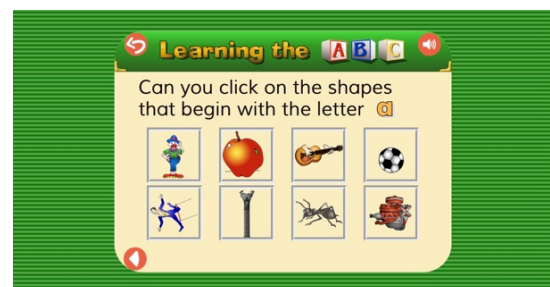
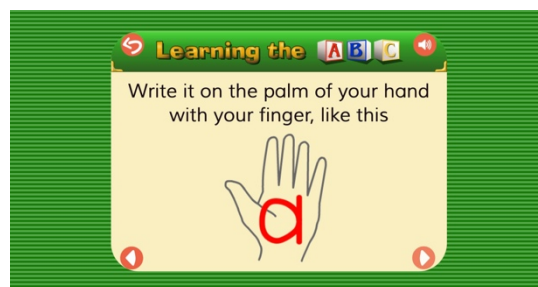
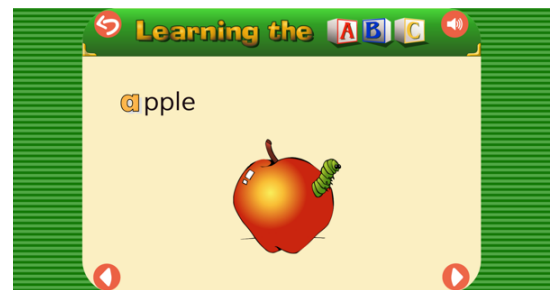
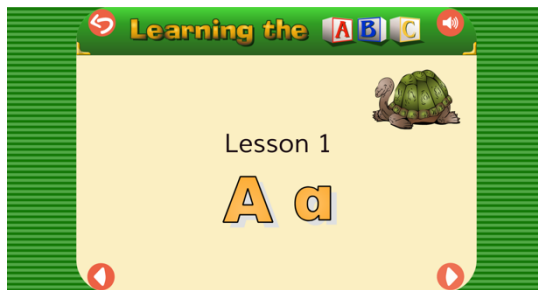
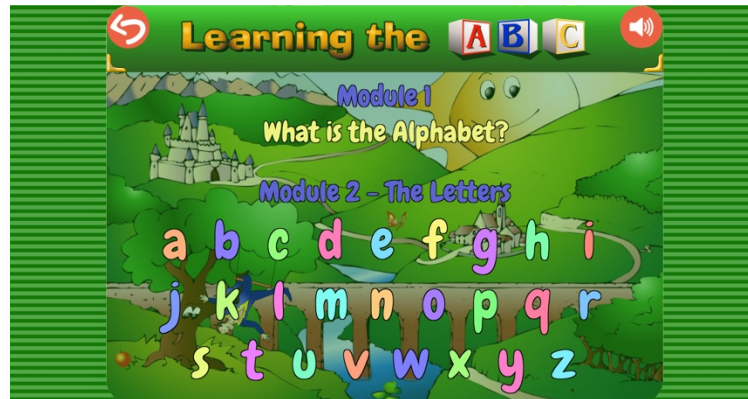
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<sup>3</sup> Piasta, S.& Hudson, A. (2022), 'Key Knowledge to Support Phonological Awareness and Phonics Instruction', *The Reading Teacher*, ILA

## How does Ziptales help with alphabet awareness?

Ziptales has four modules devoted to the alphabet and simple (emergent reader) words:

### Learning the ABC



This module deals systematically with all 26 letters of the alphabet. Each letter is identified, then shown with words which have the featured letter as the initial letter (eg a -pple).

There are mini lessons in drawing the letter (on paper and in the air), which has been shown to help recall<sup>4</sup>, and finally a short “test” on identifying the letter at the end of the lesson.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.readingrockets.org/topics/writing/articles/writing-made-easier-helping-students-develop-automatic-soundsymbol>

## Nursery Rhymes



A great deal of research affirms the usefulness of a rich linguistic background, with the emphasis on pictures and sound, and especially rhyme.

“The importance of rhyme awareness is undeniable concerning phonological awareness.”<sup>5</sup>



This is no surprise, as the whole point of phonemic awareness is to have children focus on sound elements ... “Little Bo Peep has lost her sheep ...” and all the other favorites.

“Rhymes are fantastic vocabulary boosters. They often feature a pleasing rhythmic pattern and simple repetitive phrases that babies and young children find easy to remember and repeat. In order to develop their phonological awareness, children need to be repeatedly exposed to spoken language, and nursery rhymes provide the perfect way to do this.”<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Grofcikova, S. and Macajova, M. (2021) *CEPS Journal*

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.pacey.org.uk/news-and-views/pacey-blog/2019/october-2019/the-importance-of-nursery-rhymes-in-early-childhood/>

## Letter Fun



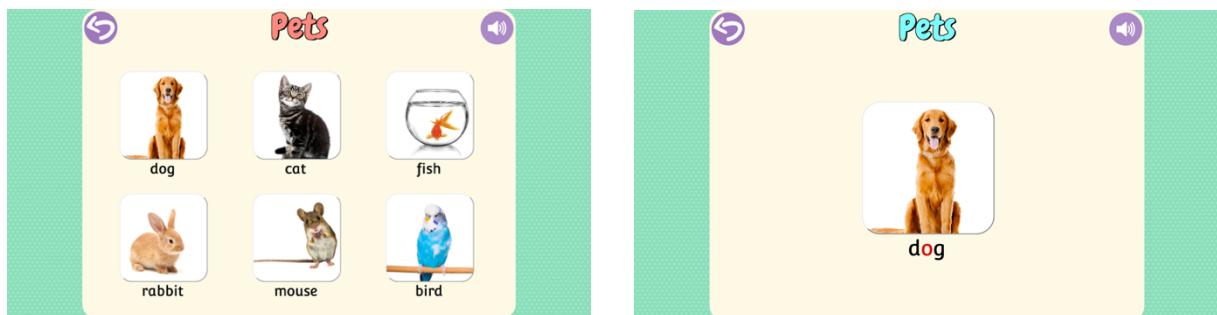
In a similar vein, **Letter Fun** shows all the letters of the alphabet and works through short words which feature them (always as the initial letter).

The sounds of the letters are pronounced slowly and carefully to help children identify them.

## My First Words



Here the emphasis is on presenting the words for commonplace things and taking children through a carefully performed focus on their component letters (eg d – o – g).



Like so many other parts of Ziptales, children can be left to navigate through these modules on their own.

It is entirely up to the teacher, but repetition is strongly correlated to learning<sup>7</sup>. Drawing a letter in the air (Learning the ABC) many times, or singing along with “Little Bo Bop” (Nursery Rhymes), or following the voiceover in “A- a- ant” (Letter Fun), are agreeable and simple ways to reinforce phonemic awareness.

Teachers will have a variety of options for teaching the alphabet, and simple beginner words, and these modules are not to be missed.

<sup>7</sup> <https://irisreading.com/how-does-repetition-help-memory-and-memorization/#:~:text=One%20study%20found%20that%20when,list%20aloud%20without%20repeating%20it.>