

The Story Behind Teaching Letter Sounds through Puppet Shows

Teaching letter sounds is foundational to decoding. While stories are a powerful tool for recalling letter sounds, they can also be detrimental if the lessons do not contain a correct pronunciation of the sounds. If children mispronounce letter sounds, blending them together results in decoding difficulties. Some computer games I looked through taught letter sounds incorrectly by adding a schwa vowel to the end of the letter sound. A schwa vowel sounds similar to the short vowel "u". For example instead of the letter "t" saying "t" as at the end of the word b-a-t, it is mistakenly taught as "tuh". If letters have schwa vowels attached, decoding a word like "bat" can end up sounding like "buh-a-tuh" causing the child needless frustration.

My answer came the year a number of my students in my class had speech challenges. A speech pathologist was employed to work with my students weekly for some months. She introduced me to The Lindamood program written by Patricia and Phyllis Lindamood.

The effectiveness of her work with these students was undoubtedly the answer to their difficulties. I was so grateful! I purchased a copy of the program. It was an understanding of letter sounds from an angle that was new to me. Speech pathology teaches children that letter sounds are made with your lips, mouth, tongue, teeth, throat and nose.

Adapting the material, I was able to integrate the pronunciation of letter sounds into the puppet shows. At the end of the puppet show, the children were given mirrors to practice using their lips, tongue, teeth, throat and nose to make the new sound.

One cute moment came from a parent after we had learned the letter "M". She was puzzled as to why her son had said the letter m could come out his nose! I explained that we had made the sound of the letter m and then plugged our noses. Try it! I suggested. Making the sound, she plugged her nose midway. The sound stopped. Light dawning, the parent laughed. "So I guess some alphabet sounds actually do come out your nose!"



Noisy Letters:

Some letters make vibrations in your throat such as b, d, v, g, j, l. Others make your lips vibrate like v. Your tongue vibrates with "th" when it comes at the beginning of a word. For example: they

Quiet Letters:

Other letters are formed inside your mouth using your lips, tongue or teeth and do not vibrate. For example: c, f, h, k, p, qu, s,

Nose Letters:
















































Two of the alphabet letters make sounds which come through your nose. These are m, n











Effective Letter Sound





























Teaching Strategies:

































The charts on the next few pages, depict the speech pathology used in writing the puppet shows which made the lessons effective.

My Chart of How to Teach Letter Sounds (based on Lindamood method & modified for use in puppet shows)

Alphabet Consonants	Noisy Letter *Lips buzz *Throat *mouth	Quiet Letter *Lips *Throat *mouth	Open Mouth	Closed Mouth	Short burst of air	Blow until out of air	Stick out lips in a squarish shape.	Top teeth on bottom lip	Lips move by popping open	Cup tongue in mouth (near bottom of mouth)	Curly tongue behind top teeth.	Blow sound out nose until air runs out	Tongue taps off back of top teeth
Bb													
Cc													
Dd													
Ff ph gh													
Gg													
Hh													
Jj													
Kk													
Ll													
Mm													
Nn kn													
Pp													
Rr wr ur, ir, er													
Ss							Keep tongue behind top teeth. Slightly cup it to touch the sides of the roof of your mouth.						

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Tt													
Vv													
Zz							Keep tongue behind top teeth. Slightly cup it to touch the sides of the roof of your mouth.						

Alphabet Consonants digraphs & diphthongs	Noisy *Lips buzz *Throat *mouth	Quiet *Lips *Throat *mouth	Open Mouth	closed Mouth	Short burst of air	Blow until out of air	Mouth changes shape	Stick out lips in a squarish shape	Bite tongue gently	Cup tongue in mouth (near bottom of mouth)			
w													
wh													
sh													
th Noisy		Found at beginning of words											
th Quiet			Found at end of words										
ch													
qu (kw)													
x (ks)				For “s” portion of the sound keep tongue behind top teeth & cup tongue to touch sides of your mouth’s roof									

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ce ci													
oi oy													
au aw													
ge gi													
y													
cy								For “s” portion of sound keep tongue behind top teeth & cup tongue to touch the sides of the roof of your mouth.					
gy													
ow (slow)													
ow (how)													
or													

More on Learning Letter Sounds: Short Vowels

In 1994, I came across an article in **Time Magazine** called "Fertile Minds" by J. Madeleine Nash on how a child's brain develops. In it, scientists discovered that children learn to recognize vowel sounds around six months. It was logical to conclude that if a child had ear infections between the ages of five and nine months it would explain why some students (not ESL) struggled to distinguish between short vowel sounds (a,e,i,o,u).

The tips from the Lindamood program for short vowel sounds worked wonders in helping students decode short vowel words as well as to spell them. It was amazing to watch children sounding out three letter words by segmenting them so they could apply the short vowel strategies they had been taught.

NOTE:

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- b) if given the source, the name of the author, in the case of a work...



Quote: Wiring Language:

WHAT'S GOING ON: A six month-old can recognize the vowel sounds that are the basic building blocks of speech. WHAT PARENTS CAN DO: Talking to a baby a lot, researchers have found, significantly speeds up the process of learning new words. The high-pitched speech style known as Parentese helps babies connect objects with words."

Article by J. Madeleine Nash

Short Vowels Jaw Position



short vowel **a**



short vowel **e**



short vowel **i**



short vowel **o**



short vowel **u**

Short vowel sounds are among the most tricky letter sounds to master.

Teaching Tips:

"A" To enunciate "a" properly: **big** smile, open your mouth and keep your teeth **more than a finger-width apart** Example: sat

"E" To enunciate "e" properly: big smile, and keep your teeth **exactly a finger-width apart**. Example: set

"I" To enunciate "i" properly: big smile, and close your teeth so that they are a **finger-nail-width apart** Example: sit

"O" To enunciate "o" properly: open up your mouth to form an oval and say "aw!" (Squeeze cheeks *gently* if necessary) Example: got

"U" To enunciate "u" properly: pretend you are saying "up" and leave off the "p". Example: cup

DAILY REVIEW

Review of making the sounds by placing lips, tongue, teeth and especially the jaw in proper position are necessary. Practice all five sounds in a row at least three or four times per day until mastery.

REMEMBER:

The **key** to differentiating between short vowels **a, e, i** is the **position of the jaw**. **A large smile must accompany all three jaw positions**. **Short a** requires the most open jaw. **Short e** is the jaw open a fingerwidth apart. **Short i** is the jaw open a fingernail width apart.

NOTE: My sister posed for these photographs and was paid \$100.00 as a thank-you..

More on Learning Letter Sounds:

My mom and I made my first puppet stand and puppets when I was in grade one! Making and using puppets was something I did all through elementary school. When I began teaching, I made marionette puppets with my students in grade six. Naturally, I also used puppets with my grade one classes. Children loved Timothy, the mouse puppet, who was learning to read right alongside them. (I still have him!) He was sent home with each child on his/her birthday. I used the mouse puppet to make reading mistakes so that children would see that everyone learns by trying and making mistakes. The illustration of babies learning to walk, falling down, getting back up and trying again is one I used a lot with my students. No matter your age - no learning happens perfectly. It is a process based on the teaching we have received, and the experiences we have. Everyone make mistakes and we all need grace and room to grow and learn. I used my mouse puppet to help the children learn this important fact of life. No one is perfect, but with patience and perseverance you can learn to read.

The puppet shows were a fun venue for introducing letter sounds. Together with the speech pathology tips, they became a powerful tool.

NOTE: I wish to acknowledge the help received from a wonderful teacher named Mrs. Haase. When I first started teaching grade one, she gave me a copy of the names she used for teaching letters. Occasionally one child was put back in kindergarten for maturity reasons. Sometimes we got each other's student the following year. Not wanting to create teaching confusion for one particular child, I asked her if I could use the letter names she had given to me. She generously agreed and so the puppet show scripts were written using these titles. This ensured continuity between classes and made an easier transition for any students having to repeat the month of September a year later. Mrs. Haase's kindness to me will always be treasured.



Above is a photo of my classroom puppet stand and below is a shot of the first puppet show with my homemade puppets for the twin ee's. Look carefully, and you will find the twins' toys in a box taped to the puppet stand.





In the puppet shows, I adapted the Lindamood program to add pronunciation tips for both consonant and vowel sounds. I believe this is what made the puppet show lessons so successful.

Some years later when I began home schooling our oldest daughter, I wrote the puppet shows down as scripts and performed them live for her while my husband videoed them. I didn't try selling the first recordings, because the quality wasn't good enough and so I added the scripts to my book Smart Start Companion.

* * *

My sister's children called me the puppet show lady when they were little, because they had grown up watching these first Smart Start puppet shows. I had given my sister a copy Smart Start in Language Arts when she lived in another province and she used the program to teach most of her children to read.

A couple of years passed and my sister moved nearby. This gave us the opportunity of home schooling our children together. At the time I was revising Smart Start in Language Arts to include daily phonics and sentence writing. After finishing the revision, I still hoped to have the puppet shows in video format to accompany the program. Muppets are expensive. I didn't have the funds, but thought of cashing in my Co-op membership. It amounted to approximately one thousand dollars—enough to buy the muppets. I then sewed curtains for the new puppet stand my husband built. We bought a video camera and used the P.A. system from our workshops. We hired my sister's family to help out, and created the updated puppet shows.

Unfortunately, the sound quality was so poor that my husband Kevin had to purchase some expensive editing software. We then paid one of my sister's sons by the hour to edit the material. My sister helped her son get high school credits for completing this project. All in all, it was a memorable experience.



In my puppet show scripts, I adapted the Lindamood to include correct pronunciation tips for both consonant and vowel sounds at the end of each lesson. Adding these pronunciation tips made the puppet show lessons effective in teaching letter sounds.



We donated most of the large muppets to the home school board, The Center for Learning in Okotoks, AB because they were using our home school programs. We had previously supplied the Center for Learning with a copy of our puppet show videos along with digital copies of the grades one, two, three, four Smart Start teachers' manuals at our cost. This school board in turn agreed to purchase consumable student programs from our company.

Several years passed and their elementary administration changed. We were told that the Center for Learning was changing direction and would no longer be using these programs. As a final gift to the school, we were able to donate approximately one hundred and fifty copies of our grade one/two Smart Start programs. Kevin and I wish them all the best in their future endeavours as they continue to serve families around our province.

PLEASE NOTE: Photos of children in the videos and book covers have been removed due to the changing times.

NOTE: Our daughter Kara designed and created all our book covers beginning with the revised school edition of Smart Start in Language Arts.

