

## **The effects of teaching English alphabet with and without initial introduction of letter names on Iranian grade seven students' reading speed**

**Ali Tayebnejad Manjili**

Islamic Azad University, Takestan Branch

### **Abstract**

One of the most important steps in teaching English is teaching its alphabet to the learners. Implementing the best method will highly help teachers to achieve acceptable results in helping students to read better and faster. Two basic methods are frequently used by Iranian educators. Some start by the name of the letters and introduce the sounds that they symbolize later, while others are those who are very concerned about the sounds and tend to teach the letter names at the end of the course. Through this study, the researcher has sought to explore the effects of teaching English Alphabets with and without initial introduction of letter names on grade seven Iranian students reading speed. To achieve this goal, 20 grade-seven students (N=20), who were alphabetically assigned to two different classes (n=10), with no previous experience of learning English were taught using these - two - different methods. Then they were asked to read **20** words as fast as they could. Using a chronometer, their reading times were calculated and recorded. According to their achieved time, they were given ranks from **1**(the fastest) to **20**(the slowest). Implementing the rank sums test the results were compared and analyzed and then the **z** value for rank sums was obtained which was equal to -2.20(Negative **z** value is due to assigning number 1 to the highest rank and 20 to the lowest one).The **z** critical for  $\alpha$  of .05 is 1.96.Knowing this, we can reject the null hypothesis and have the confidence in the conclusion that subjects in group A who used the experimental method (teaching the alphabets by their sounds and names at the same time) outperformed those in group B (teaching the Alphabets by their sounds).

Key words: **alphabet , naming the letters, sound of the letters**

### **Introduction**

Learning the alphabet is an important part of learning a writing system, but how to start it has always been a field of controversy in recent years . One of the common steps in learning the alphabetic principle is recognizing and naming the letters of the alphabet from the very first day. Not all researchers agree on the importance of learning the names of the letters in learning to read. Doff (1988) claims that teaching letter knowledge is not an important instructional goal. He believes that children need to associate the sounds with letters, and may not need to know the letter names, for reading. He asserts that knowing the name of the letter is useful, for example when spelling words aloud but not really necessary for writing. He adds that giving the name of the letter at this stage could be confusing, especially if the name is different from the sound.

On the contrary there are many others who believe it is necessary to introduce the name of the characters from the very first stage. They think teachers need to be explicit in teaching letter-name associations by showing the letter symbols and telling students the letter name. This familiarity with letters symbols and their names helps prepare students for further developing their phonological awareness, learning sound-symbol relationships, and learning how to sound out words (Adams, 1990). This paper aims to examine the effects of the two aforementioned methods of teaching English alphabet on Iranian grade seven students' reading speed.

### **Statement of the problem**

Recognition of the letters of the alphabet and knowing the sounds they make is one of the key predictors of reading success. Sound-letter correspondences are the relationships between sounds (or phonemes) and letters (or graphemes). This starting point highlights the connections between the sounds in words and the letters that are used to represent those sounds. Included are two other related concepts: the alphabetic principle and letter recognition. Knowledge of sound-letter relationships means knowing, for example, that the /t/ sound is represented by the letter t. It also means knowing that the sound /s/ can be

represented by more than one letter, for example, *s* as in *soft* and *c* as in *city*. Many adults who are non-readers have trouble with identifying these relationships between sounds and letters. An awareness of the alphabetic principle means knowing that speech can be turned into print, that print can be turned into speech, and that letters are used to represent sounds in the language.

The alphabet is an invented system of symbols. Alone, each letter of the alphabet has limited value, but combinations of letters create words, the essence of written communication. In order to read an alphabetic language like English, children must learn the alphabetic principle—that letter symbols represent sounds. This knowledge is a critical precursor to reading words, since words are merely a combination of the letters that can be used to represent a word's specific combination of sounds. However, little agreement exists about how to promote the development of alphabet knowledge effectively. Some studies have determined that teaching the letter names and sounds together helps children learn reading better and faster while other believe that it is better to start by teaching the sounds of the letters, not their names. Knowing the names of letters is not necessary to read or write. Knowledge of letter names can interfere with successful decoding. This controversy is also available among Iranian educators and different strategies are being used by them to teach English Alphabet to Iranian students without paying attention to their possible disadvantages which results in students with reading problems or various degrees of proficiency in reading since there is not a unified method to be followed by all.

### **Research Question**

The present study is an attempt to determine the potential effect(s) of two different methods of teaching English Alphabets on Iranian grade seven students reading speed and to answer the following research question:

**Does teaching the name of the alphabet characters and their sounds simultaneously have a positive effect on faster reading?**

### **Significance of the study**

Learning the alphabet of a language is a simple concept, but it is the most important stage of a human being's literacy development. Usually, the alphabetic principle states that there are individual letters, or combinations of letters, in order to represent the regular sounds of speech. Through human knowledge of the alphabet of a particular language, a person can read or speak words that are otherwise unfamiliar to them. Learning the alphabet is fundamental for learning to read; on the other hand, without an accurate knowledge of letters, children will definitely have serious difficulty in the early stages of literacy. Letter recognition and phonemic awareness are the two most essential predictors of reading ability. Learning the alphabet is the main foundation of a written language, while phonemes provide the knowledge of oral language. However, little agreement exists about how to promote the development of alphabet knowledge effectively.

While it is true that decoding instruction is based on letter-sound instruction, the knowledge of letter names provides a common language to discuss letters. Many letters have more than one sound that they produce and many sounds are produced by more than one letter. Without a consistent language surrounding the symbols of the alphabet, it is more difficult for students and teachers to discuss these letters consistently. This is particularly important when considering spelling instruction because sounds have to be mapped to letters. Letter names also provide a connection between upper and lowercase letters of the alphabet. When educators discuss the importance of children possessing knowledge of letters of the alphabet, they are often discussing a variety of skills. Some may only mean that students will learn to recognize and name the letters of the alphabet. Others will include learning how to write the letters as part of this skill, while others will include matching sounds to letters as a component of letter knowledge. Despite this confusion on the definition of knowledge of letters, educators do agree upon its importance. Instruction on letters of the alphabet is clearly important because one of the beginning reader's biggest responsibilities is to figure out how our alphabetic language works.

To many cognitive psychologists, good readers are clearly distinguished from poor readers by more rapid, automatic, context-free and accurate word recognition. How to help readers to achieve this, however, is a complex and challenging issue.

### **Review of related literature**

Even a casual observer of a kindergarten or first grade class would expect to see and hear the alphabet. Much more however, than the singing of twenty-six letter names by these jubilant little ones, is necessary to truly know the ABCs. Though the terminology, alphabetic principle, would be foreign to a youngster beginning to learn to read, yet the fact that letters in written words represent spoken sounds in a predictable way, is in fact the basis for their being able to learn to read (Berg & Stegeman, 2003; Bursuck, Munk, Nelson, & Curran, 2002; Foorman, Fletcher, Francis, Mehta, & Schatschneider, 1998). The continuum of skills based on recalling and using alphabet letters and sounds in attaining literacy is not as easy as it might seem. From a child's typical first accomplishment of singing or reciting the alphabet, to recognizing both uppercase and lower case individual letters separately and as related to one another, to naming these symbols, to associating and remembering the sometimes multiple sounds they make when reading, to application of them in fluent word reading and comprehension, the task is not an easy one. Furthermore, acquiring this knowledge does not happen naturally, as acquiring spoken language does.

Alphabet knowledge has been found to be one of the strongest predictors of future reading success in young children (Cardoso-Martins, & Pennington, 2004; Holopainen, Ahonen, & Lyytinen, 2001; McBride-Chang, 1999; Smith, Scott, Roberts, & Locke, 2008), and a best predictor of later word reading ability (Schatschneider, Francis, Carlson, Fletcher, & Foorman, 2004). Adams (1990) found that "there exists a wealth of evidence indicating that the speed and accuracy shown by young readers in recognizing individual letters is a critical determinant of their reading proficiency and future growth" (p. 112). Failure to acquire this knowledge is an indicator for later reading difficulties (Piasta & Wagner, 2010; Holopainen, et al., 2001). Sam Blumefeld (2001) argues that the first step in this process is learning the letter names. Some pedagogues believe that teaching the letter sounds should precede teaching the letter names. They contend that teaching the letter names first may confuse the child when learning the letter sounds. He argues that the child should be taught the letter names because all objects have names, and we identify them by their names. The child has seen letters all over the place in this literate world. She has seen them in the storybooks her parents read to her. The child hasn't a clue what the letters mean until she is taught their sounds. That's when you explain what the letters mean. Learning the letter names is just the beginning of the long process of understanding. Sometimes, just knowing the letter names helps a child learn to read on his or her own. There are indeed precocious children who actually teach themselves to read. Of course, there is no law that says you can't teach the letter sounds anytime you want. In the field of early literacy, alphabet knowledge refers to children's familiarity with letter forms, names, and corresponding sounds, as measured by recognition, production, and writing tasks. Together, such alphabet knowledge represents an important component of emergent literacy (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Children's knowledge of letter names and sounds is the best predictor of their later reading and spelling abilities (Hammill, 2004; Scarborough, 1998; Schatschneider, Fletcher, Francis, Carlson, & Foorman, 2004). Letter name and letter sound knowledge predict subsequent literacy skills independently of other important predictors including phonological awareness and oral language (Burgess & Lonigan, 1998; McBride-Chang, 1999; Wagner, Torgesen, & Rashotte, 1994). Preschool and kindergarten students with poor knowledge of letter names and sounds are more likely to struggle with learning to read and be classified as having reading disabilities (Gallagher, Frith, & Snowling, 2000; O'Connor & Jenkins, 1999; Torppa, Poikkeus, Laakso, Eklund, & Lyytinen, 2006). These children tend to fall further behind their peers in reading acquisition, leading to gaps in spelling, reading fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension skills (Stanovich, 1986; Torgesen, 2002). For these reasons, alphabet knowledge has become an important learning goal for young children. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) recognizes development of the alphabetic principle as a goal for the preschool years and proficiency in letter discrimination, letter naming,

and letter–sound correspondences are expected during the kindergarten year (NAEYC, 1998). Standards for Head Start (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services & Administration for Children and Families, 2003) require children to demonstrate awareness of letters as individual symbols and the capability to identify at least 10 letters by name. Both the Early Reading First and Reading First programs set explicit goals for increasing letter knowledge and letter–sound correspondences (U.S. Department of Education, 2002; 2003). Finally, many state curriculum frameworks, as required by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002, include letter name learning, basic sound knowledge, and letter writing in their literacy standards for prekindergarten and kindergarten students (e.g., Florida Department of Education, n.d.; Massachusetts Department of Education, 2001).

Despite these initiatives, relatively little is known about the impact of early instruction on the development of alphabet knowledge. This fact is especially troublesome as large numbers of children continue to enter kindergarten knowing less than half of the letter names and fewer letter sounds (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services & Administration for Children and Families, 2005, 2006). Approaches to alphabet teaching vary greatly, as there has been disagreement about the appropriateness of early literacy instruction and about what constitutes effective instruction (Bredenkamp, 1987; Dickinson, 2002; Elkind & Whitehurst, 2001; Foulín, 2005; Justice, Pence, Bowles, & Wiggins, 2006). The present study synthesized the research literature on the effects of alphabet instruction on both alphabet knowledge and other emergent literacy outcomes. We examined potential moderators of these effects, including factors related to sample and instructional characteristics. We also examined whether effect sizes were affected by publication bias or methodological issues related to study quality.

### **The Importance of Teaching Letter Names**

The knowledge of letter names has been found to be the best predictor of future reading and spelling abilities for children as they enter school even when consideration is given to factors of phonological awareness and intelligence. Because of this research, it is often assumed that adequate focus is given to this important aspect of early literacy development. However, the importance of teaching letter-sound knowledge is sometimes seen as more important than letter-name instruction. Three current articles express why teaching letter naming should remain an important instructional focus.

The basis of English literacy instruction is knowledge of the alphabet. While it is true that decoding instruction is based on letter-sound instruction, the knowledge of letter names provides a common language to discuss letters. Many letters have more than one sound that they produce and many sounds are produced by more than one letter. Without a consistent language surrounding the symbols of the alphabet, it is more difficult for students and teachers to discuss these letters consistently. This is particularly important when considering spelling instruction because sounds have to be mapped to letters. Letter names also provide a connection between upper and lowercase letters of the alphabet. Teaching the letter name “A” provides a bridge between the symbols of *A* and *a*. These connections are critical to build memory networks in the brain for the alphabet.

Many letter names also provide clues to the most common sound that the letter makes. For instance, the letter name “B” includes the sound /b/ within the name of this letter. In these instances, the letter name provides important background information for children to learn letter-sound correspondences more rapidly. Unfortunately, this does not apply to all 26 letters of the alphabet. Letters such as “W” do not include their most common sound. In fact, young children sometimes confuse letters because the name does not include the sound from a different letter such as the letter name “Y” beginning with the /w/ sound. This potential confusion is often sighted as justification for not teaching letter names. However, even with these confusions possible, a study by Piasta and Wagner (2009) found that students who were taught letter names and letter sounds together actually had better letter sound knowledge than students who were only taught letter sounds. This finding indicates that potential confusions of names and sounds is not a valid reason to not teach letter names, but rather that letter names actually support letter sound acquisition.

It is clear that letter name instruction should not be overlooked in favor of letter sound knowledge, but it is also important to remember that the basis of decoding instruction relies on letter sound knowledge. With

this in mind, letter naming instruction should not be belabored to the detriment of letter sound instruction. Jones and Reutzel (2012) developed an instructional technique called Enhanced Alphabet Knowledge (EAK) Instruction. This instructional format teaches letter names and sounds along with the written form for each letter in a quick and efficient format with consistent distributed review cycles. Within an EAK format, all 26 letter and sounds are taught within the first 26 days of school and then reinforcement lessons are taught consistently for students who need more time or on frequently confused letters.

### **Letter names in English and other alphabetic writing systems**

Children who are learning to read and write must learn the shapes and the sound values of the letters that are used in their language. Many languages also have formal labels for letters that include sounds other than those made by the letter. For example, the English label for *b* includes the phoneme /i/ as well as the phoneme that *b* represents, /b/. As we have described, young children are expected to learn the conventional letter names in the U.S. and a number of other countries. Why do letters have names that differ from their sounds, and why are letter names used with children? One answer is that sound-based labels are ambiguous for sounds that correspond to more than one letter, such as English /k/, which may be spelled as *k* (e.g., *kite*) or *c* (e.g., *cat*). But formal letter names exist and are taught to children even in many languages with highly regular spelling-to-sound correspondences, suggesting that this is not a complete explanation.

### **Phonological patterning**

Phonological patterning refers to the tendency for letter names to be similar to one another. For example, above and beyond the fact that they include their sounds, the English names of the consonants *l*, *m*, and *n* all consist of /ɛ/ followed by the consonant. There are several reasons why letter names tend to be similar to each other. One is that letter names for a new writing system are all invented at the same time. People tend to give similar names when naming similar items simultaneously, as when parents select rhyming names for twins. Likewise, it is natural to choose the same vowel to fill out the names of consonant letters. A second reason why letter names tend to be similar to one another is that, even when the names are not invented simultaneously, they may be patterned on existing names for related items. For example, parents often give girls names ending in *a*, even when inventing new names, because that vowel appears at the end of many other female names. Similarly, when the consonant *v* was added to the alphabet, it was named /vi/ because many other consonant names ended in /i/ (*b*, *c*, *d*, etc.). A third reason for phonological patterning in letter names is that they are often recited in a series, in the same fixed order. In such cases, people tend to anticipate the sound of the next item in the series. For example, the /f/ in the English word *four* probably comes from anticipating the initial consonant of the following number, *five*. In like manner, the name of the letter *j*, /dʒe/, took its vowel from the name of the following letter, *k* /ke/. The original name, still heard occasionally in Scotland, was /dʒaɪ/.

The nature and extent of phonological patterning varies between languages. The English system is of intermediate consistency. All the vowel letters are named by their historically long value. Virtually all consonants have two-phoneme names, usually either an /ɛ/ before the consonant or an /i/ after it. Even the selection of those two vowel extensions has a phonological patterning: /ɛ/ is used before a continuant (*f*, *l*, *m*, *n*, *s*) and /i/ after a stop (*b*, *d*, *p*, *t*). However, the English system has several perturbations due to its long historical development. The letter *c* is named with an /i/ because originally (in Latin) it was always a stop. After the consonant changed to a continuant, the original pattern was obscured, and the new letter names for *v* and (in America) *z* were built with /i/ instead of /ɛ/, even though they are continuants. The names for *k* and *q* used different vowels, to distinguish them from *c*. The name of *r* reflects the fact that /ɛr/ sequences changed to /ar/ in English. The name /zɛd/ for *z*, used in many parts of the English-speaking world, comes from the Greek name *zeta*. The irregular names for *h*, *j*, and *w* have already been mentioned.

The middling degree of patterning found in English is typical of languages that adopted the Latin letter-name system. Phonological patterning is, on the whole, even lower in languages that retained the old Semitic letter names. In Hebrew, for example, the names of consonants all begin with the sound of the letter, but speakers of the language who are not aware of the language's history and of related letter-name systems cannot predict the other phonemes in the letter name. On the other hand, several other systems have a much higher degree of phonological patterning than English. In Turkish, for example, the names of

consonants consist of the consonant sound, plus /e/, with thoroughgoing regularity. The same system is used in many Balkan countries, and has recently come into use in Portugal.

A high degree of patterning should make it simpler to learn letter names, recognize new names as letter names, and determine the sound value of the letter that has a given name. On the other hand, strong phonological patterning hurts discriminability, because many letter names become extremely similar to one another.

### **The significance of alphabet knowledge**

All of human language is composed of a small number of speech sounds. How many are there in English? Forty-four. But we have an alphabet of only 26 letters. How did this mismatch come about? When the Romans conquered England they imposed the Latin alphabet on the Anglo-Saxons, who then adapted the Latin alphabet to their language. Which meant that some of the letters would have to stand for more than one sound, and some of the sounds would be represented by more than one letter, as in sh, ch, th.

Alphabet knowledge is essential for learning to read and spell in English (Adams, 1990; Ehri, 1987, 1998). Along with oral language and phonological awareness, it represents one of the most important emergent literacy skills acquired by young children (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Children's alphabet knowledge has long been deemed one of the best predictors of later word reading ability (e.g., Adams, 1990; Hammill, 2004; Scarborough, 1998; Schatschneider, Fletcher, Francis, Carlson, & Foorman, 2004). Likewise, failure to acquire such knowledge is an important indicator of risk for later reading difficulties (e.g., Gallagher, Frith, & Snowling, 2000; O'Connor & Jenkins, 1999; Torppa, Poikkeus, Laakso, Eklund, & Lyytinen, 2006). A great deal of research has demonstrated that letter knowledge is integrally involved in word recognition (e.g., Ehri, 1987, 1998; Ehri & Wilce, 1985; Frith, 1985; Gough & Hillinger, 1980; Treiman & Rodriguez, 1999).

Children start out by treating words as holistic, visually distinct logographs. As they begin to acquire knowledge of letter names and letter sounds, children shift from relying on visual information in words to using phonetic information represented by the letters in words. A general conclusion of this line of work has been that children use letter knowledge to amalgamate spellings and internally store word pronunciations in ways that facilitate lexical access. Ehri and Wilce (1985) conducted an early study looking at the relationship between letter knowledge and word reading in kindergarten children. Prereaders, novices, and veterans were taught to read simplified phonetic spellings (e.g., *JRF* for *giraffe*) and visual spellings where letters had no sound relationship to pronunciations but were more visually distinct (e.g., *uHe* for *mask*). Prereaders learned to read visual spellings more easily, whereas novice and veteran readers learned to read the phonetic spellings more easily. Ehri and Wilce interpreted these results as indicating that as children begin to read, they shift from relying on visual information in words to using phonetic information in words. She described the process of using phonetic information in word reading as one that is based on establishing connections between graphemes in word spellings and sounds in word pronunciations (Ehri, 1998).

The significance of alphabet knowledge for acquiring literacy skills is reflected in many recent initiatives. For example, many state curriculum frameworks include letter name and sound learning for young children (Florida Department of Education, n. d.; Massachusetts Department of Education, 2001; Ohio Department of Education, 2007). Both the Early Reading First and Reading First programs set explicit goals seeking to increase participants' letter knowledge and understanding of letter-sound correspondences (U. S. Department of Education, 2002; 2003), as does the Head Start program (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, 2003). Early childhood curricula used in preschool and kindergarten classrooms commonly include an alphabetic component (Justice, Pence, Bowles, & Wiggins, 2006). These curricula vary markedly in how alphabet knowledge is taught, a reflection perhaps of our current lack of knowledge about letter name and sound development and best practices for fostering their acquisition (Piasta & Wagner, in press). Despite widespread agreement as to the importance

of letter name and sound knowledge, we know much less about children's alphabet knowledge development than we do about the development of other emergent literacy skills.

English has an alphabetic writing system; letters in written words represent sounds in spoken words. The awareness that letters represent the sounds in spoken words is called the alphabetic principle. One of the basic steps in learning the alphabetic principle is recognizing and naming the letters of the alphabet. Letter naming knowledge has long been recognized as a potent predictor of later reading ability, and it is believed that teaching young children letter names does support their ability to use sound cues contained in the letter names (e.g. /b/ in B, /f/ in F) to learn letter sounds (Phillips & Piasta, 2013).

Letter-name knowledge has been shown to be a reliably better predictor than measured IQ (Chall, 1967; Durrell, 1958; Ekwall & Shanker, 1983), vocabulary and parent-child book reading (Share, Jorm, MacLean, & Matthews, 1984). This relationship was initially reported in 1967 (Bond & Dykstra, 1967; Chall, 1967) and has been consistently found in studies since that time (e.g., Meuhl & DiNello, 1976; Muter, 1994; Richek, 1977-1978; Scanlon & Vellutino, 1996; Share et al., 1984; Vellutino & Scanlon, 1987). The relationship between letter-name knowledge and reading demonstrated by Bond and Dykstra (1967) and Chall (1967) was based on correlations, so the causal role of letter name knowledge in beginning reading could not be determined from those studies.

Following these two reports, experimental studies were undertaken with kindergarten and first-grade children in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Jenkins, Bausell, & Jenkins, 1972; Johnson, 1969; Ohnmacht, 1969; Samuels, 1972; Silberberg, Silberberg, & Iversen, 1972). The studies included instruction in letter names followed by a variety of word-recognition and/or comprehension measures. The purpose of these experiments was to examine the hypothesis that letter-name knowledge (rather than some other associated variable such as print exposure or cognitive maturity) played a causal role in the relationship between letter-name knowledge and early reading. If knowledge of letter names was a causal factor, then instruction that increased children's letter-name knowledge should increase early reading performance. Because only one study reported significant reading improvement (Johnson, 1969), the authors of the studies concluded there was little educational benefit to be gained from letter-name instruction.

In North America, learning the alphabet is traditionally regarded as a quintessential academic task of kindergarten. Despite or perhaps because of this, relatively little research has been conducted on the acquisition of children's alphabetic knowledge and factors which may influence it. However there is a clear body of literature showing that letter-name knowledge is a strong predictor of beginning reading (Adams, 1990; Burgess & Lonigan, 1998; Byrne & Fielding-Barnsley, 1989; Calfee & Drum, 1979; Chall, 1967; Stevenson & Neuman, 1986; Stuart & Colheart, 1988; Wagner, Torgesen, & Rashotte, 1994), challenged only by letter sound knowledge (e.g., Lomax & McGee, 1987; McBride-Chang, 1999; Pennington & Lefly, 2001), and phonemic awareness.

Ehri and Wilce (1979) suggested that letter name knowledge may be inseparable from letter-sound knowledge because so many letter names sound a great deal like the sound that is associated with them (for example, /m/ for the letter m). Gail Gillon (2003) describes a "bi-directional" relationship between letter-name and phoneme awareness, where knowledge of one enhances knowledge of the other. Children will also have to learn the sounds in words (phonemic awareness) and the letters that represent those sounds. Ehri & Wilce (1979) found that children who did not know letter names had more difficulty learning letter sounds. Letter names are closely related to the letter-sound relationships, and knowing the letter names helps children associate sound with many of the letters. Also Walsh, Price, and Gillingham (1988) argued that knowledge of letter names eases the process of learning to read by "vesting the symbols (letters) with immediate familiarity" (p. 110), thus facilitating the rapid and efficient information processing necessary for reading.

Ehri (1983) has made a persuasive argument for why letter-name knowledge should help beginning readers associate the alphabetic symbols with their sounds. She pointed out that "most, if not all, of the names contain sounds commonly symbolized by the letters in word spellings" (Ehri, 1983, p. 143). She

characterized the set of letter names as the foundation children need to induce the letter-sound system involved in reading. This alphabetic theory (Feitelson, 1988) has also been proposed as relevant to the beginning stage of spelling (Beers & Henderson, 1977; Read, 1971).

It has also been proposed that knowing the names of letters makes a direct contribution to early reading by helping young children appreciate that writing represents spoken language rather than directly reflecting meaning. Because letter names sometimes match sequences of phonemes heard in words (e.g., *farm*—*R*, or *deaf*—*F*), whole syllables (*candy*—*D*), or even whole spoken words (e.g., *UDyou*), knowing letter names can sensitize children to the fundamental phonological nature of writing. Both naturalistic (Gentry, 1982; Read, 1976; Treiman, 1993) and experimental studies (De Abreu & Cardoso-Martins, 1998; Levin, Patel, Margalit, & Barad, 2002; McBride-Chang & Treiman, 2003; Treiman, 1994; Treiman & Rodriguez, 1999; Treiman & TincoV, 1997; Treiman, TincoV, & Richmond-Welty, 1996) have demonstrated the influence of letter names on early attempts at reading and writing. For example, Treiman et al. (1996) found that preschool children were better at identifying the first letter of the spoken word *beach* that contains the name of the letter B, than the word *bone* that does not. Treiman et al. (1996) also found that the correspondence between a spoken word and a letter name can sometimes mislead children into identifying the letter Y as the first letter in the word *wife*, or C as the initial letter of the word *seem* (see also Levin et al., 2002).

The relation between the names and shapes of letters is largely arbitrary in English, although a number of motivated letter shapes exist in certain other alphabets. As a result, English-speaking children have no choice but to memorize the links between letters, shapes and names in a rote fashion. Importantly, the relation between the names and the sounds of letters is not arbitrary in English or any other alphabetic system. English-speaking children take advantage of the fact that most letter names contain their sounds, and this makes learning of letter sounds quite different from learning of letter names. Children who know the names of letters can take advantage of certain relations between printed and spoken words, such as the link between the *e* in the printed *eat* and the /i/ in its spoken form. This helps children move from treating printed words as arbitrary visual patterns to treating them as maps of linguistic structure.

As we described earlier, some researchers have suggested that letter names may be harmful to children and should not be taught (Feitelson, 1988). The research reviewed here shows, to the contrary, that letter names are more helpful than harmful to children who are learning English and other languages. There is some truth to the belief, deeply held in the U.S. and a number of other countries, that letter names provide an important foundation for reading instruction. The challenge for educators is to take advantage of the knowledge that children bring with them to school, showing children how letter names can often aid them in reading and spelling words and pointing out cases in which letter names mislead.

The letter names of English, although generally iconic, are not as systematic as those of certain other languages. If we were to design a new system of English letter names to maximize pedagogical utility, we might make different choices. For example, it might be more useful to label *d* as /da/ than as /di/ if there are more words that contain /da/ than /di/, as in fact there are in the sample of kindergarten and first-grade words examined here. It might be helpful to label *ch* as /tʃ/ followed by a vowel rather than the current *c*, *h* to show how it sounds in words. As mentioned earlier, Spanish follows this approach. Efforts to reform the English spelling system have borne little fruit, however. We doubt that efforts to reform the letter names in general use would fare substantially better.

While these generalizations have been reported, previous studies have not examined whether the letters grouped into the various categories, such as sound at the start of the name, sound at the end of the name, and sound not in the name, form coherent categories by showing similar correct response rates. These categories were vowels (a, e, i, o, u), consonant–vowel names with the sound at the start of the name (j, k, p, t, v, z, b, p, d), vowel–consonant names with the sound at the end of the name (f, l, m, n, r, x, s), and a mixed category in which the letter name did not contain its sound or one of its sounds (c, g, q, w, h, y). A second interpretation is that the relationship of letter-name and letter-sound knowledge to each other and the predictive value of letter name knowledge to reading skill could be a function of other cognitive abilities



that facilitate the acquisition of alphabetic knowledge, phonological awareness, and early reading skill. The influence of potential “third variables” such as age, general language ability, and intelligence, and the necessity of controlling for them was emphasized by Castles and Coltheart (2004). However research examining the relationship between letter-sound knowledge and letter-name knowledge has included such third variables to only a limited degree. Thus a second major purpose was to evaluate the predictive significance of letter-name knowledge to concurrent letter-sound knowledge after taking into account a range of cognitive abilities that might mediate the relationship. The choice of these “third factors” was guided by previous research. At a general level, reviews by Stanovich (1992), Scarborough (1998), Swanson, Trainin, Necochea, and Hammill (2003) showed a positive correlation between intelligence and reading, and/or between intelligence and phonological awareness, pointing to the importance of general ability or “g”. This is reflected in Block Design and Vocabulary subtests of the Wechsler intelligence scales (Sattler, 2001). In addition, the strong relationship observed between receptive vocabulary and phonological awareness (Bowey, 1994; Burgess & Lonigan, 1998; Chaney, 1992; Lonigan, Burgess, Anthony, & Barker, 1998; Smith & Tager-Flusberg, 1982; Tunmer, Herriman, & Nesdale, 1988; Wagner et al., 1994) has been interpreted as support for the theory that vocabulary acquisition contributes to phonological awareness via the increasingly fine discriminations and differentiations required among an increasing number of lexical items for efficient phonological representation (Metsala, 1999). Regardless of the interpretation, inclusion of receptive vocabulary would appear to be important in examining the relationship of phonological awareness to alphabetic knowledge and should reduce the association between the two. However, findings from previous research are inconsistent on this point. Bowey (1994) found that once oral language differences between children were controlled, no differences were observed in children’s phonological awareness as a function of their letter-name knowledge. In contrast both Wagner et al. (1994) and Burgess and Lonigan (1998) found that individual differences in children’s letter-name and letter-sound knowledge in kindergarten and Grade 1 significantly predicted phonological awareness a year later even after controlling for vocabulary knowledge. Both Block Design and a test of receptive vocabulary were included in the present study. A second interpretation is that the relationship of letter-name and letter-sound knowledge to each other and the predictive value of letter name knowledge to reading skill could be a function of other cognitive abilities that facilitate the acquisition of alphabetic knowledge, phonological awareness, and early reading skill. The influence of potential “third variables” such as age, general language ability, and intelligence, and the necessity of controlling for them was emphasized by Castles and Coltheart (2004). However research examining the relationship between letter-sound knowledge and letter-name knowledge has included such third variables to only a limited degree. Thus a second major purpose was to evaluate the predictive significance of letter-name knowledge to concurrent letter-sound knowledge after taking into account a range of cognitive abilities that might mediate the relationship.

### **Is letter naming helpful?**

While traditional methodology of teaching reading introduces letter names first rather than letter sounds and many educators have been conditioned to think that this is what a child needs to become a proficient reader and are still putting the letter name on the pedestal; there are many others who think differently. They believe letter names and capital letters are not the priority for the learner to transition from non-reader to reader as easily as possible whereas lower case letters and sounds are. It may sound a little counter-intuitive, but that's just because most people were taught to read by learning letter names first. When a child learns a letter name, then he has to "translate" from the name to the sound in order to sound out a word. It's a very inefficient process for the brain to perform. Some studies suggest that although letter naming predicts the ability to read later on, it does not cause a child to learn more readily. Della Palacios (2013) states that Sometimes the child knows the names of letters (ay, bee, see, dee..). Unfortunately, this knowledge, far from being helpful, may even delay the acquisition of reading. To know that “s” is pronounced ess, “k” kay and “i” eye is useless when we try to read the word “ski.” Letter names cannot be assembled during reading.

Venezky (1975) argued that letter names are not consistently predictive of their sounds and thus knowledge of letter names could actually interfere when children try to learn the sound system. Feitelson surmised that instruction in naming letters might be "downright harmful" for children in the initial stages of beginning reading (1988 p. 137). Sam Blumenfeld (2002) believes that the child doesn't have to know the alphabet perfectly before going on to the second step, for he or she will continue to master the alphabet while learning the letter sounds.

According to Della Palacios (2013) the knowledge of the character names at early stages, far from being helpful, may even delay the acquisition of reading. Sarah Mueller (2008) argues that when a child learns letter sounds directly, he doesn't have to take the intermediate step of associating letter name to sound. She also adds the student sees the word **hat**, and can immediately think "**huh æ t**", then blends the sounds together into "hat." It's a much more direct process for him. His brain only has to remember 1 thing for each letter, not both a name and a sound. Deb Chitwood (2010) believes letters should be introduced by phonetic sounds rather than letter names and not in their order within the alphabet. Instead, they should be introduced in an order that allows the child to make many words with the letters he or she has learned.

Adrian Doff (1988) also argues that knowing the name of the letter is useful when spelling words, but is not really necessary for writing or reading. He thinks giving the name of the letters at this stage could be confusing, especially if the name is different from the sound (e.g. the vowels). Christine (2014) introduces three important reasons for teaching letter sounds prior to letter names. Because they are easier to learn than letter names: (1) Because they are easier to learn than letter names. (2) Because letter sounds are much more important for decoding skills, and (3) Because this way we ask our learners to succeed at just one task at a time.

Sarah Cowan (2012) states that If a child is taught that a "b" (name) makes the sound "b" as in bus, when it comes time to blend sounds into words, the decoding process will occur faster and more smoothly. Traditionally, when decoding the word "bus", you see the b (name), think about the sound, decode, and say the sound aloud. Cutting back the steps, looking at a "b" (letter) as a "b" (sound), your child will be able to read sooner. She believes that It is not too late for letter names to come after your child has a firm understanding of the sounds. She also adds this doesn't mean that if a child calls a letter by its name you shouldn't deny it, acknowledge their findings and by including the sound, their knowledge will increase, making them that much closer to reading.

Knowledge about letters – their shapes, their names, and their linguistic functions plays an important role in the development of reading and spelling ability. For example, children who are learning to read and write in English should know that the shape V is called /vi/ and that it generally represents the phoneme /v/ (see International Phonetic Association, 1999 for an explanation of the phonemic symbols). Children's knowledge about letters is often tested by providing them with one attribute of a letter and asking them to supply one or more other attributes. For example, children are shown the shape V and are asked to say its name in a letter name task or its sound in a letter sound task. Performance is typically pooled across all of the letters in each task to yield measures of children's letter name and letter sound knowledge. Some researchers additionally pool knowledge of names and sounds, for example by asking children to provide either the name or the sound of a letter and counting the number of letters for which either piece of information is known (e.g., Riley, 1996). Supporting the idea that letter knowledge is important in learning to read and spell, young children's knowledge as pooled across letters or across names and sounds predicts their later literacy skills (e.g., McBride-Chang, 1999; Riley, 1996). However, such pooling may mask potentially important differences across letters and across tasks. Task differences are widely reported, with North American preschoolers and kindergartners generally performing better on the name task than the sound task (e.g., Evans, Bell, Shaw, Moretti, & Page, 2006; McBride-Chang, 1999; Treiman, Tincoff, Rodriguez, Mouzaki, & Francis, 1998). In the U.S. and Canada, as in a number of other countries, children are often exposed to letter names informally at home and at preschool. Letter sounds are not usually stressed until later. Differences among letters have also been reported. Some English letters, such as v, have their sounds at the beginnings of their names. The name /vi/ begins with /v/, the phoneme that this letter symbolizes. Other letters, such as m, have the letter that they

represent at the end of the name. And some phonemes are spelled by a letter whose name does not contain that phoneme. For example, the phoneme typically represented by h, /h/, is not in the letter's name at all. When asked about letters' sounds, North American children generally perform best on the first type of letter, intermediate on the second type, and most poorly on the third type (Evans et al., 2006; McBride-Chang, 1999; Treiman et al., 1998). These differences suggest that children bring their knowledge of letter names to the learning of letter-sound correspondences, using the letters' names to help learn and remember the sounds they represent. Thus, knowing v's name helps children learn its sound because /v/ appears in the salient initial position of the letter's name. Knowing m's name is less helpful in learning its sound because /m/ appears in a less salient position of the name and knowing h's name provides no useful cues to its sound. In the work reported here, we examined these differences among categories of letters to shed light on

how children bring their knowledge and skills to early literacy learning.

Several lines of research support the idea that the superiority for sound-at-beginning-of-name letters over other letters in the sound task reflects children's use of letter names. Children who are familiar with letter names may say that y makes the sound /wE/ or that w corresponds to /dE/, treating these letters as if their sounds were at the beginnings of their names (Ellefson, Treiman, & Kessler, 2007; Thompson, Fletcher-Flinn, & Cottrell, 1999; Treiman, Weatherston, & Berch, 1994). Additional evidence comes from children who learn letter sounds before they have mastered letter names. This is common in the United Kingdom, where letters' sounds are currently taught before the names and where parents do not place much stress on the early learning of letter names. Correspondingly, British children do not perform better on sound-at-beginning-of-name letters than on other letters in the letter sound

task (Ellefson et al., 2007). The different results for British and U.S. children speak against the idea that the sound-at-beginning-of-name letters are most frequent in English or that their shapes are easier to distinguish. If either of these were true, then all groups of children exposed to English should have shown similar results. If the sounds symbolized by the sound-at-beginning-of-name letters were easier for children to produce than the sounds of the other types of letters, this could explain children's better performance on these letters in the sound task. However, that does not appear to be the case. We used Shriberg's (1993) rankings of speech sound mastery to determine whether the consonant sounds associated with the sound-at-beginning-of-name letters b, d, j, k, p, t, v, and z are mastered earlier than the sounds associated with the sound-at-end-of-name letters f, l, m, n, r, and s or the sound-not-in-name letters h, w, and y. A Kruskal-Wallis test showed no significant difference among the three categories. Further evidence against a potential confound

with production mastery is the above-mentioned finding that British children perform no better on sound-at-beginning-of-name letters than the other types of letters in the sound task (Ellefson et al., 2007). Thus, the finding that children with good knowledge of letter names perform better in the sound test with letters such as v than letters such as m and h is best explained by the idea that these children use the letters' names as guides to the sounds they represent. What skills are required to make such inferences? Many researchers have assumed that explicit phonological awareness is needed (e.g., Bowey, 2005; Foulín, 2005; Share, 2004; Treiman et al., 1998). According to this view, children must be able to segment a syllable such as /vi/ into /v/ and /i/ in order to derive the letter sound /v/ from the letter name /vi/. Children with poor phonological awareness, who treat the syllable /vi/ as a unitary whole, will not benefit from the letter name in learning the letter sound. As Foulín (2005, p. 139) stated, "extracting letter sounds from letter names obviously requires a certain level of phoneme analysis skill." Bowey (2005, p. 166) echoed this view when she stated that "phonological sensitivity and letter-name knowledge together help some children to derive letter sounds for themselves." The idea that phonological awareness is important in letter-sound learning fits with the view that it is important in learning to read.

### **The Controversy of Teaching Phonics**

The standard way of thinking about phonics has it that phonics knowledge is developmental and integrated into beginning reading and writing instruction. Cristie and Enz (2007) in their book cover the development and teaching of both oral and written language from preschool through the elementary grades. When treating phonics, they recommend a combination of meaningful engagements with print and appropriate instruction on literacy skills that reflects on the kindergarten level. Because of the importance of literacy in society, literacy instruction is viewed by many as a foundation for education reform. At the core of children's school success is their literacy achievement. However, teaching phonics seems to go in and out of favor in American schools. The role of phonics in reading, in learning to read, and in reading instruction is probably the most widely misunderstood and misrepresented aspect of language education today. The dispute of teaching phonics centers around two polarized perspectives. On one hand, there are people who advocate an emphasis on breaking the alphabetic code (a phonics approach); on the other hand, there are people who support instruction that relies on a meaning-emphasis approach (a whole-word approach). It is paradoxical that in the twentieth century this conflict is still raging after several decades of research on this specific phase of teaching reading, and after many more decades of both child study and language study. Researchers are investigating the effectiveness of phonics as a teaching method in the field of childhood education. In this very discussed field, there are pros and cons of implementing phonics in Kindergarten, as well as advantages and disadvantages that affect the teaching of phonics in school.

Phonics is a very controversial topic in the scholastic system of the United States and the continuing debate over the value of phonics as a method of teaching beginning readers has consistently overlooked one essential factor, which is the student's learning style. Cooper and Kiger (2006) suggest that children should develop fluency, which is the ability to recognize words accurately, automatically, and rapidly. Moreover, proficient reading remains the most essential skill required for academic success. Therefore, the use of phonics in early reading instruction is significant as it will benefit and increase students' skills in literacy. Before analyzing the issue of phonics, it is important to clarify its meaning. Tompkins (2010) reports that, "Phonics is the set of relationships between phonology and orthography" (p.155). In other words, it is the association of speech sounds (also called phonemes) with printed symbols (defined as graphemes). In some languages, this sound-symbol association is fairly regular, but not in English because a single letter or a combination of letters in our alphabet may stand for different sounds. For instance, the vowel *a* in each of the following words is pronounced differently: *apple*, *angel*, *far*, *have*, and *important*. On the other hand, a single sound may be represented by more than one letter or combination of letters. Teaching phonics does not constitute a complete reading program; rather, phonics is a valuable aid to word recognition when used in conjunction with other skills, but it's only one useful skill among many. Being able to recognize and pronounce most unfamiliar words is part of the reading program. Children master this skill gradually, yet not everyone successfully attains it. Gibson (1991), who was a first-grade teacher, conducted research and studies for his own professional growth and development. Basically, Gibson tried to examine the effectiveness of phonics as a teaching method. After informally studying his first grade class, he tentatively concluded that, "Some students are phonetic learners and some are not" because of their learning style (p. 402). What made him think so was the well-constructed, formal research he carried out. In this study, he compared phonetic instruction with other methods, such as the reading approach held by a reading specialist, and acknowledged that the students who learned phonics had made progress, as well as the rest of the students who considerably improved their reading. Thus, each student has a different learning style, regardless of the program they are in, that permits to yield valuable results necessary for their future in school.

The reason the controversy over the use of phonics stirred up the national debate in the United States is because researchers found that children relying too much on phonics, without focusing on a comprehensive approach to reading, can develop confusion and create problems for the educational goals. Uribe (2009) wrote an article which overviews on the argumentation made between federal government and educational section in implementing phonics instruction at the primary education in the United States. It highlights the concerns of educators and other English language experts about the impact of phonics instruction, such as phonics complexity in terms of its rules and orthography and the confusion with its teaching methods. In

fact, there are some difficulties that young learners may encounter during the process of phonics instruction. Uribe (2009) insists that phonics rules are extremely complex and “most of the phonics generalizations taught in elementary school, often called rules, are not valid most of the time” (p. 10). Moreover, he argues that another reason some United States advocates reject the indiscriminate use of phonics is because children who apply phonics rules end up reading very slowly. Thus, if a student pays too much attention to the form of the words because he/she was taught phonics instruction in a strict way, he/she will focus his/her attention on deciphering the words and not on comprehending them. The essence of Uribe’s arguments is that during later reading students will be unable to understand the deep structure of the text they are reading because they are too concentrated on phonics. Furthermore, Uribe (2009) asserts that phonics has no place in instructional programs; the reason he believes so is because children get bored very easily with most phonics activities. As a consequence, they get discouraged and frustrated, and this causes distance and rejection from the educational instruction. However, in the same article, Uribe (2009) suggests that there is an agreement amongst educators that some knowledge of the basic sound-spelling correspondences is not fully insignificant. In fact, phonics was explained to be a “tool that students can use to help understand a text in some situations: but what really makes the difference is reading itself, the social event that takes place between reader and book” (Uribe, 2009, p. 11). In other words, phonics represents a means to the process of learning to read, and eventually, to the end of successful reading, yet phonics techniques taught in class are not intended to be ends in themselves.

The debate of ‘phonics or no phonics’ still continues in the United States. Glazer (1997) presents several reasons on why this national debate is still on. First of all, she complains of the fact that the media has promoted misleading that present the instructions that were or were not used in the whole language approach. The second issue that was raised within the debate about the teaching of phonics pertains the low test scores in word recognition and reading skills that caused the parents of the students panic and concern. Interestingly, Glazer (1997), who is the Director of the Center for Reading and Writing at Rider University, Lawrenceville, NJ, firmly argues that the notion that children learn to read by using phonics is untrue and unfounded. She believes that reading, as a letter-sound process, is not how children learn to read. The “sounding out” of words, so called phonics instruction, is important in the earliest grades, and as children move into higher grades, it would be good if they maintain the knowledge acquired previously. What is crucial is the fact that during the course of elementary, there is a shift from an emphasis on phonics to the importance of comprehension; the latter usually occurs as children move upward in the grades. Hence, phonics instruction is fundamental in the earliest grades, though Glazer (1997) insists that it should be integrated with the reading of books, stories, or good rhymes. Phonics instruction, in fact, is a consistent and significant pattern within literature study as children look closely at the ways authors and poets select words to tell their stories, write their poems, and experiment with language. Dahl, Scharer, Lawson, and Grogan (2001) believe that, “reading children’s literature and listening to stories and poems not only fosters enjoyment of literature, but also develops knowledge of letter-sound relationships” (p. 88). The readings of big books, ABC books, or poetry hold a very special place in the classrooms. In addition, the reading of good rhymes and poems develop and create an early appreciation and love of reading in young children, and that is what Dahl et al. promote in their book. In this way, teaching phonics will result to be effective and interesting.

On the other hand, Chall and Popp (1999), in their book, write a whole paragraph on what is an effective phonics program giving the teacher the essential know-how to implement phonics in a balanced reading program, yet focusing on phonics as it is considered a significant factor in successful reading development. An effective phonics program teaches the basic phonics elements and generalizations starting from Kindergarten. The practice given from the teacher helps the students to understand how words and letters are related to the way they are pronounced and written. Differently from the advocates who deny the teaching of phonics, Chall and Popp (1999) acknowledge the idea of teaching phonics in schools as it will help students progress in developing their reading skills. They emphasize that a rich background for learning phonics is found among most kindergarteners because that is when phonics instruction should begin. What if there is a failure in a phonics program? Chall and Popp (1999) include and present the

circumstances in case of an ineffective phonics program. In fact, they explain that a phonics program could fail because the skills given to the pupils are not practiced efficaciously. However, a relevant message is sent to the teachers: “The purpose of learning phonics is to help in the accurate and efficient identification of words when reading for comprehension” (Chall & Popp, 1999, p. 38).

Indeed, phonics seems to play an important role in early reading instruction. It’s an effective method of reading instruction, yet the skills taught by phonics have little to do with the processes of reading acquisition. Rod Maclean (1988) researched on this topic, and he discovered that in order to recognize a word it isn’t necessary to be phonetically skilled. Word recognition is essentially something that is possible to visualize without the need of early, explicit phonics teaching. In this regard, he illustrated two paradoxes of phonics that eventually make the teaching of phonics beneficial. The first one consists in teaching phonics for facilitating the process of learning unfamiliar words, though it isn’t needed for high-frequency words because students are supposed to be able to control their own learning and recognize them. Thus, the role of phonics is to help children make use of it when they need. The second paradox presented by Maclean (1988) has to do with learning to read. In other words, the skill of phonics is not strictly related to the way that skill is used in practice. Therefore, a resolution to this paradox could be the suggestion of a form of instructional display that helps children understand what they are learning. However, this is something valid only when young learners are starting to read. If something is clearly visualized, children may understand and process the concepts better. In fact, before children make sense of phonics study, they first must learn that print conveys meaning. Maclean (1988) argues that representing the structure of phonics doesn’t teach children the rules they need for reading words. He concludes by saying, “Phonics should be seen only as a way of getting children started on the path of learning to read, not as an ongoing teaching strategy” (Maclean, 1988, p. 516), because if students are to learn phonics association effectively, they need to see a reason for doing so, that is being able to read and understand written material that may please them.

### Participants

Participants were 20 grade seven boys (N=20) of 12-13 years of age from a public day-school with no or very little previous experience of learning English selected from among 2 different classes through implemented placement tests. Subjects whose scores were around one standard deviation below the mean were chosen since their performance reviled that they had less alphabet knowledge than the others. Group A was assigned as the experimental group to receive the treatment(teaching the alphabet characters through their names and the sounds associated with them ) and group B as the control group to receive the placebo (teaching only the sounds of the letters ).For this group letter names were taught after the sounds were thoroughly introduced .

Table 1 illustrates their achieved scores based on which subjects were selected.

**Table 2** Illustrating subjects’ achieved placement test scores.

n	Scores(out of 20) Experimental group	n	Scores(out of 20) Control group
1	5	1	2
2	18	2	18
3	12	3	7
4	10	4	13

5	2	5	4
6	15	6	3
7	3	7	1
8	19	8	17
9	2	9	18
10	4	10	11
11	20	11	4
12	1	12	2
13	18	13	16
14	3	14	10
15	16	15	4
16	3	16	19
17	9	17	3
18	12	18	8
19	1	19	4
20	15	20	17
21	4	21	19
22	16	22	2
23	2	23	1
24	20	24	20
25	18	25	16
$\Sigma x_1=248$	$\bar{x}= 9.76$ SD = 7.16	$\Sigma x_2=239$	$\bar{x} =9.60$ SD = 7

### Materials

For both groups the text book of grade seven of Iranian governmental schools and a few charts showing the letters and corresponding examples were used as well as a number of two-sided flash cards related to the content of the book which were exclusively designed according to the sounds to be taught in each session with pictures on one side and words on the other. Additionally an audio CD of alphabet song and an interational soft ware of teaching alphabet were implemented.

### Procedure

In a course of 10 sessions some pre planned English words such as "boy, map, fan, bed, ...." were introduced using flash cards without showing their written sides. So far both groups received exactly the same instructions. After being satisfied that all the students successfully learned the words, the process of teaching the alphabet characters started. They had been grouped according to the similarities in shapes and writing ways such as letters p, b, d, q and so on. For each session only one vowel sound introduced. For the experimental group (group A) Introducing the letters started with their names followed by their most frequent sounds represented through examples, first letter of which were the letter being thought. According to the letters being taught, the related flash cards were used to check and reinforce the students understanding. This time in addition to showing the pictures, written side of the flash cards were also shown. First the pictures were shown to let the students recall the learned items. As the next step showing the written sides they were asked to read them aloud. After the teaching process was completed and all the

alphabet characters were taught, each of the participants were asked to read the 20 given words as fast as they could and the time for each student was measured and their affiliated ranks between groups were calculated for further analysis.

The process for the control group (group B) was a little different. For this group all the aforementioned steps were repeated with just one important difference. This time character names were not introduced and alphabet characters were taught by the most frequent sounds associated with them. To reinforce the students understanding of the new sounds, some related two sided flash cards were used. Teaching the name of the letters to this group was started after all the sounds were introduced and testing process finished (since the purpose of the study was to see whether or not knowing the name of the letters would make faster readers)

#### Test administration

To check the subjects reading speed, a list of 20 printed words was shown to each subject to read as fast as he could. They were not allowed to pass to the next word unless they were able to read the previous one correctly. Using a digital chronometer their reading times were measured and recorded. Everyone was given a rank comparing the reading speed of all subjects in groups A and B, from 1 (the fastest) to 20 (the slowest). Total reading time for the subjects of group A was 75.5s while that of group B was 134.5s (table 1)

**Table 2** Times and ranks obtained by the subjects on reading speed test

Group B	Reading time	rank	Group A	Reading time	rank
1	30s	14.5	1	25s	6.5
2	30	14.5	2	24	5
3	28	11.5	3	21	3
4	35	20	4	33	18
5	31	16.5	5	28	11.5
6	34	19	6	22	4
7	27	9.5	7	20	2
8	25	6.5	8	26	8
9	29	13	9	19	1
10	27	9.5	10	31	16.5
$n_2=10$		$T_2=134.5$	$n_1=10$		$T_1=75.5$

N=20

The purpose of this study was to explore the effectiveness of teaching the names and sounds associated with the alphabet characters simultaneously on reading speed. The data collection procedure was carefully performed and the raw data was submitted to SPSS (version 19.0) to calculate the required statistical analyses in order to address the research questions and hypotheses of this study. This chapter provides the detailed statistical analyses conducted throughout the research and testing the hypotheses of the study based on the obtained results. Every step which was taken in analyzing the obtained data is presented in form of tables and figures in this chapter.

In order to meet the above-mentioned objectives of the study, the following research questions were asked:

*Q. Does teaching the name of the alphabet characters and their sounds simultaneously have a positive effect on faster reading?*

Based on the above research questions, the following null hypotheses were proposed:



*H. Teaching the names and sounds associated with the alphabet characters simultaneously has a negative effect on reading speed.*

**Placement Test Results**

Placement Test was administered in the two classes of control (N = 25) and treatment (N = 25) groups in order to select the weak students. Table 4.1 displays the mean, median, mode and standard deviation of the scores obtained on the placement test in the two groups. As clear from the table, the mean in control group ( $M = 9.60$ ,  $SD = 7.00$ ) was not very different from the mean in treatment group ( $M = 9.76$ ,  $SD = 7.16$ ).

Table 4.1

*Descriptive Statistics for Placement Test Results in Control and Treatment Groups*

Group	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Median	Mode	SD
Control	25	19	1	20	9.60	8.00	2	7.00
Treatment	25	19	1	20	9.76	10.00	2	7.16

The students' scores and their frequencies in the two groups are graphically illustrated in normal curves as shown in Figure 4.1 below.

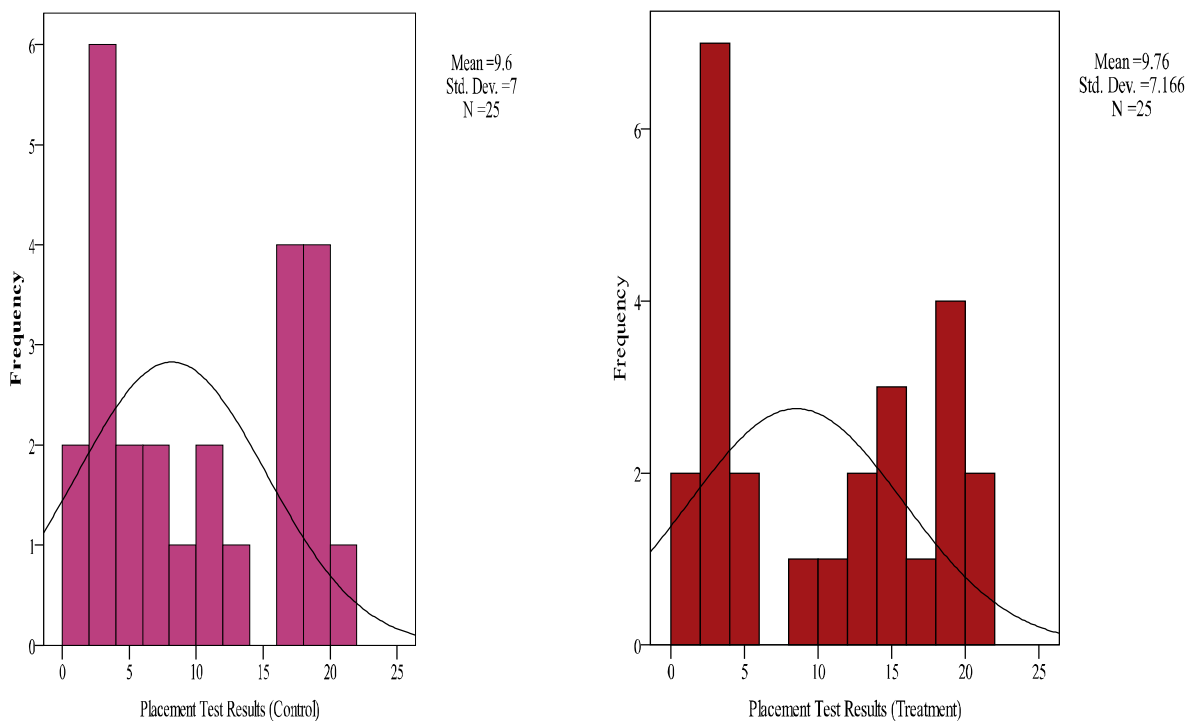


Figure 4.1 Histogram of placement test scores and their frequencies in the two groups

Those students who scored so poorly (4 and less than 4/20) on the placement test were selected as the main participants. Therefore 10 students in each class were chosen for the main study. The score of these 20 students (10 students in each group) were considered as their pre-test performance to compare with their post-test in order to test the hypothesis of this study.

**Pre-test Results**

Independent Sample Test was performed to test the homogeneity of two groups on the pre-test. Four assumptions of interval data, independence of subjects, normality and homogeneity of variances should

be met before one decides to run parametric tests (Field, 2009). The first assumption is met because the present data are measured on an interval scale. Bachman (2005, p. 236) believes that the assumption of independence of subjects is met when —the performance of any given individual is independent of the performance of other individual.

The third assumption concerns the normality of the data which is tested through Shapiro-Wilk Test. The results as appeared in Table 4.2 indicates that the scores in the two control ( $p = 17$ ) and treatment ( $p = 14$ ) groups are normally distributed since the p value exceeded the level of significance (.05) for both groups.

Table 4.2

*Shapiro-Wilk Test for Control and Treatment Groups' Scores on the Pre-test*

Group	Statistic	df	Sig.
Control	.892	10	.177
Treatment	.885	10	.149

The descriptive statistics for scores on the pre-test in the two groups are set forth in Table 4.3 below. The table shows that the mean in control group ( $M = 2.40$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ) was not very far from the mean in treatment group ( $M = 2.20$ ,  $SD = .91$ ).

Table 4.3

*Descriptive Statistics for Pre-test Scores in the Two Group*

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Control	10	2.40	1.075	.340
Treatment	10	2.20	.919	.291

The graphical demonstration of the results in Table 4.3 is shown in Figure 4.2 below.

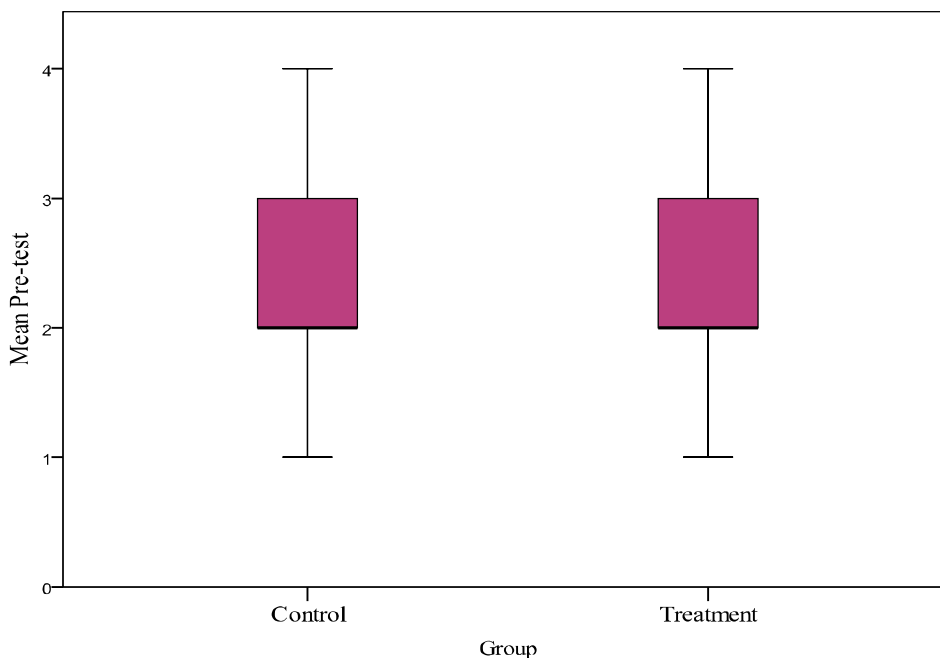


Figure 4.2 Reading speed for students in two groups on the pre-test

Table 4.4 displays the results of Independent Sample Test to find the homogeneity of two groups on the pre-test. The table shows that the hypothesis of equal of variances was supported because *Sig.* of Levene's Test (.43) was more than .05 ( $p = .43, p > .05$ ).

Table 4.4

*Independent Samples Test to Compare Two Groups' Scores on the Pre-test*

Levene's Test for Variances			T-test for Means			
	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig.</i> (2-tailed)	Mean Diff.
Equal variance assumed	.639	.434	.447	18	.660	.200

Independent Samples Test results in Table 4.3 indicates that there was no statistically significant difference in means between the two groups on the pre-test ( $t(18) = .447, p = .66, p > .05$ ), in which the *t*-observed (.447) was below the *t* critical (2.10), and the *p* value (.66) was higher than .05. Thus the homogeneity of two groups on the pre-test was approved.

**Testing the Research Hypothesis**

The research hypothesis of the current study predicted “Teaching the names and sounds associated with the alphabet characters simultaneously has a negative effect on reading speed’ de-motivation”. In order test this hypothesis, Wilcoxon Rank Sum Test (or Mann-Whitney *U* Test) was used. This test compares the median rank between control and experimental groups. Before discussing the results of Wilcoxon Rank Sum Test, the reading speed and rank for each students in the two control ( $N = 10$ ) and treatment groups ( $N = 10$ ) on the post-test are presented in Table 4.5 below.

Table 4.5

*Reading Speed and Rank for Students in Two Groups on the Post-test*

Time		Rank	
Control	Treatment	Control	Treatment
30	25	14.5	6.5
30	24	14.5	5.0
28	21	11.5	3.0
35	33	20.0	18.0
31	28	16.5	11.5
34	22	19.0	4.0
27	20	9.5	2.0
25	26	6.5	8.0
29	19	13.0	1.0
27	31	9.5	16.5

The mean rank and sum rank for the reading speed in the two control and treatment groups are set forth in Table 4.6. A quick look at the table reveals that the mean rank for experimental group (7.55) is less than the mean rank for control group (13.45) on the post-test.

Table 4.6

*Mean Rank and Sum of Ranks for Reading Speed in Two Groups on the Post-test*

Variable	Group	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Time	Control	10	13.45	134.50
	Treatment	10	07.55	75.50
	Total	20		

Figure 4.3 below graphically demonstrates the results as appeared in Table 4.6.

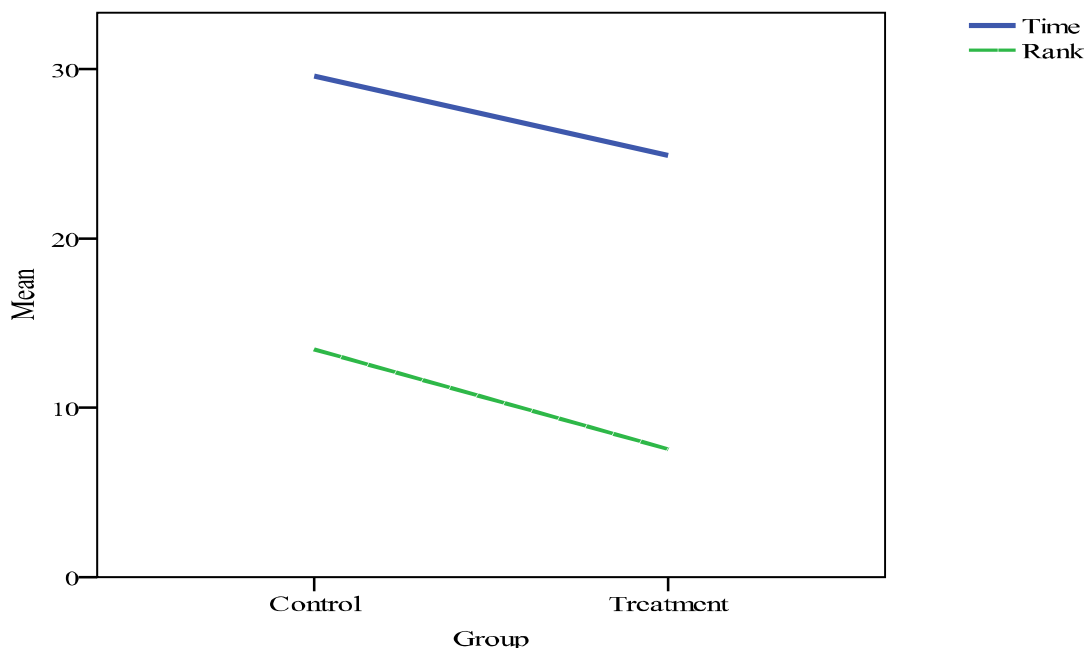


Figure 4.3 Reading speed and rank for students in two groups on the post-test

The results of non-parametric Wilcoxon Rank Sum Test (or Mann-Whitney U Test) for comparing the reading speed in the two groups on the post-test are laid out in Table 4.7.

Table 4.7

*Non-parametric Wilcoxon Rank Sum Test (Mann-Whitney U Test) to Compare the Control and Experimental Groups' Reading Speed on the Post-test*

Mann-Whitney U	Wilcoxon W	Z	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	Exact Sig. [2*(1-tailed Sig.)]
20.500	75.500	-2.234	.025	.023

Mann-Whitney *U* Test in Table 4.7 detected a significant difference between the students' reading speed in control and experimental groups on the post-test ( $U = 20.50$ ,  $W = 75.50$ ,  $p = .023$ ,  $p < .05$ ), in which the  $p$  value (.02) is less than level of significance (.05) in supporting that the median time for experimental group is higher than the median time for control group; as a result the null hypothesis of this study as teaching the names and sounds associated with the alphabet characters simultaneously has a negative effect on reading speed is **rejected**. So it can be claimed that teaching the names and sounds associated with the alphabet characters simultaneously has a positive effect on reading speed.

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#### Conclusion

Learning the alphabet is an essential part of early learning about literacy. Distinguishing between letters and learning their names is not all there is to learning the alphabet. Knowing how alphabet letters function in reading and knowing specific letter-sound associations are crucial. The present study was designed to explore the effects of teaching the alphabet with and without initial letter naming on reading speed of EFL learners of grade seven Iranian governmental schools.

To achieve this goal several steps were taken. First a placement test (letter recognition test) was administered to select students with no or almost no prior alphabet knowledge to eliminate subjects who had taken some English classes before, based on their achieved scores. To do so, mean and standard deviation scores for each group were calculated. From among the subjects in both the experimental (including 25 subjects) and the control (including 25 subjects) groups, 20 (10 for the experimental and 10 for the control group) were selected on the basis of their scores which were closer to one standard deviation below the mean, preferably lower scores since the goal was to select subjects with the least alphabet knowledge. The scores of these 20 students (10 students in each group) were considered as their pre-test performance to compare with their post-test in order to test the hypothesis of this study.

The descriptive statistics for scores on the pre-test in the two groups shows that the mean in control group ( $M = 2.40$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ) was not very far from the mean in treatment group ( $M = 2.20$ ,  $SD = .91$ ). The results of Independent Sample Test to find the homogeneity of two groups on the pre-test shows that the hypothesis of equal of variances was supported because *Sig.* of Levene's Test (.43) was more than .05 ( $p = .43$ ,  $p > .05$ ). Independent Samples Test results indicates that there was no statistically significant difference in means between the two groups on the pre-test ( $t(18) = .447$ ,  $p = .66$ ,  $p > .05$ ), in which the  $t$ -observed (.447) was below the  $t$  critical (2.10), and the  $p$  value (.66) was higher than .05. Thus the homogeneity of two groups on the pre-test was approved.

After a 2-month treatment on teaching English alphabet using two different methods, the post tests were administered for each group. The results of non-parametric Wilcoxon Rank Sum Test (or Mann-Whitney U Test) for comparing the reading speed in the two groups on the post-test detected a significant difference between the students' reading speed in control and experimental groups on the post-test ( $U = 20.50$ ,  $W = 75.50$ ,  $p = .023$ ,  $p < .05$ ), in which the  $p$  value (.02) is less than level of significance (.05) in supporting that the median time for experimental group is higher than the median time for control group; as a result the null hypothesis of this study as teaching the names and sounds associated with the alphabet characters simultaneously has a negative effect on reading speed is **rejected**. So it can be claimed that teaching the names and sounds associated with the alphabet characters simultaneously has a positive effect on reading speed.

### **Pedagogical Implications**

The results of this study are particularly relevant to educational practice for a number of reasons. (1) random assignment equated conditions in the skills and knowledge children initially brought to the task of alphabet learning and (2) the instruction provided was not confounded with implementer, schools, classrooms, or teachers. The findings are contrary to suggestions that letter name instruction is unimportant or, worse, detrimental for children's letter sound acquisition (Groff, 1984; McGuinness, 2004; see also Adams, 1990, pp. 350–355). These assertions have been founded on the notion that letter name and letter sound knowledge are not causal in nature, with letter name knowledge merely indexing other factors related to early literacy such as print awareness, exposure, and so forth (Foulin, 2005). Such beliefs have prompted approaches for teaching early literacy that disregard letter names altogether (Gurney, 1999; Jolly Learning Ltd., n.d.; Montessori & Gutek, 2004). The experimental design of the present study counters this argument, showing that letter name training, when combined with sound instruction, may causally impact students' letter sound acquisition. The results of current study suggest that junior high school educators who teach grade seven students need to consider teaching both letter names and sounds simultaneously rather than focusing solely on sound instruction since it leads to better and faster reading.

### **Suggestions for further study**

One limitation of the study concerned the intensity with which alphabet knowledge was taught. The intensity and duration of instruction provided in the current study produced only relatively modest gains in children's alphabet knowledge. Alphabet teaching affording greater instructional time, more frequent opportunities for repetition and practice, and/or better integration with regular classroom activities may well lead to greater impacts on reading speed than those reported here. Future design work might address how such instructional features and/or other letter properties and child characteristics affect children's letter sound learning and their future reading skill. The study also could not control for exposure to letter names outside the training context. Although such effects were randomly distributed across conditions leading to unbiased impact estimates, future studies might assess such exposure for inclusion in analyses or include an additional condition in which only letter names are taught in order to better understand the interplay between instruction and exposure in letter name learning. Given the relative innovation of combining these letter and child factors into a single, multilevel analysis, replication of these results with independent samples is also desirable. Finally, the development of letter name and sound knowledge are not ends in and of themselves; our efforts to better understand alphabet acquisition and instruction are aimed at facilitating later literacy development. Future work ought to continue to identify the best means of fostering alphabet knowledge and investigate the longitudinal effects of offering effective alphabet instruction on prevention of reading difficulties.

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