

Instant Recognition

by Nancy Kott, WZ8C

Some Hams are content to rag chew at slow speeds and don't have a desire to go faster. This is fine! As long as you are getting on the air and having fun with Morse code, that is what is important. However, many frustrated Hams want to go faster. "How can I increase my code speed?" is the most commonly asked question. After learning the alphabet, Hams seemingly reach a "plateau", a period where they can't make further progress. Usually they can copy 5 or 6 WPM fairly well, but they go to pieces above 7 or 8 WPM. The answer is simple: they have not adequately learned the alphabet.

They may deny this is true since they obviously must know the characters to copy 6 or 7 WPM.

However, to copy CW at higher speeds requires more than merely recognizing characters: the recognizing must be instantaneous. By instantaneous recognition I mean the ability to recognize a CW character within a half-second after hearing its completion.

Bill Pierpont, N6HFF, author of "The Art and Skill of Telegraphy," puts it this way: "Associate the code signal with the printed letter so intimately that when you hear or think of one, the other immediately pops into mind. Instant recognition is what we strive for. We must develop that patient, receptive state of mind that allows us to recognize each character instantly

and accurately as soon as it has been completed."

How do you find out if you have instant recognition? One way is to play a code practice program. As each letter plays, can you immediately say or write the letter? Or do you think "ummm...A" or "...dit dah...ummm...A"? If there is a split second delay in your recognition of the letter, then you haven't learned that letter to the point of instant recognition. A split second may not seem like much; it's not going to make much difference when you're going 5 or 10 WPM but when you get to higher speeds it's going to mess you up. The time it takes you to think "...ummm" before recognizing the letter will be long enough to make you miss the next letter after it. It will snowball to the point where you lose whole words. You may get enough of it to make sense of the copy, but you will not feel comfortable chatting on the air. It might discourage you enough to make you want to give up because you feel you are practicing and practicing and aren't making progress.

I'm sure you've heard the stories of legendary CW operators who can carry on a high speed chat on the air while drinking a cup of coffee and fielding questions from people in the room. These operators are comfortable with the code because it's so familiar they don't have to think about what they're copying.

Irene, WO8E, feels she is at a plateau. Even though she has passed the 20 WPM test and has

her Extra class license she doesn't feel comfortable carrying on a conversation at 20 WPM. We wondered if she had instant recognition, maybe she didn't and this was holding her back. She listened to the code characters one by one and sure enough there are a handful of characters that she has to think about before identifying them! Once you find you don't have instant recognition, how do you acquire it? There are two ways: the hard way and the easy way. The hard way is to proceed as you are doing, eventually instant recognition will come to you. With some people it may take years.

The simple way is to go back to the alphabet and learn it as it should have been done in the first place. Your first reaction is probably to think it would be a waste of time because you may feel you've already memorized the alphabet. But, you've proved that you don't really know the letters because you don't have instant recognition of them yet. Once properly learned, the alphabet will produce faster speeds quickly and easily. The key is to overlearn the alphabet so it becomes so ingrained in your brain that it's second nature. In psychology there is a "Law of Contiguity", which says that if two events occur no more than one-half second apart, the mind associates the two events. This means when a Morse code character is heard and it is followed within one-half second by a spoken letter of the alphabet, the mind will associate the Morse sound with the translation. The association works automatically, as a workman thinks "lunch" when

he hears the noon whistle blow. But we quickly forget things learned by this association method, so we need to "overlearn" them to make the code a part of our permanent memory. Overlearning occurs when we continue to practice something we feel we have already learned. However, boredom soon sets in when we go over and over material we think we've already mastered. This is why practice sessions should be short, two or three minutes at a time. Short, frequent practice sessions produce more results than fewer longer sessions. Concentrate, stay focused on your goal!

Determine what characters you don't recognize immediately after they are played and concentrate on these. You should be able to say the name of the character as the last dit or dah is heard. If you don't, add it to your list. You can relearn the alphabet by using basic code tapes, listening to slow code on the air or even whistling it to yourself. It would be ideal if you could make your own tape concentrating on your problem letters, but don't omit the letters you already know. Remember, our goal is to overlearn the code: all the reinforcement you can get is good for you.

The key to success with this method is to say the letter within a half second of hearing it; hearing it and quickly saying it over and over and over. The INSTANT you recognize the letter being played, say it out loud as fast as you can. Use spare moments during the day to whistle the code under your breath and quietly say the letter

to yourself immediately afterwards. Do it while driving, sitting at your desk at work (no one will even suspect!), during commercials while watching TV, anytime you think of it. Spending just a few minutes many times a day will work wonders. By tapping out the letter with your finger as you say the letter aloud or whistle it, you involve more of your brain's memory centers. This increases your learning efficiency by reinforcing instant recognition with what is called "motor memory". Doing a practice session right before you go to sleep has also been proven to help your brain commit material to memory.

When you find that you have instant recognition with the letters, your code speed will increase effortlessly. Then you will get to the point where you can work on having instant recognition with common words. As always, I welcome your comments. Contact me at Nancy Kott, WZ8C, PO Box 47, Hadley MI 48440 or via Email at nancy@tir.com