

THE PATH TO MORSE CODE FLUENCY

By Tom Weaver W0FN (12/6/24)

Def: *The comprehension of meaning while listening combined with sending speed, rhythm and accuracy.*

- 1) Extreme familiarity with the alphabet: **Instant Character Recognition (ICR)**
- 2) Character flow skills (keeping up) powered by **Instant Error Recovery (IER)**

These two skills are foundational, and improving one helps improve the other. Instant Error Recovery isn't "letting go" of non-recognition events, *it's never hanging on in the first place. Missing stuff isn't failure, it's essential IER practice.*

We begin by learning dit/dah sequences of each letter but that's far from truly *knowing* the alphabet. When each CW letter sound *is* the letter without thought (like spoken letters), that's the level of character sound familiarity necessary for Morse code fluency. To paraphrase Nancy Kott (WZ8C), [over-learn the alphabet](#). Over-learning each letter by their unique acoustic sound is an integral part of the journey to [Morse code proficiency](#).

ICR and IER are equally essential skills. Over-learning your ABC's alone is important, but you must also have the ability to instantly recover from non-recognition events. Improving IER requires a **Try But Don't Care** attitude; being mentally alert while remaining indifferent to misses. This alert indifference helps get your conscious mind out of the way, allowing your super-fast subconscious to 'take a shot'. Be relaxed, go with the flow, adopt a light mental touch. Trying to get every single character prioritizes conscious efforts and tends to block out the subconscious. Your subconscious may not be up to the task yet due to insufficient character sound familiarity, but practice using it anyway!

Improving IER will increase your comfort level with fast CW. Good IER skills replace slow conscious comprehension efforts with a speedy 'go with the flow, try but don't care' attitude. It's tough to master 25 WPM comprehension (for example) if you avoid listening to it. Practicing with speedy CW will build your ICR and IER skills faster. An IER mindset can accelerate your ICR improvement, which benefits your IER speed, which in turn helps ICR, etc. Take advantage of this positive feedback loop - it will accelerate your journey.

*ICR isn't a 'recognize letters quickly with plenty of time between them' skill. It's all about word building as letters arrive in the midst of a rapid flow of CW. As CW character flows speed up, ICR begins to give way to **Character Flow Recognition (CFR)**. A very high level of character sound familiarity is what empowers CFR; familiarity-driven CFR is the subconscious equivalent to ICR/IER skills. CFR is 'sound surfing', where familiarity reigns supreme. *CFR and its comprehension skills depend upon a mastery of unique character sound familiarity.**

Learning to hear a unique sound per letter at very short recognition intervals (speedy CW) is how you develop CFR; listen to code faster than your comfort level! If you wish, try [word building without CW](#) to check your spelling and word building skills. If short phrases or sentences are difficult to comprehend you may still be decoding dits and dahs (too slow). As character sound familiarity grows, recognition will transition into an automated background/subconscious task. The brain's conscious retention buffer is then free to build words as letters arrive, string them together, follow trains of thought, and understand what's being said.

Instant **Word Recognition** and Instant **Syllable Recognition** (IWR and ISR) occur naturally as short groups of letters are heard repeatedly (CQ, THE, RST, QTH, TNX, WX, ING, ED, ER, TEST, etc.). Common letter sequences heard often enough will eventually morph into a single sound rhythm. Since this happens naturally over time, IWR and ISR will automatically improve.

As the character speed increases it gets easier and easier to hear each letter as a single acoustic sound rhythm. Decoding dit/dah sequences is too slow once you put the pencil down; hearing each letter as a single sound becomes important. Listen to on-air QSOs, short stories, and rag chews. Prioritize 'keeping up' (CFR practice) and don't worry about missing stuff (IER practice). As you go with the flow regardless of non-recognition events you'll notice your conscious mind will start to step aside and let your subconscious do the recognition work.

We all learn differently, so do more of what is effective for you and less of what doesn't seem to help. When you get tired and it feels more like work and less like fun, stop and pick it up again later. 'Code talk' to yourself and/or out loud through the day, and practice sending and listening to CW multiple times per day. Good luck, have fun, keep practice sessions short and sweet (10 – 15 minutes), and get a code buddy. Check out the [Long Island CW Club](#); it's a welcoming community with a rich variety of online classes that will make your journey more enjoyable.