

Does Covering the Keys Facilitate Learning to Keyboard?

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Learning to key without looking at the keyboard is a difficult thing to do. This is especially difficult if your learners have taught themselves to type and developed “bad habits.” On of the most prominent “bad habits” that novice keyboarders learn is looking at the keyboard while typing. In response to this need, vendors have developed keyboard covers (or skins) which hide the letters on the keys from students. But does this work?

The \$64 question is “Will it help my students learn to touch type faster if we install keyboard covers?”

Let’s see what the research says:

Steven Reagan (2000) studied multiple factors when middle school students used software programs to learn touch typing skills. He compared two typing programs: one that was drill and practice (*KeyWords Elementary*) and a gaming drill and practice program (*Type to Learn 3*). Half of the students in each of these groups used covers on their keyboards and half of them did not. The results showed that the middle school students who used *KeyWords Elementary* and had covers on their keyboards did not experience a significant different in improvement over those who could see the letters on their keys.

Conversely, students who had covered keyboards while using *Type to Learn* achieved a significant increase in their keyboarding skills. Interestingly enough, the *Type to Learn* users without the covers achieved an average speed that was lower than either of the *KeyWords Elementary* users. The researcher observed that the game players were highly motivated to do well on the game so those without covers would look at the keyboard instead of using the more efficient touch-typing methods.

Lois Nichols (2004) did some research with 3rd and 4th graders (n=84). The students were randomly assigned to use either covered or uncovered keyboards. They received instruction 30 minutes/day for 4 weeks (10 hours) using Sunburst’s *Type To Learn 3*. The software is developed to enable the students to progress independently through the program. *Type to Learn 3* provides an on-screen keyboard with superimposed hands showing the students which keys to press.

It turned out that the students who had the covers on their keyboards finished the 4 weeks typing significantly faster than students who were able to watch the keys. There was no significant difference in their levels of accuracy.

Leonard West (1967) explored the effects of depriving visual feedback when typists typed on a typewriter. Unlike the other two studies which reviewed the effects of using covers on students' abilities to learn to keyboard faster, West did not study typing speed improvement. He asked people who could already type (9 – 118 wpm) and then measured the difference between their speed and accuracy rates with and without being able to view the keyboard. Not surprisingly, the less experienced typists experienced a high increase in errors and decrease in speed while the accomplished typists had a small increase in errors and slight decrease in speed. While this research is interesting, it doesn't hold much relevancy for optimizing keyboarding instruction programs.

These studies that researched the effects of using covers when teaching keyboarding found that those students who couldn't see their keyboards while they use keyboarding software learned to keyboard significantly faster than those who did not use covers. This indicates that covers can be helpful when learning to keyboard. It would be useful to engage in additional research at elementary, middle and secondary levels. The effects of using a gaming context could be further studied by using the Reagan study design with other software packages.

References:

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Questions?

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