slate **40**, for example, to form words, phrases, sentences or other arrangements of symbols or characters used in teaching and communicating using a symbolic language such as Braille. Some blocks **10***a* include a tactilly recognizable top surface having one or more protrusions **16**, for example, representing a Braille character or symbol. Other blocks **10***b* may include a flat top surface.

The block retaining slate **40** includes a base portion **42**, such as a flexible or rigid board, and a plurality of block engaging members **44** arranged in a predefined pattern on a first surface **41** of the base portion **42**. Typically, the base portion **42** and block engaging members **44** are made of a plastic or other rigid material. A second surface of the block retaining slate (not shown) may include a material such as magnets, VELCRO® brand hook-and-loop fasteners, and rubber to allow the block retaining slate **40** to be held firmly in place on a surface. The blocks **10** engage the block engaging members **44** on the first surface **41** block retaining slate **40** so that the blocks **10** can be arranged and aligned, for example, to form combinations of characters or symbols used in symbolic language teaching and communications, such as Braille words.

According to the preferred embodiment, the predefined pattern of block engaging members **44** include groups **50** of engaging members **44** adapted to engage one of the blocks **10**. The block retaining slate **40** further includes spaced regions **52** between each group **50** of engaging members **44** so that one block **10***c* (shown in phantom in FIGS. **1** and **3**) will not engage block engaging members **44** in two adjacent groups. The embodiment shown in FIG. **1** includes six engaging members **44** in each group **50**, however, the present invention contemplates any number of engaging members **44** in each group **50** of engaging members.

The predefined pattern of block engaging members **44**, according to one preferred embodiment, includes columns **46** of block engaging members and rows **48** of block engaging members **44**. The columns **46** and rows **48** of engaging members **44** form groups **50** of engaging members **44** with each group **50** of engaging members **44** defined by the intersection of one column **46** and one row **48** of engaging members. The block retaining slate **40** includes spaced regions **52** between each column **46** (or row **48**) of block engaging members **44**. Although the predefined pattern is shown as rows and columns of block engaging members defining groups of block engaging members, the present invention contemplates other patterns that define groups of block engaging members with spaced regions in between.

According to one preferred embodiment, the block retaining slate **40** further includes a ridge or rib portion **54** between each row **48** (or column **46**) of block engaging members **44**. The present invention also contemplates having ribs or ridges **54** between both the columns **46** and rows **48** or having spaced regions **52** between both columns **46** and rows **48**. The spaced regions **52** and/or ribs or ridges **54** facilitate alignment of the blocks **10** with the columns **46** and rows **48** (and with/proximate other blocks **10**) on the block retaining slate **40**, by preventing the blocks **10***c* (as shown in phantom in FIG. **3**) from engaging with engaging members **44** in two adjacent groups **50** across the spaced region **52** (or across the rib or ridge portion **54**). This predefined pattern of block engaging members **44** is particularly useful for disabled or visually impaired individuals who may have difficulty with positioning and aligning blocks **10** on the block retaining slate **40**. Visually impaired individuals, especially children, can easily slide their fingers along the spaced region **52** or rib **54** and secure the block **10** with a group **50** of engaging members **44** into the desired alignment.

Aligning the blocks **10**, e.g. in columns and rows, on the retaining slate **40** provides a further advantage in using the tactile recognition block to teach or learn Braille. An individual learning to read Braille, particularly a visually impaired child, can easily go across one line of Braille chracters and then drop down to the next line of characters without skipping a row or re-reading the same row.

According to one embodiment, the block retaining slate **40** further includes a rounded corner region **49** so that the block retaining slate **40** can be properly oriented and the symbols or characters arranged on the block retaining slate **40** can be properly recognized. The preferred embodiment of the blocks **10** includes a rounded corner region **17** that allows the blocks **10** to be properly oriented on the block retaining slate **40**, for example, so that the characters or symbols depicted on the blocks **10** are properly oriented for tactile recognition.

Each block **10**, FIG. **2**, includes an engaging region **14**, for engaging with block engaging members **44** of the block retaining slate **40**. According to the preferred embodiment, the engaging region **14** on each block **10** includes one or more cavities **15** within the block **10** that receive the block engaging members **44**, for example, in a friction fit.

According to the preferred embodiment, each block engaging member **44** includes a rounded block receiving region **45**, such as semi-spherical region, for being received in the cavities **15** of the engaging region **14** of each block **10**. The rounded block receiving region **45** allows the block engaging members **44** to be more easily received in the cavities **15** and into engagement with the block **10**. Accordingly, a disabled or visually impaired individual can more easily align and engage the blocks **10** with the engaging members **44**.

When a block **10***c* (shown in phantom), FIG. **3**, is positioned over a spaced region **52** or over a rib or ridge portion (not shown) the cavities **15** in the engaging region **14** of the block **10***c* are unable to receive and engage with the block engaging members **44**. For example, the spaced region **52** between the groups **50** of block engaging members **44** has a distance d_1, which is greater than the distance d_2 between the engaging members **44** within each group **50**. The spacing and the rounded block receiving regions **45** allow the blocks **10** to be more easily engaged with a group **50** of engaging members **44**.

Accordingly, the block retaining slate according to the present invention facilitates the engagement of blocks, such as tactile recognition (e.g. Braille) blocks, with the block engaging members on the block retaining slate. The block retaining slate according to the present invention includes a predefined pattern of block engaging members that facilitates proper alignment of the blocks with other blocks on the block retaining slate, for example, so that a combination of characters or symbols (e.g. a word, phrase, or sentence) can be arranged on the block retaining slate.

Modifications and substitutions by one of ordinary skill in the art are considered to be within the scope of the present invention which is not to be limited except by the claims which follow.

What is claimed is:

1. A block retaining slate for blocks having an engaging region, said block retaining slate comprising:

a base portion having at least a first and second surface; and

a plurality of block engaging members arranged in a predefined pattern including a plurality of groups of block engaging members on said first surface with a