QUARTERLY

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Spelling and Vocabulary Development

Joseph O'Rourke

Words are the basic units of language. We think with words. We also speak, listen, read, and write with words. Cognitive growth is enhanced by vocabulary growth. Experiences generate words, but words also generate experiences.

Vocabulary development is concept development. We find it hard to internalize an object or process unless we can name it. Our words describe our experiences. We express our ideas with words. We are our words.

Word Study and Spelling

Spelling is word formation. It is an integral, constructive part of vocabulary study. Vocabulary acquisition precedes reading skill. Students must know words to read (decode written symbols). However, if they are to progress beyond decoding to encoding, they must acquire skill in letter discrimination and placement. In short, students must be able to spell (place the graphemes of a word in conventional order to form words) before they can write, or encode, with skill and fluency.

While the decoder recognizes the word *descend*, the encoder has to be able to reproduce the grapheme relationships that make up the word *descend*. Therefore, the skillful encoder is in a better position to recognize *descend* in reading and, in addition, is likely to learn more easily the related words *descending*, *descendant*, *ascend*, and *ascendant*. Pearson (1985) speaks of not only knowing a word but owning it—an important concept. But we don't really take full possession of a word until we can spell it.

Given the importance of spelling skill, therefore, we need to look at spelling instruction in the broader context of language development. When spelling is taught in isolation, for instance, as lists of words to be learned by Friday, students often see spelling as a discrete act, a separate task, unrelated to other language experiences. As early as possible, students need to learn that spelling is not merely memorizing where the letters go. They should be encouraged to discover that spelling is word construction, that spelling is the discriminating placement of letters to form concepts and ideas represented by words.

We know that spelling ability ranges widely. There is, of course, a difference in the innate ability of students to visualize the arrangement of letters and word parts (Zutell, 1980). But most students can sharply improve their spelling skills by 1) developing a spelling conscience, 2) being aware that certain words are commonly misspelled and need to be double-checked until they are well known, and 3) noticing and learning meaningful word structures.

Developing a Spelling Conscience

An important part of being a good speller is developing a spelling conscience—wanting to spell correctly, realizing that correct spelling is a courtesy to the reader. How can we help students develop this concern for correct spelling? The best way to develop a spelling conscience in students is to make them word conscious. As teachers we must get students to notice words, arouse their curiosity about words, and help them see the significance of words in their lives.

Students who notice words, who are curious about word construction, are usually good spellers (Chomsky, 1968). Students who see the importance of words, who are on friendly terms with words, who have fun with words, and who respect words are likely to spell them correctly. We don't misspell our friends' names. We have more respect. Our spelling conscience won't allow it.

Of course, we want students to write good sentences. Thus we need to give adequate attention to syntax. But as teachers, many of us spend too much time on word order and not enough time on words. Emphasizing word study enhances spelling skill. Actually, it is hard to separate spelling from vocabulary study. One reinforces the other (Templeton, 1980). A combination of vocabulary study and spelling activities leads to the development of a spelling conscience. Spelling and vocabulary should go hand in hand. Word development is

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In This Issue

EDPRESS

From the Editor

Walter B. Barbe

The subjects discussed in this issue of the Spelling Progress Quarterly cover a broad range, from historical discussion of spelling reform to classroom application of specific teaching techniques to spelling theory and its implementation.

"Spelling and Vocabulary Development" by Joseph O'Rourke is a comprehensive article whose basic premise is that existentially "we are our words." The implications of such a fundamental influence are thoroughly investigated, both in terms of specific teaching techniques and, more broadly, integration of word awareness into the curriculum. Joseph O'Rourke urges teachers to develop students' word consciousness so they can apply their knowledge to new words out of the classroom as well as in it, and so they will enjoy the language their whole lives without relying on a school lesson. The article outlines various techniques that can be utilized to develop this awareness.

"When Noah Missed the Boat" is a historical reprimand and a cry of distress for the lost opportunity, 200 years ago, to establish and institute a more logical spelling system. Direct quotations from Noah Webster and Benjamin Franklin remind us that the issue of spelling reform is not new. Harvie Barnard ends his article on a positive note by encouraging readers to adopt the alternatives that do exist.

Judy Bassham investigates the learning process of beginning spellers in "The Role of Invented Spelling." She discusses the productivity of invented spelling as part of the process and goes on to examine the crucial importance of teachers' reactions to such attempts. The most far-reaching conclusion of her article is that the development of a sense of authorship in students will naturally lead to a desire to write and spell correctly; however, that initial sense of ownership can only develop if early spelling attempts are not only tolerated, but also encouraged.

Patricia Anderson re-examines the past, present, and future use of a common teaching technique in "Spelling Dictation: Used, Abused, and Refused." After summarizing the available research and hypothesizing why dictation has been used and continues to be used, often inappropriately, she includes a useful list of effective applications of the technique.

Once again, we find our contributors, by and large, emphasizing the spelling process. The comprehension and assimilation of a process or pattern places at the learner's disposal the entire language, not just the fraction which is explicitly taught in school.

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concept development and concept development involves noting similarities and differences. Therefore, it is also important that teachers provide the opportunity for students to notice the clear similarities or slight differences in the pronunciation and structure of words (Read, 1973). Word study provides that opportunity.

Checking Commonly Misspelled Words

Teachers can and should combine spelling and vocabulary instruction. For example, in referring to words with a silent *k* or other spelling anomalies, they might remind students that while pronunciations of many English words changed slowly but constantly, their spellings became static centuries ago. For example, when Chaucer wrote "The Knight's Tale," the word *knight* was pronounced *k-nicht* (the *ch* having the Greek *chi* sound). It is now pronounced *nite*, but still retains the original spelling, *knight*. The word *night* has gone through the same process: the pronunciation changed but the spelling froze. Another example is the variation in the pronunciation of *gh*, which is silent or stands for the same sound as *f*:

light, bright, plough
rough, enough, tough

Aside from the few phonemically irregular words, perhaps one of the chief causes of poor spelling is careless pronunciation. *Government* is often mispronounced and therefore spelled *goverment*, *quantity* becomes *quanity*, *vanilla* becomes *vanella*, and *arctic* becomes *artic*. (Actually, the latter pronunciation of *arctic* is now acceptable, though the spelling is not.)

Some spelling errors occur when words sound the same: *principle-principal, stake-steak, flew-flu*. Some students mistake *affect* for *effect* because they don't distinguish the *e* from the *a*. Students should be encouraged to take note of mispronunciations they hear and discuss them in class. Common mispronunciations that cause spelling errors include *chimley* for *chimney*, *athalete* for *athlete*, *ast* for *asked*, and *excape* for *escape*.

Predicting and Avoiding Spelling Difficulties

Students need to be reminded that certain words are often misspelled and that we all need to check these words after spelling them. Sometimes we can use memory devices, but they do not always work. We can improve our spelling by learning certain principles and patterns. We can use memory devices such as noting roots and affixes, but we will still make some spelling mistakes unless we are able to predict, double-check, and work on the words which we might misspell. Incidentally, we should keep in mind the fact that the number of words commonly misspelled is relatively small. In analyzing 17,000 words for sound-letter relationships, Hanna (1971) found that only 3 per cent of the core vocabulary could be termed "spelling demons." Indeed, students who are alerted to their personal "demons" often show rapid improvement in the spelling of these troublesome words.

What can teachers do to pinpoint and alleviate difficult spelling problems? Through the years several scholars have suggested focusing on particular graphemes or patterns that cause problems. Included below is a short list of words often misspelled. This list was chosen from *Spelling Difficulties in 3,876 Words*, a key study by Arthur I. Gates (1937). A list such as Gates's enables the teacher to alert students to the most probable source of misspellings. It shows, for example, that the most common misspelling of *absolutely* is *absolutly*, or that the most common misspelling of *bulletin* is *bullitin*. The teacher might also consult other lists of this kind. For example, Nolen and McCartin (1984) present and discuss lists of patterned regularities in children's spelling errors. Additional error patterns are presented and analyzed by Ganschow (1984). Students might use such lists, or perhaps one prepared by the teacher, who has noted the trouble spots in particular words. Students can check themselves against such a master list to see which words and letters give them trouble. Thus they can discover and make a list of their personal "spelling demons." The list can be modified from time to time.

Correct Spelling	*Most Common Misspelling*
absolutely	absolutly
bulletin	bullitin
descend	decend
February	Febuary
interrupt	interupt

Noticing Word Patterns and Structures

Hanna, Hodges, and others have noted the regularity in English sounds and their corresponding symbols. Since over 80 per cent of English words are phonemically regular, teachers may be neglecting unwittingly a ready-made method for learning and spelling words, that is, decoding and encoding word patterns.

The language code, which we must decode to read and encode to write, has order: otherwise we could make no generalizations about the language. This order is quite clear. For example, the *ou* sound is peculiar to such words as *house, couch, louse, grouch*, and *slouch*. From such words the students can generalize about the *ou* pattern and the sound it represents. Exceptions to this generalization are easily learned.

In addition to making generalizations about regular patterns of graphemes that make up sounds, syllables, and words, students need practice making discriminations. They should note that variations in word meanings are often distinguishable by the addition or omission of a letter: *rat, rate; hat, hate;*

singing, singeing; dying, dyeing; bat, bait, bate.

The students' lack of understanding about the relationship between spelling and vocabulary is apparent when they spell *bare* as *bear*, *there* as *their*, *fête* as *fate*. Teachers can point out that anagrammatic words result from the transposition of letters. The position of a letter makes a big difference in words such as *lair* and *liar*, *dairy* and *diary*, *casual* and *causal*.

The effective speller is able to encode sounds, syllables, and words, and meaningful symbols, or elements, such as *ab* (from), *ad* (to), *ante* (before), *post* (after), *able*, *ible* (can be). Thus encoding gives students practice discriminating regular letter patterns that form meaningful syllables—roots and affixes that are generative of many words. Learning and recognizing these morphological elements gives the speller a mnemonic edge.

Vocabulary development is concept development. We find it hard to internalize an object or process unless we can name it. Our words describe our experiences. We express our ideas with words. We are our words.

It is often thought that merely presenting spelling words in the context of sentences is of great help to students. Of course, we know it helps students relate one word to another, one idea to another. However, the sentence approach offers no structure for spelling learners. There are no principles students can follow, no way to help them organize their formerly learned knowledge to apply to new spelling words.

Students who relate spelling practice to word study, who are taught to recognize certain syllables as meaningful units, readily recognize these units when they turn up in new words. For example, the *anti* in *antifreeze* is spelled the same as the *anti* in *antidote*. If students know how to spell *bicycle*, they can be shown that they already know how to spell one part of *bisect*. If they can spell *circus* and are taught to recognize *circu* as a unit, the spelling of harder words is a short step away—*circuit*, *circuitous*, *circulatory*.

Integrating Spelling and Word Study

By teaching spelling as a part of word study, the teacher supplies a context that is missing in some spelling programs. Combining spelling and word study makes the learning of spelling a more relevant activity: it integrates spelling with the study of written language. Effective word study helps the students make associations, form patterns, and relate concepts. An effective spelling program organizes relevant materials into word-attack skills, whole words and their meanings, word parts and their meanings, and the synthesis of these elements to rebuild whole words.

Teachers can often help students generalize about word formation. Some spelling series group related words together to help the students make both visual and aural associations. Teachers not using such sound programs can select and arrange spelling words in similar groups or clusters. For example, the students can readily see meaningful patterns in the following sets of words:

multiply	omit	multitude
multiplicand	permit	altitude
multiplier	admit	aptitude
multiple	commit	attitude
multiplication	submit	fortitude
multitude	remit	beatitude

Such arrangements reinforce the learning of letter patterns that the students must recognize to become good spellers. To become good spellers, students must be able to discover predictable patterns in words and word segments (Radebaugh, 1985).

Spelling and Meaningful Syllables

Although English is in some respects phonemically irregular, linguists have pointed out that there is a great deal of regularity in English sounds and corresponding symbols (Hanna, Hodges, 1971). This means that many prefixes, roots, and suffixes (actually syllables and compounds of syllables) appear in predictable positions in respect to phoneme-grapheme correspondence. Awareness of this consistency becomes increasingly important as pupils develop greater sophistication in their approach to spelling and writing activities. For example, students can be taught early that *ex*, *pre*, *pro*, and *anti* appear at the beginning of words and that *ette*, *ess*, *icle*, *let* and *ism* appear at the end.

We know that speech comes before writing and that syllabication helps students pronounce words. For example, dictionaries give the syllabication of the words *fanatic* as **fa nat' ic** and *fanciful* as **fan' ci ful.** This type of entry is sometimes a help and sometimes a hindrance in pronouncing the words. Regardless, it should be pointed out that syllabication does not always help students see the meaningful parts of words: it does not help them decide whether *fa*, *fan*, or *fanat* are meaningful word parts of *fanatic*. In short, the students get no hint about how to classify meaningful parts as a way of remembering the spelling of a word. They must be given help.

Let's consider the word *telegram*. Dictionaries give the syllabication of *telegram* as **tel' e gram.** An approach to spelling emphasizing meaningful part-combinations would stress not *tel* but *tele*, meaning "distant." Such an approach would tie in directly

with a systematic study of key prefixes, roots, and suffixes. Thus the teaching of *tele* as a meaningful entity offers an effective way of attacking the spelling of this word. Students learning *tele* as a unit meaning "distant" would be unlikely to spell *telegram* as *telagram*, *telegraph* as *telagraph*, and *telephone* as *telaphone*—all common spelling errors. Therefore, in addition to learning phonetic syllabication in spelling activities, students need to be aware that word elements with meaning also exist.

This does not mean that students are to disregard the syllabic sounds of words found in phonetic keys. Rather, it means that in addition to phonetic aids, greater emphasis should be placed on the meaningful word elements as aids to word-building, spelling, and reading. For example, the dictionary listing of *biology* as **bi ol' o' gy** may help with pronunciation, but the students should know that this syllabic arrangement does not have meaning. A meaningful formation is *bio* (life) + *logy* (study of). In general, students do not seek out this kind of linguistic information. Teachers must point it out to them and provide illustrative examples on a regular, systematic basis. Teachers must manipulate the educational environment (Dewey, 1954).

Classifying Words for Spelling and Word Study

Through systematically teaching meaningful word parts such as prefixes, roots, and suffixes, and by analyzing words, the teacher can give the students practical help. For example, words can be classified for study. They can be prepared (as below) in a format that highlights meaningful and related word parts (Dale, O'Rourke, 1971).

Prefixes

mis spell	re fund	trans plant
mis state	re play	trans fer
post pone	super natural	tri cycle
post script	super structure	tri vial

Roots

uni form	de script ion	pro ject
re form	pre script ion	re ject
tele graph	vis ible	trans port ation
steno graph er	super vis e	port able

Suffixes

de pend able	inspect or	book let
avail able	act or	ring let
civil ize	friend ship	psycho logy
crystal ize	penman ship	mytho logy

Inflections and Spellings

Students often have difficulty learning words and their spellings because they don't relate an unfamiliar word to any known word. Teachers should point out that many English words are formed by inflected change, so spelling a "new" word may merely involve adding a syllable or changing a letter of a known word. Students can benefit from the transfer involved in forming new words from words already known. We know that students are able to transfer relevant information, including spelling patterns, from known to unknown words (Beers, 1980). But they will learn faster if they are taught and encouraged to look for structurally related words, or word families.

The Living Word Vocabulary, a 30-year national study of word knowledge by Dale and O'Rourke (1981), provides a list of pairs of related words and their grade levels. This useful book shows us that many words are separated by as much as a six or eight-year span: for instance, *habit* is known at the fourth-grade level, *habitual* at the tenth; *infant* at sixth, *infancy* at eighth; *pretend* at fourth, *pretense* at twelfth; *real* at fourth, *reality* at eighth; and *type* at fourth, *typical* at tenth. *Example* is known on the fourth-grade level, but *exemplify*, an inflectional form of *example*, is not known before the tenth-grade level. *Exemplify* could be learned much earlier and more easily if the students were shown that it is merely another form of *example*.

Obviously, students are not making connections between related words. As teachers, we need to point out the similar structure of different but related words (Chomsky, 1970). If spelling programs emphasized the relationship of words formed from common roots, if the inflections of words were stressed to show that many words are slightly changed forms of words the students already know, they would make an appreciable gain in spelling and word knowledge.

Will It Work in the Classroom?

On the whole, this article has dealt with the benefits of the practical application of spelling activities as they relate to word study. It has been noted that the best way to develop a spelling conscience in students is to make them word conscious, get them to notice words, and encourage them to become interested in words.

It has also been pointed out that a practical approach to solving many spelling problems is to predict spelling difficulties. Teachers can use existing word lists in spelling texts or prepare their own, thus pinpointing the trouble spots. Students can also make lists of their own "spelling demons."

The article reminds teachers that spelling is word formation and that the best way to impress students with the importance of spelling is to relate it to vocabulary development. This gives spelling a purpose.

When combining spelling with word study, teachers need to remember that the structure of one task may help in learning another. Students learn more than the particular thing they are studying at the time. The melding of vocabulary and spelling often results in collateral learning (Dewey, 1954).

A systematic program of vocabulary study, developed and conducted by the author for eighth-grade students throughout the Columbus, Ohio, Public Schools resulted in the students' ability to form and "create" words from learned roots. But this activity also resulted in a collateral learning, a secondary learning—the improvement of spelling. The students had discovered for themselves that there are basic word structures and spelling patterns common to many words (O'Rourke, 1974).

Thus students who in the pre-tests wrote *benafit*, *photagraph*, and *thermomater* spelled these words correctly in the post-tests. In short, they learned the meaningful elements *bene* (well), *photo* (light), and *meter* (measure) and transferred this knowledge to the spelling of words.

Why did this collateral learning take place? The students were simply encouraged to notice words and word parts. They were also given the opportunity to discover for themselves the spelling patterns and existing logical relationships in the meaningful word elements that make up words. Indeed, the results present a convincing argument for the claim that spelling and vocabulary should go hand in hand.

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When Noah Missed the Boat

Harvie Barnard

Perhaps twenty thousand years elapsed between the launching of Noah's Ark and the foundering of Noah Webster's noblest intentions. The Ark represented a rescue mission from a storm of divine wrath, and Noah Webster's intentions, if implemented, would have delivered English speaking peoples from the inconsistent and confusing spelling of their language. Though Webster's commitment to reformed spelling is clearly stated in his *Dissertation on The English Language*, the publication of his *Dictionary of the English Language* nearly forty years later represented a change of heart and the loss of an opportunity to create a new spelling system at a formative time in American history.

For more than 200 years, it has been a well-kept secret that according to Webster's *Dissertation*, published in 1789, he proclaimed in the appendix, "I will here subjoin what Dr. Franklin has done and written to effect a reform in our mode of spelling." This surprising statement supports Webster's previous confession that "I once believed that a reformation of our orthography would be unnecessary and impractical. This opinion was hasty, being the result of a slight examination of the subject. I now believe with Dr. Franklin that such a reformation is practicable and highly necessary." Elsewhere in the appendix Webster recognized that "...America is in a situation most favorable for great reformations; and the present time is, in a singular degree, auspicious." Webster was so fervent in his conviction that the time and place for spelling reform had arrived that he argued in terms of patriotism and national pride.

> Now is the time and this is the country in which we may expect success in attempting changes favorable to language, science and government. Delay in the plan here proposed may be fatal; under a tranquil general government, the minds of men may again sink into indolence; a national acquiescence in error will follow; and posterity be doomed to struggle with difficulties, which time and accident will perpetually multiply... Let us then seize the present moment and establish a national language, as well as a national government. Let us remember that there is a certain respect due to the opinions of other nations....In short, let it be impressed upon the mind of every American that to neglect this means of commanding respect abroad is treason against the character and dignity of a brave and independent people.

Webster concluded his *Dissertation* by quoting a letter from Benjamin Franklin, who wrote:

> In short, whatever the difficulties and inconveniences now are, they will be more easily surmounted now than hereafter; and some time or other it must be done, or our writing will become the same as the Chinese, as to the difficulty of learning and using it. And it would already have been such, if we had continued the Saxon spelling and writing used by our forefathers.
>
> I am, my dear friend,
>
> B. FRANKLIN
>
> (London, Craven Street, Sept. 28, 1768)

In this viewpoint it appears that Webster had the support of several distinguished writers of his time in addition to that of Benjamin Franklin. In fact, Webster stated with some pride, "In the singularity of spelling certain words, I am authorized by Sidney, Clarendon, Middleton, Blackstone, Ash, or other eminent writers whose authority, being supported by good principles and convenience, is deemed superior to that of Johnson, whose pedantry has corrupted the purity of our language, and whose principles would in time destroy all agreement between the spelling and pronunciation of words."

In this prediction it appears that Webster was prophetic. Yet somehow the orthography of Samuel Johnson prevailed, perhaps because his *Dictionary of the English Language* was so widely recognized as the most thoroughly researched publication of its kind at that time, and because Johnson's definitions and illustrations of the use and meanings of words were outstandingly superior to those of all other dictionaries in the English language. Yet the Johnson dictionary revealed two serious weaknesses, as pointed out by Webster and other writers. First, there was an obvious lack of dependable relationships between Johnsonian spellings and the way these spellings sounded when spoken. In addition, the *Dictionary of the English Language* virtually ignored diction, as far as pronunciation was concerned, and there were no diacritical marks to help the uncertain seeker for clues. As Webster clearly stated, "...the same letters often represented different sounds, and the same sounds were expressed by different letters."

During the thirty-nine years which elapsed between the publication of the *Dissertation* and Webster's *American Dictionary of the English Language*, Benjamin Franklin died; and Noah, fifty-one years younger, became deeply involved in publishing and writing to earn a living. This undoubtedly required a less idealistic point of view and perhaps was the reason, combined with the loss of his mentor and greatly admired friend, for a change of attitude in respect to the reform of English spelling.

In publishing his widely imitated *American Dictionary of the English Language*, Noah Webster used many of the spellings of Samuel Johnson's 1755 dictionary. Few exceptions were included. Thus our American spellers became locked into the orthography of a bygone period of English history. By abandoning his original determination and common sense opinions of the the weirdly inconsistent English spellings and the "pedantry" espoused by Johnson, "Noah missed the boat."

It is undoubtedly a great misfortune for English-speaking peoples that Webster's analysis of the problems inherent in our English spelling was correct, for his prophecies on the consequences of delay have proved true. The result has been that during the past 200 years, posterity has struggled and suffered with the queerly inconsistent spellings which have confused and frustrated many generations of English-speaking children and all those forced to conform with the spellings set down as "sacred" by our academic dictators of diction and orthography.

Times have changed. Pronunciations have changed. The language has been modified. Thou-

sands of new words have been coined, and expressions have developed which, in spite of Samuel Johnson, tend toward phonetic spellings, spellings which more nearly represent the spoken language. So as Noah Webster said in 1789—and his admonition may be more applicable today than it was then—"Now is the time and this is the country."

The wisdom of both the younger Webster and the older Franklin has been proved true. Our problem now is the implementation of spelling reform of our American English language. A thoroughly researched and fully computerized program of phonetically acceptable spelling has been developed and is now ready for use. It is called the AMERICAN ALTERNATIVE. It is a flexible system which, like fashion, speech, and communication, incorporates inevitable change and improvements. The fact that alternatives exist in the use of the new AMERICAN ALTERNATIVE makes this spelling reform system both practical and convenient. It is a substantial improvement over the inflexible spellings we now use. Furthermore, as an implement of modern communication, it would add to the efficiency of education, as well as business transactions, and international understanding.

The Role of Invented Spelling

Judy W. Bassham

The simplest yet most supportive statement about the relationship of spelling to writing was made by Donald Graves when he said, "Spelling is for writing".[1] Spelling is addressed by an author throughout a piece of writing and is polished in the editing stage. Attention to spelling is one way an author shows respect for his/her audience. Children who write for others focus on communicating their intent. The purpose of this article is to explore the role of invented spelling in children's writing.

Those of us who have contact with children, either our own or our students, have observed their early experiences with writing. A four-year-old will work with a large crayon and a piece of paper for several minutes. When completed, the piece is brought to a receptive adult with the directive, "Read my story!" The child is experiencing the initial desire of all beginning authors—that of finding an appreciative audience. If only that audience knew how critical his/her response is at that moment. When children's attempts at spelling are celebrated, the children are motivated to continue to write and that motivation necessitates "spelling" more words.

Children's initial experiences with spelling are based on the sounds they hear. Just as they experiment with speech, children invent their spelling. In the early stages of written communication, children draw pictures and use stick and circle figures to make "words." They come to school with varying experiential backgrounds with language, and these backgrounds contribute to the rate of success children have in working with language. Children who have rich experiences in oral language may begin dictating and copying whole sentences. Others begin by using one-word labels for their drawings. Common words are stored in children's memories and are withdrawn as they write. *D* becomes *DG*, then *DAG*, and finally *DOG*. Consonants are recorded first with one or two making up the intended words. Vowels are added later.

A child's attempts at invented spelling need to be encouraged. In one of her early books, Marie Clay states that "when children are left free to write they seldom copy and more often invent."[2] There is a correlation between the amount of writing done by a child and spelling consciousness. As children write, they develop a desire to have their writing "published" or made available to an audience. As they develop this sense of audience, they become aware that someone else is going to read their work. This awareness triggers a sense of pride which calls

[1] Donald H. Graves, *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work* (Exeter, NH: Heinemann Educational Books) 1983, p. 193.

[2] Marie M. Clay, *What Did I Write?* (Exeter, NH: Heinemann Educational Books) 1975, p. 43.

attention to the mechanics a child uses in his/her writing. There is more focus on spelling as well as punctuation, etc.

Let's take a look at two classrooms where children write. Teacher A lets her children write. She gives topic choices and allows students to talk about their writing and topic ideas with each other. The teacher confers with each child and encourages him/her to sound out words to be spelled. Each child is encouraged to keep a list of frequently used words and as these are used more and more, the child is self-motivated to "spell them right." The classroom abounds with books and children are free to read often. They begin to recognize words in print and add them to their lexicons. The more they write, the greater the need for more words. The teacher assists students who request help with spelling and encourages children to use each other as sources for words they need to use in their writing. Gradually these young writers begin to explore dictionaries and other reference books, including their spelling text. The teacher's role is to assist and guide. Language becomes real to children because they are using it in context. Invented spelling evolves into a need for correctness, and a patient teacher who writes with his/her students encourages progress.

Teacher B believes that children can't write until they learn to spell. She assigns topics and asks for papers by the end of class. These are returned the next day full of red marks and circles and "sp" notations. Because their writing is controlled by the teacher, these children feel no ownership of their work. It is something set apart and used to remind them of their "mistakes." Although some children's desire to write is strong enough to overcome this type of instruction, others become discouraged and do not look forward to their writing time in school.

Teacher A's children add words to their lexicons as they need and use them in their writing. The teacher encourages and assists each child through conferences. The child reads his/her piece to the teacher or to a group of peers and answers questions about content or intent. Invented spelling is treated as a beginning step to correct spelling. *DG* becomes *DOG* when the child begins not only to hear the vowel sound but to see the word in his/her reading as well as to use it often when writing.

A teacher's attitude of encouragement of a child's invented spelling creates an easy transition into formal spelling. Because children have been urged to write with invented spelling and have the desire to present their work to an audience, the need to develop skills for spelling becomes dominant. As children use certain words more often in their writing, they soon realize that the words they need to have read by others are spelled a certain way. Children want to "spell them right." The teacher assists students in developing the needed skills for spelling. Beginning visual and auditory discrimination activities are followed by work with initial consonants, phonograms, and consonant clusters. Children begin to recognize patterns in spelling words correctly, and these patterns become stored in their memories, to be recalled when needed. Through revision and editing, children develop a sense of pride in their writing and begin to see the need for correctly spelled words as well as to give attention to other language mechanics or conventions.

Children learn to spell as they write, and their need for correctness grows. Their freedom to invent is the foundation for learning to spell correctly. I still have a paper which I wrote in first grade. I proudly signed my whole name by spelling the middle one "And". In second grade I spelled it "Ann" and I was still writing. Patient teachers in those early years not only let me write; they encouraged my need to experiment with the language.

Spelling Dictation: Used, Abused, and Refused

Patricia Anderson

> The blooming flowers grew quickly in the garden. The blooming flowers...The blooming flowers...grew quickly...grew quickly...in the garden...in the garden...The blooming flowers grew quickly in the garden.

When read aloud by a classroom teacher, the preceding sentence exemplifies the strategy known as spelling dictation. Often used for both testing and instruction, dictation passages can be a group of sentences, a story, or a paragraph description of an object or event. Those passages usually contain the basic spelling words from a list of words either currently or previously studied.

Dictation requires students to record speech in correct spelling form. Hanna, Hodges, and Hanna (1971) define spelling as "an act of encoding the

phonemes of speech into the graphemes of the writing system" (p. 103). Through encoding (writing speech), students learn more of the use of words in proper context and can apply a variety of spelling skills. Young children decide early that certain phonemes are used to construct words, even if they cannot properly identify which specific phonemes are used in spoken words (e.g., recording *rit* for *write*.) Dictation gives children the opportunity to examine the phonemes used in speech and their relationship to graphemes.

There appears to be relatively little written specifically about spelling dictation. Although it has existed in both past and present, there is a scarcity of conclusive or innovative discussion on the topic. In most instances, the comments on spelling dictation are brief and included with other general dialogue on spelling.

Despite this lack of attention within the literature, dictation strategies are still prevalent in many schools. The following paragraphs describe their use and abuse. The refusal to adhere to spelling dictation is discussed, followed by recommendations for more appropriate uses of the strategy.

Using Spelling Dictation

Teachers offer many reasons for the use of spelling dictation in both instructional and evaluative modes. First, many teachers today claim to use spelling dictation for instruction as a transitional activity between workbooks, boardwork, textbooks, ditto worksheets, and spelling lessons (Schofer, 1977). They see a need for careful integration of spelling skills into students' other written work. Second, teachers often use dictation for instruction and evaluation because it places spelling skills in a "real-life" situation—in a context most transferable to other study areas. Third, spelling words, especially homophones, need to be examined within a specific context. Providing that context for homophones within sentences (e.g., She *threw* the ball over the wall. The office is *through* those doors.) is a reason cited for the use of spelling dictation, particularly in instructional settings. Finally, other teachers are concerned that students might forget the correct spelling of previously studied words; writing the words within a dictated context offers a means of evaluating students' acquisition of unvarying habits of correct spelling (Burns and Broman, 1983).

Most spelling programs give some attention to dictation. In textbook series, sentences for dictation are often included as one of the evaluation methods from which the teacher may select. However, attention given to dictation as an evaluation method is often minimal. Some programs seem to appease teachers who support this strategy by simply supplying dictation sentences within their instructional program but without explaining or suggesting appropriate uses. The sentences for dictation often appear contrived; teachers and students have expressed dissatisfaction with those passages.

Hanna, Hodges, and Hanna (1971) explain that most programs provide for review after six weeks' work with word lists. Within those reviews, they suggest using dictation passages, each of which incorporates several spelling words previously studied. Indeed, some teachers follow that pattern and use dictation for review purposes. Other teachers believe that dictation should be given daily, while some believe it should be used weekly. Thus, it is evident that no standard exists for the use of spelling dictation in either instructional or evaluative modes.

Abusing Spelling Dictation

Every idea or strategy can be abused. Such abuse occurs when the intended use of a technique is ignored while other less appropriate applications are emphasized. That has often been the case for spelling dictation. Designed to identify spelling words with their meanings in contextual settings, the dictation method for learning and evaluation has been extended well past its intended use. Misunderstanding, tradition, and the memories and perceptions of the general public in regard to dictation have added to this problem.

Henderson (1985) claims, "Until very recent years most of us did 'fly blind' in our efforts to teach spelling" (p. 95). Has spelling dictation been one of the areas where spelling teachers have "flown blind"? Have teachers resorted to an inappropriate or ineffective (though potentially effective and productive) technique because they knew no alternatives? Have they simply recalled and used strategies through which they were taught? With excessive time restraints, perhaps teachers have failed to search for alternatives to traditional strategies. If so, such teaching has constituted "abuse" of the strategy of spelling dictation.

Unless the words selected for spelling dictation sentences are those which have been previously studied in spelling lessons, it seems unfair to base students' spelling grades on words that have not been studied.

The "back to basics" issue and the recent public attention given to children's achievement in schools have added to the inappropriate use of spelling dictation. As teachers have been pressured to prepare a thorough evaluation for every student, spelling dictation scores may have been inadvertently added to increase the number of grades for students. Additionally, the public's perceptions and memories

of spelling lessons have provided additional encouragement for continuing inappropriate uses of this technique. Teachers have often found acceptance for dictation exercises because many parents of today's school children clearly remember being taught with identical teaching methods.

One kind of abuse of spelling dictation fits in the category of being used for evaluation purposes rather than instructional purposes. Some teachers claim that spelling dictation alone is the best regular and thorough evaluation of students' abilities to spell correctly. Those teachers' good intentions are admirable, but they may be somewhat misdirected. Unless the words selected for spelling dictation sentences are those which have been previously studied in spelling lessons, it seems unfair to base students' spelling grades on words that have not been studied. Even if words required for spelling are familiar ones, it is inappropriate to base children's performance evaluations continuously on previous work which may or may not have been mastered. However, using those same sentences for instruction (defining spelling words in initial study) and not for evaluation does not constitute an abuse.

The final description of inappropriate dictation emphasizes words in context for evaluation purposes. Required in some spelling curriculums are regular dictation passages to be mastered by all children at each grade level. Such requirements are often outside the guidelines established by the adopted basal programs. Teachers following the curriculum dictate an entire paragraph or group of sentences weekly. Throughout the week, parents are asked to help children master all skills required for correctly writing the dictation sentences at the end of the week. Late in the week, passages identical to those given at the beginning of the week are dictated; the work is corrected and evaluated. Scores on the final test may even be determined by the number of words correctly spelled, the number of letters capitalized, and the number of correctly punctuated sentences. Children, then, are being evaluated on spelling work for some non-spelling skills.

Refusing Spelling Dictation

In 1977 Allred examined research on spelling dictation and found, amazingly, that the most informative studies were completed in 1916, 1922, and 1927. Called the "context method" at that time, dictation was designed to give spelling words a context for correct identification. Describing spelling dictation as a "bone of contention" since then, Allred states, "Of all the research findings that are consistent, the one most difficult for teachers or authors to accept in practice is that the list method is more efficient than is the context method" (p. 22). Continuing that discussion, Allred insists that students should be required to write the word alone, not the entire sentence provided with most oral spelling tests. Like Allred, Wallace et al. (1972) suggest that further investigation continue to examine the use of context as an aid to spelling instruction and evaluation. Evidence of such investigation is not yet available; thus no further definite statements can be made about recent conclusive studies which discount the use of the spelling dictation strategy.

Scores on the final test may even be determined by the number of words correctly spelled, the number of letters capitalized, and the number of correctly punctuated sentences. Children, then, are being evaluated on spelling work for some non-spelling skills.

Recommendations for Spelling Dictation

While some spelling dictation procedures may be questionable, it seems that the dictation method can be used appropriately for both instruction and evaluation. Teachers using spelling dictation may want to select from the following possibilities for the appropriate use of spelling dictation.

1) *Introducing and Modeling Dictation.* When first expecting children to participate in dictation exercises of individual spelling words, complete sentences, or paragraphs, the teacher needs to practice initially with the children and explain the procedure orally. At this beginning point, more learning is likely to occur if the teacher writes on the overhead projector (with the image projected) as the children complete their own writing at their seats. Later, when children are more familiar with the technique, the image is not projected, and the written sample serves as an evaluation standard for self-checking. If the teacher writes at the same time as the student, he/she will become more aware of the speed required for different dictation items and can be more accommodating in providing appropriate time for most writers.

2) *Scribe.* Designed by Cunningham in 1978 to enhance dictation and listening skills, *Scribe* requires children to complete a dictation activity daily. While the teacher prepares a model for students to see later, a short and interesting item is dictated. Students are to be "scribes," recording a short passage in correct form before being shown the model by the teacher. Immediately after seeing the model, they correct their own papers; this system provides for informal and non-threatening evaluation. Formal assessment of spelling skills is not recommended with this strategy, which is designed to create a fun and interesting way to apply better dictation and listening skills.

3) *Original Dictation.* As mentioned earlier, many sentences prepared for spelling dictation appear contrived and unrealistic. As an alternative to such dictation passages, the concerned teacher may replace the passages for dictation with materials which are more appealing or interesting to the student. In a classroom where word lists are examined every week, students are often asked to create their own sentences using their spelling words. Asking students to submit sentences for class or group dictation may be one way to increase interest and enthusiasm for the task. Even with nonsensical sentences, the use of students' original sentences may increase motivation for a task often perceived as being mundane.

4) *Grouping for Dictation.* While not all students are good spellers, some are also not good writers of spelling dictation. Teachers may wish to plan different dictation sentences for different groups of children, with groups organized according to past performance on spelling dictation and word list tests. Even though this method may require more preparation and evaluation time for the teacher, it is likely to be more effective in providing sound instruction and evaluation for each student. At the same time, it can reduce frustration for students for whom dictation is a difficult or overly tedious process. Hanna, Hodges, and Hanna (1971) even suggest that less capable spellers be allowed to write only the test word in a prepared sentence and that other spellers complete the entire dictation sentence, consisting of four to six words. This method of adapting dictation to the individual capabilities of students may eliminate undue concern and reduce the negativism they often associate with spelling evaluations.

5) *Self-checking of Dictation.* When students are asked to complete a spelling dictation exercise, their most effective learning from that activity will occur immediately after they have completed that task. Like other authors, Burns and Broman (1983) encourage students to self-check their work. The use of a different color pencil or pen is often helpful for separating the correct from the incorrect spellings. Corrections in another color also make changes more obvious for evaluating work individually and learning from errors. By using this process, children are more likely to recognize their own mistakes, thus more appropriately meeting their individual needs.

6) *Note-taking and Dictation.* As students are introduced to the concept of recording others' oral explanations for study purposes, the importance of developing skills in taking dictation will become apparent. With thorough introduction, teaching, and modeling, children can become more effective note-takers. Dictation provides consistent and successful practice. By showing students how to take notes (using an overhead projector or the chalkboard), the teacher can increase dictation and note-taking skills simultaneously and also show the relevancy of spelling and other writing skills.

7) *La Dictee.* This is an extensive and systematic method using dictation to teach composition. As described by Tiedt (1981), it is designed to use stimulating literature to incorporate language and thinking skills. Teachers who use *La Dictee* first introduce background information about a selected literary work. One paragraph from that work is discussed and then dictated to the class. Students correct their own work and include their completed work in a notebook for further individual study. Extension activities such as creative writing or sentence combining can be developed to accompany the original passage. Like the previous recommendation, *La Dictee* provides opportunities for students to examine their own skills in dictation and spelling, thus reaffirming the relevancy of the use of spelling dictation.

Summary

While spelling dictation remains in use today, it appears to be a two-sided issue. The use of dictation continues, though the discussion that has been devoted to it over the years has not clearly justified its existence. In its most appropriate forms, spelling dictation incorporates the written context of spelling words and self-evaluation of spelling. If limited to specific and controlled settings, spelling dictation is a viable and useful technique for instruction and evaluation of spelling.

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