
Too much that is known about how to teach spelling isn't being put into practice. I can think of no subject we teach more poorly or harbor more myths about than spelling.—Richard Gentry, 1987

Background

For decades, more people seem to have considered themselves poor spellers than good spellers, despite the fact that most of us spell correctly the vast majority of the words we write. With spelling, we seem to expect that all of us should spell one hundred percent correctly, even on first drafts, and even as young children. Perhaps it is this unrealistic expectation that leads some parents and others to object when teachers use newer methods of helping children learn to spell, such as encouraging children to "use invented spelling" in their early attempts to write. Such critics mistakenly assume that children who initially use approximate spellings will never become good spellers, or that if the time-honored method of memorizing spelling lists were used instead, every child would become a perfect speller. Neither observed experience nor research supports these assumptions.

What research demonstrates

- Young children using invented spelling employ a considerably greater variety of words in their writing than those encouraged to use only the words they can spell correctly (Gunderson & Shapiro, 1987, 1988; Clarke, 1988; Stice & Bertrand, 1990).
- By the end of first grade, children encouraged to use invented spellings typically score as well or better on standardized tests of spelling than children allowed to use only correct spellings in first drafts (Clarke, 1988; Stice & Bertrand, 1990).
- Young children encouraged to use invented spellings seem to develop word recognition and phonics skills sooner than those not encouraged to spell the sounds they hear in words (Clarke, 1988).
- At least in grades 3-6, it is not clear that spelling instruction has much of an effect beyond what is learned through reading alone, if children are reading extensively (Krashen, 1991).

What helps children learn to spell

- Learners of all ages need encouragement to write, write, write, and just to spell words the best they can in first drafts.
- As young children begin to hear separate sounds in words, they benefit from help in writing the sounds they hear: that is, from guidance in inventing spellings. Gradually, their initial invented spellings (usually one letter per word) more or less naturally give way to more complete and sophisticated invented spellings and to conventional spellings, as long as the children are reading and writing extensively.

- Extensive exposure to print helps children internalize not only the spellings of particular words, but spelling patterns. Young children especially benefit from reading favourite selections again and again. Learners of all ages need to read, read, read.
- Children benefit from guidance in developing a spelling conscience: a concern for spelling, and a sense of when something may not be spelled correctly. For instance, as a first step toward correcting their spelling, children who are already spelling many words correctly might be encouraged to circle words in their first draft that they think might be spelled incorrectly.
- Teaching children strategies for correcting spelling is far more important than giving them the correct spelling of any particular word. Such strategies include: writing the word two or three different ways and deciding which one "looks right"; locating the correct spelling in a familiar text or in print displayed in the classroom; asking someone, consulting a dictionary, or using a spelling checker on the computer or a hand-held electronic speller.
- Spelling strategies and major spelling patterns can be taught much more effectively through minilessons involving student discussion than through workbook pages or spelling tests. Children benefit especially when, as a group, they are guided in noticing spelling patterns for themselves.
- By the intermediate grades and middle school, students can benefit immensely from minilessons that help them discover the meanings of Latin and Greek roots and suffixes. Such learning is valuable for spelling and writing but perhaps even more valuable for vocabulary development and reading.
- Studying spelling lists is most useful if children each choose a limited number of words (say five a week) that they want to learn: ideally, words they are interested in, and words they use frequently in their writing but haven't yet learned to spell correctly all the time. At the end of the week, partners can test each other on the words they each have practiced during the week.
- Individualized spelling dictionaries can be helpful as children are trying to get a grasp on the spellings of words. Teachers can make each child a booklet in which the child can enter words he or she is learning to spell. File boxes with index cards, or even computer files or data bases for each child, can serve the same purpose.

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