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ABSTRACT

Spelling instruction should be multi-faceted and not tied to any special time of day. Teachers in a "spelling classroom" should demonstrate their fascination with words, encourage the exploration of words, and know that spelling is developmental. The spelling classroom can be identified by: (1) the print in the room and the children's engagement with it; (2) the teacher modeling her/himself as a writer first and a speller second; (3) acceptance of approximations at all levels, accompanied by appropriate challenge and support to move children towards the standard forms; (4) the high status of spelling; and (5) the existence of a rigorous but needs-based spelling program. These features support growing writers and spellers and help them to tackle the challenges of writing with confidence and enthusiasm. (RS)

PRIMARY ENGLISH TEACHING ASSOCIATION

This conversation took place in my Year 1 classroom the other day:

ANNA: How do you do *beach*?
ME: I think Ashleigh wrote *beach* in her journal yesterday. You could check with her.
ANNA: (to Ashleigh) Do you know how to write *beach*?
ASHLEIGH: This is what I wrote yesterday . . . BISH (pointing to it).
ANNA: (pointing to the SH) But this says SH. I think it sounds more like CH at the end. Listen . . . *bish* . . . *beach*. Which one do you think? I'm going to put CH . . . Look what I wrote, Mrs B — 'I wnt to the bch' — I thought it sounded better than Ashleigh's way.

This type of conversation happens regularly in my classroom. I know about it because I initiate some of it, I listen for it and I understand what's happening for the children engaged in it. Anna and Ashleigh are both keen writers who know that spelling has an important place in making their writing meaningful for readers. In fact, in my classroom there is celebration when I can read a child's writing by myself without the author having to tell me what it's about. This is because I have a number of children who say in a very matter-of-fact way, when I ask them to read their writing to me, 'Oh, I can't read,' and so then I have to say, 'Tell me what you wrote about,' and they do!

What do I know about my spelling behaviour?

My learning about the children I teach begins with my understanding of my own processes and products. So, when I think about spelling and how I teach it, I need to think about my own spelling and how I use it.

'I'm good at spelling' — what exactly does that mean and how did I get to be a good speller?

It means that although I don't spell every word correctly every time I write it, I do *know* many things about spelling: I have a spelling-specific knowledge about writing and language, and I have particular attitudes to and awarenesses about writing and spelling.

So what do I know about spelling?

- I can spell high-frequency words automatically: i.e. I don't really think about them at all — I just write them.
- I can successfully attempt most words that I have to write (in English).
- I know how to check my spelling and I know *when* to check it.
- When I look at several different versions of a word, I can generally choose the standard version.
- I acknowledge my 'demon' words and make sure I have a dictionary handy.
- I know the letter clusters, syllables, prefixes and suffixes characteristic of English.

What attitudes and awarenesses do I have regarding spelling?

- Spelling is a tool of writing (as are handwriting and punctuation).
- Standard (or 'correct') spelling is very important because it means that my writing can more easily be read by others.
- When a piece of writing is very important to me, I still become anxious about my spelling.
- People may make judgments about the standard of my education and my professional standing based on my spelling.
- People may make judgments about my school in particular, or about educators and education in general, based on what they perceive I do about spelling in my classroom.

The problem underlying the last three points is, of course, that most English words have only one accepted spelling. Thus spelling, like punctuality, is a matter of accuracy which can be quickly assessed as right or wrong. And simply because spelling performance and punctuality (or lack of it) are relatively so easy to assess (and condemn), they're often treated unthinkingly as reliable indicators of other abilities which are much harder to assess.

What do I do about teaching spelling?

My approach can best be described as multi-faceted and is not tied to any special time of the day. I run a 'spelling classroom': I'm fascinated by words and communicate this to children; I encourage explorations of words; I know that learning to spell is developmental and that, given the right conditions, children can do it.

There are differing accounts of the stages of spelling. However, as Wendy Bean and Chrystine Bouffler observe in *Spell by Writing* (PETA 1987, p. 14), such accounts are only partially satisfying, and I feel more comfortable with the non-hierarchical list of spelling *strategies* which they offer instead. Children will make more or less use of these strategies at various stages of their development.

Obviously my approach will vary according to what grade I'm teaching, but there will be common features whether it is a K or Year 6 class. As I'm currently teaching Year 1 children, who are early readers and writers, I have to concentrate hard on spelling because I know that what I do now helps to lay down spelling patterns, habits and attitudes which are very long-lasting indeed. If I 'do it right', I'll be helping these children to become writers for whom spelling is a tool, rather than people who, paralysed by fear of getting the spelling wrong, dislike and avoid writing. Equally, when I taught Years 4 and 5, it was vital to continue to help the children to realise the importance of spelling in their writing and to remind them that, even when they began a draft, they needed to pay attention to spelling in order to make it more accessible to the reader working with them. In any case, for most people, it's more efficient to aim for standard spelling from the start rather than leaving it all to be 'fixed' at the end.

How to identify the spelling classroom

These are what I believe to be the features of the spelling classroom.

A supportive environment

What does that look like? What does it sound like? It looks like this —

lots of print: word banks (created in front of the children at their request), pieces of text, explanations of how we did things, lists of things we have to do, writing in all stages (messy and neat)

writer's books: dictionaries at several levels (home-made and commercial), word list books and thesauruses

writer's tools: pencils, pens, rubbers, paper of different sizes and colours, word processor and printer

lots and lots and lots of books: both commercially produced and child-produced.

Summary: there is a great deal of print in the room and the teacher constantly refers to it and refers the children to it so that they are engaged with it.

It sounds like this —

children are active in the process

'Look over there, Maria; Mrs B wrote that yesterday.'

'Can you remember if you put a G in *night*?'

'I didn't know your name had a P, Philip; I thought it was an F.'

'You can use my dictionary because it's got more words than yours.'

the teacher demonstrates her involvement with words in general and with spelling in particular

'I like the look of this word *q-ue-ue*. It feels good when you say it too.'

'I'll need a pencil — I can't do some words out loud.'

'Yes, a kitchen is a funny place for a dictionary!'

'The thesaurus is a great help.'

'I'm not sure what language *verandah* comes from; we'll need to look it up.'

teachers engage in the spelling process

'That's great. You have this part right.'

'Ben, didn't you have ..... as part of your spelling list? Sarah, why don't you check with Ben?'

'I think ..... is in the writing we did about ..... yesterday. It's near the Reading Corner, so go and see if you can find it.'

'Listen to me say *February*. Can you hear something different in the middle?'

teachers help to keep the task manageable

'Put a circle around any words you aren't sure of.'

'Fix the words you think you can fix.'

'Good — you've fixed those words. We'll fix the rest and then you can publish.'

N.B. If children are asked to keep on fixing words until they're all correct, they may never actually finish anything. A teacher who remarks, 'Good — you've found most of the mistakes, but I can see three that you've missed' is playing the 'Guess what's in my head' game. When a child obviously can't find some mistakes, it's much better to do the final fixing together and let the piece of writing come to an end, rather than keep it hanging indefinitely.

Summary: the children perceive their teacher as the human resource for spelling.

Approximations are accepted and valued as a sign of learning

Of course teachers accept that learners make mistakes as they learn — it's how we deal with these mistakes which is critical. If we view them in some way as a sign of

Adrian's story

Adrian puzzled me. When it was time to write he seemed to settle to the task quickly and with purpose, but what he showed me appeared to be a random string of letters. I suspected they were written right to left and so I watched carefully. This was indeed the case, but he did 'read' his work to me and the reading was consistent. I asked him if he needed me to mark where to begin the date and the writing and he said, 'Yes please'. The result was writing which still looked like a random string of letters but faced the right way!

Later, as I wrote my journal in front of the class, I deliberately squashed three words together and said, 'Oh, I forgot the spaces — now it'll be hard to read. I'd better redo that bit.' Adrian looked curious. As the children went off to do their writing, I said to Adrian, 'Maybe you can put some spaces between your words and then I could read your writing by myself.' He agreed to try. He came back with writing that said, 'I wt to the tm zn and i lwd it'. I read with great glee, 'I went to the Time Zone and I liked it'. 'No,' said Adrian, stamping his foot, 'I loved it.' We both laughed and I said I was really happy that I could read his writing. Now I'm waiting to see more growth in this young writer.

failure or, even worse, as a sign of recalcitrance, we're likely to develop anxiety and fear in the children we teach. However, if we accept that *effort* and *knowledge* are involved in an approximation, then we can use approximation as a stepping stone. Because I do accept this, I no longer use the term 'invented spelling', but rather refer, in discussion with adults, to 'non-standard spelling forms'. The word *invented* can imply that children, on a whim, just make up a string of letters, which is not what I have observed them typically doing.

For example, in the conversation between Anna and Ashleigh reported at the beginning of this PEN, it's evident that the children gave some thought to the word *beach*. They compared their versions, Anna used her knowledge of sounds to make a decision and she was able to articulate the process. None of this seems like random invention to me. Children are very serious about writing and mostly adopt a writer's approach to the business.

As a teacher, I must be aware of what knowledge and understanding children are demonstrating when they use a non-standard spelling form, so that I can acknowledge what they know and lead them further on. Usually I ask if I'm not clear where a non-standard form came from. For example, when Sharda (in Kinder) had written a long piece, I asked her which word was the hardest to write. She pointed to an A which she read as 'because' and said, 'This one. *Because* is a very long word.' A few days later she wrote the word as BCS. I said, 'Oh, a different way to write *because*.' She replied, 'I know more about it now.' After a few more days she wrote BCZ and I remarked, 'Another way for *because*. How did you think to write it that way?' She withered me with a glance and said, 'Listen to it!' Sharda viewed me, I think, not as a teacher but as a co-writer.

Summary: approximations show us what children know and what they can do.

What about approximations and older children?

Most of what I've said about younger learners applies to older learners too. Their spelling practices usually follow one or more generalisations about spelling which they've generated themselves. Thus, when I ask them how they reached a particular approximation, they can often point to other words which support their choice. However, I must challenge these writers too, helping them to develop and refine their sense of letter clusters, prefixes, suffixes and syllables.

I'm reluctant to challenge children while they're writing because they often take this to mean that the spelling is more important than the writing. So I have a ten-minute 'word study' time two to three times a week. For these occasions I take care to select words which are relevant to the topic, theme, story or learning centre currently under focus, so that there is a context which will help develop knowledge and understanding. I also have on hand at least one dictionary with word roots and derivations so that we can build up a picture of the wide range of sources which have contributed to the English language.

Summary: older children's approximations also show what they know and we need to challenge them to move on from there.

Spelling has status as well as purpose

If something has status in my classroom, I give it time. Thus, just as we spend time reading and talking about it, so we spend time spelling and talking about it. Any activity which has spelling as its focus is clearly signalled — I say, 'This game is designed to help you recognise word families,' rather than just putting out a word family Bingo game. Children like to know why they are doing things and so I tell them. They also like to know that what

they do helps them to get better at something, and so I tell them that too.

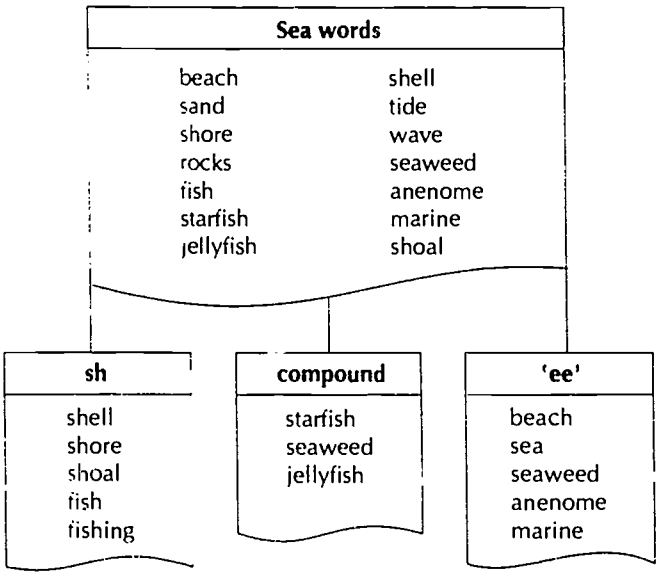
Summary: be clear about why the children are doing what they are doing and tell them why.

The spelling program

Although spelling is pervasive and creeps into many places, my program has more precisely five aspects: topic words, personal spelling lists, techniques for learning words, orthography and word derivation, and proof-reading.

Topic words

Topic words are words which are used intensively for the duration of a particular topic and will be drawn into the children's vocabulary. They can be brainstormed at the beginning of a topic (and of course added to as the topic is developed). Decisions can then be made about how to sort and display them — by alphabet, by word family, by sounds or other connections — or in several different ways. Yet, however they are grouped, the children must be part of the decision making, so that they know the reasons for the groupings and the connections are clear to them. The words will then be useable. There should also be discussion about whole words, letter clusters, like spellings which produce different sounds (e.g. *beach* and *head*) and unlike spellings which produce the same sounds (e.g. *sea* and *see*).



Personal spelling lists

Personal spelling lists are generated at regular publishing conferences and developed by teacher and child from more than one piece of writing. They should take into account the child's experience as a writer, as well as the teacher's knowledge of the child's language and cognitive competence. More proficient spellers will need less intervention from the teacher to develop their lists. There is an expectation that the child will then take some steps (see *Techniques for learning words* below) to incorporate the standard spelling of listed words into his or her future writing. Words which continue to give trouble can be included in a personal spelling dictionary.

I've seen some bizarre inclusions in personal spelling lists (e.g. *masticate* for a Year 1 child), and I'm more and more convinced that they are only useful if they comprise words the writer uses frequently. Such words make a list useful precisely because they are needed so often, and especially useful is a list including words which don't follow a predictable pattern, such as *because*, *want* or *when*.

Some children need personal spelling lists and dictionaries much less than others — indeed, a minority of children seem to spell quite accurately without a great deal of effort. However, in my experience most children need lists, need help to compile them in the early st ges and continued monitoring as they move through the school. Nevertheless I won't begin anything too formal with my Year 1 class until at least second term, when all the children are writing freely and perceive themselves as writers.

Orthography and word origins

The more interest in the meanings and origins of words you can generate in children, the more you will contribute to their continuing growth as readers, writers and spellers. (Of course you'll do this much better if you take a real interest in words yourself.) English is particularly rich in terms of the languages that have contributed to its present form, and many of the perversities and inconsistencies of standard spelling can only be understood in the light of word origins.

The exploration of words is a regular component of word study time, but a great deal of related discussion will also arise spontaneously from other kinds of literacy activity, such as shared reading, roving conferences or brainstorming some new facet of a topic.

Word study time forms part of the daily language block. It can either be a whole class focus or else one of the teacher-directed activities for one or more small groups, depending on immediate needs. It's a good time to expand on word family charts generated during topic word sorting: for example, in the early years you might expand on ways of writing the *ee* sound (as in the 'sea word' charts on this page), finding other words spelt with *ea* or *ee*. As spellers become more proficient, the focus widens to include less regular letter clusters, building on root words and exploration of syllables, prefixes and suffixes.

Techniques for learning words

While some people seem to have an almost photographic recall of word shapes, most of us need some method of inscribing words in our memories. But there's not just

one way for all of us, and children will need help to find the method which suits them best.

* 'Look – Cover – Write – Check' is a good strategy for many children because it is visual and kinaesthetic.
* However, some children will need 'Look – Cover – Say – Write – Check' because they need the auditory dimension.
* Some may need to move around as they say or learn the words.
* Some may need to write the words several times (though I remember failing to learn *plasticine* by this method at teachers' college).
* Some may need to focus only on the part of the word which gives them difficulty. A Year 6 boy showed me this strategy when I admitted that *restaurant* gave me trouble. I said I couldn't remember where the U went and he replied, 'Well, just look at that bit, Miss'.

Proofreading

If children are to become accurate, independent spellers, they need to develop the skill of proofreading — indeed, learning to proofread is an essential part of learning to be a writer. We need to model the skill first and then give children time to practise it.

It's worth pointing out to children that proofreading is a *distinct* skill, requiring different habits from ordinary reading. Efficient readers (which is what we are usually teaching children to become) only scan as much of each word as they need in order to identify it and carry the meaning forward. They certainly don't examine every letter. Efficient proofreaders don't necessarily do that either, but they do look at the *whole* word and instantaneously compare its profile with the master image of that word stored in their memory. A mismatch triggers realisation of something amiss — it's that crucial awareness of *when* to check a spelling. The large variations in people's ability to spell and proofread accurately can be partly explained in terms of variations in their exposure to standard spellings (i.e. how much and how widely they've read) and variations in the ease and accuracy with which they can store and retrieve the images of standard word forms.

At the moment the focus for my Year 1 class is to get them writing; it's too early to push them into proofreading what they write. None the less I do model proofreading by making decisions out loud as I work on my journal. It sounds like this: 'Is it c-o-r-d or c-h-o-r-d for the string on a blind? I think it's c-o-r-d — the other one's to do with music . . . ' or 'I'll need a question mark here . . . '. I muse aloud, sometimes rereading, and circle words I'm not sure about. I may write a word several times to choose the version which looks the best; I may look it up in a dictionary. The finished journal entry can look messy, but the children have seen what happens and parts of my conversation with myself are heard in the classroom as they write.

With older children who are more experienced writers, the process can be more formal. I use pieces of children's writing (with their permission), either making enough copies for children to share one between two, or putting a piece onto an OHP transparency, or both. The focus for proofreading is on spelling and punctuation (decisions about the order and meaning of the piece have been made beforehand at an author's circle or a conference). We have a rule about respect for the writer and so suggestions about fixing must be given in a respectful and constructive manner.

When the children have their own copies, they go through circling any words they think are non-standard and putting in any missing punctuation. They fix those words they can fix and then we pool our findings. I do the final spelling and punctuation on my own copy or on the OHP, and the piece is then returned to the writer for publication. Alternatively the whole process can be shown publicly on the OHP, with me doing the circling and scribing in response to children's comments, and this is probably the best way to begin. Much of the incidental chat during these sessions can support growing understanding — for example:

'I didn't know that was how you spelt . . . '

'Should there be a comma in here?'

'When you see the word in the writing, it helps you with the spelling.'

What do I do about . . . ?

Commercially produced spelling programs

A note of caution here — although there is a place for structured work (such as sorting word families and classifying words alphabetically), I have never been convinced that someone who is removed from my classroom can provide exactly what my students need in the order they need it. Before deciding to use an external spelling program, then, I would need to consider these questions:

Are the sections of this book arranged by theme? If they are and some of the themes fit my intentions for the year, it may provide a support.

Do the activities provide for the varied learning styles of different children? Are all the activities suitable only for visual/kinaesthetic learners, or are the auditory learners provided for?

Are the lists composed of words that children of this age group would usually write (or read)? Some words may need to be removed or added.

Are words arranged in such a way as to provide a spelling and/or meaning link for the learner? For example —

group, grouped, grouping, regroup

know, unknown, unknowing, knowledge, knowledgeable, acknowledge

telegraph, telephone, telephonist, telecommunication, telescope, television

Spelling tests

The purpose of a spelling program is to develop children as competent and accurate spellers, and the real test of a program's success is the increase in the number of standard spellings in the children's writing. However, the traditional 'spelling test' still has its adherents, and that raises a number of issues:

* If your spelling program is mostly individualised, can you really devise one test for the whole class?
* What might be the effect on a child's perception of her/himself as a speller if s/he consistently averages 5/10?
* Is it possible for a child to learn words intensively for a test, spell them correctly in the test and later write them in non-standard form? (Even though I was always in the 10/10 group, I know that my spelling is distinctly wobbly at times.)

There are ways to 'test' spelling which do not isolate the words from the context in which they are used. For example, you can compare different drafts of one piece of writing, as well as writing samples taken over time, and observe participation in word study activities. Where there is concern, you may need more specific monitoring, and here Max Kemp's observational records may be helpful (see *Further reading*).

Spelling games

Spelling games and word games are fun. They certainly have a place in the classroom as long as they're presented to children in such a way that they know what can be learned from them. There are many commercially produced books with spelling games by the score (some are listed in *Further reading*), and most of these are good if you can relate them to what's happening in the classroom. I find that I have to adapt games depending on when I use them, and I may have to adapt them again when I use them again. Examples would be playing Hangman with topic words, using topic words to make a crossword, or making a Bingo game using high-frequency words that the children have trouble with. I encourage the tried and true games such as I Spy (which I would play in small groups so that all can join in). There are also the big word games, Scrabble and Boggle, which seem to have a special status, and I can't help feeling this is because they're not seen as school-based.

Concluding summary

The spelling classroom can be identified by:

- the print in the room and the children's engagement with it
- the teacher modelling her/himself as a writer first and a speller second
- the acceptance of approximations at all levels, accompanied by appropriate challenge and support to move children towards the standard forms
- the high status of spelling
- the existence of a rigorous but needs-based spelling program.

All of these features support growing writers and spellers and help them to tackle the challenges of writing with confidence and enthusiasm.

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Further reading

I have found these books to be an invaluable source of ideas for the spelling classroom:

Bolton, Faye & Snowball, Diane 1985, *Springboards: Ideas for Spelling*, Nelson, Melbourne.

—— 1993, *Teaching Spelling: A Practical Resource*, Nelson, Melbourne.

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Kemp, Max 1987, *Watching Children Read and Write: Observational Records for Children with Special Needs*, Nelson, Melbourne.

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