

Spelling: Best Ideas = Best Practices

The good news is that there have been a number of “best ideas” in the learning and teaching of spelling over the last several years. The not-so-good-news is that most educators are still not aware of this fact—and that a few not-so-good-ideas are still in common practice. But you’re reading this column, so you’re already in the position to help spread the word! Let’s look at the best ideas first, relate them to the not-so-good ideas, and consider what they mean for the future of spelling instruction.

The following best ideas are supported by research, which is important because solid research supports best practice, but the research base is especially important in the current political context of literacy instruction. These interrelated ideas have been explored in previous columns this year as well as in my article in the March 2002 *Voices from the Middle* issue on spelling:

The spelling system of English makes sense—most of the time! The spelling system not only represents sound; it represents *meaning* as well. Most older students are ready to explore all these levels of representation and learn how they interact. Students learn, for example, that they can fix up a spelling error such as *defanition* by thinking of its base word, *define*. They clearly hear the vowel sound in the second syllable of *define*, and it provides the clue to remembering the spelling of the second syllable in *definition*. Through examining examples such as these, students learn the *spell-*

ing–meaning connection: Words that are related in meaning are often related in spelling as well, despite changes in sound.

Effective spelling instruction powerfully supports the nature and development of the reading process. Effective spelling instruction engages students in examining written words from a variety of perspectives, better enabling them to remember *and understand* the spelling of words. This knowledge in turn underlies the more rapid and accurate perception of words during reading. The variety of instructional perspectives includes comparing and contrasting words in the search for patterns and the generalizations that apply to the patterns. For example, the rationale underlying the doubling of final consonants in words such as *tapped* and *hopped* can be discovered by contrasting these words with *taped* and *hoped*. Again, this active search for pattern builds word knowledge that serves both the encoding and the decoding of words.

Spelling instruction in the middle grades provides a bridge to vocabulary instruction. Words that students know how to read but misspell can be explained by connecting the words to unknown words that are similar in spelling and meaning. For example, the error in the second syllable of *presadent* can be corrected more effectively by pointing out the related word *preside*. Although the students most likely are not familiar with the word *preside*, the teacher discusses the meaning relationship between *preside* and *president*: “A *president* is someone who *presides* over a country.” By directly discussing the connection between a familiar but misspelled word and a related but unfamiliar word, teachers address two important objectives at the same time: 1) Establishing a powerful framework for students’ vocabulary expansion

by focusing on the *structure* or spelling of the words as the key to detecting and understanding similarity, and 2) providing a clue to a problematic spelling error. In our *preside/president* example, the familiar word *president* provides a conceptual hook for the unfamiliar word *preside*, while the unfamiliar word *preside* provides the clue to remembering the spelling of *president*—in the second syllable of *preside* the vowel sound is clearly heard and the spelling is obvious.

Spelling assessments have been developed that pinpoint students' level of spelling development. Teachers intuitively know that all students in a class are not at the same level of spelling expertise, just as all students are not at the same level of reading expertise. By examining students' errors on a well-constructed spelling assessment, teachers can pinpoint students' level of spelling knowledge through the identification of the types of words and patterns that are most appropriate for spelling study. Such well-constructed assessments are presented in Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, and Johnston (2003), Ganske (1999), and Masterson, Apel, and Wasowicz (2002).

The following ideas are not-so-good and not-so-big because of the research-grounded ideas we've just discussed:

Write each spelling word several times each. This practice stems from the belief that spelling is illogical and the only way to remember a word's spelling is somehow to emblazon it on the brain through repetition. Actually, this practice is one of the least effective approaches teachers could possibly use because it does not focus students' critical attention on the specific word or on the detection of spelling patterns that apply across a large number of words.

Students will learn to spell simply by being immersed in lots of reading and writing. Though this may be true for some students, it is not true for most. The practice has gained popularity over the years because of the assumption (once again!) that the spelling system is illogical, because teachers realized the futility of the "write each word several times" approach, and because of the assumption that if students are meaningfully and conse-

quentially involved in reading and writing engagements, they will pick up what they need to know along the way. It is also true, however, that most students—including those for whom spelling appears to develop with little effort—do not discover the relationship between spelling and meaning on their own. In most cases, it takes a teacher to point out this connection and guide students to the understanding of how to apply knowledge of this connection in spelling and vocabulary.

New vocabulary words can also be taught as spelling words. There is an intuitive appeal to this practice; it appears that it would help focus attention on the new vocabulary words and reinforce an understanding of their meaning. Not only do most students forget the spellings of such words over time, however, but they also do not learn spelling patterns that apply to many other words.

What about big ideas in spelling for the future? Might spelling study and instruction be made obsolete by voice recognition software on the one hand and spellcheck on the other? Perhaps, but not likely. Remember, spelling knowledge underlies reading as well as writing, so as long as the ability to decode printed information is valued, attention to the structure or spelling of words will be necessary. The usefulness of spellcheck, interestingly, depends on the writer's spelling knowledge; spellcheck is not that much of an aid to those who do not spell well. And, so long as the ability to communicate effectively through printed language is valued, this ability will more likely be realized through the type of thoughtful reflection afforded by writing than by talking to voice recognition software.

References

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