



# Research Paper on Spelling Strategies

by

**Isolde Basner**

*Teachers' Certificate Course Graduate of 2011*

The process of English spelling is complex and must be explicitly taught. Strategies for teaching how words are constructed have been debated for many years. Numerous insightful research articles about the explorations in developmental spelling and suggestions of spelling instruction strategies have been published. The purpose of this paper is to engage with these articles and ideas and recommend what seem to be the most effective strategies for spelling instruction and teaching.

This paper will be based around the following topics or themes:

- The spelling system and precise programming.
- Understanding key attitudes; building phonemic awareness; invented/composed spelling and the connection between reading and spelling.
- The importance of teaching correct spelling with the aim of developing students' phonic awareness through general strategies.
- Word study instruction.
- Intervention for students with spelling difficulties.

## ***The spelling system and precise programming***

According to Bear & Templeton (1998), there are different layers of information that he calls 'the spelling system', the developmental stages of spelling. It is important to find out what students know about these layers, because they help to determine where teaching should begin.

### **The three layers of information in the spelling system are:**

- a) Alphabetic layer,
- b) Pattern layer,
- c) Meaning layer (Henderson & Templeton, 1986).

**The alphabetic layer** is the understanding, after children know and recognise the sounds in words, that each letter symbol of the alphabet represents at least one sound in a left to right fashion. Five are vowels and the rest are consonants. This understanding has been backed up by Beers & Henderson, (1977) and Gentry & Henderson, (1981).

**The pattern layer** provides information about the grouping of letters like syllables, phonograms (more than one letter can make one sound), spelling rules and decoding. It is about gaining phonic awareness and is an ongoing process.

**The meaning layer** is about exploration of the meaning elements within words, for example finding the base/root within words and connecting to related vocabulary. An example for this is the words 'sign/signature and local/locality. This is also known as 'word study instruction' or 'morphological knowledge' (Meeks, 2003, Westwood, 2005 & Kelman & Apel, 2004).



The knowledge of this three layer system and determining which of these above three layers apply to the students at the time we start to teach and to determine a starting point for spelling tuition is essential.

***Understanding key attitudes; building phonemic awareness; invented spelling and the connection between spelling and reading***

Emergent literacy is an active period when children listen to stories and study picture books. They gain vocabulary through books and conversations and learn names of objects. At this stage, words, letters and even sentences can be pointed out and we can talk about short and long words. The aim is, for the child to hear the sounds in words without a connection to the symbols of letters yet (Bear, 1991).

This is the stage of pre-phonemic spelling. At this stage we can play games using objects or picture cards, such as “Which picture/object begins with ‘m’ (mat)”. The next step is to ask for the end sound (‘t’ in net); then finally the middle sound (‘a’ in hat). This practise should start at early childhood/preschool age.

When the child can recognise the beginning, end and middle sounds in words, we can find strategies to teach the letter symbols, which match the pronunciation of the sound. This begins at preschool or kindergarten at school. Once the children know enough letter/sound combinations, the practise of invented/composed spelling can begin.

Suzanne Carreker (1998), has concurred with Maria Montessori and talks about how the following practices successfully work in Montessori schools for the 3 to 6 age group. As the child can’t spell/write at this stage, Montessori suggested the use of ‘the movable alphabet’, a box with loose letters, (vowels a different colour to consonants). The child can manipulate the letters to ‘make’ words. It is based on the notion that children have a natural inclination to invent the spelling of a word based on the syllables and sounds he or she can hear within the spoken word. Suzanne Carreker said that it is easier for a child to express their own thoughts by manipulating the movable symbols to compose, than decoding someone else’s thoughts as it is practised in reading. Carol Woods (2004), backs this up in her paper; progressing from phonetic to standard spelling (Chall, D. as cited in Woods, C, 1993).

All these activities require phonemic and phonic awareness. (Dahl and her associates, 2003) by finding:

**Phonemic awareness** is about hearing all sounds in the correct order with no sounds left out or added (Lin Meek 2003). It is the connection between spelling and reading, which are both closely linked together.

**Phonic awareness** is about decoding and learning spelling rules.

The ability and enthusiasm to begin to read with fluency is a signal to begin moving from invented to standard spelling.

Spelling instruction will bring those patterns to a conscious level. We can now work on phonic awareness and guide the child from invented to correct spelling and from the alphabetic layer to the pattern layer.

***The importance of teaching correct spelling with the aim of developing students’ phonic awareness through general strategies***



Phonic awareness is an important aspect in the pattern layer stage of the spelling system. Larsen and Hammill, 1986, state that there are words which are predictable in their spelling patterns and those which are seemingly unpredictable.

To decode the latter, takes phonological processing strategies, which must be taught, so that these words can also become predictable. (Hammond 2004). This teaching of rules includes teaching letter combinations, short and long vowel sounds, the meaning of the 'e' at the end of words, phonics like digraphs (two letters but one sound as in sh, th, ch ai, ow.), trigraphs (3 letters make one sound like a'-ear') and tetragraphs at a later stage (4 letters make one sound like '-ight'); every syllable must have a vowel; th, ch; unvoiced and voiced, like 'ch' can make three sounds, it can say can ch, k, sh like a train ch-k-sh (Lin Meeks), just to name some of many spelling rules.

Lam and Westwood, 2006, developed a useful general purpose strategy for attempted word writing:

- Saying the word.
- Repeating the word slowly.
- Counting the syllables.
- Finger spelling (Lin Meeks) (e.g., fish: "What can you hear in fish?" child says the sound, tutor shows a finger for each letter, two together for digraphs as in 'sh').
- Attempting to write the syllables in sequence.
- Matching letters and letter groups to sounds.
- Checking the result carefully, while again saying the word slowly in segments.
- Checking the visual appearance of the word.
- Repeating the process if necessary until satisfied; checking with other sources if still not satisfied (dictionary, spellchecker, another student or adult).

This idea is backed up by Dahl, et.Al. (2003).

During this time of decoding, we study the words ongoing, which takes us to the third and next layer of the spelling system, the meaning layer.

### ***Word study instruction***

This practice integrates spelling and vocabulary instruction (Bear D.R., Henry, 1996, Moats, 1995). The study of words is also known as morphological knowledge and is a vital part of the spelling strategies and its word connections. Carreker, 1999; Meeks, 2003; & Westwood, 2005 all back this idea up.

The greater the knowledge of the pattern layer, the easier it is to work within this meaning layer (Ehri, 1993; Henderson & Templeton, 1986). English words are spelled according to both, their sounds and their meaningful parts (morphemes), such as the root, e.g. 'bene' meaning 'good'. In addition to continuing to learn the rules of spelling, we must help students to develop a deep understanding of English, by studying the meanings of roots, prefixes and suffixes; families of related words; the historical development of the English language and words' language of origin. If students examine words this way, they will be more likely to be able to figure out the new word's meaning as well as how to spell it and how to use it with precision (Kelman & Apel, 2004). An example is the Spanish word 'fin'. It means 'end' and our English words are 'finish', 'final'. Or the root word 'med', meaning healing. Deriving words are 'medical', 'medicine', 'remedy'.

One other strategy for word study is 'parsing', which means sorting words by nouns, verbs and adjectives; and by finding homonyms, antonyms and so on. Research suggests that we must explore these word patterns through engaging and interesting activities to install a love for learning about language. (Massengill, 2006; Gaskins, I.W., Ehri, L.C., Cress, C., O'Hara, C., & Donnell K., 1996).



### ***Intervention and strategies for students with spelling difficulties***

Fulk and Stormont-Spurgin, (1995); Mc Naughton, Hughes and Clark, (1994); Wanzek, Vaughn, Wexler, Swanson, Edmond and Kim, 2006 came to the conclusion that students with difficulties need explicit instruction and very gradual integration of information about print, speech sounds and meaning (Moats, 2005-06) with multiple practice opportunities.

The already recommended strategies in this paper apply, but in addition, these students need more individualised attention and should be taught in small groups, or better yet, in a one on one situation, as more time and intensity needs to be taken to allow repetition and practise.

The program has to be systematic and multisensory. For example, the use of the sandpaper letters for teaching symbols; where students feel the letters in the same way they will later write them and pronounce the sound at the same time. Working with objects and picture cards is a good strategy, as it keeps special needs students more interested.

Since these children often lack confidence and therefore lack interest to attempt spelling, it is important to awake the arousal of children's genuine interest in words. This requires, that tutors themselves display infectious enthusiasm for all forms of word study and application. Finding the correct starting point for teaching students with difficulties is vital, and must be found by careful assessment.

To conclude this paper it has to be said, that after taking many studies into account, it seems that spelling outcomes can consistently improve by applying strategies which include explicit instruction by using an engaging and multisensory approach, with multiple opportunities for practice. The important part is, to find out after assessing, in which layer and level of the spelling system we find the student in and to guide him/her by using the recommended strategies to gain a spelling knowledge, so that seemingly unpredictable words can become predictable in order to develop a love for literacy and spelling.

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