Discuss spelling and recommend the best strategies for spelling instruction

By

Kylie Jarrett

2013 Teachers' Certificate Course student

This paper examines the predominant methods used around the world in the teaching of spelling and reading. Research clearly indicates that spelling supports learning to read. Leading Educationists have concluded that reading and spelling are highly related (Santoro, Coyne, Simmons, 2006) clearly reciprocal (O'sullivan, 2000) and symbiotic (Coltheart & Prior, 2005). Educational theorists have been at odds for decades as to how beginning reading and spelling should be taught. There are the educators who advocate whole-language approaches, and cognitive scientists who argue for explicit, systematic instruction in phonics. Research shows that effective teaching of spelling is multifaceted (O'sullivan, 2000)

In its essence, spelling is complex and requires the development of specific skills to attain proficiency. Moats (1984) defines "spelling as a multifaceted linguistic skill that integrates and depends upon several layers of knowledge: phonological awareness, semantic knowledge, and orthographic knowledge of the letter sequences and patterns that are used to spell words." This definition is supported by Santoro, Coyne and Simmons (2006).

The whole-language approach is an implicit form of instruction where reading and spelling are taught incidentally. Coltheart and Prior (2006) describe it as an approach where learners are self-governed and construct knowledge of reading by themselves with minimal instruction in decoding. The constructivist theorists who support this approach to reading instruction claim that learning to read develops naturally in the same way that language acquisition occurs. Another key feature of this approach is the belief that reading is a 'natural process' whose development should not be interfered with by explicit instruction and teachers are essentially the facilitators of learning (Coltheart & Prior, 2006)

In complete contrast to this model is a Code-based approach that focuses on the explicit teaching of the structure and function of written and oral language in ways that allow children, regardless of their backgrounds, to reflect on and consciously manipulate the language. This involves an awareness of phonemes, syllables and morphology. Thus, unlike whole-language approaches, code-based methods typically require a high degree of teacher-centred presentation of learning material, with an emphasis on explicit instruction, scheduled practice and feedback (e.g., Center, 2005; Westwood, 2003, 2004; Department of Education, Science and Training, 2005). Theorists who advocate this model emphasize the importance of phonemic awareness and letter-sound relationship followed by alphabetic understanding (O'Sullivan, 2000; Santoro, Coyne & Simmons, 2006).

Whole-Language has been the predominant method in which students in Australian schools have been taught reading over the past few decades. In recent years a key priority for the Australian Government has been to achieve sustained improvements in the literacy skills of Australian children. National Reading standards and importantly classroom teaching models and strategies have been high on the agenda to evaluate and reform. Therefore an inquiry into reading research and teaching practices of literacy was undertaken in Australia. This took the form of The National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy and was launched in Nov 2004 its Report and Recommendations were revealed in a document entitled "Teaching Reading: National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy" (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2005).

The Inquiry found strong evidence that a whole-language approach to the teaching of reading on its own is not in the best interests of children, particularly those experiencing reading difficulties. Moreover, where there is unsystematic or no phonics instruction, children's literacy progress is significantly impeded, inhibiting their initial and subsequent growth in reading accuracy, fluency, writing, spelling and comprehension. The Report also highlights the vital role of the teacher and the issue of teacher quality, noting that: *"Teachers are the most valuable resource available to schools" and "highly effective teachers and their professional learning do make a difference in the classroom"* (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2005). Other research also emphasises the crucial role the teacher plays in spelling instruction and vocabulary development. (O'sullivan, 2000; Bear & Templeton, 1998).

Australia is not alone in its concern for the reading standards of its country's children. Coltheart and Prior (2006), explore the findings of other developed countries, including the USA and the UK who also commissioned national surveys to investigate reading standards and classroom teaching practices of reading. The USA established the National Reading Panel in 1997 and the UK formed the Select Committee on the Teaching of Reading 2005, both of which concluded that systematic instruction in phonics is an essential component of any effective method of teaching reading. There is overwhelming evidence to support the benefits of the implementation of an explicit systematic phonics based program in schools for students of all abilities. Through her research O'sullivan (2000), concludes that children of early stages of writing and spelling and older children with spelling difficulties benefitted from being helped to use not only phonetic strategies but also to recognise visual, structural and semantic aspects of the spelling system. Santoro, Coyne, and Simmons, (2006) also state that "to spell a child must possess phonemic awareness and knowledge of the alphabetic principal". Importantly the research supports the notion that some children do not discover the alphabetic principle on their own, and need systematic direct instruction in the alphabet principle, phonological analysis, and alphabet coding (Stanovich, 2000, p. 415; Templeton, 1992).

'The evidence is clear that direct systematic instruction in phonics during the early years of schooling is an essential foundation for teaching children to read. Findings from the research evidence indicate that all students learn best when teachers adopt an integrated approach to reading that explicitly teaches phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary knowledge and comprehension.' (Rowe, 2005).

As explained by Moats (2006), the research base for claiming that spelling is important for young children is solid. Learning to spell enhances children's reading and writing. Therefore it is vital for students to access quality spelling instruction. Children cannot be left to crack the code on their own at the clear and present risk of failure. Spelling must be taught in a systematic manner with direct and explicit phonics instruction, so that all children have the opportunity to master the essential alphabetic code-breaking skills required for foundational reading and spelling proficiency.

Bear and Templeton (1998), highlight the value of assessment and the importance of catering for student's individual needs. Importantly all children have a right to be taught in a manner that suits their learning styles and teachers have the responsibility to provide high quality instruction that best suits individual needs.

It can be concluded that in order for children to become proficient spellers they must ultimately receive high quality spelling instruction that is as Shaywitz (2003) says "guided by a scientific knowledge base". Therefore, teachers must have access to effective teaching strategies that have been shown from evidence based research findings to be effective (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2005). The research clearly presents that the most effective method of spelling instruction is explicit and direct instruction that systematically teaches phonology, orthography, and morphological processing (Ouellette & Senechal, 2008).

References

Bear, D. & Templeton, S. 1998. Explorations in developmental spelling: Foundations for learning and teaching phonics, spelling, and vocabulary. *The Reading Teacher. 52:222-242.*

Bissaker, K. & Westwood, P. 2006. Diagnostic uses of the South Australian spelling test. *Australian Journal of Learning Disabilities, 11:1, 25-33.*

Castiglioni-Spalten, M. & Ehri, L.C. 2003. Phonemic awareness instruction: Contribution of articulatory segmentation to novice beginners' reading and spelling. *Scientific Studies of Reading. 7.1, 25-52.*

Coltheart, M & Prior, M, 2006, Learning to Read in Australia. *Australasian Journal of Learning Disabilities, 11(4), 157-164*

Department of Education, Science and Training, 2005, *Teaching Reading: National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy*

Kohnen, S., Nickels, L. & Coltheart, M. 2010. Skill generalization in teaching spelling to children with learning difficulties. *Australian Journal of Learning Disabilities, 15:2, 115-129* Maley, N. 2008. A whole new language. Bulletin – *Learning Difficulties Australia. 40:2, 9- 11.*

Moats, L. C. 2005-2006. How spelling supports reading: And why it is more regular and predictable than you think. *American Educator. 12-22, 42-43.*

O'Sullivan, O. 2000. *Understanding Spelling. Reading, April* 2000. 9-16.

Ouellete, G. & Senechal, M. 2008. A window into early literacy: Exploring the cognitive and linguistic underpinnings of invented spelling. *Scientific Studies of Reading. 12.2, 195-219.*

Rowe, K 2005, 'National inquiry into the teaching of literacy (Australia)', *Teaching reading, ACER website,*

Santoro, L., Coyne, M. & Simmons, D. 2006. The reading-spelling connection: Developing and evaluating a beginning spelling intervention for children at risk of reading disability. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice, 21.2, 122-133.*

Shaywitz, S., 2003, *Overcoming Dyslexia A New and Complete Science- Based Program for Reading Problems at Any Level*, Vintage Books, New York.

Stanovich, Keith E., 2000, *Progress in Understanding Reading.* New York: The Guilford Press,

**Originally printed in the SPELD NSW December 2013 E-NEWS