



Literature Bites

Early Years Spelling



Fundamentally, spelling is about learning about how words work. When it comes to building that understanding there are 4 areas of knowledge to build. That is, phonology (how sounds work), orthography (what the conventions or rules of the written language are), morphology (how to understand and work with the smallest units of meaning) and etymology (how the history and origins of a word influence its spelling and use). All of these factors are important for students to develop over time, but not all are tackled in equal measure in the early years of school.

Galuschka et al. (2020) published a meta-analysis that included 34 controlled trials and had a focus on students with dyslexia and other difficulties. They found that approaches to spelling instruction that included phonics, orthography (rules of spelling) and morphology all had a moderate to high impact. However, memorisation strategies did not perform as well.

The question for early years teachers is then, “When do I teach what?” In this paper, the authors identify that there are many theoretical models and significant research findings that support teaching phonics before morphology or focusing on orthographic considerations. They also discussed that simple phoneme grapheme correspondences, alone, were not sufficient for students to master spelling. As such, the recommendation was that we should begin to teach students about orthographic conventions (spelling rules) and morphology as soon as students have knowledge of the basics of the alphabetic code for reading and spelling.

We have examined the 'what' and a rough timing of 'when', but what about the 'how'? Galuschka et al. share the observation that students need to know about how a word sounds, how a word is constructed and what a word means in order to learn to spell it. This connects with Linnea Ehri's (2015) phases of sight word learning that also identifies these three critical components. Ehri describes these three components of word knowledge (how they sound, what they look like and what they mean) as the 'super glue' that binds words to long term memory.

But what about students who don't have a reading difficulty? What does the research say about teaching them? Graham and Santangelo completed a meta-analysis in 2014 examining 53 studies that involved over 6000 students from kindergarten to year 12. Most of the studies included whole cohorts of students, not just those with difficulties. They found that formal spelling instruction led to stronger results than a 'spelling is caught' approach.

While the studies used a range of instructional practices, the authors of this paper outlined 3 components:

- 1) Teaching students how to spell specific words,
- 2) Using skills, rules and strategies to spell unknown words
- 3) Connecting and extending knowledge through word study (including teacher-led morphology based spelling instruction)

This meta-analysis found that formal spelling instruction supported the development of a range of areas including phonological awareness and reading generally, and that students taught to spell formally were more likely to transfer correct spelling to their writing at text level. While there was no guarantee that this correct transfer would occur in every case, there was enough transfer to show that formal instruction was superior.

Practical Implications

The first thing to do to make sure that early years students are developing strong spelling is to teach them to connect phonemes and graphemes. In his book, 'Reading in the Brain' (2009), Stanislas Dehaene reminds us that this is essential for spelling and many other skills. Alves et. al. (2019) describe the acquiring of alphabetic principle as 'a landmark in spelling development'. They then ask us to ensure that students are developing phonemic awareness as this is the basis for any further spelling development.

What does this mean for teachers? Teach robust phonics lessons that include building automatic phoneme/grapheme correspondences (both ways, not just for recognising, but also for recalling) and include word level reading and spelling every day. While we do this, it is important to closely monitor student development as segmenting words into phonemes is a major stumbling block for many students (Treiman & Kessler, 2007) and it MUST be overcome if students are to progress to word level proficiency. This means that the inclusion of phonemic awareness tasks must be a focus for all early years classrooms.

Of course, spelling does not end in phonics. There are those other areas of word study to consider; orthography, morphology and etymology. How do they influence how we manage early years spelling? We have already heard from the Galuschka et. al. (2020) that these other areas should be included in instruction once the foundations of phonics are established. But that doesn't mean that early years students need to be immersed in a world of morphology, spelling rules and etymological word study. Rather, we can gently introduce these concepts as student skill and knowledge develops over time.

Louisa Moats (2020) reminds us that while spelling is multilinguistic in nature, that is, it includes phonics, orthographic patterns, morphology and etymology, it is not a good idea to be too focused on spelling rules. This may be included in short lessons as necessary but our students are better served by working with them on pattern recognition and developing insights into how our language is structured. This isn't a word level, open ended inquiry, however. As with phonics, morphology and orthography need to be taught explicitly to make sure that all children learn what they need to. After all, this brings about the equitable, inclusive type of instruction that we are all aiming for.

Questions for reflection

- 1) How does our current approach to spelling in the early years compare with the findings and recommendations from research?
- 2) How can we adjust how we teach spelling in the early years to bring it into alignment with recommendations from research?
- 3) What further knowledge do we need to be able to do this?
- 4) What will the impact on our students be if we make these changes?
- 5) How will we know that our approach has been successful? How will we measure impact?
- 6) How will we share information with our families to help them understand any shift in practice we identify?

References:

- Alves, R.U., Limpo, T., Salas, N., & Joshi, R.M. (2019) Chapter 9: Handwriting and Spelling. In Graham, S., MacArthur, C.A., & Hebert, M. (ed) Best Practices in Writing Instruction. 3rd edition, The Guildford Press.
- Dehaene, S. (2009). Reading in the Brain: The new Science of How We Read. Penguin Books.
- Ehri, L. C. (2005). Learning to read words: Theory findings and issues. *Scientific Studies of Reading*, 9(2), 167–188. Retrieved March 18, 2022, from <https://mimtsstac.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Presentations/AnitaArcherWorkshops/January2014/LearningtoReadWords.pdf>
- Galuschka, K., Görgen, R., Kalmar, J., Haberstroh, S., Schmalz, X., & Schulte-Körne, G. (2020). Effectiveness of spelling interventions for learners with dyslexia: A meta-analysis and systematic review. *Educational Psychologist*, 55(1), 1–20. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.lakeheadu.ca/10.1080/00461520.2019.1659794>
- Graham, Steve & Santangelo, Tanya. (2014). Does spelling instruction make students better spellers, readers, and writers? A meta-analytic review. *Reading and Writing*. October, 2014. DOI: 27. 10.1007/s11145-014-9517-0.
- Moats, L. C. (2020). *Speech to print* (3rd ed.). Paul Brooks Publishing.
- Treiman, R., & Kessler, B. (2007) *Writing Systems and Spelling Development*. In Snowing, M.J. & Hulme, C. (ed) *The Science of Reading: A Handbook*. Blackwell Publishing.