

Summary of Research Findings about Spelling

from the book Ideas for Spelling by Diane Snowball

Spelling is a highly complex task that is gradually mastered...It is not merely the memorization of words. Spelling involves the use of strategies which may vary according to the words being attempted.

It is a common misconception that a good speller is one who spells all words correctly all the time. The student may be using words they feel safe with and may have no idea how to attempt unknown words.

If children are not allowed opportunities to attempt spellings of unknown words (i.e. use invented spelling), it is not possible to teach according to their needs.

At the beginning stages of spelling development, children do not have a conscious understanding of the morphological aspects of [English spelling]. They use the most obvious aid for spelling words...the relationship between sounds and letters.

There are 26 letter (graphemes) in the English alphabet. There are 44 distinct sounds (phonemes). To teach children that a letter has only one sound is incorrect.

When spelling a word, the sound-symbol relationship provides great assistance as an initial attack...However, children will gradually realize...this strategy alone will not always produce correct spelling.

E.g. Ghoti Hooks = Fish Hooks

Gh (in enough) = F

o (in women) = i

ti (in action) = sh

Letter Sequence and Letter Position play an important role in learning to spell correctly.

E.g. “s” in the initial position can only be followed by a vowel or the consonants c, h, k, l, m, p, qu, t, w.

Likewise, the phoneme “f” is represented by f, ff, ph, and gh. If the sound is at the beginning of a word, it is only represented as f or ph. At the end, it not likely to be represented by f.

The teaching of spelling should be based on the nature of the English orthography...Children should be encouraged as soon as possible to be aware of the meaning relationships between words and to use such knowledge to attempt spelling.

Through intensive exposure to print and personal experience with writing, children progress towards correct spelling at their own pace.

Developmental Stages in Spelling

(based on the work of Richard Gentry)

1. Precommunicative

random strings of symbols
symbols may be repeated
upper and lower case are used indiscriminately

2. Semiphonetic

spelling is abbreviated with only 1, 2, or 3 letter
TL (table) BRZ (birds) S (said)

evidence of using letters to represent sounds
TP (type) BT (bit)

may be left-to-right in arrangement

3. Phonetic

there may be a match between letters and all essential sounds
STIK (stick) TABL (table) SEDRLU (Cinderella)

there may be consistency in representing partial sounds by specific letters

letter name strategies may still be used
SED (seed) EVRE (every)

nasal consonants may be omitted
STAP (stamp) WET (went)

may be substitution of incorrect letter with similar pronunciations
JAP or JRAP (drape) CHUCK (truck)

4. Transitional – writers may operate here for a long period of time

vowels appear in every syllable

nasals appear before consonants

letter name strategy is converted to vowel and consonant
ELEVATUR for LEVATR (elevator)

vowel is inserted before “r” at the end of a word (see previous)

silent e becomes fixed and overgeneralized

morphology and visual patterns used more
SOMEBODY instead of SUMBODY

correct letters but in incorrect sequence
CAOCH (coach) THIER (their)

5. Correct Stage – the ultimate goal

Teaching Spelling in the Middle Grades (6-9)

1. Look for patterns and needs based on observations made during student-teacher conferences and editing/revision of student work.
2. Use “teachable moments” to give specific/individual spelling instruction. E.g. clothes vs close
3. Use mini-lessons to teach and/or introduce high frequency words and commonly misspelled words
4. Teach homophones, homonyms, antonyms, prefixes, suffixes, root words, word families, and “generalizations” as either a mini-lesson or strategy lesson.
5. Have students keep an individualized spelling list in their Writer’s Notebook.
6. Provide, via centers or writing workshop activities, for Word Work using Making Big Words and other spelling “games”.
7. Continue to promote awareness of spelling patterns and word derivations.

Paul Mucci, 2001