

The S-Word Revisited: A Case for Spelling as Foundational Literacy Knowledge

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When the English tongue we speak, why is *break* not rhymed with *freak*?
Will you tell me why it's true, we say *sew* but likewise *few*?
And the maker of the verse cannot rhyme his *horse* with *worse*.
Beard is not the same as *heard*; *chord* is different from *word*.
Cow is *cow*, but *low* is *low*; *show* is never rhymed with *foe*.
Think of *hose*, *dose*, and *lose*, and think of *goose* and yet of *choose*;
Think of *comb*, *tomb*, and *bomb*; *doll* and *roll*, or *home* and *some*.
Since *pay* is rhymed with *say*, why not *paid* with *said*, I pray?
Think of *blood*, *food*, and *good*; *mould* is not pronounced like *could*.
Wherefore *done*, but *gone*, and *lone*—is there any reason known?
To sum up all, it seems to me sounds and letters don't agree.

--Lord Cromer, 1902

The topic of spelling in the English language tends to arouse spirited reactions. In this article, the first author, a classroom teacher, collaborates with her former graduate school mentor to revisit spelling instruction and position it as a foundational element in a literacy program. The authors present reasons why English orthography can confuse and frustrate users and then transition into the first author's reflection about her father's journey with learning to spell. Next, they discuss how spelling instruction in primary-grade classrooms supports reading and spotlight a few select English language particulars that require explicit instruction. Throughout, they exhort teachers to encourage students to become curious, strategic risk-takers—and most importantly, create those learning contexts that build students' efficacy.

Introduction

The subject of Standard American English spelling with its quirks, rules and exceptions, and patterns and counterexamples elicit humor and frustration. Responses to the above poem, penned by Lord Cromer (1902) include eye rolls, exasperated sighs, and wry commentary.

However, knowing about the history and structure of English provides insight and erodes the erroneous notion that English is a chaotic language with impossible, irrational spellings.

Compared to Italian, for example, with its near one-to-one letter-sound correspondences and strong phonemic orthographic structure, English is etymologically based, which explains the variability and, at times, confounding nature of letter order (Gentry, 2007). English spelling reflects the evolution of words from one language, merging with others, and their eventual arrival in English (Kress et al., 2016; Upward & Pulcini, 1996). Accordingly, although there are only twenty-six symbols in the alphabet, they combine to produce nearly 50 speech sounds and represent more than 100 spelling patterns (Kress et al., 2016; Savage, 2011; Vadasy et al., 2008). According to Templeton and Morris (1999) spelling and reading “have much in common because the process of writing words and the process of reading words draw upon the same underlying base of word knowledge” (p. 103). Spellers isolate sounds and represent them in written form whereas reading, the inverse process, decodes the letters to produce a word (Morrow, 2020).

Orthographic understandings require skilled instruction. The engine that drives efficient reading and spelling (Templeton & Morris, 1999) and taught by primary-level teachers, makes explicit the links between writing words and decoding practices (Bear, 1991; Invernizzi, 2002). Moats (2010) recommends a structured approach to language and literacy learning where content and principles are gained steadily and continuously over the elementary years. Spelling approached as a problem-solving process holds surprises for spellers about the intricacies of how spelling works (Graham, 2020). Additionally, daily exposure to a variety of texts and incentives to read and write invite learners to be curious about words and willing to take risks. Initially, students spell one-syllable words sound-by-sound before transitioning to more advanced

language skills where they use syllable and morpheme knowledge—e.g., base words and affixes. In both encoding and decoding, the goal to transition learners to become independent, purposeful, and confident language users propels instruction. The richness and frequency of verbal interactions, talking about the meanings of words, and doing lots of reading enhances spelling knowledge (Beck et al., 2013; Morrow, 2020).

My Father's Story

Growing up in the bayous of Louisiana, my father learned English with a thick accent that stemmed from what he called “the broken English of French Cajuns.” When encountering him for the first time, acquaintances or even strangers tried to place his accent, usually without success. “Boston? New York? Philadelphia?” His unique accent puzzled them. As an adult, these exchanges sometimes led to conversations that often charmed the stranger but belied the fact that he struggled mastering standard English. Pronouncing words differently from those around him influenced his spelling, which he considered to be his greatest academic challenge. The result? A student who viewed himself as an expert in math and science—and a lousy speller. My father's story brings forth many questions for me as an educator. What did this academic challenge mean for my father and his learning trajectory? What instruction contributed to this scenario? How do I help my students see the connections between reading words and spelling them? These questions drive my commitment to teach with intentionality the layered orthographic understandings that make up English spelling.

My father's recollections of learning to spell are bookended with his disappointment in seeing his graded weekly spelling tests and words circled in red ink on writing assignments. Such product orientation and accuracy focus run counter to what we know to be encouraging, exploratory spelling and writing development. Additionally, his perennial struggles with sound-

alike words, such as *ate/eight* and *to/two/two*, remain difficult for him as an adult. Had he understood that different spellings serve as clues to word meaning might have helped his young mind accept the logic of words with the same pronunciation but different meanings and spellings.

Nonetheless, while this disconnect with the orthographic system did not diminish what he has been able to accomplish, it did develop into long-term associations where he would avoid writing tasks. Now as a teacher, I wonder how my instruction serves to expand students' word knowledge. What can I do to demystify spelling, focus on orthographic patterns, compare regularly and irregularly spelled words, teach effective strategies, and build learners' confidence and word accuracy? Primary-level teachers like me have daily opportunities to support student orthographic knowledge in ways that invite discovery and curiosity and promote positive associations with the world of print. Further, a meaningful spelling curriculum builds upon existing knowledge and includes a plan for spelling consciousness (Gentry & Gillet, 2003). Because expert spelling is not simply caught, an effective program provides a safety net to ensure that exposure to words is continuous and comprehensive throughout a child's formative elementary school experience (Gentry, 2007; Morrow, 2020). In hindsight, such instructional approaches might have altered my dad's avoidance of writing tasks and altered his perception of himself as a speller. Even though he found success in other areas, very likely there are students whose orthographic struggles may limit their literacy identities and impact subsequent school experiences.

Spelling ought not to be treated as a simplistic subject that centers on memorization. Rather, addressing spelling as a complex process with intentionally sequenced lessons that showcase patterns within a complex orthographic system more accurately reflects spelling's role

as an important aspect of language learning (Gentry & Gillet, 2003). Even though many factors have contributed to the demise of spelling as a dedicated course of study, including advances in technology that auto-corrects misspelled words, we argue that providing targeted instruction not only fosters spelling skill and mastery but advances learners' overall literacy development. Because reading and writing involve letter symbols and focus on constructing meaning, children should engage in both daily; when children spell and write, they strengthen reading skills (Morrow, 2020, p. 229).

Effective Spelling Instruction

Pedagogical decisions impact students' sense of themselves as spellers and word users. Newlands (2011) suggested several basic principles that help tentative spellers become more self-assured: know essential rules, observe patterns, apply a strategy, analyze and correct errors, and have fun with words (p. 147). Heckham-Hungler and Williams (2003) concluded that the goal of effective instruction is to create fluent writers, not to win spelling bees or earn perfect scores on weekly tests. Transfer of word knowledge to independent writing and increased confidence with encoding words increases the likelihood of students seeing themselves as spellers (Fisher et al., 2023). Confident spellers take risks, enjoy word variety, and do not limit themselves to "safe," easy-to-spell words—e.g., *big* vs. *enormous* or *immense*—thus, expanding their word prowess. Unlike speaking, which develops with exposure to oral language, children need instruction. Pinker (1999) noted that even though youngsters are "wired for sound, print is an optional accessory that must be bolted on" (p. ix).

Students' conversations about words can suggest their readiness to learn. Read and Treiman (2014) observed that adults support children's independent spelling efforts but also can provide correction calibrated to the individual's level of development. For example, when a child

asks a direct question about spelling, this might be evidence of what they are ready to learn. Additionally, if teachers pose questions, the learner's response yields a data source of what the child knows that then gives direction to possible instruction. This balance between accepting and advancing a child's grasp of encoding and sound-letter knowledge characterizes thoughtful literacy and differs from traditional views of spelling that mirror those of basic arithmetic: an area in which invention is unwelcome (Read & Treiman, 2014). Moreover, when teachers understand the characteristics of early spellings and why they occur, they are more likely to offer supportive guidance (Invernizzi, 2017).

Homophones

English language word complexity abounds, yet spelling conventions can clarify word meaning. One concept is homophones—two or more words that share the same pronunciation but have distinct meanings, spellings, and origins (Woodsworth, 1995, p. 198). Since texts designed for early readers contain such words, focused instruction can advance reading and spelling knowledge (Moats, 2010). Homophone ubiquity in simple and more advanced texts means children must be taught to identify, read, and spell words, such as *for/four*, *new/knew*, and *there/they're/their*. Observing how *flour/flower* are alike, noting the *-our* and *-or* vowel patterns, and creating silly or serious sentences build conceptual knowledge and word learning. In the intermediate grades, students may encounter *foreword* as a homophone to *forward*, which appears more frequently in texts read by grade-school students. Studying each word's spelling structure and syllable pattern aids in constructing meaning. In comparing *foreword* with *forward*, the former spelling describes a book feature whereas the latter refers to directionality. By locating the foreword section of a text, children can more readily understand how this word and its spelling are linked.

Learning and laughter co-exist in educational spaces, especially as teachers attempt to accompany clear, explicit instruction with hands-on learning that honors student readiness. Moats (2010) observed that “hundreds of small decisions guide the teacher’s actions hour to hour” (p. xxii). While heightening students’ consciousness of sounds in words and the frequently occurring patterns that spell those sounds remains central to advancing literacy proficiency, making the learning process enjoyable has equal merit.

A Developmental Process

The continual nature of encountering new words makes spelling an ongoing endeavor. An individual’s vocabulary is never finite (Fisher et al., 2023; Invernizzi, 2017) because as an unconstrained language skill, word learning offers no boundaries or endpoint (Stahl, 2011). Each day presents exposure to new words; additionally, vocabulary expands through reading and life experiences.

For many users, a vexing aspect of English orthography is the lack of one-to-one correspondence between sounds in a word and the letters needed to spell it. Researchers (Fisher, 2023; Savage, 2011; Sheets, 2013) exhort teachers to use direct, focused instruction to help children learn how the alphabetic principle approximates spelling. As an example, *white* has three phonemes (/w/ /ī/ /t/) but uses five letters: *white*. Spelling this word requires knowledge of consonant digraphs and the silent-e, added to many one-syllable words to mark the long vowel. Accordingly, teaching the most basic, frequently occurring sound-letter correspondences equips learners to read and spell *white* and numerous other words correctly.

As students transition from the developmental stages of reading and spelling, they begin to recognize patterns within words. While still building upon sound-letter relationships, they learn that a single sound can have multiple spellings. The long-A sound, for example, is not only

represented by the single letter A but can manifest as *ay*, *ai*, *a-e*, *eigh*, and *ey*. As students learn new letter patterns, they tend to use the most common examples to inform their decisions about spelling. The word *sleigh* may be written as *slay* because *-ay* is a frequently occurring letter combination, encountered in *day*, *stay*, *today*, and *play*. Further, even though *eigh* is not a common pattern, it does surface in a subset of words: *eight*, *neighbor*, *weigh*, and *freight*. This is one example of many vowel variances that confound spellers; however, thoughtful instruction can mediate these competing logics.

As learners progress in their sophistication about the alphabetic principle, spelling instruction expands on phonemic structure and includes morphemic understanding (Gentry & Gillet, 2003). Typically, during the intermediate grades, spelling instruction focuses more on morphemes, the smallest units of meaning in words (Morrow, 2020). When suffixes, including derivational and inflectional endings, are attached to base words, spelling often changes (Flanagan, 2012; Moats, 2010). For example, the understanding that the silent-e in one-syllable words—such as *make*, *hope*, and *hike*—is dropped when adding an inflectional ending that starts with a vowel changes a more unfamiliar word, like *amaze*, to *amazing*. Being able to add suffixes and endings necessitates a more nuanced understanding of language principles, analysis, and letter manipulation (Bear et al., 2020). Being able to spell *amazing* requires manipulation of an essential language principle that manifests in hundreds of similar patterns: dropping the final-e to add a suffix that begins with a vowel. What is often introduced in first grade becomes reinforced as students encounter this spelling feature in texts they read.

Knowing about syllables can also inform spelling accuracy (Reed et al., 2016). The closed syllable principle, or consonant-short vowel-consonant letter pattern, explains why *kitten* has two Ts. Students learn that in a c-v-c syllable—with the short vowel “closed in” by a

consonant—the final consonant *T* is doubled to preserve the short vowel sound. This pattern awareness and recognition helps students spell an extensive subset of words: *willow*, *mitten*, *happy*, *commit*, *lesson*, *ladder*, etc. Closed syllables are but one example of linguistic understandings, which are part of an early spelling program (Morrow, 2020).

How students encode words indicates their developing knowledge of English orthographic structures. Spelling informs reading, and reading informs spelling. Accordingly, adequate instructional time should be allotted to spelling because it takes more memory and practice for students to master compared to reading (Reed, 2012). As students move from lower elementary grades to higher levels, explicit spelling instruction expands their linguistic competency and includes phonemic and morphemic structures (Gentry & Gillet, 2003).

Conclusion

While focusing too much on spelling correctness could discourage students from broadening their written vocabulary, spelling has earned a place in a primary classroom's literacy curriculum. Finding balance is key. A robust spelling curriculum teaches students how to spell and use strategies, rather than how to memorize (Henderson, 1990). Expert instruction encourages students to explore, examine, and experiment with words and letter order (Reed, 2012). While some may believe English is “too difficult” or has too many exceptions to make spelling instruction viable, such thinking is short sighted; indeed, instructors provide the lynchpin for making spelling an engaging, vital part of language learning.

I consider my dad to be competent, self-directed, and a high achiever. Fortunately, he did not let his spelling challenges prevent him from succeeding in his career. However, he might well have benefited from a coherent spelling curriculum that could have given him the confidence to write. Had he received orthographic foundational knowledge during those early

years, later, as an engineer, he might not have had to rely on spell-check when writing technical reports. More importantly, his confidence might have blossomed. When provided entrée into the mysteries of English spelling, children *can* become empowered spellers. This empowerment, however, does not occur in isolation; it requires dedicated educators, a robust curriculum, and abundant exposure to words.

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