Teaching Spelling in the Middle Years: Reviewing Programs for Diverse Student Groups

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Abstract:

In what follows, I draw attention to understandings about the teaching of Standard Australian English spelling developed by being immersed in the URL[1] project site for four years though sharing professional dialogue with teachers and educators and entering into informal conversations with some of the students and their parents. My understandings focus on the potential and problematics of oft-used generic spelling programs and approaches for student cohorts marked by social, cultural and linguistic diversity. This article concludes by considering two possible extensions to the word study approach that may have utility for working with middle years students from diverse backgrounds: creating a discursive 'Third Space' that overtly recognises students' language experiences and the technique of colour blocking to create a visual stress.

The URL Project Site:

Working with the URL project team meant continually rethinking how social, cultural and linguistic diversity interfaced with literacy teaching and learning. The URL project school is located in a large primary school (F-7) in a satellite city in one of the lowest socio economic areas of South East Queensland and works with a population of students and the extended community who identify as culturally and linguistically diverse. Up to 15 percent of the student cohort identifies as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander and a further 14 percent identifies as Pasifika. Another 6 per cent, mainly migrants from Russia and Korea and humanitarian visa entrants from Burma, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Afghanistan, are supported through the English as a Second Language (ESL) program (Woods, Dooley, Luke & Exley, 2014). Taken together, these students engage with a range of languages that are considered to be non-dominant in the Australian education context. I use the term 'engage' to acknowledge that sometimes students might be listeners rather than speakers or readers and writers of these languages and contexts of use may be limited by function, such as social gatherings or religious activities. The important point is that unlike most of the mono-lingual Australian population (myself included), some of these students are engaged with one or more language systems such as another dialect of English (i.e. the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students) or a Polynesian language (for example, Samoan which is derived from 14 alphabet letters with a highly developed formal and informal register). Other students from the URL project engage with Russian (a Slavic language with unpredictable vowel patterns), Korean (a character-based language made up of 19 consonant and 21 vowel phonemes), and Myanmar (a circular letter alphabet made up of 33 letters and 12 vowels) or come from nation states with multiple official languages of varying histories such as that found in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Afghanistan.

All of the students at the URL project site are required to gain proficiency as spellers of Standard Australian English (SAE). SAE is also a complex language in terms of its structure (syntax) and semantics (meaning). The written patterns (spelling) for SAE are no walk in the park, even for mainstream English as mother-tongue speakers. In a practical guide published in an earlier edition of 'Literacy Learning: the Middle Years', Donnelly (2013) laments the problematic of learning a spelling rule without having an acute appreciation of its foundation or the instances of exception. One source of difficulty comes from the fact that the English language uses 26 alphabet letters to make 40+ phonemes (sounds) represented via 120+ different written combinations. It's not possible to pinpoint the exact number of phonemes and written combinations as foreign language words are adopted and adapted into SAE over time, thus increasing the number of phonemes and written combinations being used in the SAE spelling system. Another source of difficulty seems to be the increasing exposure to and adoption of the spelling patterns associated with new media and technology by middle years students (see Zedda-Sampson, 2013). Although Adam's (2006) research into the instant messaging practices of five case study middle years students found that instant messaging facilitates the expedient recording of hand written notes in the design phase of writing tasks, the case study students admitted that the constant and prolonged use of instant messaging spelling disrupted their recall of and finesse with powerful vocabulary and more complex SAE spelling patterns during the final editing stages of writing.

In an attempt to help middle years students from diverse backgrounds to master the complexity of SAE spelling orthography, schools all over the nation implement a range of spelling programs and approaches. In what follows, I summarise some reflections made whilst sharing professional dialogue with the teachers and educators and entering into informal conversations with some of the students and their parents and carers at the URL project site. I am not recounting what happened in the name of spelling instruction at the URL project site. Instead, my reflections focus on the possibilities and problematics of oft-used generic spelling programs and approaches as they might apply to this and other communities marked by social, cultural and linguistic diversity.

Overview of Year Level Spelling Workbooks and Year Level Spelling Lists:

Two popular approaches to spelling instruction in the middle years are year level spelling workbooks and year level spelling lists. These approaches are often used in classrooms as independent activities, small group activities or teacher directed activities or used for student directed homework activities or purchased by parents for at-home tutoring. Year level spelling lists can be downloaded from the internet and added to teacher produced resources such as 'look, say, cover, write and check' sheets or homework lists for drill and memorisation exercises or so the target words can be written into sentences. Whilst I acknowledge that not all year level spelling workbooks or year level spelling lists are set up in the same way or offer the same teaching and learning experiences, the usefulness of these resources can be called into question when working with populations of middle years students marked by diversity.

A problematic: Confined to a Year of Schooling

Year level spelling workbooks or year level spelling lists are set for students by virtue of their inclusion in a particular year level. However, being in the same year level does not mean that all students are working at the same spelling stage or responding well to the same pedagogical approach. After all, spelling is, relatively speaking, an individual pursuit in that a student's spelling stage is determined by previous experiences with and understandings of phonemes and written word patterns derived from reading experiences. On this latter point, Krashen's (1989) seminal research work on the 'input hypothesis' documents how spelling acquisition is 'most efficiently attained by comprehensible input in the form of reading' (p. 440). Thus diverse instructional needs

cannot be met by setting a year level spelling workbook or year level spelling list for all students in a particular year level.

A problematic: What counts as 'standard'?

Year level spelling workbooks and year level spelling lists that home in on phoneme patterns presume that all students use the same SAE pronunciation. Yet, not all SAE speakers say their words exactly the same. My mother's pronunciation of 'gone' as /gawn/[2] harks back to her childhood spent in the northern Queensland eastern seaboard town of Ayr. My husband's pronunciation of 'dance' as /darnce/ harks back to his childhood as the offspring of Yorkshire immigrants. There are differences of opinion as to the point of inflection for 'castle': /car-sol/ or /cas-ill/. Similarly, the inflection for 'tomato' can be /tow-mate-oh/ or /ta-mar-tow/ and 'film' can be pronounced as a single syllable, /film/, or as two syllables, /fill-em/. And the list goes on. The issue is that these phoneme based spelling workbooks and spelling lists presuppose standardised pronunciation, thus rendering students' variations of pronunciation insignificant.

A problematic: Short term gain

In an attempt to turn spelling work into independent work, be it in class or in a homework situation, spelling workbooks and spelling list activities often rely on drill and memorisation (such as 'look-say-cover-write-and-check') and weekly spelling tests of targeted words for short-term gain with very little opportunity for students to be scaffolded to 'discover' spelling patterns that may build a stronger longer term appreciation of the logic of the SAE spelling system. In an earlier edition of 'Literacy Learning: the Middle Years', Pearson (2012) provided a comprehensive discussion on the problematic of weekly spelling tests so I shan't repeat the manuscript here.

A problematic: The predictable spelling errors of English language learners

Because these year level spelling workbooks and year level spelling lists are massed produced for a general market, they cannot home in on the predictable spelling errors of particular groups of English language learners. Students who speak a mother-tongue other than English bring particular influences to pronunciations as well as their understandings of written word patterns. As a case in point, Yang (2005) recounts that a teacher noted the Korean students confused the phonemes /r/ and /l/ because these phonemes are not differentiated in the Korean language.

A problematic: Absence on diagnostic information

If these year level spelling workbooks and year level spelling lists are offered as independent activities, they cannot home in on the diagnostic information contained in students' spelling errors. As such, the metaphoric 'window of word knowledge' of individual students does not become the impetus for just-in-time or teachable-moment instruction that lies within a students' zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978).

A problematic: Not linked to here-and-now

The word lists in year level spelling workbooks and generic year level spelling lists are artificially produced and not linked to the texts students are reading or the words that students need for their writing in the here-and-now. Thus the opportunities for students to continually see (reading) and

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[2] Rather than using the International Phonetics Alphabet, I've attempted to use common letter patterns to represent pronunciation. I've used a forwards slash either side of the target word or phoneme to indicate 'pronunciation' and have used the hyphen to indicate a syllable break.

use (writing) the target words for real communication and meaning making purposes cannot be harnessed.

Overview of a Word Study Program:

As a point of contrast to the standalone year level spelling workbooks and year level spelling lists reviewed above, other commercial publishers offer teaching programs that are heavily reliant upon teacher scaffolding. An action based research project carried out by Kreis (2005), a Year 3 teacher in Queensland, highlights the increases in spelling age that can achieved for middle years students when teachers offer scaffolded instruction and alter the function of spelling assessment from a numeric score to qualification of spelling behaviours. One very popular program that I'll reflect on is 'Words Their Way' (WTW) (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton & Johnston, 2012). WTW seriously attempts to ameliorate the weaknesses of the predetermined year level spelling workbooks and the generic year level spelling lists by foregrounding the three interacting layers of English orthography: alphabet knowledge, pattern knowledge and word meaning knowledge (see Invernizzi & Hayes, 2004). Regardless of their placement in a particular year level of schooling, students are allocated to one of five stages of instruction on the basis of an assessment of their spelling behaviours in a formal test or in everyday writing:

- emergent spelling stage (typically ages 1-7 years of age) where students make random marks, representational drawing, mock linear or letter-like writing, or random letters or numbers;
- letter name spelling stage (typically ages 4-9 years of age) where students might spell 'min' for 'mine', or 'jv', 'jrf' or 'driv' for 'drive', etc;
- within word spelling stage (typically ages 6-12 years of age) where students might spell 'seet' or 'sete' for 'seat', or 'bake' for 'back', etc;
- syllables and affixes spelling stage (typically 8-18 years of age) where students might spell 'hoping' for 'hopping' or 'disposul' for 'disposal', etc; and
- derivational spelling stage (typically 10+ years of age) where students might spell 'solem' for 'solemn' or 'ammusement' for 'amusement', etc.

I've added the word 'typically' to the years of age brackets to recognise that a student's stage of spelling is dependent upon experiences with languages, the phonemes of English, print text in general and spelling in particular. One point about ages and stages of spelling is made clear by the authors of WTW: it is feasible that students in the middle years of schooling, and perhaps in any one class in the middle years, could span a couple if not a few stages of spelling. The focus of WTW is for teachers to determine a student's instructional level via an assessment rubric drawn from a formal test or an everyday piece of writing, determine which groups of students have similar instructional needs and from there organise the class into three or four relatively comparable spelling groups.

According to the notion of developmental stages, students must demonstrate a considerable body of knowledge before being permitted to move onto the next developmental stage. For example, students identified as being located in the 'within word' stage are guided through the following instructional approaches (Bear et al, 2012, inside front cover):
- sort pictures to contrast short and vowel patterns as well as ambiguous vowels and *r*-controlled vowels
- study complex consonants and homophones
- developing weekly routines and word study notebooks
- enhance vocabulary through homophones and inflectional morphology.

However, these developmental stages are not viewed as non-negotiable. The authors of WTW encourage teachers to observe their English learner's native languages to better understand the students' literacy development in English. Students who are representative of diverse cultural and linguistic groups can be scaffolded to draw upon other already acquired layers of language skills. For example, students who have some knowledge of Norman French or of the Latin roots used in Spanish, Italian, Portuguese and Romanian languages may have substantial knowledge about the units of meanings called morphemes (the smallest units of meaning in a language). These students might be ready to connect with the instructional approaches of the derivational stage. Students do not need to be put into a holding pattern and limited to the activities and knowledges within their designated developmental stage of spelling. Instead teachers are encouraged to facilitate students using their language histories (or what Moll et al (1992) refer to as 'funds of knowledge') to advantage. On this latter point, another publication is available for teachers of English Language Learners called 'Words Their Way with English Learners' (see Helman, Bear, Templeton, Invernizzi & Johnston, 2012). This resource is instructive for altering teaching practice for English language learners.

Every stage of spelling development is founded on a small group multi-sensory teacher guided activity called 'sorts'. Through active exploration in groups of 6 to 8 students for 15-20 minutes, sorts involve students in analysing single words placed on small flashcards to discover the 'regularities, patterns, and conventions of English orthography needed to read and spell' as well as specific knowledge about individual words that don't conform to these regular patterns (Bear et al, 2012, p. 4). The three basic types of sorts reflect the three layers of English orthography: sound sorts based on saying what is in the picture, written pattern sorts to analyse the way particular phonemes are written, and meaning sorts (including concept sorts for building vocabulary and spelling-meaning sorts based on homophone and homographs etc). The phonemes or words that do not fit into the regular pattern sorts are discovered by the students and declared as 'oddballs' and placed in a separate column/pile. Because of the teacher guided group work analytical learning approach, target words, or pictures of target words, can be added or removed by the teacher or students according to the students' reading levels, known vocabulary and pronunciation preferences. The important point is that the initial exploration of sorts was never planned as being anything but a teacher guided small group multi-sensory cooperative learning analytical activity placed within each student's zone of proximal development.

A potential extension: Diversity as a resource for new learning

Whilst not explicitly articulated in the WTW teachers' book (Bear et al, 2012), when working in contexts marked by social, cultural and linguistic diversity, one of the greatest possibilities of the teacher guided group work analytical learning approach is the attention that can be given to target phonemes or words that may be pronounced differently by different students. Because the picture and word sorts are undertaken in small ability groupings, all attending students have the opportunity to 'say and lay' phonemic, written and meaning patterns. This is where teachers can extend the WTW program to open the space for students to share their existing funds of language knowledge, including vocabulary and justifications for oddball choices. Hauser, an experienced educational consultant working with disengaged youth in the AUSSIE program in New York City Middle Schools draws on his experiences to conclude 'the best resources are the students in the classroom' (2017, p. ii). This proposed shift is in stark contrast to normative pedagogies where diversity and hybridity are rendered 'invisible' or suppressed and thus further devalued. The sort of discursive space I am proposing is akin to the construct of a collective 'Third Space', a paradigm shift that Gutierrez (2008) recognises as a particular kind of ZPD. Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopez and Tejeda's (1999) theoretical paper on 'Third Space' thinking highlight how 'alternative and competing discourses and positionings transform conflict and difference into rich zones of collaboration and learning' (p. 286). In this

paradigm shift, no single language or register is privileged, and the extended linguistic repertoires of individual students become the central mediating tools for participating and making meaning in this newly conformed discursive space. In such a pedagogical space, students' hybridity and diversity is not seen as a deficit for SAE spelling, but as an important resource for SAE language learning activities. Because 'Third Space' pedagogies are interactionally constituted between the teacher and the students and within the student group, I argue there is the potential for contributing students to reconceive who they are and what they might be able to accomplish in terms of their SAE spelling goals.

A potential extension: Visual stress

The picture and word sorts described above are designed to 'help students to learn how and where to look at and listen to words' (Bear et al, 2012, p. 56). I propose that this analytical activity can be extended by drawing on the power of the visual stress, in particular that of colour blocking. As detailed in an experimental study undertaken with 56 secondary school students who struggled with accurately spelling 'demon words', that is words that do not follow consistent spelling patterns, Irwin (1971) introduced a traffic light colour blocking strategy. She colour blocked the troublesome part of the word with red to indicate 'stop and concentrate' (e.g. 'ar' in 'calendar'), yellow to indicate 'slow-down from the first letter to the last letter' (e.g. 'mischievous') and green to indicate the most likely choice when confronted with two or more very similar words (e.g. 'capitol' and 'capital' with 'capital' colour blocked in green to indicate the most likely spelling required given that 'capitol' is a relatively unique word). In this intervention study, Irwin undertook the analytical work of colour blocking for each of the demon words and then asked the students to either 'concentrate' on the list, copy the target words or practise spelling and checking the target words. Compared with students in the control group who were exposed to traditional spelling lessons, the students in the intervention group improved their short term recall of the 116 target words and maintained their memory span for at least two months without any further intervention. Whilst Irwin's (1971) intervention does not capitalise upon more contemporary pedagogies associated with the teacher led small group analytical learning discussions discussed above, her findings suggest that WTW can be extended in positive ways for students in the middle years of schooling.

A problematic: Ability grouping in the middle years in the Australian context

Another matter that warrants consideration by teachers is that WTW subscribes to an ability grouping ethos. Because WTW was developed and trialled in the United States, and because the ethos and social outcomes of ability grouping change across time and place, it is instructive to turn to some of the Australian-based research on ability grouping practices in the middle years of schooling. Whilst not sufficiently researched in terms of spelling groups in the middle years of schooling, research in mathematics education has found ability grouping to be a self-fulfilling prophecy of sorts. In a study undertaken with 96 students from Years 9 and 10, Zevenbergen (2003) found that those from 'higher-ability' groups were more likely to benefit (if benefits were realised) compared with those from 'lower-ability' groups who were found to be most at-risk in homogenous settings. Another large scale meta-analysis using an Australian wide study of 15 years olds found that students of all ability levels were prone to 'Big Fish Little Pond Effects' in the disciplinary fields of English, Mathematics and Science (Seaton, Marsh, Yeung & Craven, 2011). Whilst these findings are not directly comparable with ability groupings for the teaching of spelling in the middle years, the need for caution is noted.

Closing thoughts:

Spelling instruction cannot be handed over as it were to students in the middle years. This brief review of research and of generic spelling and word study programs and practices attests to the need for carefully scaffolded instruction and possible practices for investing in inclusion when working with middle years students from diverse social, cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Whilst the extension strategies proposed have been drawn from and articulate with an evidence base, it seems that there is a need for further research into the teaching of SAE spelling when working with middle years students from diverse backgrounds.

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