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Fostering spelling ability

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Abstract

Many teachers of primary-age children are seeking to implement the whole language concept into instructional programs by focusing on children's involvement in the language processes (comprehension and composition). Smith and Goodman (1971) explain that the whole language concept is based on the nature of language and how children learn language. As children engage in the language processes, language abilities emerge. Children generate their own hypotheses about the regularity underlying language, test them, and revise these hypotheses based on the feedback they receive.

Fostering Spelling Ability

A Graduate Project

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by

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Many teachers of primary-age children are seeking to implement the whole language concept into instructional programs by focusing on children's involvement in the language processes (comprehension and composition). Smith and Goodman (1971) explain that the whole language concept is based on the nature of language and how children learn language. As children engage in the language processes, language abilities emerge. Children generate their own hypotheses about the regularity underlying language, test them, and revise these hypotheses based on the feedback they receive.

In spite of this knowledge about children's emerging literacy, many teachers in developing a spelling program for young children view it as a separate, sequential hierarchy of skills and not as a vital component in literacy learning. Spelling is related to form. Form becomes important as children progress in the process of creating meaning; it helps children express their ideas with greater ease and with more clarity.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine historical and current views of spelling instruction and to develop a spelling program for a first-grade classroom consistent with the whole language concept.

Evolution of Spelling Instruction

A study done by Nelson (1989) traces early positions on spelling instruction in American education.

The Rote Memory View

The rote memory position was in place before the 1780's, but its rationale was not developed until Ernest Horn did his research on frequency lists and word-study routines at the start of this century. This view is primarily based on two premises: The first premise is that English spelling is under-principled and learning how to spell is driven by rote memorization. Words are mastered as individual and separate challenges and are arbitrary sequences of letters divorced from logic (Horn, 1919).

The second premise of the rote memory position is that learning to spell is word specific (Horn, 1919). Words are learned one at a time. Hillerich (1987) supports this view by stating that words in a list should be arranged in order of frequency of use from year to year. He believes if words are arranged by sound to encourage a generalization, it would cause phonetic misspellings. The implications of this view of spelling are that children who master more correct spellings of words simply have better memory capacity. The only recourse to poor spelling is drill which offers little hope to the underachieving speller. This theory of spelling characterizes children as passive recipients of instruction.

The Generalization View

This rote memory position remained without opposition until a group of studies at Stanford University responded to the premise that English is unprincipled. Hanna and his colleagues found that there was greater consistency in English letter-to-sound relationships (Hanna & Moore, 1953; Hanna, Hanna, Hodges, & Rudorf, 1966).

This study led to recommendations for change in instructional methods. Spelling was no longer viewed as a letter-by-letter or word-by-word matter; instead, sound values associated with patterned sequences of letters became the organizing units of instruction (Hanna et al., 1966). By focusing on generalizations, the learner was able to take a more active role in learning to spell. Once a child learned the phoneme-grapheme patterns in a few words on a list, he/she could spell other words containing the same pattern.

The Developmental View

The view of spelling as developmental was conceptualized by Henderson. It struck a needed compromise between valuing both the word and the alphabetic principle in learning to spell. Henderson acknowledged the impact of frequency on word learning and the abundant orthographic patterning in English and went further to discover how children make sense of these regularities. The active role of the learner came to the forefront as Henderson

concentrated on how children discover the order of the English language. He found conceptual stages as children learn to spell in first and second grade (Beers & Henderson, 1977). By considering the types of knowledge the child brings to learning to spell, he pointed spelling in a new direction. Yet, he retained the old routine of weekly spelling lists with recommendations for instructional change in the selection and arrangement of the words for study and the yearly and weekly routine for studying those words (Henderson, 1985).

Henderson (1985) abides by the historical notion of a security list containing about 4,000 words. He also believes the words should be selected according to the frequency in which they appear in children's and adults' writing samples. He expands on the notion of frequency by adding that the frequency in which words appear in children's reading experience should be considered. Henderson also advocates grouping words by pattern within the year whenever possible. He bases this pedagogical decision on the premise that children learn to spell by internalizing spelling patterns in words they encounter frequently, bringing together the rote memory and generalization positions. The selection of words by structure and frequency must be relative to the child's position on the developmental word knowledge continuum. Henderson's minimum criterion for

grading words is that the child must be able to read the word he or she is asked to learn to spell.

Henderson (1985) supports a framework based on a yearly instructional routine that dates from the early half of this century. This routine includes a placement pretest that determines where children are put in the spelling curriculum and the use of a Monday pretest and mid-week word study, culminated by a Friday posttest. Spaced review tests are also suggested. The researcher (1981) recommends that the mid-week word study should be divided in half between traditional visualization writing routines and active "word sorting" procedures that engage the child directly in examining the set of spelling words for their relationship with general spelling principles.

Reviewing the evolution of spelling instruction allows one to conclude that the manner in which spelling is taught depends to a great degree on how spelling is viewed. Although Henderson advocates a formal spelling program individually tailored for each learner, most schools have adopted a formal spelling curriculum that puts children in each grade level in one spelling text. Many spelling methods that are used to instruct children are based on the belief that spelling has a unique place in the language arts: It is clear-cut and exacting (Polloway & Smith, 1982).

The adoption of this type of spelling program is usually accompanied by embracing instructional principles that focus on teaching children to spell words correctly. Spelling becomes a subject to be taught through the systematic mastery of a sequenced hierarchy of skills. Instruction focuses only on the formal aspects of spelling and generally ignores its functional uses. The child's developmental experience with spelling is virtually ignored because focus is placed on sufficient teaching and practice. Progress is measured through formal assessment to determine which drills on the hierarchy are mastered and which need remediation (Teale & Sulzby, 1986).

Recent Findings in Spelling Research

It is becoming apparent that spelling is far more complex than previously believed. In a paper by Wilde (1990), a review of older research suggests that the effectiveness of traditional spelling programs has been overrated. Callaway, McDaniel, and Mason (1972) found that of five language arts programs, the best spelling came from students in a program that focused on relating reading and writing with no formal spelling curriculum. The worst spelling performance was from students who participated in a formal spelling program unrelated to reading and writing. This study was not based on the recent extensive research that has shown the value of inventive spelling. Wilde (1990) offers three new views drawn from recent research in spelling:

1. As in the traditional spelling program, the current goal of the spelling curriculum and instruction is to produce competent, independent spellers. But while traditional programs emphasized the memorization of spellings in isolated lists, divorced from the rest of the curriculum, a more useful and applicable spelling curriculum grows out of writing. The latter focuses on how students spell the words they use in writing as they express themselves for a variety of purposes throughout the day.

2. Learning to spell is the acquisition of a complex schematic system that is learned through use and expressed in increasingly successful approximations to mature practice. Children's invented spellings can be seen in the same matter as children learn to talk. It involves a series of increasingly sophisticated stages. Traditional programs view spelling as a right or wrong situation, with no appreciation for an incorrect but logical choice.

3. Because learning to spell is a developmental process dependent on both maturation and experience, pace and direction are determined primarily by the learner. Primary-age children differ greatly from each other in spelling ability as they move through the elementary grades. Because of such differences in development, instruction aimed at an entire class will be appropriate only for some students.

It can be concluded that spelling as a language ability is developmental, exhibiting predictable stages of acquisition that begin in early childhood (Gentry, 1982; Henderson, 1981).

Stages of Spelling Development

Gentry (1982) built on Henderson's research findings on developmental spelling and concluded that children learn to spell through invented spelling. When children invent spellings, they think about words and generate new knowledge. Morris (1981) found developmental spelling stages can provide teachers with a flexible framework for analyzing and monitoring the conceptual growth of primary-school spellers.

Gillet and Temple (1990) summarize spelling development into five different stages.

Prephonemic spelling. Children use letters and letter-like forms, such as numerals and incorrectly formed or made-up letters in writing. It is not easy to read as the letters and forms are used at random and do not represent sounds. The writing is usually written horizontally on a page. This stage shows that the child is aware that words are made up of letters and that print is arranged horizontally.

Early phonemic spelling. In this stage, children use letters in writing. Letters are beginning to be used to represent some of the sounds in words. Single letters are often used to represent more than one sound in words or whole words.

Letter-name spelling. In this stage, children are aware that letters represent sounds. The letters they use stand for sounds but include no silent letters in words that have long vowels. They often use the names of letters to represent sounds in words as well as the sounds of letters.

Derivational spelling. A derivational speller shows mastery of most of the phonemic and rule-governed spelling patterns but shows a lack of awareness of relational patterns among words derived from the same source.

Transitional spelling. Spelling is almost complete in this stage. All of the phonemes are represented and long and short vowel sounds are spelled correctly or begin to show an understanding of word patterns.

Spelling Strategies and Piaget's Concept of Decentration

A study done by Zutell (1979) compared spelling strategies of primary-age children and their relationship to Piaget's concept of decentration. He found that Piaget's findings of cognitive development can be related to the progressive model of children's spelling. Piaget emphasized the need for the child to structure experience in order to comprehend it. He also related that there are different stages of development and that entrance into a given stage depends on the kinds of structures a child is able to coordinate. The differences in cognitive functioning between Piaget's preoperational and concrete

operational stages seem particularly relevant to the study of
children's misspellings for two reasons: (a) the change from
preoperational to operational thinking typically occurs between
the ages of five and eight when a child is expected to begin to
read and write, and (b) the coordination of structures available
to the child might affect the way he/she perceives the
structural and phonetic relationships believed to underlie
orthographic regularity. With this in mind, one can ask how one
formal spelling program can serve primary-age children when
there is such a range in cognitive structures.

Spelling in a Process-Writing Program

Calkins (1983) in her work in a second-grade classroom
wrote anecdotally about invented spelling's role in facilitating
writing. She observed children who were allowed to use their
own spellings in first drafts wrote more detailed and in-depth
pieces. Their ideas and written vocabularies were not hindered
by an atmosphere that placed too much emphasis on correct
spelling. Clarke (1988) documented that first-grade students
who were encouraged to use invented spelling in their writing
showed both increased independence in writing and greater skill
in spelling compared to students who were asked to spell
correctly.

Critics of invented spelling often argue that this practice
gives the writer the idea that spelling is not relevant.

Graves (1983) explains while invented spelling allows emphasis to be placed on meaning, the teacher works to lead the child toward correct spellings, recognizing that there are different stages of invention. When words of high frequency appear in a child's writing, even though these words are still in the invented state, the teacher can provide correct spellings for the child. As the child gradually realizes that spellings are not variable and that words are spelled but one way, correctly written words take on greater importance. By the end of first grade, many children can reach the "age of convention" and want to conform to the conventions of spelling and punctuation, realizing more and more that there are rules to spelling.

Emerging Spelling Abilities and the
Whole Language Concept

After formulating goals for spelling instruction based on recent studies, it becomes increasingly clear that principles associated with the whole language concept embrace this enlightened approach to spelling. Cambourne (1988) concluded from his study of emerging literacy that seven conditions are vital to extending the whole language concept throughout the school program: immersion, demonstration, engagement, expectations, responsibility, approximation, and use. How these conditions complement emerging research in spelling abilities will be discussed.

Immersion

To enhance a child's spelling development, the learning environment needs to be saturated with print. Literature works, signs, messages, labels, picture dictionaries, vocabulary lists, poem charts offer sources of the correct spellings of words to the developing speller. By repeatedly viewing words associated with meaningful experiences, the speller recognizes the stability of print and begins to see the conventions of the printed word.

Demonstration

The teacher needs to offer frequent demonstrations of the composition process. Engaging in the writing process naturally leads to form. The writer may need, not only to find a correct spelling for a word but where to find it. Lists of words related to class study can be placed on charts for easy access. Also, important words can be entered in student word books as an individualized reference to facilitate writing.

Engagement

Language learning begins with contextual language. Just as young children develop speech through attempts to negotiate meaning within a situational and linguistic context, spelling also develops in context (Goodman, 1986; Smith, 1982). The classroom teacher needs to provide a whole array of opportunities to write--stories, letters, notes, and messages. By providing a

meaningful context in which writing can take place, children discover the properties of word structure (Norris, 1989).

Expectations

A teacher can nurture the expectation that correct form allows meaning to transfer from writer to reader. The child can come to realize that spelling facilitates the creation of meaning for the writer and the audience.

Responsibility

Through allowing time and context for writing and spelling, a personal responsibility lies with the student to create meaningful writing. Through individual conferences and class mini-lessons, the teacher can provide scaffolds, or supportive responses, and models for the learner to reach the next stage of spelling. During the first months of writing conferences, a child may ask the teacher to correct all of the misspellings. Later the teacher can encourage the child to find the spellings he/she is uncomfortable with on their own, prior to a conference. Another suggestion would be to encourage the writer to search for the correct spellings in other texts or dictionaries on their own before a conference, increasing responsibility for form to the writer.

Approximation

Spelling instruction begins with the level of spelling knowledge. Rather than having one level of instruction and one

standard of correctness, goals need to be based on each child's present stage of development. Spelling progresses through predictable stages as children acquire experience with and knowledge of written language (Gentry, 1982). By accepting these stages, teachers can provide information that will help their students formulate rules; therefore, refining their system of spelling. Through conferences, teachers have an opportunity to provide a scaffold for the child to form a new hypothesis for language composition and spelling.

A nurturing learning environment acknowledges a student's accomplishments in writing and spelling and gently encourages a writer toward correct form. Experimentation and risk-taking allows new hypotheses to be generated. Small successes are celebrated by the teacher and writer as each small change in a new hypothesis moves his/her approximation closer to correct spelling.

Use

Writing is a communication process in which experience is shared. Rather than viewing spelling as a list of words to be mastered, spelling is viewed as a means of communicating with an audience through writing. Graves (1983) stresses the importance of children publishing their writing, for it contributes to the writer's development.

Summary

A developmental approach to fostering spelling abilities is consistent with the recent research in the area of emerging literacy. Instead of teaching spelling as a hierarchy of skills isolated from the writing process, it has become an integral part of creating meaning.

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