

# Spelling – How Children Learn

## What Do We Know About Spelling?

- 1 The ability to spell easily and automatically enables us to become more effective writers. The less energy and thought we have to put into thinking about spelling, the more thought we can put into what is said.
- 2 Spelling is only one aspect of effective writing. Historically, however, levels of literacy have often been measured by spelling ability. Among employers in the 'public' arena this attitude still prevails. It is very important to be aware that generally someone is going to read what we write. We must take responsibility to see that spelling is correct. If we don't, people will make judgements about our level of literacy and sometimes even our intelligence.
- 3 Good spellers are self-monitoring and self-regulating. They take responsibility for getting spelling correct. They look for their own errors. They check words they are not sure of in a dictionary, or ask a friend. Ultimately all writers must take responsibility for ensuring their spelling is correct. Good spellers are not perfect spellers. They are people who can say, 'No that doesn't look right', and then check to see if the word is correct.
- 4 The English language is not a regular language, but it is systematic and patterned. Learning to spell is a process of working out the patterns and systems of the English language, then applying these understandings to new words as we encounter them. So, learning to spell entails learning to understand the systematic code by which English is written.
- 5 Learning to spell is not learning lists of words. It is a developmental process of learning to apply different strategies appropriately, so that we can spell correctly all the words we write. These strategies include sound sequences, knowledge of graphophonic relationships, visual patterns and meaning. In order to do this, we need to learn to classify, hypothesise, generalise, look for patterns and relationships, and seek to understand the relationships between meaning and spelling. **Spelling is a thinking process not a rote-learning task.**
- 6 Understanding spelling helps writers to make better meaning when they write. Good spellers understand the links between word meaning and spelling. Investigating word meanings not only guides us to spell words correctly, but helps develop a diverse vocabulary. If our first-draft writing is reasonably legible and contains few spelling errors we can easily find the parts that need revision as we read.

## **Teacher's Role**

It is the teacher's role to make these understandings explicit as he or she talks with children about spelling and writing. With this knowledge, children will see good reasons for making the effort to improve their spelling.

## Creating Effective Classroom Contexts

Spelling arises from and informs reading and writing, It is through reading that children discover print and through reading and writing that they explore it. Reading reinforces children's understandings about the meaning of words and the relationships between them and so fosters their ability to use the semantic and syntactic cuing systems. It helps them develop and extend their knowledge of graphophonics and it exposes them to word models which they can use as referents. Spelling is a writer's tool. As they focus on spelling in the context of writing, children develop a systematic understanding of the way the graphophonic system works. This, in turn, provides children with decoding knowledge which they can use as they read. In itself spelling has no purpose and no audience, but in the context of writing, spelling becomes very important to both purpose and audience. It is important for children to realise that a 'public audience' will always make harsh judgements about poor spelling and that good spelling is a vital component of communication through writing.

Six contexts are discussed here as frameworks for presenting teaching strategies and activities and helping teachers monitor spelling behaviours. For convenience of access these strategies are labelled Context One, Context Two, etc., but it is stressed that the order in which they are presented is not significant. The contexts are listed and described below.

### **Context 1: Modelled and Shared Reading**

Modelled and shared reading sessions enable children to interact with print in exciting and purposeful ways as they construct understandings about words, how they look and how they work together to create meaning. Modelling and sharing sessions provide excellent contexts for fostering awareness and refining understandings through talk.

### **Context 2: Complementary Activities**

Complementary activities reinforce the learning which has taken place in shared reading and writing sessions. Children need to encounter and engage with a concept or strategy in a range of different contexts so that they can clarify their understandings and become more skilled in their use of a strategy through purposeful practice.

### **Context 3: Independent Writing**

Independent writing opportunities engage children in writing for many different purposes and audiences, both in real life and in play. Children need to talk as they write. They will use these opportunities to experiment with and apply the understandings they have gained in the shared reading session.

### **Context 4: Modelled and Shared Writing**

Modelled and shared writing sessions enable teachers to introduce children to spelling strategies and the use of words in a wide range of different forms of writing. These sessions show how successful writers meet challenges as the teacher 'thinks aloud'; solving problems and making decisions. The interactive nature of these sessions gives them special value. Teachers are able to reinforce and extend developing understandings, providing opportunities for heightening children's awareness and enabling them to generalise their understandings. Proof-reading and editing skills can be modelled effectively in this context.

### **Context 5: Independent Reading**

Independent reading opportunities engage children in the creation of meaning, enabling them to come to grips with concepts and conventions of print and the representation of words in print. Children sometimes like to read peacefully by themselves, but they need to know they can ask questions and discuss issues with peers should the need arise.

### **Context 6: Sharing and Reflecting**

Sharing and reflecting on ideas, processes and products is crucial to the learning process. Children need to be given time, opportunity and support as they think about what they have learned, talk about it with others and represent it in ways which make sense to them. It is through reflection and talk that explicit understandings about the spelling system can be clarified and focused.

### **Integrated and Ongoing Learning**

In all these contexts children construct understandings about spelling and develop spelling strategies that enable them to be effective writers. It is because children meet the challenge of spelling every time they want to write that they realise how important it is to write words that other people can read.

For young writers the cognitive demands of spelling are great, so the sooner children are able to automate spelling, the more they will be able to focus on the content of their writing. It is important that this is discussed with children explicitly.

The order in which children participate in these learning contexts will be dictated by the teacher's objectives and the nature of the strategies and activities employed.

### **Phases of Spelling Development**

There are basically three phases children go through as they learn how to spell:

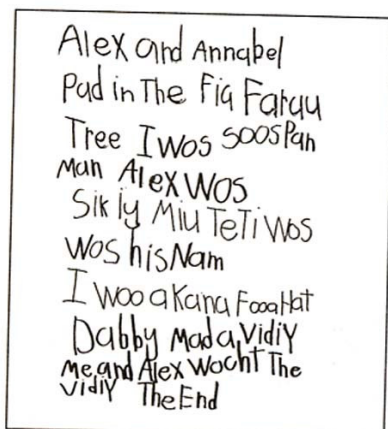
**Preliminary Spelling phase** – in this phase children become aware that print carries a message. They experiment with writing-like symbols as they try to represent written language. Their writing is not readable by others as understandings of sound-symbol relationships have yet to develop.

**Semi-Phonetic Spelling phase** – in this phase children show developing understanding of sound-symbol relationships. Their spelling attempts show some evidence of sound-symbol correspondence. They may represent a whole word with one, two or three letters. In this, as in all phases of development children will be copying, recalling and inventing words. Children at this phase are able to copy letter by letter.

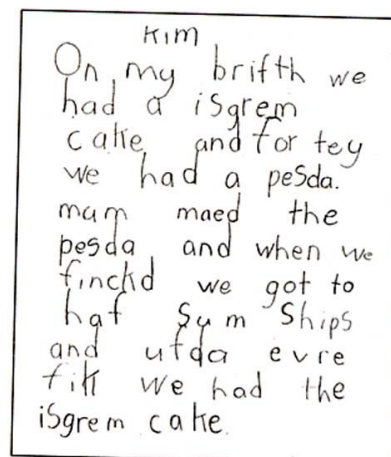
**Phonetic Spelling phase** – In this phase writers are able to provide an almost perfect match between letters and sounds. Letters are chosen on the basis of sound often without regard for conventional letter patterns. Spelling attempts are meaningful and becoming more like standard spelling. There is often evidence of self-constructed rules that may not conform to adult rules. Writers copy, recall and construct words according to their current understandings. They use rote recall for an increasing number of words.

For the purpose of this article, we will look in detail at the phonetic spelling phase.

### Phonetic Spelling Indicators



Alex and Annabel  
 Pad in The Fig Fatou  
 Tree I was soospan  
 man Alex was  
 Sikly Miu Teti was  
 was his Nam  
 I was a Kana Fooatkat  
 Dabby Mada Vidiy  
 me and Alex wocht the  
 Vidiy The End



kim  
 On my brifith we  
 had a isgrem  
 cake and for tey  
 we had a pesda.  
 marn maed the  
 pesda and when we  
 finchid we got to  
 haf sum Ships  
 and utda evre  
 fitt we had the  
 isgrem cake.

#### The writer:

- chooses letters on the basis of sound without regard for conventional spelling patterns, e.g. kaj (cage), tabi (table), birgia (burglar), vampia (vampire), pepi (people), sum (some), bak (back)
- sounds out and represents all substantial sounds in a word e.g. kt n (kitten), wacht (watched), anathe (another), aftrwoods (afterwards), siclon (cyclone), spidr (spider), isgrem (icecream), necst (next), peepl (people)
- develops particular spellings for certain sounds often using self- or mulated rules, e.g. becoz (because)/ woz (was), wher (were)/ whas (was), dor (door)/ sor (saw)/ mor (more), hape (happy)/ f une (funny), poot (put)/ wood (would)
- substitutes incorrect letters for those with similar pronunciation, e.g. oshan (ocean), nacher (nature), wold (world), heard (herd), disobays (disobeys), consert (concert), butiful (beautiful), tuched (touched), daw (door), tresher (treasure), thort (thought)
- adds an incorrect vowel after a correct vowel or consonant, e.g. hait (hat), derum (drum), miu (my), fiene (fine), saeid (said), beof ore (before), seing (sing) represents

- past tense in different ways according to the sounds heard, e.g. stopt (stopped), watcht (watched), livd (lived)
- uses the letter 'r' to represent a syllable, e.g. watr (water), mot hr (mother)
  - confuses short vowel sounds, e.g. pell (pill), yallow (yellow), u (a), pan (pen), lat (let), sow (saw) sometimes omits one letter of a two letter blend or digraph, e.g. fog (frog), mik (milk), eve (leave), plak (plank)
  - still uses some letter name strategies e.g. awa (away), exeunt (excellent), mit (might), lrst (last), cay (cave)
  - creates some words by combining known sight words and patterns e.g. apreesheight (appreciate), jenyowine (genuine), MaThursday (Mother's Day)
  - usually spells commonly used sight words correctly, e.g. in, has, his, he, my, the, here
  - uses some known patterns in words, e.g. . . . ing, th..., sh..., nght (night)
  - is beginning to use syllabification for spelling longer words, e.g. telephon (telephone), but ufl (beautiful). Some syllables may be omitted.
  - identifies and uses knowledge of similar sounding words
  - experiments with spelling words in different ways
  - applies knowledge which has been gained from reading and words encountered in books, e.g. pirate, ship
  - is beginning to use simple homonyms and homophones correctly, e.g. wind, read, park, their/there, one/won, for/four, too/to
  - is willing to have-a-go at spelling
  - sees self positively as a writer and speller.

## Teaching Notes

Children's spelling at this phase is logical and is very largely the outcome of their understanding of the relationships between letters and sounds. This understanding may not yet be the same as that of adults. Children's writing can be understood by others if it is read phonetically, although conventional connections may not always be made between letters and sounds. A typical example of unconventional spelling that could be related directly to logical thinking was provided by a little girl whose teacher was called 'Mrs Law'. This child consistently spelt 'door' as 'daw', 'more' as 'maw', 'pour' as 'paw' and 'saw' as 'saw'.

Phonetic spellers have also acquired a large bank of words that they can read, write and spell 'without thinking'.

It is crucial that children in this phase are encouraged to write spontaneously across a wide range of contexts so that they have many opportunities to try out and apply their understandings, gradually refining them in the light of all their encounters with print. If children feel that their spelling must be correct they will learn by rote rather than by constructing rules and will often restrict their use of words to the 'safe' vocabulary that they already know.

The emphasis in teaching at this stage focuses on categorising and classifying words according to spelling patterns. There should also be continued emphasis on building up a systematic view of spelling, i.e. letters can represent different sounds depending on context or place in the word — a sound can be represented by more than one letter or letters.

There is also a need to teach children to think about meaning as a strategy, particularly with inflected words, e.g. jump-jumped. It is appropriate at this stage to introduce strategies that will help children to identify critical features of words, i.e. differentiating characteristics.

### Major Teaching Emphases

Phonetic spellers should be exposed to a wide variety of printed materials to provide data from which (at their own pace) they can draw new conclusions about spelling.

- teach writers to look for visual patterns and common letter sequences in words
- teach writers to identify critical features of words (i.e. differentiating characteristics)
- continue to emphasise the building up of a systematic view of spelling with emphasis on the way:
  - (a) letters can represent different sounds depending on context or place in the word
  - (b) a sound can be represented by more than one letter or letters
- teach writers to think about meaning as a strategy
- continue the development of word banks by incorporating theme, topic, high frequency and interesting words as they arise
- introduce proof-reading strategies
- continue to explore and identify sound-symbol relationships
- categorise and classify words according to spelling patterns
- develop and use alphabetical lists
- ensure that students have access to a wide range of reading materials on many topics

#### *At all phases:*

- model writing in a variety of contexts
- encourage students to reflect on their spelling strategies
- encourage children to reflect on their understandings, gradually building a complete picture of the spelling system
- ensure that students have opportunities to write for a variety of audiences and purposes
- encourage students to take risks and have-a-go at spelling words they need to write



This article is an excerpt from the book  
**First Steps: Spelling Developmental Continuum**  
ISBN: 0-7312-2361-6

This article offers descriptions of the sorts of things that children are likely to do at a certain stage as they learn how to spell. The book is part of a series of four books based on the First Steps strategy for linking assessment with teaching and learning. This book describes children's literacy behaviours as they learn how to spell. It makes explicit links between assessment and teaching strategies and offers practical suggestions for helping children at each phase of their spelling development.

The other titles in the series are based on the Oral Language, Reading, and Writing developmental continuum.