What I Wish I’d Known about Teaching Spelling

It’s a truism in our profession that even the best education programs can’t completely prepare first-year teachers for the reality of working with students every day. My experience as a high school English teacher was no exception. In addition to my naiveté about such issues as adolescents’ rate of homework completion, degree of sexual experience, and amount of time spent without supervision, I entered the classroom with little appreciation of how wide-ranging my students’ spelling achievements would be. My first semester of teaching made this range abundantly clear: Although some students’ errors were limited to minor issues such as a lot spelled as one word or necessary spelled with an extra c, other students’ writing demonstrated a multitude of spelling snafus. Many kids didn’t appear to have command of such conventions as when to double a consonant or drop an e, and some of their errors were downright offensive to the eye, juxtaposing letters that never appear next to each other in a correctly-spelled English word. I hadn’t anticipated such errors in students’ writing, but I certainly couldn’t ignore the frequency with which they cropped up—like dandelions on a well-kept lawn—in much of the written work I assigned.

And I wasn’t the only one who was aware of students’ spelling deficiencies; many kids identified these issues themselves. Their concerns often surfaced during the first week of school, when I administered a survey to my tenth graders about their preferences and experiences with reading and writing. Patterns emerged across each set of surveys, with 15 to 20 percent of the students in each class citing their poor spelling as a primary reason why they hated to or refused to write.

Unfortunately, I didn’t have much of a knowledge base from which to address this problem. As is the case with many English teachers, my education had been literature-heavy and writing-light. Although I did take one excellent class on the composing process during my preservice master’s program, only a single session was devoted to teaching surface features, with spelling covered fairly briefly under that umbrella. My own experiences weren’t much more helpful, as spelling had always come easily, almost magically, to me. Although I was reasonably certain that I hadn’t developed my skills from the lists I was given and the tests I took, I wasn’t sure what, beyond wide reading, had taught me to spell.

Frankly, I resented a little that I even had to worry about teaching spelling. After all, I had bigger issues to consider, such as helping my students to write compellingly argued position papers or to admire the elegantly-constructed chiasmi in Frederick Douglass’s Narrative. I did try to address spelling within the context of individual writing conferences, but this method seemed inefficient and time-consuming. More than once after a round of such meetings with students, I groused to myself (something I admit now with more than a twinge of guilt) that my kids’ spelling woes could have been easily solved if their previous teachers had just done their jobs better.

**Kelly Chandler**
All I Needed to Know about Spelling I Learned from Elementary Teachers

Fortunately for me, my collaboration with a group of teachers from Mapleton Elementary School in northern Maine helped me to deconstruct this fairly condescending attitude toward my lower-grade colleagues, as well as to realize that learning to spell well is a complicated process—one that extends beyond the purview of the elementary school and requires the explicit consideration of secondary teachers like me. Although it is certainly true that some students come to high school needing spelling remediation because of previous poor teaching, many students who made satisfactory K–5 or even K–8 progress still need their English teachers to understand spelling development and make explicit provision for its teaching. As students' writing and thinking become more complex, so do their spelling needs, and their teachers must be prepared to meet those needs.

Frankly, I resented a little that I even had to worry about teaching spelling.

My own acquisition of new knowledge about spelling was almost purely serendipitous, however. I did not intend to consider that topic at all when my partnership with the Mapleton research collective began. In 1996, a year after I left the secondary classroom to pursue a doctorate in literacy education, several Mapleton teachers who knew of my interest in reading and classroom-based inquiry invited me to be the facilitator of a schoolwide teacher-research group they were launching. With my help and the support of monthly afterschool meetings, teachers designed case studies of particular children and used the data they collected to explore more effective ways of teaching readers who struggle. Having achieved some success with these case studies, group members decided to tackle a second inquiry topic the following year. After a good deal of conversation about possibilities, they settled on spelling—an area of their teaching that they felt lagged behind their reading and writing instruction.

While my lack of expertise in this area gave me pause, I was intrigued by the group's collaborative process and agreed to remain as facilitator.

Over the next two years, from the fall of 1997 to the spring of 1999, members and I read and discussed professional literature about spelling while collecting and analyzing data on a schoolwide basis from surveys, observations, and writing samples. Teachers also gathered data to examine personally significant questions such as these: What happens when my first graders explore spelling patterns within the context of the morning message? What effect do weekly spelling meetings have on my fourth graders' awareness of spelling strategies?

The more progress we made as a group, the clearer it became that our work was also answering my set of personally significant questions—those that had nagged me about spelling when I worked with teenage writers. As I learned with and from my Mapleton colleagues, I also realized that many of the resources group members consulted and discussed were ones with which secondary teachers tended not to be familiar, making it more difficult for them to develop deep knowledge about teaching spelling. For these reasons, I discuss in the rest of this article the particular learnings about spelling instruction that I constructed in the context of elementary-focused research and reading but see as most relevant to and easily implemented by teachers of older students. It is my hope that others will benefit from hearing what I wish I had known about spelling during my earlier work with high school students.

Data-Driven Suggestions for Improving Spelling at the Secondary Level

Professional literature by Wilde, Laminack and Wood, Hughes and Searle, and Snowball and Bolton played a key role in developing my knowledge base about spelling, and I do recommend that other secondary teachers consider sampling resources originally written for an elementary audience. My most significant insights, however, came from the analysis of classroom-based data in the context of the schoolwide inquiry project. For this reason, I structure the rest of this article around the four data sources—observations, student surveys, student samples, and parent surveys—that primarily informed my collaboration with the Mapleton research group. I hope
this organization will underscore the data-driven nature of my suggestions, as well as encourage readers to collect similar kinds of information in their own classroom contexts. Those who do engage in this kind of inquiry (something I wish I’d done during my own secondary teaching) will undoubtedly be able to add their own sound contributions to the list of secondary-appropriate instructional activities that follow.

Please note that in advocating explicit attention to spelling in the secondary classroom, I am not suggesting that it become one of the paramount areas of focus. I’m keenly aware of the multiple responsibilities English teachers have in teaching reading, writing, literature, and information retrieval. Spelling, as the schoolwide belief statement we developed in the Mapleton research group (see Figure 1) indicates, is only one small part of the communicative process. Nonetheless, I do believe that a little bit of instruction—particularly when it is targeted at the right students and permits exploration in social contexts—can go a long way toward helping high school students become the kind of accurate and independent spellers that nearly all colleges and workplaces require.

Observations of Student Spellers at Work

When members of the Mapleton research group and I observed children at work and questioned them about their spelling strategies, we discovered that we had underestimated the degree of problem-solving required for children to integrate spelling into the writing process. Spelling required more than the memorization of a set of words, since every day that they wrote, students might be making one or more spelling-related decisions:

- How much time should I spend spelling this word? Am I going to get distracted from the flow of my writing if I stop?
- Do I need to invent a spelling for this word, or is it a “one-second word” (Wilde, Ten Tough Questions) that I could get right if I thought about it briefly?
- Am I going to need this word throughout my piece? Is it worth taking the time to get it right now, rather than having to do a lot of editing later?
- Have I ever seen this word in print before? If so, where? What other words might look like it?
- Should I try the word a couple of different ways, write the first letter followed by a dash, or look for it in a resource in the room?

We realized that determining the most efficient strategy for spelling a word required students to draw on knowledge from reading, to be aware of their surroundings, to use analogies, and to know themselves as writers. Most of the time, the decision-making process was implicit, under the surface of students’ minds rather than consciously reasoned, but that did not make it any less complex. And we also realized that the more often we could open up that process to students—to demonstrate how we made decisions ourselves as writers, to help them to reflect on what worked and didn’t work—the more flexible, efficient, and purposeful the children could be in their spelling. To help secondary students expand their repertoire of spelling strategies and make sound decisions about which strategies to use in particular contexts, I recommend the following teaching practices.

1. **Generate a class list of spelling strategies.**

Even though the members of the research group are competent adult spellers, we benefited from
brainstorming a collective list (Figure 2) of strategies we used to figure out spellings for unknown words. Each of us used at least a couple of different methods, but we were surprised to see how many other possibilities there were. Everyone in the group adopted at least one new option from the list, with “have a go”—another name for making multiple attempts and choosing the one that looks right—as the group’s clear-cut new favorite. (See Routman and Tobin for more detailed discussions of how to document these attempts over time for assessment and evaluation purposes.) Secondary teachers can use the same brainstorming process with their classes, thus enriching the classroom “gene pool” with strategies that might not be familiar to all students. Teachers who model some of the least familiar options in their own writing by using an overhead projector—or who invite students to do the same—can help to make these strategies more concrete and accessible.

2. Help students to monitor their own use of strategies.

While observing in research-group member Gail Gibson’s classroom, I noticed that fifth grader Christina DeFlores had been extremely successful in identifying and fixing the spelling errors from the first draft of a thank-you letter she wrote to a classroom speaker. In an informal conference, I asked Christina to talk to me about her thought processes as a speller. Using data from my notes, I made a key to her self-corrections (see Figure 3) that revealed a good deal about the resources, rules, and procedures Christina relied on to edit her work to correctness. Secondary teachers could adopt a variation of this

| Figure 3. |
| Key to Christina's Self-Corrections |
| 1) picture |
| Christina: “Picture was a spelling word a while back, so I sort of forgot it until I looked at it again.” |
| 2) prisoners |
| Kelly: “How did you know to change the i to an o?” |
| Christina: “Because o and i can make, like, the same kinds of sounds.” |
| 3) captured |
| Christina: “You know how c and k are tricky. They can sound the same. The one with the c looked more like it was spelled right.” |
| 4) write |
| Christina: “The r sounded before the i.” |
| 5) fought |
| Christina used two known words that sounded the same (got and thought) in her attempts, as well as the have-a-go strategy (writing the word four times until it looked right). |
| 6) interesting |
| Christina: “I sounded it out again, then looked it up in the dictionary. I found out I didn’t have the e’s right.” |
| 7) autograph |
| Christina used placeholder spelling with this word: “I knew it wasn’t right. I just wrote it that way until I could figure it out.” Then she split the compound word into its components: “I knew how to spell both parts.” |
assessment plan, as older learners would be capable of documenting their strategy use and self-corrections independently, without an adult-led conference. Requiring that portfolios include some specific documentation of students’ spelling attempts and self-corrections would send a clear message that spelling is important, as well as allow teachers and students to see growth over time as they examine artifacts together at the end of the school year.

Student Surveys

Early on in our study, members of the research group surveyed students about their attitudes toward and beliefs about spelling, using the following set of questions adapted from Wilde (You Can Read This): How do you feel about spelling? Do you like trying to figure out unknown words? When is it important to spell correctly? Each teacher summarized her class’s responses on a single sheet of paper so we could examine the data more easily for patterns. One of the trends that most interested us was students’ inability to answer Question Six, “Why do you think words are spelled the way they are?” Most students at all grade levels said they didn’t know, but those who did take a guess focused on letter-sound relationships or historical arbitrariness (“people just wanted to spell them that way,” or even “because God made them that way”). Most of my tenth graders could not have been more articulate about this question—a finding that I think has important implications for secondary teachers. Students who see spelling as arbitrary and whimsical are more likely to give up when faced with spelling challenges. Why should they try to problem-solve a conventional spelling when a word could contain nearly any letters, in any order? To counter this attitude and help students feel more in control of the spelling process, I recommend the following teaching practices.

1. Teach the four regular spelling rules to students who don’t already know them.

According to Wilde, one of the spelling researchers trusted most by Mapleton group members, the following four rules are regular enough to be taught: (1) ie/ei, (2) dropping e before suffixes, (3) changing y to i before suffixes, and (4) doubling consonants before suffixes. Many secondary students can already articulate these principles and/or apply them intuitively, but some of them can’t. For the latter, I recommend a discovery approach, where small groups consider numerous examples that follow the rule and then develop a generalization from the patterns they observe. As Snowball and Bolton put it, when spellers “are asked to use their own words to explain what they are learning, their knowledge is much more meaningful,” as well as more likely to transfer to their writing (12). Many poor spellers are comforted to learn that there are indeed some predictable patterns in English, and the number of errors they make could be substantially decreased if they applied these four rules consistently in their writing.

2. Explore patterns in the context of periodic spelling inquiry workshops.

According to Laminack and Wood, spelling inquiry workshops are regular times set aside for students to talk with each other and their teacher about spelling issues sparked by their reading and writing. Children prepare for such meetings by keeping track of words whose spellings were difficult for them or sparked their curiosity. When Mapleton research group member Kim Wright tried this approach with her fourth graders, she was able to use students’ contributions as springboards for considering a variety of spelling patterns. For example, when a student shared the word “exploration” because he noticed it in his social studies textbook and found the /shun/ sound at the end to be tricky to spell, Kim invited class members to generate a list of other words that ended with the same sound. As a result of their brainstorming, students discovered that words with that particular ending sound were spelled most often with -tion, sometimes with -sion, and least often with -cean, as in “ocean.” The lesson gave them reasonable choices to try in their spelling, making them less likely to have to invent spellings for words with that sound each time they encountered them. Secondary teachers might not need to schedule such workshops on a weekly basis, but periodic preparation for them can raise students’ awareness of spelling patterns as they read and write. Such workshops also offer students the chance to engage in collaborative talk around spelling—an approach that allows strong spellers as well as the teacher to scaffold their peers’ learning.

Student Samples

In the spring of 1998, everyone in the research group who taught grades one through five administered a common writing task prompting all students
to write about a special person in their lives. Having all of the children tackle the same topic allowed us to consider spelling trends at a particular level; for example, third grade teachers Jill Brown and Martha LaPointe collaborated to analyze both of their classes’ data and calibrate their expectations for students. As a schoolwide research group, we were also able to examine how children’s spellings changed as they progressed through the grades, and it was particularly helpful in this respect to chart how the spellings of common words such as because, friend, and favorite appeared in first through fifth grade writing.

We realized that determining the most efficient strategy for spelling a word required students to draw on knowledge from reading, to be aware of their surroundings, to use analogies, and to know themselves as writers.

Although we noticed a steady increase in the percentage of correctly-spelled words as writers gained more experience, we also noticed a less heartening trend. We were all familiar with Hughes and Searle’s argument that proficient spelling requires writers to use information from three sources: how a word sounds, how it looks on the page, and what it means. The writing samples, corroborated with data from conferences and observations, suggested that even Mapleton’s best fourth and fifth grade spellers rarely used word meanings as a way to figure out spellings for words. Instead, they relied far more often on sound, visual information, and resources such as the dictionary and spellchecker. Many secondary students have the same need to be taught meaning-based alternatives that their lower-grade counterparts did. To help students learn to employ all of the spelling logics available to them and therefore learn to spell more challenging words, I recommend the following teaching practices.

1. **Teach meaning-based strategies explicitly through mini-lessons.**

One of the most useful aspects of Hughes and Searle’s work is their developmental feature list, a collection of words designed to reveal the particular spelling conventions students control—and don’t control—at a particular point in their development. When I administered part of this list to a small group of fifth graders from Gail Gibson’s class, I learned a great deal about their ability to use word meaning as clues for spelling. Although all four of the students spelled both compete and invite correctly, they had much more difficulty spelling competition and invitation, two words whose second syllables cannot be encoded correctly on the basis of sound alone. When, in a mini-lesson, I asked the students to refer to their correct spellings of the verbs, two out of four immediately transferred that knowledge to the other context and self-corrected both of the longer and more difficult words. Mini-lessons on the role of prefixes, suffixes, and roots in spelling will help students learn to spell far more than the words in question, as students who learn from them will be able to use that knowledge in other writing contexts, and in some cases, other content areas.

2. **Have students keep lists of words they encounter that have similar spelling patterns but different pronunciations.**

Students who rely on sound and visual information as their primary logic in making spelling decisions have a difficult time with words such as sign, signature, and designate, words whose derivations are similar but whose pronunciations have evolved in different ways. (See Snowball and Bolton for a more extensive discussion of this issue.) Through brief, focused lessons, teachers can point out these patterns, present a historical context for why they exist, and invite students to chart additional examples over a specified period of time. Discussions of the words collected by the class can help kids connect what they know about spelling one word to a number of other words, as well as promote vocabulary development in an authentic way.
Parent Surveys

After several months of inquiry, my Mapleton colleagues and I realized that, while we often invoked the presence of parents in our research group discussions, we didn’t have much hard data about parents’ perceptions of spelling instruction. Consequently, we designed and sent home a brief survey featuring questions such as, How important do you feel spelling is? and How much time do you think should be spent on spelling in school? Several patterns were clear across the 124 surveys (representing about 84 percent of the total) that we received. Parents placed a high premium on spelling, with all of them circling numbers on the “important” or “extremely important” end of our continuum. Two-thirds of them wanted to see a separate grade for spelling on their child’s report card. About 90 percent of them felt that correct spelling was necessary all the time, even in less formal writing such as personal journals. Comments such as the following were common: “When you write something and it has misspelled words, it indicates to me that you are not very knowledgeable, so I don’t take your content as seriously as I would otherwise.” While members of the research group and I did not always agree with some parents’ beliefs that drill and repetition were the way to eradicate such errors, we had to admit, as we discussed the survey results, that we, too, made critical judgments about writers when their work was poorly edited.

These data suggest that many parents are not likely to be tolerant of writing instruction at any grade level that does not explicitly support students’ moving toward ever-increasing levels of spelling accuracy. They apparently see correct spelling as even more crucial for adolescents than younger children because many of the texts written by older students (e.g., job applications and college essays) are addressed to real-world audiences whose responses can have profound consequences for their future. To help students develop the personal accountability for spelling as well as the independent editing proficiency that parents expect, I recommend the following teaching practices.

1. Have students keep personal spelling dictionaries.

In reflecting on my previous teaching of spelling, I realized that one of the reasons my conferences were so ineffective was because I helped kids to spell words for a particular piece without having a mechanism for the student or me to monitor the use of those words in subsequent writing. Personal spelling dictionaries are one approach secondary teachers can use to hold kids accountable for what they learn in conferences, as well as to personalize the spelling curriculum for learners with different needs. By keeping a short alphabetized list of words they have struggled to spell, kids create their own quick, personalized references for writing. I would suggest being judicious in the use of such dictionaries, however. In my experience, students benefit the most from them when they inscribe only a small number of words, make sure those words are ones they are likely to need again as writers, and remove words from the list after they have mastered them.

2. Teach individual students how to isolate errors that they commonly make in their writing.

Mapleton students, particularly those in the upper grades, were often aware of their spelling demons. I frequently heard children say things like “I always mix its and it’s up” or “I can never remember if it’s i before e or e before i in friend.” Despite this awareness, it was often challenging for them to find these errors in their writing, especially when they were attending to a variety of other issues such as capitalization and punctuation. Teachers can help students become more independent in their editing by showing them how to scan their texts for one particular kind of error at a time. (Students might consult their spelling dictionaries for words that commonly give them trouble.) At the same time, secondary teachers might model such editing tips as reading their pieces backwards in order to focus attention on spelling rather than meaning. A change in font size or typeface can also be helpful in a final edit, since moving the words to different positions on the page, particularly words that are scanned quickly while the reader skips down to the next line of text, can call attention to errors that were previously overlooked.

Making a Commitment to Students like Seth

My experiences as a teacher and researcher in high schools suggest that English teachers evaluate students’ spelling fairly frequently. Rubrics for writing assignments often include a category for editing, and some teachers still use a grading procedure that results in split grades for a paper: one for content and
another for mechanics, including spelling. While I
object to the way the latter method divorces form
from content, I don’t oppose secondary teachers’
evaluation of spelling in and of itself. What does con-
cern me is the way that this evaluation is often sev-
ered from the rest of the teaching-learning cycle.
When we hold secondary students accountable for
poor spelling but do not provide any deliberate in-
struction regarding how to become better spellers,
we abdicate our absolutely essential responsibility
to help all the writers in our care move forward from
wherever they may be in their development.

The injustice of this situation was brought
home to me most clearly when one member of the
Mapleton research group suggested that I interview
her husband about spelling. “We’ve been talking a
lot lately about how we were taught spelling in
school,” she said, “and I think you’ll be interested in
what he has to say.” I listened with rapt attention for
nearly an hour as Seth, a college-educated profes-
sional who has held leadership positions in the mili-
tary and in his family-owned business, told me the
story of his struggles with spelling. Although he
had been read to regularly as a child by his teacher-
mother, spelling had always seemed frustratingly ar-
bitrary to him. He studied his twenty-word lists,
earned high marks on Friday tests, and promptly for-
got all that he had temporarily crammed into his
head about those words. During his sophomore year
in college, his English instructor had a policy that any
spelling errors in students’ papers would result in an
automatic lowering of their grade by 25 percent. Ac-
cording to Seth, “When she said that, I knew I was
already down to a C. I was a wreck.” Determined to
save his grade, he developed a time-consuming edit-
ing strategy: “I couldn’t pick up on any errors on my
own, so I had to go through every word and look it
up in the dictionary before I turned a paper in. I
ended up spending all my time on spelling, and the
writing was kind of on the back burner.” As an adult,
Seth relies on a combination of spellchecking and
peer response to correct his spelling; he is still reti-
cent to share any first-draft texts with an audience.

I’ll admit that Seth’s story is an unusual one. Most
students would probably resign themselves to
low grades rather than stay up all night checking
their spelling word by word. And most students have
developed a better sense of when words look right
than Seth apparently did. But I don’t think this story
is anomalous. In my classes at Noble High School,
there were certainly Seths—students whose fear of
and lack of control over spelling nearly paralyzed
them when they needed to express themselves. Nor
do I think that Seth’s experience in his college writ-
ing class is an anachronism from the “bad old days”
before process writing advocates such as Graves,
Calkins, and Atwell showed teachers the light. While
the work of these researchers has had a profound
impact on the way many teachers at all grade levels
approach writing, there are still plenty of people in
high schools and colleges who see holding the line
against spelling errors as a way to stem what they
perceive as the tide of carelessness and laziness in
our culture. My interview with Seth, more than any
other data from nearly two years of research, helped
me to challenge this assumption.

When we hold secondary students
accountable for poor spelling
but do not provide any deliberate
instruction regarding how to
become better spellers, we
abdicate our absolutely essential
responsibility to help all the
writers in our care move
forward from wherever they
may be in their development.

It’s unlikely that I could have helped Seth
master spelling completely had he been my student
and had I used some of the teaching approaches I’ve
described here. Some individuals do appear to have
natural gifts lacked by others that allow them to see
words in their minds, learn new words almost ef-
fortlessly from reading, and extrapolate a pattern
from one word to another. None of these things
came easily to Seth. I have no doubt, however, that
he could have been taught less arduous ways to edit his work. Sensitive, contextualized instruction, even near the end of his K–12 schooling, might well have helped him to organize the chaos that was in his brain regarding the spelling system.

As secondary educator Janet Allen reminds us, it’s never too late to help adolescents come to new understandings about literacy. Those of us who work with teenage writers can still make an enormous difference in students’ abilities to construct understandings about spelling and how it works. Hughes and Searle, whose longitudinal study of Canadian spellers spanned more than eight years, might even argue that high school is an excellent time for explicit attention to spelling. According to these researchers, conventional wisdom about the timing for spelling instruction may not make sense, given what we know about cognitive and language development:

. . . as the children move into higher grades there is less opportunity to read and write in the engaged way that appears to support spelling and less opportunity for systematic language exploration. Spelling instruction tends to become much more focused on correcting and rewriting text. Ironically, this focus may come just at a time when many children are better able to handle approaches that encourage explicit analysis and generalization. If spelling is indeed a priority, and something we wish to do more than complain about, we have to recognize its complexity and give it a more developmental time throughout a child’s years at school. (184)

Having been one of the “complainers” during my tenure in the secondary classroom, I appreciate the complexity of the issues that can keep high school teachers from addressing spelling. Having been one of the inquirers in the Mapleton teacher-research group, I know it’s well worth it for all of us to do so.

Works Cited


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