What teachers need to know about Spelling
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Teacher – trying to spell is simply crazy –
With rules that are fuzzy and logic that’s hazy.

Teacher – why doesn’t s-e-d spell said,
When b-e-d spells bed and r-e-d spells red?

Preface

Spelling is not taught effectively in many schools. An enormous gap exists between current research knowledge about spelling and contemporary classroom practice. Studies in the past two decades have revealed much about the normal development of spelling ability and how students can be helped most effectively to become proficient spellers. Research has also explored the many causes of spelling difficulty and disability. Unfortunately, many teachers remain ignorant of much of this information because the topic of spelling rarely features in any significant way in pre-service and in-service teacher education programs. When it does gain a mention it is usually dealt with from a discredited whole-language perspective that favours informality rather than direct instruction.

As I indicate in several places in this book, teachers remain confused about their role in relation to spelling instruction; and they often leave students’ spelling skills to develop incidentally. Teachers’ own knowledge of spelling principles and spelling strategies is often lacking in depth, so they are uncertain precisely what needs to be taught and how to teach it, even if they have the desire to give spelling greater prominence in their literacy program.

This book attempts to bridge the gap between knowledge that has accumulated from research on spelling acquisition and the practicalities of teaching spelling more effectively in schools. I have devoted some attention to current trends and community views on the importance (or otherwise) of spelling standards because this provides the context in which change is now beginning to occur, partly as a result of a call for greater accountability for students’ educational progress.

I have addressed developmental aspects of spelling, together with the need to teach students effective strategies for analysing and encoding words. Practical suggestions have been included for methods and activities that are applicable for all students, and this is supplemented by specific
advice on assessment of spelling and helping weaker spellers. Links to other sources of information are provided in each chapter and additional material appears in the appendices. This book presents a concise summary of what teachers need to know about students’ spelling, and how best to support its development.

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PETER WESTWOOD
Where is spelling on the literacy agenda?

KEY ISSUES

- Public interest in spelling standards remains very strong.
- Parents are concerned that schools do not seem to take a sufficiently active role in teaching children to spell.
- Official views have swung back in favour of systematic instruction.
- Guidelines and policies have been developed; but teachers remain uncertain about how best to teach spelling.
- There is little evidence that teacher education courses are providing beginning teachers with adequate guidance on instructional methods for spelling.

After many years of almost total neglect, the teaching of spelling is now receiving more attention in curriculum policy and assessment documents, in the media, and in educational research. Several writers have observed that for the previous 30 years the education system increasingly de-emphasised formal spelling instruction in schools in favour of an incidental approach to learning (e.g., Egan & van Gorder, 1998; Foorman et al., 2006; Griffiths, 2004; Wallace, 2006). This trend had left teachers of literacy confused about their precise role in relation to students’ spelling development (Bryan, 2003; Fresch, 2007; Johnson, 2001; Kervin & McKenzie, 2005; Louden & Rohl, 2006). For example, teachers wonder if they should devote specific time and attention to teaching spelling in a systematic manner, or should they
deal with spelling only through corrective feedback on students’ written work? If they are to adopt a systematic approach, what corpus of words should they attempt to teach and how should they attempt to teach the words? Should they encourage memorisation of spelling patterns or should they teach students to apply particular strategies for learning and remembering words? Should they encourage students to invent the spelling of words they wish to use rather than worrying about accuracy? Are spelling lists useful? What purpose is served by regularly testing students’ spelling? These, and many other issues, still appear to cause teachers some degree of anxiety (Kervin & McKenzie, 2005; Templeton & Morris, 1999).

**Public interest in spelling**

Naturally, spelling is a topic that attracts interest among the general public. Vedora and Stromer (2007, p. 489) observe that, ‘Spelling is a vital part of the educational process because learning to read, write, spell and express one’s thoughts accurately in writing is essential for a literate society’.

It is often felt (rightly or wrongly) that the standard of an individual’s spelling is some indication of his or her intelligence, ability and level of education. Employers expect their employees to be able to spell if their job calls for communication in writing. Entry to tertiary courses of study frequently calls for written application and often a supplementary written test. The standard of an applicant’s spelling is one factor that could influence any decision made by a selection panel. Even writing letters and emails to friends can be a source of embarrassment if they contain glaring errors that are later identified. As Templeton and Morris (1999, p. 102) remark, ‘Spelling is so visible, so obvious, that it often assumes the role of a proxy for literacy and in that role is bound to generate controversy’.

Parents represent one group with very strong views about spelling. They expect schools to regard accurate spelling as important, and to develop their children’s spelling proficiency. They become worried, for example, when their children take written work home from school containing ‘invented’ spelling and no evidence that the teacher has provided guidance or corrections. Teachers probably spend much time and effort trying to convince parents that allowing young children to invent the spelling of words they wanted to use will not cause long-term problems (Kolodziej & Columba, 2005). Many parents remain unconvinced.
Parents’ concern seemed justified in 1994 when a study in South Australia revealed a significant decline in primary school students’ spelling standards since 1978 – covering a period in the 1980s and early 1990s in which whole-language philosophy permeated almost all classroom literacy practices in that state (Westwood, 1994). When the results were released, public interest was very great indeed, with regular features and letters to the editor in the press, and interviews on television. To provide some evidence of this public concern, condensed extracts from two typical letters to the editor of the Adelaide daily newspaper The Advertiser of 12 April 1994 are presented here:

Are children being encouraged to invent their spelling and then left to discover the correct spelling later? To encourage young children to use and spell experimentally words within their vocabulary but outside their spelling range is sound practice but surely there should be a stage in their education when formal grammar and spelling lessons are introduced to discipline their earlier freedom. Our language is too precious, too precise, too flexible, too elegant, to be left to casual instruction.

D.B., Eden Hills

[Good practice] should be that when a child is learning to read and write at primary school level that the student is taught to do this correctly from the beginning. The idea that ‘don’t worry about the spelling, this will come later’ does not work for all the children and the inability to spell can reflect in lack of reading skills also. Hence, by high school age, some students are still not able to read and write to a satisfactory standard, and without these skills other subjects are jeopardised.

D.W., Parent Liaison, Salisbury High School

Of course, advocates and disciples of whole language hit back. For example, in the same issue of The Advertiser (12 April 1994) a university language arts lecturer criticised the research findings, saying:

First, the survey itself takes spelling out of the context in which it matters – writing. Second, children’s spelling achievement is seen as indicative of literacy standards. We all know that there is a lot more to being literate than spelling correctly! Third, tenuous and unsubstantiated connections are drawn between current teaching methodologies and spelling results as
measured in a test … [and] the invidious idea that the instantaneous correct spelling of words should be the goal of schooling is reinforced. While this is a useful skill, the ability to recognise errors in writing and to correct them with a dictionary is eminently preferable.

It is not surprising that spelling instruction has been noted as a flashpoint in the heated debates over the merits of whole-language-oriented teaching and more structured approaches (Templeton & Morris, 1999). The so-called ‘reading wars’ between exponents of opposing philosophies actually includes battles and skirmishes related specifically to spelling instruction.

Perhaps it is important to explain at this point that in the early 1980s teachers in South Australia had been greatly influenced by the in-service professional training program known as ELIC (Early Literacy In-service Course). During that time, as a result of advice disseminated through ELIC, there was a very rapid reduction in the amount of time teachers devoted to the explicit teaching of spelling and phonics. Instead, these component skills were to be taught only in context; in other words, spelling was to be addressed as an integral part of the writing process. Whole-language principles dictated that decontextualised instruction of component skills is undesirable. It was firmly believed that students would become proficient spellers in a ‘natural’ way if they simply had the opportunity to write every day about meaningful topics and received corrective feedback from their teachers.

The notion of ‘natural learning’ is attractive, but Graham (2000) has argued strongly that this approach, if used alone, is inadequate for effective spelling development. The data from the South Australian study appear to support this view, particularly since a follow-up study in 2004 showed an improvement in spelling standards when whole-language teaching gave way in the late 1990s to a more balanced approach that embodied some explicit teaching (Westwood & Bissaker, 2005).

**Government initiatives**

During the 1990s, growing concern was expressed that too many students in Australia (for example, almost 30 per cent of students in Years 3 and 5) were not achieving adequate levels of literacy (Commonwealth of Australia, 1997; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment
Education and Training, 1992) and that teachers were not being adequately trained to teach a full range of reading, writing and spelling skills in a systematic way. In 1997 the Education Ministers in the various states and territories agreed that one basic goal for primary education must be that every child leaving primary school should be numerate, and able to read, write and spell at an appropriate level (MCEETYA, 1997). The National Literacy Plan emerged, and the Benchmarks for Literacy were introduced in 2000, specifying clearly the standards to be expected of students in Year 3, Year 5 and Year 7 (Curriculum Corporation, 2000). The introduction of benchmarks saw spelling once again given the recognition it deserves, rather than being subsumed under the more general skill area of 'writing'.

The benchmarks, although not popular with some educators, have given a sense of direction for spelling instruction that was rather lacking in previous curriculum guidelines such as English: A curriculum profile for Australian schools (Curriculum Corporation, 1994). It was not until official documents began to specify in some detail the spelling skills and standards that students should display that spelling returned to the literacy agenda. To reinforce this, regular national testing of standards in spelling, grammar and punctuation for students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 commenced in 2008.

In the United Kingdom, where whole language had also been the recommended approach to literacy teaching, concern was also being expressed about standards. The outcome was the formulation of the National Literacy Strategy that has had a direct and positive influence on classroom practice in recent years. The importance of explicit teaching of spelling in schools is strongly reinforced in the renewed Primary Framework (DES, 2006) in which spelling is identified as one of the 12 key strands of learning. There is an emphasis now on daily ‘word study’ and spelling within the ‘literacy hour’; and the teaching of phonic knowledge (which underpins basic spelling ability) has become respectable again.

Reports in the United States of America, the United Kingdom and Australia calling for the use of research-based instructional methods for the teaching of basic academic skills have also had a potentially beneficial spin-off for strengthening instruction in spelling as well as reading and phonics (Ellis, 2005; House of Commons Education and Skills Committee, UK, 2005; National Reading Panel, US, 2000; Rose, 2005). These reports have reinforced the importance of direct teaching of essential literacy skills, particularly in the early stages of acquisition.
It would be folly, of course, to suppose that these documents have had any real impact yet on the thinking and practices of those teachers and teacher educators who remain ardent believers in ‘whole language’ and ‘natural learning’. Nor can we assume that teacher educators have suddenly started including coverage of direct teaching approaches or instructional methods for spelling in their language arts methodology courses; that would be too much to hope for. The situation in pre-service teacher education is still much the same now as the one Bryan (2003, p. 14) remembers. She recalls, ‘When I began teaching in 1991, spelling seemed to be a four-letter word. Spelling was an area almost untouched during my years [of teacher education] at university. I had no idea how to go about teaching students to learn to spell’.

Public interest in spelling was aroused again when *The Australian* carried a report indicating that ‘Singapore kids spell better than Aussies’ (Ferrari, 2006). It had been found that in a writing test conducted with large samples of students in both countries that about nine times more students in Singapore were able to spell less-common and irregular English words, compared to students in Australia. This is particularly impressive because about half the students in Singapore learn English as a second language. The conclusion was that Singaporean students’ success was due to the use of direct and explicit instruction in schools. In a follow-up article in the *Weekend Australian*, Wheeldon (2006, p. 21) remarked: ‘These results cannot be a surprise since we stopped serious teaching of spelling, grammar and sentence construction decades ago … If you want good spelling and grammar, find someone over 55’. She commented also that ‘a failure to teach spelling is a failure of duty of care’.

**Current situation**

Perhaps the most significant change since the 1990s can be seen in the fact that it is now respectable again to speak of teaching spelling, as opposed to arguing against such teaching. The growing body of research data clearly indicates that students become better spellers if learning is not left to chance (e.g., Canado, 2006; DuBois et al., 2007; Foorman et al., 2006; Strattman & Hodson, 2005). In particular, students with learning difficulties benefit greatly from direct instruction that helps them under-
stand and apply the principles underpinning the construction of words in the English language (Frank, 2007; Joseph & Orlins, 2005; Vedora & Stromer, 2007). Of course, it is not a matter of replacing the use of students’ own writing as a source of instruction, but rather of supplementing this contextualised teaching with a more structured approach to word study. As with all areas of literacy teaching, it is a matter of achieving the appropriate balance between whole-language student-centred principles and the direct teaching and practice that is necessary to establish essential skills (Egan & van Gorder, 1998).

Now that spelling is back on the agenda, most education authorities are providing guidelines for teachers (e.g., DECS, SA, 1997; DET, NSW, 1998; DE, Tas., 2007a) and for parents (e.g., Board of Studies, NSW, 2007). In most cases these guidelines are necessary in order to compensate for the fact that many teachers trained in the years between 1980 and 2000 received little or no guidance on how to teach spelling. Even today we cannot be sure that there has been much change in this respect within university departments of methodology and teaching practice. A single lecture or workshop session on the topic of spelling is totally inadequate for equipping teachers with the depth of required information and practical skills. Where teachers are gaining most professional benefit seems to be in schools where they have established a whole-school policy on the teaching of spelling and where teachers support one another in terms of acquiring new skills and understandings (Egan & van Gorder, 1998; Kervin & McKenzie, 2005).

It is not only in the area of policy and curriculum guidelines that growth occurred after the 1990s. The period between 1990 and 2007 saw a very significant increase in the number of well-designed research studies that explored aspects of spelling acquisition and the effectiveness of different methods of instruction (summarised in Schlagal, 2002; and Westwood, 2008). Several of these studies focused on spelling in alphabetic languages other than English (e.g., Cardoso-Martins et al., 2006; Rahbari et al., 2007) or on children learning English as a second or additional language (e.g., Lam & Westwood, 2006; Lipka & Siegel, 2007). Virtually all of these studies provide evidence that learning to spell is not a ‘natural’ process but rather a complex task involving many different perceptual, cognitive and linguistic skills. In the following chapters relevant information from some of this research is interpreted in practical terms.
Teachers’ expertise

To be an effective teacher of spelling, one must have a genuine interest in words, their origin, meaning and construction, and must also have an understanding of the phonological, orthographic and morphographic principles and rules that govern English spelling. In particular, it is important that teachers also recognise and can articulate the various strategies that a speller can use when faced with spelling an unfamiliar word.

It cannot be denied that teachers’ own knowledge of these concepts, principles and strategies, and of grammar as a whole, is often deficient (Hurry et al., 2005; Moats, 1994). For example, in the United States of America, Bos et al. (2001) discovered that many pre-service and serving teachers were ignorant of even basic principles of word structure such as the number of phonemes contained in a word like ‘grass’, or the second sound in the word ‘queen’. A similar lack of knowledge, even related to syllables and basic phonics, was revealed in a study of pre-service teachers in Australia (Meehan & Hammond, 2006).

It is also reported that many teachers are also unaware of the developmental aspects of spelling and therefore do not really know what standard of accuracy they should be expecting from students at different ages (Johnson, 2001; Schlagal, 2001). As a result, even when they do feel that they should do something positive about spelling, they are likely to resort to the use of word lists and memorisation rather than teaching spelling as a thinking process (Fresch, 2007; Johnson, 2001). Although spelling lists exist that are developmentally appropriate and can be helpful in fostering spelling development, most lists are not of that type and their use is often counterproductive (Manning & Underbakke, 2005). More will be said about lists in a later chapter.

Finally, many teachers appear not to be fully aware of the various factors that can cause some students to have difficulties learning to spell. They are uncertain how to determine the instructional needs of weaker spellers and how to tailor their teaching to meet those needs.

Given these weaknesses in many teachers’ content knowledge in relation to spelling, it is not surprising that spelling is not well taught, even though it is firmly back on the literacy agenda. The following chapters are intended to provide teachers with a better understanding of the main theoretical issues and practical approaches involved in teaching students to spell.

Examples of spelling benchmarks for Year 3 and Year 5 online at QCA website for International Review of Curriculum and Assessment (INCA) at: http://www.inca.org.uk/australia-appendix-mainstream.html See also: http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/school_education/policy_initiatives_reviews/key_issues/literacy_numeracy/national_literacy_and_numeracy_benchmarks.htm

A discussion of standards in spelling is provided by Jennifer Chew (1999) online at: http://www.spellingsociety.org/journals/j25/chew.php

A list of ten false assumptions about teaching spelling, compiled by Richard Gentry, provides an excellent discussion starter for school staff meetings and for teachers in the English Department. It can be found online at: http://jrichardgentry.com/text/ten_false_assumptions.pdf