Spelling: a retrospective look at past research and practices

Peter Westwood explains that we have learnt a lot about spelling over the last hundred years and teaching needs to more consistently put into practice the methods that have been shown to work.
Spelling has been a popular focus of attention for researchers over many generations. Some of this attention has been directed to studying students who find spelling an extremely difficult skill to master. This short article provides a brief overview of some of the past research and teaching practices with due reference to the attitude towards learning and teaching that prevailed at particular times.

Earliest studies

The earliest published work that I can locate that specifically addresses spelling is a paper by Wyckoff (1892) with the title Constitutional Bad Spellers. It may represent the first serious consideration given to students who had a learning disability affecting their encoding of words. This was the same time period when attention in Germany and the UK (and later in Scandinavia) was being given to a phenomenon that was at first termed 'word blindness'. This disability affected a small number of extremely poor readers of normal intelligence and who were free from any sensory impairment (Henshawwood, 1895; Kussmaul, 1877; Morgan, 1896). We refer to this condition now as 'dyslexia' or 'reading disability'. All these students with very poor reading skills were found also to be extremely weak spellers; and Carman (1900) believed that their problem was due to 'poor observation of small details of words in print'. This obsession with visual perception as the key to spelling ability has continued even up to today, both in the teaching practices we use and in the focus of much of the research (Westwood, 2015). In the beginning, poor auditory skills and lack of phonetic knowledge were relatively overlooked as contributory factors in spelling difficulties.

The early part of the twentieth century was a very active time for research into spelling. Excellent reviews of this period can be found in Gruppe (1913) and Hollingsworth (1918). It was an era when there was no doubt in educators' minds that spelling was a skill that needed to be taught, not left to incidental learning. Time was allocated in most primary school timetables for spelling instruction; and there was a clear expectation that students would work hard to become competent spellers. Efforts were made to develop materials such as graded word lists and 'word families' that could be used by teachers to develop students' spelling ability and test their progress over time (e.g., Ayres, 1915; Starch, 1915). Handbooks also appeared in print giving practical guidance on how to teach spelling (e.g., Tidyman, 1919). Unfortunately, rote learning and memorisation remained the principal methods of learning to spell.

Among the writers and researchers with greatest impact on classroom practice at that time was Grace Fernald. She produced the Teachers' Manual of Spelling in 1918, based on her own teaching experience. Fernald's little book is amazing in that she was addressing what are still current matters of interest, namely visual and auditory perception, visual imagery and memory, the learning of phonetic and non-phonetic words, and how best to develop automatically (which she called 'spelling habit formation'). It is interesting to note that the opening sentence in Fernald's 1918 manual is: 'The complaint is very common that the present age is one of poor spellers'. Perhaps nothing changes in 100 years, given the concern today over declining spelling standards of school students and university graduates in the US, Australia and Britain (ACARA, 2017; Elliott et al., 2016; Meeks, Kemp & Stephenson, 2014; Paton, 2012; Queen's English Society, 2018).

The same year that Fernald published her manual, Hollingsworth was producing a monograph titled the Psychology of Special Disability in Spelling (1918), drawing on the information that was becoming increasingly available on the topics of 'word-blindness' and 'alexia'. Hollingsworth's book is available to be read online by entering the title at: www.hathitrust.org

In the United States in the 1920s, Gates was writing about the development of spelling ability in his volume The Psychology of Reading and Spelling (Gates, 1922). Looking at that book now, it seems that he placed too much emphasis on visual memory as the principal influence on the ability to spell. His section on 'how to learn to spell a word' describes exactly what amounts to the popular 'look-say-cover-write-check' method, although he does not refer to it by that name.

The late educational psychologist Sir Cyril Burt has been discredited for his work on twin studies in the UK, but his earlier work on basic academic skills was very sound. He referred to 'reading, spelling and arithmetic' as the most important subjects to be taught in the primary school curriculum. Burt was the first to provide classroom tests that can yield what he termed 'spelling ages'; and he was convinced that two simple tests used together (spelling and mental arithmetic) were highly sensitive for detecting students described in those days as 'backward' or 'innately dull' — we prefer to say 'students with learning difficulties'. One of his most widely used publications at the time was Mental and Scholastic Tests (Burt, 1921) containing well-designed assessments for spelling.

Burt's interest in spelling went beyond testing. He also made recommendations concerning teaching approaches for students who were poor spellers. For example, he suggested that learners who had difficulty detecting sounds within spoken words should be taught by a visual approach (e.g., flashcards). However, if a student was weak in visual memory he or she should instead engage in word building with letter cards to become familiar with letter sequences and spelling patterns. More recent research has questioned the validity of this simplistic 'modality matching' approach in remedial teaching (Kavale & Forness, 1987; Willingham, 2005). Current research suggests that rather than trying to bypass a so-called weaker modality we need instead to integrate both auditory and visual perception in the teaching of spelling. In particular, activities to improve phonemic awareness and phonetic skills should accompany activities such as flashcard recognition and repeated writing as an aid to spelling. During Burt's time, the importance of training phonemic awareness (detecting the separate sounds that make up spoken words) for reading and spelling had not been explored — that did not occur until research in the 1980s (e.g., Bradley & Bryant, 1983).

Through the 1930s into the 1950s, attitudes in schools were still
positive towards the teaching of spelling as an important literacy skill. In 1951 it was written "Every good teacher is eager to help pupils spell better so that they will not be handicapped when they need to write. Accuracy in written communication is a serious matter" (Hildreth, 1951, p.245).

In those years, teachers in the US were relying on advice from books such as Teaching Spelling (Hildreth, 1955), an important text because it acknowledges the role of phonics in attempting to spell unfamiliar words. Teachers in the UK and Australia came to rely on guidance from materials authored by Schonell (1932; 1942). I recall being given a copy of his Essentials of Teaching and Testing Spelling when I took up my first teaching position in a primary school in 1959. I was told to give my students a set number of words to learn each week and to test their spelling regularly. I did as I was told.

**Spelling instruction falls out of favour**

Then came the 1960s. This was the beginning of the period in which creative writing became the ultimate goal in literacy education. Teachers were encouraged to believe that spelling ability would develop incidentally when students wrote freely every day about exciting topics, and when they were encouraged to invent the spelling of any words they wished to use. The idea that spelling should be taught as a separate skill was frowned upon, much in the same way that teaching phonics was frowned upon later during the reign of the whole-language approach. The 1960s also saw look-and-say whole word recognition emerge as the main way that reading was to be taught in primary schools. Phonics teaching became much less popular, although some teachers held the good sense to continue using the method.

In the late 1960s, Peters explored the weaknesses in the argument that spelling is caught not taught (Peters, 1967). Her conclusion was that spelling does indeed need to be taught. However, she continued with the belief that visual perception and visual memory (together with an easy style of handwriting) contribute most in learning to spell. She felt that the key was to train children to attend closely to commonly occurring letter sequences that are found within many different words. She favoured teaching strategies such as look-cover-write-check to increase visual imagery of word forms.

**Remedial teaching took a wrong turn**

While mainstream education in the 1960s and 1970s was undervaluing the direct teaching of phonics and spelling skills, remedial and special education headed off in any entirely different direction anyway, believing that poor spelling and reading may be due to deficits in underlying processes, such as faulty visual discrimination, confusion over right and left, and inefficient eye tracking. This belief led to the introduction of "ability training" programs such as the Frostig Visual-Perceptual Training Program (Frostig & Horne, 1964). This program aimed to improve processes that were believed to underpin reading and writing by providing worksheets that claimed to improve hand-eye coordination, figure ground discrimination, form constancy, and spatial relationships. Despite the brief popularity of this program in the US, research by Jacobs (1968), Friesen (1969) and others could find no supportive evidence of its efficacy. The activities are too far removed from working with words to have any effect on children’s spelling or reading ability—even though they may get better at completing the worksheets. Meta-analysis of data from studies of perceptual training programs usually yields negligible effect sizes (Hattie & Yates, 2014).

**A glimmer of light**

The introduction of a program first titled Morphographic Spelling (Dixon, 1976) and later renamed Spelling through Morphographs (Dixon & Englemann, 2007) was a serious attempt to swim against the tide of incidental learning. This direct instruction program was designed to teach spelling to 4th Grade and older students by focusing on mastery of root words, prefixes and suffixes. Many features of the program adopt a behavioural teaching approach, with modelling of responses, guided practice, reinforcement and corrective feedback. The approach was utterly shunned by mainstream disciples of creative writing, who were always appalled by any notion of direct teaching that focused on a single skill. This morphographic approach was (and still is) used mainly in remedial education settings. For a thorough review of direct instruction approaches for spelling see Hamperstall (2015).

It is pertinent to note that the inclusion of morphology (the study of small units of meaning within words) in spelling and reading programs is now regarded as cutting-edge pedagogy (e.g., Crosson & Moore, 2017; Hammond, 2017; IDA, 2017; Zoski & Erickson, 2017), so Morphographic Spelling was thus ahead of its time.

**Whole-language was far from whole**

The 1980s and 1990s saw schools in the US, Britain and Australia adopting the whole-language approach for literacy teaching. This grew out of the creative writing movement together with the growing influence from constructivist theories of learning. In whole-language approaches, specific skills such as spelling and phonics decoding were not to be a main focus of instruction; instead it was believed that the emphasis should be on reading for meaning and writing for real purposes. Students were encouraged to guess words in their reading and to invent the spelling of any word they wanted to use when writing. Their teachers were not expected to mark written work too harshly lest this crush imagination and creativity. Practice exercises for spelling were taboo. One of the main arguments from the disciples of whole-language approaches was that English spelling is so unpredictable that it is useless to try to spell words by attending to their component sounds. This is nonsense, because at least 80 per cent of words can be written correctly or almost correctly by using sound-to-letter correspondences. This percentage increases significantly if a speller also knows a wide range of commonly occurring letter groups (orthographic units) that represent pronounceable parts of words, such as -ing, -ous, un-, -tch, -nk, -sk, -str, -ight.

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Some educators argue that the whole-language approach did not have a negative impact on students’ spelling standards because they learned to spell by writing every day; but the evidence suggests otherwise (Westwood & Bissaker, 2005). For example, testing...
of a large number of students in South Australia found a decline in spelling standards between 1978 and 1993, particularly in the primary school years. And by 2004, average spelling standards had not returned to the level of 1978. It is unlikely to be coincidental that South Australia embraced whole-language most enthusiastically in the period from 1980 to 1999, and the teaching of phonics and spelling was well and truly put on the back burner.

**Input from cognitive psychology**

In the 1980s and 1990s, researchers who were far removed from whole-language ideology were discovering that students’ reading comprehension, writing skills and spelling could be improved significantly if they were explicitly taught to use strategies for approaching these tasks systematically (e.g., Cole & Chan, 1990; Lyndon, 1989; Zutell, 1979). For example, when students are given words to learn they also need to be taught to examine each word and decide whether it can be written correctly by ‘spelling it as it sounds’, or whether it is non-phonetic and needs to be mastered by strategies such as look-cover-write-check or repeated writing. The use of cognitive strategy training is now strongly recommended and has gained acceptance in many classrooms since the 1990s (Davis, 2013; Hepplewhite, 2008; Tompkins, 10; Woodwood, 2014). The approach can be regarded as ‘teaching spelling as a thinking process’.

**Current developments**

It is a very positive sign that the revised National Curriculum in the UK, the modified Australian Curriculum, and the Common Core State Standards in the US have all strengthened the amount of attention given to phonics, word knowledge and spelling. Research has strongly supported a view that phonics knowledge does contribute greatly to the development of independent spelling ability, as well as strengthening reading skills — but some schools are still doing far too little teaching of decoding and encoding. Quigley (2016) has rightly suggested that all schools need to conduct an audit to determine just how consistently spelling is being taught at each year level. I suggest that it is equally important to discover how much coverage of methodology for teaching spelling is being provided for trainee teachers in our pre-service teacher education courses. I suspect it is little or none.

Coupled with this renewed attention to phonics, research has also discovered the benefits of introducing ‘word study’ to help reveal connections between phonological, morphological and orthographic structures within words (Bowers & Bowers, 2017; Crosson & Moore, 2017; Gray, Ehri & Lecke, 2018). The current view is that children acquire the ability to spell on the basis of their increasing phonological, linguistic and semantic knowledge, as well as from very frequent exposure to words in print (Treiman, 2017). Explicit teaching methods are most effective for addressing and integrating these areas of knowledge.

**Research has strongly supported a view that phonics knowledge does contribute greatly to the development of independent spelling ability**

Finally, recent research has continued to investigate the effects that digital technology (including spell-checkers) is having on the spelling ability of students. Elliott et al. (2016) have reviewed the literature in this area and conclude that to date there is no clear evidence of negative effects. Rather than proving to be detrimental to spelling, technology has given us useful programs and apps that can be used by students for learning to spell (Ecalle et al., 2009; Heitzon & Sniereber, 2004; Kest et al., 2011; Wu & Zhang, 2010).

Peter Westwood is a retired academic who now freelances as an education writer and editor. He is widely published in the field of education with his best-selling text Commonsense Methods for Children with Special Needs (Routledge) now in its 7th edition. Routledge also publishes his book Teaching Spelling: Exploring commonsense strategies and best practices. Peter is a Life Member of Learning Difficulties Australia.

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Activities for Practising Spelling – Toxic to Helpful

Based on many years researching and practising spelling activities with struggling students, Lyn Stone’s forthright suggestions about what really works, and maybe more importantly what doesn’t, will provoke lively debate amongst those trying to help children to become better spellers.

Fölquent, accurate writing is an apex activity. It is one of the most complicated things a person can do. It requires the creation and use of brain structures available only to humans, years of practice, and, if it is to be done well by all, it requires skilled teaching from the outset. Within the set of skills needed for writing fluency, there is spelling, often not given its full due because it is regarded as a lower-order or mechanical skill. When students do not learn spelling easily, however, the difficulty forms a bottleneck that often limits the expression of higher-order writing skills. The teaching challenge involved in helping these students to improve their spelling is, in turn, surprisingly demanding. English spelling presents a host of challenges to both students and teachers. It is a very complex system, and is essentially multi-layered, reflecting intricate, context-dependent patterns of sound-letter correspondeces and meaning-related considerations, as well as reflecting the history of English borrowings from other languages. Many teachers are not confident about teaching spelling, and unfortunately, spelling practice may well be the greatest victim of wasted opportunity in literacy instruction. The number of “spelling activities” available that do nothing to increase spelling ability is astounding.

This article is about practising spelling, rather than about choosing words to be taught or helping students to understand the meaning and phonemic and morphemic structure of the words.

The Spelling Activities Scale, below, is based on a collection I have made over the years of homework sheets that have been given to my children. I then placed them on a scale of merit, ranging from toxic, through useless and then to helpful.

To determine the place of each spelling practice activity on the scale, I asked the question, “Will this improve/ reinforce a typically developing child’s ability to spell?”

Before I go on, I’d like to stress again that this article is about spelling practice – what teachers can do to help students consolidate what they have been taught about the spelling of words, and reach a point of automaticity and fluency in spelling. There are several critical aspects of literacy learning that are not on this scale; I take it that they go without saying. One such aspect is the act of silent reading. Reading increases exposure to words and patterns and increases vocabulary (Cunningham & Stanovich 2001). But it is not a spelling activity.

Even more importantly, explicit, systematic, direct, cumulative, structured teaching with a clear scope and sequence is not on this scale either. It is, rather, taken as sine qua non. This Spelling Activities Scale refers to activities to reinforce the teaching of sets of words and orthographic patterns, once they have had their phonemic structure explored, and have been defined, with their meaning components, including morphemes and root words, fully analysed. When literacy teaching is not explicit, systematic, direct, cumulative, and structured, and does not include meaningful analysis of the spelling words to be studied, the spelling practice activities outlined here will be characterised by a shorter helpful arrow, with a corresponding increase in length of the longer, toxic arrow.

1. Drilling
2. Dictation
3. Copying
4. Crossword puzzles
5. Analogy writing
6. Mnemonics
7. Bouncing ball (rhyming, physical movement and letter naming)
8. Spelling bees
9. Practice tests
10. Synthetic phonics
11. Diagramming the word/its components
12. Phonograms
13. Making a word search
14. Scrabble games
15. Rainbow writing
16. Random offers
17. Alphabetizing lists
18. Close exercises
19. Scrambling up individual letters
20. Word-collecting
21. Blends, etc.
22. Words inside words

Figure 1. The Spelling Activities Scale
Anything on the helpful part of the Spelling Activities Scale will have some positive, long-lasting effect. Anything on the useless part may have a temporary effect, but offers nothing long-lasting or constituting a good use of learning time. Useless strategies have about the same effect as cramming for an exam, which gives them a temporary appearance of useful. Anything in the toxic area will help to instil poor habits in typically developing children and will risk actually impeding the progress of those with learning difficulties.

For some children, toxic activities also include those things that may be helpful for others. For example, spelling bees can be too confronting and anxiety-causing for some children, and will fail to teach them anything except to avoid school.

In a similar vein, some activities deemed useless could actually prove to be toxic for children with learning difficulties. These children need to spend their time doing things to improve their skills. Useless activities rob them of crucial practice and opportunity to improve, thus rendering those activities toxic in the long term.

I daresay there are many more activities not mentioned, but the ones that make it into the helpful zone involve processing words from left to right, in the correct sequence, all the way through. Any activity that requires messing with letter sequences begins to slide into the useless/toxic zone.

**Toxic spelling activities**

We'll start with the worst. At the very bottom of the scale, and toxic to everybody, is the act of asking students to look for words inside words, irrespective of whether they are linked in meaning. This is not the same as separating root words from their affixes (e.g. play + -ing = playing), but instead, for example, getting them to spot the word sin in business or win in throwing. It is simply irrelevant and not generalisable to any other words.

Then comes blends as units. I have written about this extensively in a blog piece called Round the Blend, but in summary, my experience tells me that activities promoting clusters of consonants such as st- in stop or -nd in hand as single units are not linguistically accurate and are the direct cause reading and spelling errors in too many cases. Some students who struggle with the awareness of the separate phonemes in a consonant cluster find it very difficult to make sense of spelling when the identity of the phonemes is not clarified for them.

**Useless strategies have about the same effect as cramming for an exam, which gives them a temporary appearance of useful**

This brings us to word-coffins. This is not a widely used term (because I just coined it last week), but it is certainly a widely used activity. This is where children are directed to analyse words according to their shapes. They draw boxes around them, or write words into pre-fabricated word boxes. This activity is so devoid of anything resembling good practice, it actually pains me to mention it. I am not sure what theory it could possibly be based on, except some dreadful "visual" part of the baseless 3-cuing system. They are called word-coffins because to me, those boxes signal that high quality spelling instruction is as dead as a doornail in this classroom.

I’ve also heard of word-coffins being referred to as Elkonin boxes, but they are not the same thing. Daniil Elkonin, a Russian-Soviet psychologist, would no doubt have been very disappointed to see his name applied to such a dreadful activity. Elkonin boxes, which give a phonology-spelling framework, are useful. The boxes are all the same size, and each orthographic pattern is represented within one box and matched to the phoneme it represents. The value of this task is to draw students’ attention to the idea that there are different phonemes in words which can be isolated through careful listening and awareness of the position of the lips, tongue and teeth.

Bordering on useless for average learners, but toxic for struggling children, is the act of reducing words to individual letters and cutting/jumbling them up for reassembly. Pacing orthographic patterns in memory requires exposure to the correct sequence of letters (Ehri 2014). Messing
about with an incorrect sequence risks diminishing, not increasing, a child’s memory for orthographic patterns.

Similarly, fill in the missing letter exercises can be detrimental to struggling students, and for typically developing students, I ask, “What’s the point? It is better to spend time reading and writing whole words than engaging in no-sequence, no-pattern busy work.”

Alphabetising lists of words is great if you want to teach the order of the alphabet, but not much else. As a spelling activity, it is generally useless, and if relied upon too heavily, reinforces the unhelpful habit of only paying attention to the first letter of a word.

**Useless spelling activities**

Then we enter the great grey desert of useless activities. They won’t really harm anyone, but they won’t teach much, if anything, about spelling. We begin with lists containing random words, some with affixes attached and some not. These can be toxic in the absence of explicit instruction in morphology. For example, a Google search for “Grade 3 spelling list” often yields something like the following hotchpotch:

- why
- began
- parties
- being
- hopping
- beautiful
- knight

Each one of these words could be used as a gateway to understanding more about English spelling, but instead, they are lumped together as whole words, to be crammed as an unrelated list and never to be used again. No pattern is learned that would help with the spelling of similar words. No awareness is gained of morphology or etymology. The task is much harder than it need be and much less effective than it could be.

Next up is “rainbow writing” (writing a word using a different colour for every letter). It verges on the toxic because it is so prevalent, time-consuming and yet so devoid of merit. Like jumbled letters, it disguises orthographic patterns. Any activity that requires a child to use more than two colouring implements is art, not literacy.

Then there is the bizarre practice of assigning Scrabble word scores to spelling words. Each letter, due to its frequency, has a certain score. The letter <i>, being the most common, has a score of 1, whereas <o> and <p>

have 8 points etc. This may slightly enhance the statistical learning aspect of spelling (Arciuli & Simpson 2012), but on such a small and painstaking scale that it’s hardly worth the bother. Regular reading is far more likely to establish an understanding of letter frequency, so why not do that?

We do have some pretty excellent software that will create word search puzzles at the push of a button, and for that, we can be thankful. But it’s hardly an activity that places correct patterns into the orthographic lexicon at any rate worth spending time on. However, searching for words in a word search puzzle is a time-consuming activity that fails to cement the orthographic lexicon efficiently.

I see flashcards being recommended for helping with spelling, but I’ve yet to see how they could possibly be useful. If you flash a word at a person, you are asking them to memorise a word for reading, not for spelling. I know of no research study that has shown whole word methods to be superior to structured literacy in any aspect of learning to read and write. Flashcards for spelling practice are of little use.

**Moving towards useful activities...**

Colouring, circling or underlining vowels and consonants in words is the first activity on the scale that requires actual processing from left to right. It’s still a bit mindless, but we’re not yet getting somewhere, because the focus is on drawing student attention to syllable structure and orthographic patterns, even if the mechanics of circling or colouring are clumsy and time consuming.

Word families are terrific things... if planned and sequenced carefully in a way that draws student attention to learning that can be generalised. For example, learning the ‘igh’ words (high, tight, light) all at one time makes great sense. Poorly conceptualised groupings that are based on limited teacher knowledge are confusing because they are not generalisable. For example, lied, tier and chief ought not be grouped together. Each is based on a different orthographic pattern, and lumping these words together makes no sense to students. Likewise, putting nose, road and slow in the same ‘family’ doesn’t help students to understand which spelling of a particular phoneme should be chosen. Sometimes, the demands are even greater. Learning to spell play, fate, neigh, rain, steak, and obey all at once is much too complex and the words in these families often contain other information that needs to be explicitly taught.

I see hundreds of worksheets based on rime/coda “word families”, such as pan, man, can etc. This is a waste of time, given that this type of simple CVC pattern is relatively easy to perceive and represent. That is, it is more efficient to learn the individual letters and sounds and combine these to read and spell words than it is to also learn combinations like ‘an’. If you know ‘a’ and ‘n’, then learning ‘an’ as a word family is superfluous. Worse still, are vast “families” based on a single letter, usually an initial consonant, like run, right, ranunculus (okay, I exaggerated the last one, but it might as well be on these lists, for all the good they do). If you want your families to work, use close families, not random, sprawling ones. One example of a close, useful family, is the group of nine separate words that can be generated just by adding a different consonant to the word all (ball, call, fail, gall, hall, mall, tall, wall and wall). They are often misspelled, so I have them generated, defined, used in sentences and drilled as the all family and I usually see long-term transfer to subsequent dictation and composition pieces.

Another useful word family is that of words with ‘we’. It is useful to know that the letter <w> is affected by a preceding <e> in many words. This is what I call the w-effect. The letter <w> makes the <e> say /ə/, such as in was, wash, want and wand. This is a useful family for several reasons:

- It contains many high-frequency words.
- It applies broadly.
- It can be used to illustrate the vowel-changing properties of <w> in other words (work, war etc.). I tell students to be suspicious if they see <w> preceding <e> or <o>.

Sometimes my students even get inspired to illustrate the W Effect, like my friend Douglas did quite dramatically in Figure 4 (in his own time, in addition to his reading and spelling homework, not in place of it).

![Figure 4. W Effect picture](image-url)
The teaching of these families does not precede instruction in sound-symbol relationships and phonological processing, but is intended to be used as a bridge between phonology and orthography.

Sliding back down to the slightly helpful area, practice tests are often recommended as a spelling activity. They fall into a similar zone as the “Look, say, cover, write, check” catchphrase that is rampant in Australian schools. In isolation, these activities teach nothing except that the student is still wrong or hasn’t crammed the words successfully. Perhaps as part of a larger, more explicit, systematic sequence of teaching and learning, where students have the opportunity to self-correct and reflect on the patterns they find difficult to remember, they have some value.

Spelling bees are a somewhat discriminatory, only really favouring the 1-2 exposure types who memorise words easily, but if done cooperatively and in teams, where everyone who wants to participate gets a turn, they can be quite good practice.

Practising spelling through letter-naming whilst being engaged in a physical activity makes some sense, if the words are directly and explicitly taught first. There is always something be gained from practice, and it might be a bonus that this type of practice is more appealing to some students than just sitting. It is a form of drilling, and if drills can be fun without distracting from the purpose, there is no harm in that.

Using mnemonics (memory hooks) for selected words is helpful, if used appropriately. It is tempting to try and rely too heavily on mnemonics, so my rule of thumb is that if a word can be sounded out using the child’s store of known patterns, a mnemonic is a waste of time. Mnemonics come down to personal preference and teacher knowledge, but I urge caution when applying them too liberally. A strange example of this is teaching a mnemonic for the word geography. I have seen it presented as “George’s elderly old grandfather rode a pig home yesterday.” The opportunity to teach three very useful morphemes, geo-, -graph- and -y would be lost in favour of a nonsensical sentence.

Having said that, one of my favourite mnemonics is for library. I could teach students that the word library comes from libr, meaning “book” and that libr is thought to be in the same etymological family as leaf, or that it has a noun-forming suffix: -ary, or even that it is often said with a collapsed syllable in the middle, but I prefer just to say, “There’s a B3A in the library!” Not many forget it after that.

The Top Five

The top five activities in the countdown all require rapid recall and writing. These, more than any other, will deliver the necessary practice in spelling to improve long-term recall.

Five: Airisky writing. I’ve been watching this activity emerge over the years, and I must say, judiciously used, it seems promising. This is when children use their fingers to write their target words in the air. It is important when doing this activity that students always recite the words from the first letter to the last rather than backwards, for example.

Four: Word families. I cannot stress enough the importance of grouping words to be learned as a spelling focus into close, logical families. This can be done along orthographic, etymological or morphological lines (and those lines often overlap).

Three: Copying. Copying words, sentences and paragraphs is a great way not only to practise fluency and spelling, using a scaffolded, stable framework, but if used purposefully, can also enhance everything else that constitutes writing.

Two: Dictation is slightly harder, in that students have to use their memory for spelling and writing conventions. It is doubly useful to copy and dictate sentences and paragraphs using explicitly taught words.

One: Drilling. At the very top we have drilling. Yep, good old drilling. Old-fashioned, old-school, back-to-basics, traditional drilling. I don’t care what names are thrown at me for recommending this, and neither does any teacher/practitioner worth their salt. By drilling, I mean going over and over an expanding list of words. Here’s a simple procedure:

- Harvest words from written compositions by students, focusing on words that are misspelled
- Model the spelling of each word and have students write them in columns.
- Have students identify, through a simple marking system, e.g. underlining digraphs, placing a cross underneath silent letters etc., the parts that they need to pay most attention to. Place them in families containing similar difficult parts.
- Drill the words, first by sounding each phoneme and then by saying the whole word.

- Define and use each word in a sentence
- Use the words in copied/dictated sentences and paragraphs.
- Have students compose sentences containing the words.
- Build up to hundreds of words and practise drilling the columns frequently.

If you give a list of spelling words to a child to learn, that child has made an investment of time and cognitive effort. A return on that investment will only come if the child has had enough exposure to the word and enough practice writing it, from start to finish, from left to right. Too often, children are asked to make an investment for zero yield, and then are blamed for getting low scores in measures of spelling ability or for losing faith and motivation. On the other hand, if carefully and explicitly taught, and practised to mastery, spelling word lists can provide a self-extending treasure trove that lasts a lifetime.

Lyn Stone is a linguist and literacy and language specialist. She is a regular contributor to the Australian print and radio media on linguistics as it relates to education and has been featured many times on ABC Radio and Fairfax media, talking about spelling, grammar and dyslexia. Lyn’s two flagship programmes, Spelling for Life and Language for Life have been implemented in schools with excellent results for over a decade and have been published by Routledge as two books. Her new book, Reading for Life will be released on December 20th 2018.

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