

THAT'S TEACHING SPELLING???

Find out what your teachers are doing right now in their spelling classes; then share with them the results of research on the most effective methods for teaching spelling.

ROBERT L. HILLERICH

One purpose of this article is to share a modest study of what went on for 34 periods in six classrooms when teachers claimed to be "teaching spelling." The major purpose, however, is to suggest how you, as a principal or supervisor, can become involved in demonstrating instructional leadership to improve the teaching of spelling in your school.

In 1973, Hodges reported on a literature search from which he found no study of what teachers or students did during the time allotted to spelling. Whether it is the great amount of time such studies require, the low priority often given spelling, or whatever reason, I have found no such study reported since Hodges's statement. Do you know what your teachers do during "spelling"?

The Study

A total of six elementary teachers in grades 2, 3, 6, 7, and 8 were observed during 34 "spelling periods" for five to eight consecutive visits each. The observer recorded observations in detail on a time chart by minutes, as shown in Figure 1. The observed behaviors were then organized and tallied.

Teacher Behaviors

So much variation existed among the six teachers that it would make little sense to record averages for the total group. However, several unfortunate surprises were revealed in the analysis of the data. First of all, four of the six teachers devoted 40 minutes per day to spelling. In contrast, research evidence suggests

that about an hour per week is all that is necessary for spelling instruction per se.

While the length of period may have been an administrative decision, some of this exorbitant time could have been devoted to developing skill in written expression, since writing is the reason we learn to spell.

The second disheartening fact is that most of the allocated time was not devoted to instruction of any kind. From 28.7 to 82.7 percent was devoted to administration and irrelevant activities. The former included general tasks, giving mechanical directions, discipline, and grading papers at the desk. The latter consisted of collecting lunch money, doing unrelated paper work, reading the newspaper (18.6 percent of one teacher's time), or staring out the window (3.1 percent of another teacher's time).

The next largest portion of time was devoted to workbook correction with students. While this may imply some

spelling instruction, such was not the case. The workbook pages were assigned, completed by students (at times other than "spelling," in the case of some teachers), corrected orally, and the scores used for grading purposes. In other words, there was no instruction on the skills; students were assigned practice pages and then graded on the results.

Only one teacher was actually "teaching." That teacher devoted 38 percent of the time to talking with students about phonic rules. Unfortunately, research summaries indicate that teaching spelling by sound is likely to result in phonetic misspellers (Hillerich, 1977). However, this teacher must at least be given credit for following some instructional plan.

On a little more positive note, five of the six teachers did devote from 3.9 to 18.6 percent of the time to dictated tests. Here again, however, only one

Figure 1. Time Chart for Recording Observations

Beginning Time: _____	Date: _____	Grade: _____
Ending Time: _____	Observer: _____	Teacher: _____
Time	Teacher Behavior	Student Behavior
01	_____	_____
02	_____	_____
03	_____	_____
04	_____	_____
05	_____	_____

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teacher corrected tests orally and that was done *after* an exchange of papers in order to arrive at another grade.

Finally, three teachers engaged students in oral spelling activities. Again, research evidence does not support this as a means for learning to spell correctly. In contrast, throughout the 34 periods observed, no teacher mentioned *how* students were to study a word for spelling.

Overall, only about 50 percent of teachers' time was devoted to anything related to spelling, and most of this time was devoted to unprofitable activities.

Student Behaviors

As you might suppose, student behaviors closely paralleled those of their teachers. The only student activity consistent across all six classes was listening to mechanical directions. In addition, students followed these directions, sat or socialized, reported scores, spelled orally, and wrote spelling words *X* number of times. Such activities, which do not contribute to skill development, accounted for about one-third of students' time, with a range from 11.2 to 77.1 percent among the six classes.

Workbook completion and oral correction accounted for the next major portion of time, ranging from 14.9 to 81.6 percent of all classroom activity.

Testing, correction of tests, and instruction—activities that might contribute to spelling skill—accounted for anywhere from zero to 53.7 percent of students' time during spelling periods.

We might also look at these data in another way. We have known for years that the amount of time allocated to a subject—within limits—has a direct effect on achievement in that subject. Even more influential is time-on-task within allocated time. And an even greater contributor still is interactive on-task instructional time (Stallings, 1980). This would mean that independent workbook completion and other such instructional practices are of questionable effectiveness. Such a view results in half of the classes spending over 75 percent of their time on noneffective activities.

What Does It Mean?

Obviously this small study, even though it represents over 30 hours of instructional observation, can *prove* nothing. Nevertheless, it should suggest the advisability of finding out what your teachers and students do during "spelling."

While observation and suggestions alone will contribute significantly to the instructional program, it would be unfortunate to stop there. Methods for teaching spelling are less complex and more agreed on in the research than are instructional methods in just about any other area. The next step is to help teachers make their teaching more effective.

Teaching Spelling Effectively

It is not my purpose here to provide a detailed account of the research on the teaching of spelling. That has been done elsewhere (Hillerich, 1977). However, very briefly, this is what the research indicates.

Word List. The word list in a spelling program is a "security blanket" to provide fluency in writing. The list should be made up of high frequency words, and their spelling must become automatic. This automaticity is accomplished through administration of a pretest—before students see the words—followed by immediate self-correction by those students.

Study. Once unknown words have been identified through the pretest, those words should be studied through a visual memory, kinesthetic approach to memorization. This method must be taught, retaught, and reviewed by the teacher with students.

Test. In addition to the pretest to discover which words need to be studied, there should be at least one test to find out how study is progressing, and a mastery test. Results can then be charted on a record of progress so students see that they are making some gains.

Related Items. Since the purpose for learning to spell is to be able to write fluently and correctly, much practice in application—writing—is an essential part of any good spelling program. Furthermore, any writer will use some words not appropriate for any spelling list. These words can be spelled correctly through use of a dictionary. Hence, use of a dictionary *for spelling*—with all of its subskills and understandings—is an essential element in the total program.

Instruction in how to proofread for specific items, along with practice in doing this kind of proofreading, can help students spell more correctly.

Finally, in terms of generalizations about mechanics, students can be taught proper use of the apostrophe, capitaliza-

tion, and punctuation, and some structural generalizations, such as how to add endings. The latter includes rules about doubling final consonants and changing *y* to *i*.

Irrelevant Items. Whether with or without a workbook, there is no justification for teaching rules about the spellings of sounds. To do so can only result in phonetic spellings—most often misspellings—since, of all the sounds in English, only the two *th* sounds (as in *thin* and *then*) have single spellings.

Teachers sometimes have students write or use words orally in sentences in order to clarify meanings. If a student doesn't know the meaning of a word, vocabulary needs to be developed *before* that word is appropriate for a spelling list, or else the student is using a list too advanced for his or her own language level. Students won't want to write words they don't know!

Oral spelling and the rote writing of spelling words contribute nothing to skill in spelling.

Suggestions for Action

The first step to instructional improvement is a sense of awareness on the part of teachers. You, as principal or supervisor, can help bring it about—but only if you are aware of what is happening in the classroom.

One Step. You might like to adapt for your own use the observation form presented in Figure 1. Then visit a few classrooms and record what you see. Next, organize the behaviors observed as on- or off-task, interactive/noninteractive, and contributory/noncontributory to skill development.

Following each visit, share with the teacher what happened in the classroom. It is important to remember that this is not a summative evaluation conference: you are not giving the teacher a grade. You and the teacher are both interested in improving instruction, so your purpose is to provide another view of what was happening in that classroom during the "spelling period."

Perhaps the conference will consist of your brief summary and nothing but praise for what you saw. You may also have a few questions about activities or behaviors. Even if your observation was a disappointment, you can find something good to say about the performance. Then pick out one significant concern and together with the teacher attempt to arrive at a proposal for improvement.

Alternative Step. You may prefer to begin by sharing the results of the study reported in this article. Just get some of those announcements taken care of by bulletin and use a staff meeting for discussion of the observations. Such sharing can motivate a good exchange, including assertions that "It couldn't be happening here!"

Alternative Two. Perhaps you prefer to share the results reported here, along with the request that each teacher log his or her activities during spelling periods for a week. While their logs may remain their confidential property, discussion at a staff meeting can lead to group suggestions about how the teaching of spelling might be improved.

Refinement. If you want to mount a serious effort to improve the teaching of spelling in your school, you may want to share or have your teachers share the evidence on how spelling should be taught. Two more helpful references are Fitzsimmons and Loomer (1974) and Hillerich (1981). ■

References

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Teaching Spelling: A Response to Hillerich

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Spelling as a school subject is somewhat of a paradox. It is perceived on the one hand by society as an important social value and symbol of literacy, and on the other hand by many educators as a subject warranting mod-

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est priority in the curriculum. Thus, Professor Hillerich's reminder to principals of their roles as instructional leaders and of their opportunity to extend that role to spelling deserves special commendation.

The research Hillerich reported and the implications he drew from that research are a welcome addition to the professional literature on spelling and underscore the critical part that teachers play in helping students gain understanding of and competence in the subjects they study. However, I wish to take issue with the mode of spelling instruction that he proposes. He infers that, for the most part, the "truth is all in" about spelling content and method. In fact, it is not.

Hillerich's concept of spelling instruction has its roots in late 19th and early 20th century views of spelling and in the scores of scholarly inquiries into spelling content and method carried out mainly in the first half of the present century. These views stemmed primarily from two sources: an emerging "science of education" in which instructional efficiency was a major goal; and a behaviorist orientation toward learning that was prevalent during this period (Hodges, 1977). Indeed, much of the evidence Hillerich cites paraphrases Horn's statement on the "Principles of Method in Teaching Spelling, as Derived from Scientific Investigation" published in 1919. In that statement, Horn noted that

Efficiency in teaching spelling is to be increased by a specific attack on the individual words to be learned. [This approach] is in line with the whole tendency in modern experimental education, a tendency which has been well outlined by Thorndike in his discussion of education as the formation of specific bonds (Horn, 1919, p. 56).

Others, in addition to Hillerich, have since reiterated this viewpoint (see, for example, the Fitzsimmons and Loomer reference in Hillerich's article. See also Allred, 1977). Namely, learning to spell is mainly a visual memory task; there are few reliable spelling generalizations; and drill is an effective teaching device in spelling. In sum, spelling study should, as Hillerich comments, "facilitate memorization of the spelling of [words]."

Other concepts of spelling, however, warrant study. They are rooted in current and emerging insights about the development of intellect generally and about the development of language in

particular. These insights reveal that learning is generally a developmental process in which learners actively participate in their own learning by searching for and constructing generalizations about entities and events in the world around them. Nowhere is this insight more revealing than in language development in which children's "errors" reveal their growing understanding of the structural relationships of language.

So it is with spelling. Truly significant research into the development of spelling ability by Read (1975), and more recently by Henderson and his associates (1980), demonstrates that learning to spell is integrally related to learning underlying concepts about words and their structural and semantic relationships, of which sound-letter relationships are only a part. Furthermore, these concepts grow more sophisticated over time in conjunction with developmental changes in cognition and with interaction with written language both in and out of school. What these researchers and others are showing is that there are underlying cognitive processes involved in learning to spell which are developmental in nature (Frith, 1980; Hodges, 1981a; Hodges, 1981b.)

Much more needs to be done in detailing the applications of these insights to instructional practice (Read and Hodges, in press). But as gaps are filled in our understanding of the nature and growth of spelling ability, we will be better able to design curricula and devise instructional methods that go far beyond the memorization of word lists and weekly testing, and engage students in active explorations of the nature of English spelling and its place in written communication.

Hillerich concludes his article with the justifiable advice that spelling programs can be refined when principals and supervisors make available to their staffs existing knowledge about spelling. I fully agree, but must add that this knowledge is far more extensive than he has indicated and that curricular refinement will need to take into account the emerging insights into both the nature of English spelling and of the learner. The references I have noted in this brief response are useful resources for putting into context the current state of knowledge concerning learning to spell. ■

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