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Teaching Spelling in Grades One through Twelve

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TEACHING SPELLING IN GRADES

ONE THROUGH TWELVE

A Research Paper

Presented to

the Graduate Faculty

Central Washington College of Education

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Education

by

Robert Calvin Little

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THIS PAPER IS APPROVED AS MEETING
THE PLAN 2 REQUIREMENT FOR THE
COMPLETION OF A RESEARCH PAPER.

Donald J. Murphy
FOR THE GRADUATE FACULTY

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CHAPTER I

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM AND PROCEDURE

Although spelling is a minor subject in the curriculum, spelling ability is important in all classes. Regardless of a pupil's knowledge of subject and ability to express himself, inability to spell accurately detracts from the effectiveness of his written work and influences the impression made on his teacher. Outside of school, lack of spelling ability can be embarrassing in personal and (particularly) in business letters. This writer's limited experience and examination of achievement tests pointed out that pupils in his school system rank lowest in the language arts field, especially in spelling. A desire to discover new and better ways to teach spelling prompted this study.

I. THE PROBLEM

Statement of the problem. It was the purpose of this study to determine methods and procedures for successful teaching of spelling to pupils in the twelve grades of the public schools.

Importance of the study. "Throughout their entire school experience, children need to be helped to see that what one writes for others to read paints a picture of himself" (13:384). Because students in general are lacking

in spelling ability, teachers need to develop means of combating this problem. New approaches to teaching other subjects are continually being developed. Spelling should not be overlooked. If new methods are tried and found to be successful in some instances, it should be worthwhile for other teachers to examine and test these methods in their own classes. The author hopes that other teachers can use this research as an aid in teaching spelling.

Limitations of the study. Space does not permit a thorough examination and discussion of all the problems associated with spelling. The writer can only compile a guide. Teachers searching for new and better methods of teaching spelling may apply this to their own situations and pupil needs.

II. PROCEDURE

The author investigated literature in the field of spelling and recorded methods and procedures that have proved helpful and successful.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

I. SPELLING AND THE TOTAL CURRICULUM

Spelling cannot be isolated from other subjects. There is some secondary learning involving spelling in all subjects (16:110-11). Spelling plays an important role in the total language arts program. Activities for the various stages in the beginning of written language work are these: spelling awareness when the teacher does the writing, copying script text material, child participation in writing, writing with increasing independence, and trying to recall spelling of simple, common words (4:53-63). There is a relationship between spelling and vocabulary knowledge, spelling and oral word-usage, and spelling and reading (4:27-9). Betts relates spelling to the general language development of children:

It is based on the known sequences or patterns of development of communication abilities in children: first, learning to interpret auditory symbols (listening); next, learning to reproduce auditory symbols (speaking); much later, learning to interpret the printed or visual symbol (reading); finally, learning to reproduce the printed symbol (writing and spelling) (1:71).

Parke believes that spelling is one of the most important phases of language development because it is an aid in establishing communication through writing (9:38).

II. GOALS OF THE SPELLING CURRICULUM

The first step in improving the spelling curriculum should be to set up goals and objectives. These goals should be both specific and realistic (6:4). Ruth Schofield lists the following as a possible set of teacher objectives:

1. Give pupils a mastery of words found to be most frequently used.
2. Teach pupils the skills needed to spell additional words they may encounter in daily writing.
3. Give pupils the know-how to teach themselves to spell.
4. Teach pupils where to look for words they are not sure of.
5. Develop an awareness of the need for correct spelling (12:38-9).

III. PROBLEMS OF METHOD

Writers agree upon two basic sources for selecting words to be studied: the word lists found in textbooks and other published literature and word lists made up from the actual writing needs of the children. Published word lists, compiled after careful study of written work by both children and adults, contain words most frequently misspelled. These lists may not benefit every individual; a second source is often more beneficial. Blitz points out that

If a child is to learn to spell the words he needs in his daily writing, he must have individual educational opportunity. He must have the chance to learn to spell the words that he wants to spell but can't. He must not be made to study words that he already knows, or other words that he can't spell but doesn't have any need to use. Each child needs his own spelling list of words which he wants to use but can't spell correctly yet. In short, every girl and boy needs the opportunity to participate in a spelling program which recognizes and emphasizes individual spelling needs, differences of interest, and a range of abilities (2:405).

Some schools combine both sources. This could be very beneficial, but all too many teachers, using word sources from both, merely assign spelling and test on the success of the pupils' unguided study. The students are left without any real guidance or teaching (13:383).

When teaching spelling there can be a certain amount of grouping. Words can be grouped and taught simultaneously according to associated meaning or use, common structure and phonetic elements, common difficulties, or identical pronunciation (15:12-18).

Grouping follows, to a certain degree, the principle techniques of word study: analysis of common errors, visual observation and analysis of word forms, pronunciation and syllabication, phonics, sounding and auditory discrimination, word building and word structure, generalizing in spelling such as spelling rules, and word derivations (4:223-56).

There have been many investigations to determine the effect of spelling rules. Many people agree with Tidyman's

claim that teachers should decrease the value and use of rules (15:75):

Certainly no rule should be taught unless it covers a sufficient number of words to pay for the effort of learning it, and then only if children are mature enough to see the points at which it **applies** (13:387).

Horn recommends teaching only seven rules: dropping the final silent e, changing y to i, doubling the final consonant, qu, the capitalization of proper nouns and adjectives, the use of a period after an abbreviation, and the use of an apostrophe in possessives and contractions (6:21).

"Shortcomings of speech, such as mispronunciations and articulatory defects, have been found to be related to disabilities in spelling" (5:210). Correct pronunciation should be regarded as an essential step in learning. To some degree phonics should be taught. Horn points out that instruction in phonics should be regarded as an aid to spelling only (6:24). Together with the correct pronunciation phonics helps the student discover the way sounds in a given word are spelled.

As in all subjects there is a wide range of spelling achievement in any grade. Children differ in the factors that influence spelling ability: motivation, intelligence, hearing ability, the amount and nature of their written word, handwriting, methods of work, and home backgrounds (6:24). They also differ in learning auditory and visual emphasis upon succeeding parts of words, writing as well as

seeing and hearing a word, kinesthetic, or hand motor methods, oral spelling, and combinations of these (7:147).

The classroom teacher must make adjustments to the needs of individual pupils. "The most practicable plan for meeting these differences is a combination of group teaching supplemented by help given to individual pupils who are having special difficulties." Pre-testing can determine which students need individual help. Group teaching should deal only with matters of common concern (6:24-5).

Most authorities agree that short periods of concentration are best in the teaching of spelling. While Horn says that "research findings are in agreement that seventy-five minutes per week is adequate time for work on spelling and perhaps even less is necessary" (13:385), others believe that the "best spelling is done in schools where there is spelling five days a week for approximately twenty-one minutes a day" (4:187-8). Many feel that comparable results may be obtained when spelling is taught only three days a week (11:3). It is well worth noting that the time spent is not the most important factor. Far more important is the way the time is spent (15:135).

Interest largely determines how well a pupil learns to spell. How much he will undertake to do, how hard he will work, and how persistent he will be in his efforts depend on the nature and strength of his interest. Horn

suggests the following as ways a classroom teacher can aid pupils to develop interests and attitudes to improve their spelling:

1. Pupils can be led to recognize that spelling errors make a poor impression in all written work, both in school and in business.
2. They should understand that the words they learn are most likely to be needed now and in the future.
3. An efficient method for studying spelling creates interest.
4. Pupils need to be convinced that they can improve their spelling.
5. Students should be helped to assume responsibility for learning to spell.
6. Opportunities to write should be provided, thus creating a feeling of need for spelling.
7. Pupils can be led to take pride in correct spelling in all written work.
8. Mutual helpfulness is better than competition (6:19-20).

IV. SPELLING METHODS

The study-test-study method is the most widely used procedure for teaching spelling (11:3). Pupils study the words, are tested, and then study any words they have missed.

Studying usually includes writing the words, using them in sentences, and discovering such things as meanings, similarities, root words, and applicable rules.

The test-study-test method is another popular way of teaching spelling. An example of this method might be as follows:

Monday: The teacher pronounces the words then gives a pre-test.

Tuesday: Pupils study the words missed on Monday. This includes the actual writing of the words several times.

Wednesday: A second test is given.

Thursday: Pupils study the words missed Wednesday.

Friday: The final test is given (11:4-5).

The greatest merit of this procedure is in the saving of time. This has been placed as high as 75 per cent. "The reason given is that pupils do not have to study words they can already spell" (14:75).

Learning-by-listening involves a different procedure. Without seeing or hearing the words, pupils take a pre-test. They then score their own papers as the teacher spells the words orally. Students turn the papers over and immediately take a re-test. This procedure is repeated each day spelling is taught. When grading their papers the pupils do not correct the words. Listening acuity is strengthened

and is the chief medium for learning (11:5-6). An experiment involving this method and the test-study-test method showed a similar total accuracy index for both groups. The learning-by-listening method increased motivation for learning and involved less loss of time for bright students (11:14).

A study involving nineteen boys in Chestnut Hill Academy suggests another teaching procedure. For nine months the boys spent a total of one hundred minutes per week on spelling. During the first seven months they used their workbooks five days each week. The spelling words were used in sentences or in stories weekly. They had regular word lists and infrequent "bees." The last two months of the school year the boys used their workbooks only three days per week. Depending upon satisfactory achievement, no sentences were required. There were no word lists but "bees" were held four times a week. Discussion of spelling goals was also a part of the study. Results showed that eight months was the average growth made in seven months under the first approach; the latter method produced the same eight month's growth in two months (3:154-7).

The Winnetka Plan is one approach to individualized spelling. Review tests are given at the beginning of the semester. Partners dictate to each other. Words correctly spelled are checked off and not given again during the term.

During each spelling practice time pupils dictate to their partners lists of words studied the day before. They check their own papers and rewrite words incorrectly spelled. Each Monday partners dictate all words studied during the past week. These are checked by the teacher. Pupils study the words they missed and take another test the next day. This process is repeated the following day. After the pupil has completed all the words in his speller for the term, he is free to spend the spelling period on other skills. This method shows better results and a great saving in time. The chief problem is in training the child to work independently or with partners (4:182-3).

Individualized spelling has proved beneficial and quite satisfactory in many instances. By the time children are in the fourth or fifth grade there are seldom more than five or six pupils within one class who need the same words or the same kind of help (4:171). Individual word lists are compiled from the written work of the individual. New words are added as they present difficulty. Through this method the pupil learns only those words he needs for his written work.

The Salisbury method of individualized spelling recommends that words put on spelling lists be checked against a word-frequency list to see whether or not they are commonly used in writing. Word lists are studied individ-

ually and/or by the buddy system. After a word has been spelled correctly three weeks in succession, it is checked off as learned (4:183-5).

Peterson points out that some words, common to most students, could be studied by the entire group. Words should be analyzed and examples found on the individual spelling lists (4:186).

In the primary grades individualized, alphabetized spelling lists might be compiled. The teacher can record words required in various total group activities. These could form the basis for the spelling lists. New words should be added as they are identified. Each child could then find a word in his own list when he needed it in his written work. At regular intervals each child selects words in his spelling notebook that need additional study. Pupils pair off to help each other study (7:148).

Hildreth suggests the following ways and means of individualizing spelling practice:

1. Aid each pupil in acquiring methods of study most effective for his needs.
2. Give individual written assignments.
3. Group pupils according to ability.
4. Provide study exercises and games to be used independently by pupils.
5. Have brighter pupils help the slower ones.

6. Pair children of similar ability for work on the same words.

7. Evaluate and check pupil progress. Evaluate in terms of improvement in past records.

8. Give inventory tests to note the rate at which new words are being learned.

9. Help pupils keep records showing their own progress.

10. Direct capable spellers to other work such as expressive writing, vocabulary study, and practicing checking their written work (4:172-3).

There are many different methods for studying words. Most modern spellers suggest a series of steps for learning to spell a word.

They involve the pronunciation of each word, looking carefully at each part as the word is pronounced, saying the letters in sequence, attempting to recall how the word looks and saying the letters, checking this attempted recall by looking at the correct spelling of the word, writing the word, and comparing the word as written with the correct spelling of the word. These steps are repeated if necessary until the word is correctly spelled (6:19).

Haggenmuller and Fuchs recommend copying and spelling the words orally. Fulton suggests that the teacher write the word on the board and explain the meaning. The children use it in a sentence, then write it ten times saying each letter aloud. The teacher emphasizes any difficult parts of the word. Many others recommend oral spelling. The child

sees, hears, says, and writes each letter, thus getting a total impression of the word (15:67-70). Elenore Pounds suggests a four step way to better spelling:

1. The teacher writes the word, says it, and makes sure each child can pronounce it correctly.

2. The child traces the word with his finger as he pronounces it.

3. Step 2 is continued until the child gets the feel of the word in his muscles, knows the sound of it, and gets a visual image.

4. The child covers the model and tries to write the word correctly. If he is unsuccessful he starts over again (10:150-2).

Spelling is often overlooked in the high school.

Saale and Louis say:

The teaching of spelling in the modern elementary school is still an extremely significant area of the curriculum. It is a sad commentary on education that little or no emphasis is given to the improvement of spelling at the high school level (11:2).

Hildreth points out:

The compartmentalized subject-teaching which prevails in high school has tended to restrict spelling instruction to English courses. English teachers may be held responsible for teaching pupils methods of word study, spelling rules, and principles of word derivation, but this will not carry over to the student's writing in general unless the student's other teachers also show concern over spelling and demand accurately written papers (4:270).

Several recommendations for improving spelling in

high school are as follows: find the student's interests and relate spelling to these; motivate better spelling by building interest in words, demonstrating why spelling became standardized, showing that employers value correct spelling, praising good effort and achievement, arousing a genuine concern as to whether all words in papers are spelled correctly, developing a sense of pride in correct spelling, and showing that everyone can improve; help students discover for themselves the words they need; require review of all common words not yet learned; teach spelling and word building in connection with actual writing; and require students to check all spelling in written work (4:274-5).

V. EVALUATION

Achievement in spelling must be measured. It can not be taken for granted. There are several types of evaluation: the spelling section of standardized achievement tests, tests which measure achievement in daily and weekly lessons, tests which measure progress for a term or year, and observational techniques. Each of these serves a different purpose; however, the primary purpose of all should be to guide and improve learning. The evaluations used to guide the pupils' efforts from day to day most helpfully influence learning.

But whatever form of evaluation is used, whether a standardized test, a test to guide daily instruction, or an observational technic, its benefits are seriously reduced unless the pupils understand its purpose (6:28-30).

CHAPTER III

SUMMARY

Because spelling ability is important in all classes in school and in all written work outside of school, this writer wished to discover new and better ways to teach it. Although space did not permit a thorough investigation and discussion of all problems associated with spelling, the research did point out various procedures that can benefit classroom teachers.

I. THE "IDEAL" SPELLING CURRICULUM

On the basis of this research the "ideal" spelling curriculum should begin with the formulation of goals and objectives. If the teacher and students work on this together, the resulting product could prove to be the major motivating device of the spelling program. It should be pointed out to the students at this time that correct spelling in all written work will be required. Spelling awareness and the need for correct spelling at all times should be made apparent.

A test of fifty words selected at random from the spelling list used in the particular grade and administered at the beginning of each year starting with grade two would show the general spelling ability the students possess and

would indicate to the teacher the amount of stress he needed to place on the spelling program.

In the first grade there would be no spelling period as such. Students would learn a certain number of words through reading and copy work but would have no word lists to learn.

Beginning with the second grade students would begin a formal study of spelling. Only words they actually need in their writing should be taught. The study-test-study method of word study should prove to be the most successful. Words should be taught when they are most needed for writing and when interest in the particular words is highest.

Grouping students according to their abilities should begin by the third grade. Some students will be able to learn more words than others. A combination of spellers and individual word lists should be used. The following steps for learning to spell a word should be taught:

1. Pronounce the word, looking carefully at each part as the word is pronounced.
2. Say the letters in sequence, attempting to recall how the word looks.
3. Check this attempted recall by looking at the correct spelling of the word.
4. Write the word and compare the word as written with the correct spelling of the word.

5. Repeat these steps until the word is correctly spelled.

Individualized spelling can begin in the fourth grade. The test-study-test method would indicate words each child needed to study. Words missed on the initial test, words misspelled in a student's written work, and any other words of particular interest to the student would make up the child's individual list the first week. On successive weeks he would add any words he missed the preceeding week and those he misspelled in written work during that period. Before the words in his written work were added to his list, the teacher would check them with a word-frequency list.

For the most effective results, the spelling period should not be too long. If possible a daily period from fifteen to twenty minutes should prove quite successful.

Words missed by over 75 per cent of the students on the initial test each week would be studied by the class as a group. Group study would also involve such things as spelling rules, word derivations, phonics, pronunciation, analysis of common errors, and use of the dictionary.

All other work would be done individually but be teacher-guided. Students would work in pairs assigned by the teacher on the basis of tested spelling achievement. From his individual spelling list a child would be assigned so many words a week. Individual study could be by any

method the teacher desired. It should, for the most effective results, include using and writing the words. It would be necessary for the teacher to circulate during the spelling period checking work and giving individual help if needed. On one designated day each week partners would dictate to each other the spelling words studied that week. These would be collected and graded by the teacher.

Once a child had completed all of the words on his own spelling list, he would be free to do other things such as creative writing using some of the words he had learned. He could also assist other students with their spelling difficulties.

Monthly review tests of fifty words selected from the list studied would serve as a check on retention and learning achievement.

In the high school every teacher should be responsible for teaching spelling in his own particular field. Correct spelling should be demanded in all classes. The English teacher would have the added responsibility of teaching the principle techniques of word study: analysis of common errors, visual observation and analysis of word forms, pronunciation and syllabication, auditory discrimination, word building and word structure, spelling rules, and word derivations.

All spelling should be evaluated. Regardless of how

this is done--by the spelling section of standardized achievement tests, tests which measure achievement in daily and weekly lessons, tests which measure progress for a term or year, or observational techniques--the students should know the purpose of the evaluation. Grading according to past achievement is perhaps the most motivating method.

II. ADAPTATION OF THE "IDEAL" SPELLING CURRICULUM

At the present time in the writer's school system, spelling is taught only two days a week. Each of these periods is forty minutes long. Workbooks and the study-test-study method are employed. Because the author teaches the sixth grade, he feels that this procedure is not as effective as possible for that grade level.

With the approval of the principal, the writer plans to adapt the "ideal" spelling curriculum to fit the pupils' needs. In order to test the program the present procedure will be taught the first semester. The second semester will begin with a discussion and formulation of spelling goals. This will be followed by a test over the first week's words. Those words missed by 75 per cent of the class will be studied by the entire group. Spelling rules and other techniques of word study will be taught in group study. Students will do all other work individually and working with partners. Each student will have his own spelling

list. Words he misspells in written work will be added to this list. Any words he misspells on his final test each week will remain on his list for the following week. This procedure will be continued each week throughout the second term.

Regular monthly review tests and achievement tests should indicate the effectiveness of the spelling program and show, to a certain degree, which of the two procedures produces the better work.

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