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Anna H. Hall

Clemson University, ah2@clemson.edu

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Making Spelling Meaningful: Using Explicit Instruction and Individual Conferencing

Anna H. Hall
Clemson University

Abstract — This article challenges traditional modes of spelling instruction by offering theoretically based suggestions for effectively assessing and instructing students' spelling progress. The importance of explicit spelling instruction is presented along with differentiated strategies for students along the developmental spelling continuum and an individualized way to monitor spelling progress for elementary school students. Furthermore, the article seeks to provide teachers with strategies that help students develop an understanding of orthographic patterns and phonemic awareness skills while simultaneously avoiding the traditional "Friday Spelling Test" that so often dominates the elementary spelling curriculum.

Amy, a second-grade student, sighed as she received her weekly spelling list filled with words that she already knew how to spell. John, a classmate of Amy's, received the same list and was immediately overwhelmed by the thought of learning 15 new words before the test on Friday. While the skills required for learning to spell are foundational for reading and writing, the "one list fits all" (Hilden & Jones, 2012, p. 20) approach to spelling instruction usually does not fit anyone. As Hilden and Jones (2012) note, "the problem with the traditional spelling list concept is that it does not use research-based data to inform the instructional process" (p. 19). In this article, explicit teaching strategies for spelling and word study are described along with adaptations for students along the developmental spelling continuum. Additionally, an individualized way to monitor spelling progress for elementary school students is provided.

Rationale for Explicit Multilevel Instruction and Conferencing

Because skills required for spelling, reading, and writing are interrelated, poor spelling can affect children's literacy development in a variety of ways. Graham, Harris, and Chorzempa (2004) describe four effects poor spelling can have on children's writing performance, including: (1) blurring or changing the child's message; (2) influencing perceptions about a child's competence as a writer; (3) interfering with the composing process; and (4) constraining the child's writing development. Researchers have also found that children without a firm foundation of letter sound connections and spelling skills often struggle on the path to fluent reading (Rayner et al. 2006). Bear and Templeton (1998) state "spelling is much more than a courtesy to one's reader; understanding how words are spelled is a means to more proficient and efficient writing and reading" (p. 223).

Research suggests spelling knowledge progresses through distinct developmental levels as children learn to integrate the

four forms of spelling knowledge: *phonological* (i.e., knowledge of speech sounds and letter sound correspondence); *visual* (i.e., knowledge of the way words and letters look); *morphemic* (i.e., knowledge of the meanings of words); and, *etymological* (i.e., knowledge of word origins) (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 2011; Bear & Templeton, 1998; Ehri & Wilce, 1979; Gentry, 1982). A collection of seminal studies conducted by Henderson and colleagues from the University of Virginia (often referred to as the "Virginia Studies"; Bear & Templeton, 1998) helped to conceptualize the developmental nature of spelling.

Over the years, other researchers have explored the developmental course of spelling knowledge and how it relates to reading and writing. Various models of developmental spelling stages have been described. The Gentry (1982) model describes five stages of invented spelling representing how a speller conceptualizes the spelling of words in different ways throughout their spelling development. These include *precommunicative*, *semiphonetic*, *phonetic*, *transitional*, and *correct*. The Bear et al. (2011) model (a revision of the previous Bear and Templeton 1998 model) describes five stages in which children move through the following stages: (1) *Emergent* (e.g., write in letter-like forms); (2) *Letter Name Stage* (e.g., short vowels, consonant blends); (3) *Within Word Pattern Stage* (e.g., r-controlled vowels, long vowel patterns, diphthongs); (4) *Syllables and Affixes Stage* (e.g., inflectional endings, syllabication); and (5) *Derivational Relations Stage* (e.g., assimilated and absorbed prefixes, suffixes and parts of speech).

As schools become more academically diverse, it is increasingly important to provide spelling instruction that is responsive to each child's current developmental level (Graham et al., 2008). Alarming, in a study on spelling instruction conducted by Graham et al. (2008), most teachers reported making few or no adaptations for students' varying developmental levels. As a result of using traditional methods, teachers who provided limited adaptations reported that 29% of their students had difficulty with spelling.

Researchers have found that teachers often shy away from modifying how they teach spelling because they lack confidence in their ability to teach the complex underlying linguistic sources of knowledge that are needed to spell correctly (Graham et al., 2008; Masterson & Apel, 2010). Therefore, teachers traditionally focus on teaching children to memorize words instead of helping children internalize effective spelling strategies (Loeffler, 2005). In order to improve spelling instruction and make it more meaningful for all children, teachers can explicitly engage children in learning about orthographic patterns and

phonemic awareness strategies (Masterson & Apel, 2010) while making adaptations and individualizing progress monitoring.

Spelling Assessment and Instruction

Explicit Instruction

Before beginning spelling instruction, researchers suggest performing a pre-assessment of skills with each student (Masterson & Apel, 2010). Calhoon, Greenberg, and Hunter (2010) state that, “[i]t is only by systematically looking at the types of words students get wrong, and the errors they make, that one can decide how to tailor appropriate spelling instruction” (p. 160). A pre-assessment can help determine a baseline for each student and assist teachers in planning appropriate spelling activities for individuals, small groups, and the whole class. The Gentry Writing Model (Gentry, 2005) and the Primary Spelling Inventory (Bear et al., 2011) are examples of developmental pre-assessments.

Explicit spelling instruction is an intentional presentation of orthographic knowledge from the teacher to the students. This occurs during formal lessons that include instruction in phonics and phonological awareness, word sorting, and spelling games, and also throughout the day by encouraging invented spelling, conducting teacher and peer conferences, and allowing opportunities for student proofreading (Graham et al., 2008). Research-based literacy curriculums such as The Four Blocks Literacy Model (Cunningham, Hall, & Sigmon, 1999) and the Balanced Literacy Framework (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996) include daily instructional time devoted to letter/word study for elementary school students beginning in kindergarten. During these lessons, teachers help students notice sound/symbol relationships, word meanings, word structures, and how the spelling system works (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996).

Adaptations

In addition to different instructional models, there are multiple adaptations that can be used by all teachers to help students become successful spellers. To increase struggling students’ ability to identify key spelling patterns, teachers can provide additional exposure to words in authentic ways such as including them in the classroom writing center and making spelling games part of students’ nightly homework. Other ways that teachers have reported adapting instruction include re-teaching key skills to small groups, conferencing more often with weaker spellers, modifying the amount of words for each student based on their developmental level, using spelling aids for writing, using the computer to aid spelling, and modifying testing procedures (Graham et al., 2008).

Individualized Progress Monitoring

The “Friday Test” (Masterson & Abel, 2010) has been the most popular method among teachers for measuring students’ spelling progress. With a strong focus on memorization, students traditionally receive their word list on Monday, practice their words throughout the week, and spell them during a group test on Friday. Graded tests are sent home and a brand new word list is given the following week regardless of the students’ performance. Due to the isolated nature of this type of

assessment, students may not understand how reading, writing, and spelling are interrelated and necessary for communication.

An alternative way to monitor spelling progress is through individualized spelling conferences that occur within the context of students’ writing and emphasize the importance of spelling as one part of communication. For the purpose of helping students understand the link between spelling, reading, and writing and assessing students’ growth, teachers can consider three main questions when designing individualized spelling conferences: (1) How will individual conferencing be managed? (2) How will words be selected for each child? and (3) How will spelling instruction be linked to reading and writing during the conferences to illustrate the meaningful connection between these subjects?

Explicit Spelling Instruction in the Classroom

I first observed the use of explicit spelling instruction and individualized spelling conferences when I was student teaching in Auckland, New Zealand many years ago. When I became a second grade teacher, I decided to use these effective strategies to allow research-based data to inform my instructional process. The Four Blocks Literacy Model (Cunningham et al., 1999) was the literacy curriculum used by my school district; therefore, my formal spelling/word study lessons occurred during the Working with Words block (the other blocks were Guided Reading, Self-Selected Reading, and Writing). During this 15-20 minute period each day, the students and I practiced using different word wall words, examined spelling patterns, and played with words to increase orthographic knowledge.

Informal spelling instruction occurred during guided reading groups and individual student conferences conducted during Writer’s Workshop. Students were encouraged to use invented spelling in their writing, proofread their writing during peer and individual editing sessions, and use spelling aids within the classroom to assist them in their writing tasks. In order to make spelling instruction multilevel, I conducted a pre-assessment of each child’s spelling knowledge using the graded word wall list from *The Teacher’s Guide to the Four Blocks* (Cunningham et al., 1999) at the beginning of the year. After assessing each child’s performance on the pre-assessment, I used *The Gentry Writing Scale* (2005) to record the developmental spelling stage of each child. Data from the pre-assessment helped me determine a starting point for monitoring each child’s spelling progress.

To adapt instruction and testing to meet the needs of all of my students, I recruited and trained a parent helper to assist in conducting individualized spelling conferences. Each Friday, students were given a list of independent assignments (e.g., play a math game with a friend, read the next chapter in your guided reading book, write a poem) to complete at their own pace in their learning centers. During this time, students were called to the spelling table individually to meet with the parent helper or myself. Students brought their writing folders and a pencil when they came to their conference.

A variety of methods were used to discuss the student’s spelling development and determine new words for future

study. First, we gave the child a spelling test on their current list of words. Any missed words were added to their spelling journal for the following week. Then a pretest was given using the five word wall words chosen from the Four Blocks graded list for the week. Any words missed on the pretest were also added to the student's spelling journal. Next, we discussed the student's spelling progress for the week and together selected another small group (i.e., 2-5) of words from misspelled words in the student's own writing. Finally, the student was asked if there were any words he would like to learn how to spell that were not yet in his journal. These 1-2 words were added to the list for a total of 5-10 words. The number of words added to each student's journal was based on their developmental spelling level (determined by the initial pre-assessment of grade level words) and their performance on previous tests.

For example, Amy, the proficient speller, may typically spell all of the words from her previous list correctly and only miss one or two words on the weekly pretest. In her case, the majority of the conference time would be spent looking through her writing and discussing words and word patterns with which she was struggling. After adding 5-6 misspelled words from her writing to her new list, Amy would be asked to suggest a few extra words that she was interested in learning for a total of 8-10 words. In contrast, John, the struggling speller, may typically miss 50% of the words from his previous list and 3 out of 5 words on the pretest. His conference time would be spent more on identifying patterns in his missed words and working on strategies for spelling them correctly in the future. The missed words from his test would be added to his new list along with the missed words on the pretest. One or two misspelled words would be selected from his writing and added to his list for a total of 5-6 words.

Table 1 describes the steps necessary for preparing to conduct individualized spelling conferences and Table 2 summarizes the steps of conducting a conference. Additional considerations include: (1) using words that are meaningful to the child – people, places, special times of year; (2) making studying fun (e.g., buddy study time, practice tests); (3) noting improvements when you see words spelled correctly in future writing; and (4) putting previous spelling words back on the list if you see them misspelled repeatedly in future writing.

Final Thoughts

Because spelling knowledge is so crucial to young children's reading and writing development, it is critical that explicit teaching and differentiated strategies be used to maximize the benefits of spelling instruction during the elementary years. As children become confident in their ability to spell and identify patterns in words, they will be more likely to write freely and acquire foundational reading skills, such as word attack and word recognition (Graham et al., 2008).

Seminal research in developmental spelling (Read, 1971; Bear & Templeton, 1998; Henderson, 1985) provides a firm foundation for curricular choices that incorporate word study and individualized strategies. Abbot (2001) found that students engaged in word study spelling instruction outperform their peers engaged in traditional spelling groups in overall orthographic development. Research also provides evidence that struggling spellers need to learn to monitor their misspelled words in order to use their knowledge of sound and symbol correspondences effectively (Darch, Kim, Johnson, & James, 2000; Jones, 2001) and that differentiated instruction must begin with data on students' current knowledge (Hilden & Jones, 2012).

Literacy curriculums provide a starting point for introducing formal spelling instruction and word study to students, but teachers can use additional informal strategies along with data about their students in order to continually develop their instruction and improve student outcomes. If teachers can shift from traditional spelling programs focused on memorization to developmental programs focused on internalizing effective spelling strategies, students will be more likely to expand their spelling vocabularies and develop positive attitudes about their ability to spell words independently.



Dr. Anna H. Hall is an Assistant Professor in Early Childhood Education at Clemson University. Her research interests include early literacy and early childhood writing instruction. She was a classroom teacher for nine years before starting her career as a teacher educator. Dr. Hall can be contacted at ah2@clemson.edu.

Steps for Preparing an Individualized Spelling Program

Step	Teacher Action
1	Conduct a developmental pre-assessment with each child.
2	Engage children in journal writing and Writer's Workshop in order to create authentic opportunities for selecting spelling words.
3	Enlist and train a classroom volunteer to conduct spelling conferences.
4	Set aside 10-15 minutes daily or 30-45 minutes weekly for individual spelling conferences. Conduct conferences while other students are engaged in independent work or in learning centers.
5	Conduct word-study instruction as a whole-group to highlight high-frequency words and word patterns.

Table 1

Steps for Conducting an Individualized Spelling Conference

Step	Teacher Action
1	Have student bring spelling notebook, writing folder, and pencil to the table.
2	Bring assessment sheet to record child's test score as well as anecdotal notes about spelling strengths and weaknesses.
3	Week 1: Give initial test on 5 high-frequency words from grade-level list in current literacy curriculum.
4	Week 2 and beyond: Give test over last week's words – add any missed words to the student's new list in their spelling notebook (continue to add a missed word for as many weeks as it takes for the child to learn the word).
5	Look through the student's writing with him or her and find developmentally appropriate words that are misspelled – add 2-3 words to the list.
6	Ask the child if there are special words that they would like to learn how to spell – add 1-2 to the list.

Table 2

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