

This article is part of a [series drawn from work in the *Handbook of Reading Research: Volume III* \(Kamil, Mosenthal, Pearson, & Barr, 2000\)](#). (*Research Excerpt taken from: Development and Instruction*, Shane Templeton Darrell Morris)

Reconceptualizing Spelling

“Writing in 1980, Richard Venezky observed that “few cognitive psychologists have confessed an interest in spelling processes and only a handful in the last decade have even suggested that this topic was worthy of serious investigation. Similarly, the public schools exhibit limited enthusiasm for spelling” (p. 10). This state of affairs has definitely changed. In the past 20 years, psychologists -- cognitive, developmental, educational -- as well as language arts educators have all focused on spelling to a degree not seen since the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when spelling instruction was considered the first step toward learning to read.

The ways in which spelling has been conceptualized have evolved dramatically over the last few decades, from considering spelling simply as a tool for writing to recognizing that spelling offers perhaps the best window on what an individual knows about words. There has been a similar reconceptualization of the development of spelling knowledge: It is now seen primarily as a process of conceptual learning, rather than one of rote memorization. This review explores the evolution of this reconceptualization through a discussion of spelling as a system, as a subject of instruction, and as a psychological and linguistic process in writing and reading.”

Implications for Instruction

Today, at the beginning of the 21st century, we are seeing a definite evolution in the way spelling is conceptualized. Instructional implications have emerged that build upon the twin foundations of developmental appropriateness and the logic of the English spelling system. Instructional models range along a continuum from more explicit and deductive (e.g., [Henry, 1996](#)) to more implicit or inductive (e.g., [Bear, Invernizzi, & Templeton, 1996](#); [Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 2000](#); Hughes & Searle, 1997; [Invernizzi, Abouzeid, & Gill, 1994](#)).

For most students it appears that an inductive or exploratory approach is appropriate, characterized by Hughes and Searle (1997) as a search for the “logical, negotiable patterns” (p. 133) in the system. The developmental learner explores words, seeking after pattern. The particular type of pattern to be explored -- alphabetic, within word, or meaning -- is a function of the developmental level of the learner. For severely struggling spellers who are working at an appropriate developmental level, a more deductive, systematic, and direct approach may be preferred.

Learning to spell is a developmental process, and for most students it requires direct facilitation and guidance. We cannot assume that spelling may be acquired on an “as needed” basis ([Allal, 1997](#)). Though the latter practice clearly models the importance of spelling and its application in the context of writing, it relies on a strong teacher knowledge base to present appropriate words that reflect the appropriate patterns at the appropriate time. More important, however, even if we assume that all teachers have this knowledge base readily available, such incidental instruction does not provide students the degree of exposure necessary for abstraction of appropriate spelling patterns. Providing opportunities to examine words and make connections across words to abstract patterns strengthens pathways within and between lexical items -- quite literally establishing connections at the neurological level ([Foorman, 1995](#)).

Systematic spelling instruction drives orthographic knowledge that is important both to spelling and to word recognition -- and, indirectly, to comprehension ([Perfetti, 1985](#); [Stanovich & Cunningham, 1993](#)). [Templeton \(1991\)](#) suggests that spelling instruction ought to be reconceptualized from having as its purpose the simple mastery of conventional spellings to emphasizing more broadly word study. What type of instruction is of most benefit? Given the studies that have investigated the effect of examining words in the context of an active search for pattern, some general conclusions are strongly suggested:

- Significant amounts of reading and writing are critical if students are to advance in spelling ability.

- For all children in the early years of schooling, invented spelling should be encouraged. Once students begin to explore spelling on a regular basis, they should be encouraged to look for patterns; this reflects the importance of the visual comparison of words.
- For most students an inductive or exploratory approach is appropriate; for severely struggling spellers who are working at an appropriate developmental level, a more deductive, systematic, and direct approach often is preferred.
- There should be an emphasis on the interrelatedness of spelling and phonics, morphology, and vocabulary as students move farther along in development. This emphasis should include the explicit presentation and discussion of how morphology or meaning is represented in the spelling system. Students who make errors such as SOLEM for *solemn* and DEFANITE for *definite* have the cognitive sophistication to conceptualize how the orthographic representation remains constant, despite changes in sound, in related words such as *solemnity* and *define* (Templeton, 1989, [1992b](#)).

In order to provide appropriate instruction, however, teachers need first to assess their students' levels of spelling knowledge ([Henderson, 1990](#); [Morris, Blanton, Blanton, Nowacek, & Perney, 1995](#); [Morris, Blanton, Blanton, & Perney, 1995](#); [Morris, Nelson, & Perney, 1986](#); [Schlagal, 1992](#)). It is too often the case that students are presented with new information about words before they have consolidated what they know about known words. Once teachers determine where students fall along a developmental continuum, the appropriate known words in reading may be examined to support conceptual development for spelling patterns; this pattern knowledge then can be extended to unknown words.

Because individual students progress at different rates along this developmental continuum, spelling instruction should accommodate individual differences. Morris and his colleagues explored the issue of defining and determining students' spelling instructional level (Blanton, Blanton, Nowacek, & Perney, 1995). This research established that when third-grade students whose spelling instructional level is second grade are taught at this level, they perform better than similar students who are taught inappropriately (i.e., "over their heads"); they learn more about the spelling system than did the low spellers who were taught inappropriately and are better able to apply this knowledge.

Whether teachers fashion their own word-study approach based on professional resources or teach with a published program of some type, there is a need for them to understand both the spelling system and the stages of the learner ([Barone, 1992](#); Ganske, 1994; Hughes & Searle, 1997; Morris, Blanton, Blanton, Nowacek, & Perney, 1995). Indeed, teachers frequently express concern about a lack of knowledge regarding how best to teach spelling or of the nature of the spelling system itself ([Gill & Scharer, 1996](#)). Many teachers believe that emphasizing types of spelling patterns is important, but their knowledge of the nature and possible sequence of these patterns is limited. Hughes and Searle (1997) concluded that

[M]any teachers themselves see spelling as more arbitrary than systematic; at least, they give that impression to their students. Even when that is not the case, it is likely that their own knowledge of the spelling system is largely implicit or relatively poorly understood. For example, they may teach spelling as a solely sound-based system long after that is useful.... If we teachers do not believe that spelling has logical, negotiable patterns, how can we hope to help children develop that insight? (p. 133)

This state of affairs suggests that more attention needs to be given to developing a knowledge base in the content and application of a word-study curriculum in both pre-service teacher education and at the inservice level.

Conclusion

In his landmark study, Cummings (1988) characterized the spelling system of American English in terms of an "intricate simplicity." While its intricacies lie in the different levels on which it represents information from sound through meaning, its simplicity lies in the design and consistency with which it represents this information at each level (Templeton, 1992a). Educators' knowledge of the nature of the English spelling system will better inform their instruction. Learners' appreciation of the consistency and simplicity resonates with their advancing cognitive sophistication and knowledge. We can only hope that the recent dramatic reconceptualization of spelling and of learning to spell will be more widely disseminated. Were this to occur, we might attain what Cummings suggested: "It

seems probable that a better understanding of the American English orthographic system would lead us to a better teaching of literacy” (pp. 462-463).