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Vintage Visions

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Vintage Visions

What's on the horizon can be richly illuminated by that which shines from the past. This section features two articles previously published in the *Michigan Reading Journal* that remain poignant in their relevance to today's classroom.

First is a 1968 article on spelling by Ron Cramer, then an assistant professor and now a distinguished professor of education at Oakland University. Second is a 1993 article by Mark Conley, an associate professor of teacher education at Michigan State University and a past editor of the *Journal*. His vintage article is about a professor's venture into public school classrooms. Both authors revisit their topics with contemporary pieces, which are printed immediately after their vintage articles.

The Influence of Reading on Spelling Achievement*

BY RONALD L. CRAMER

The relationship between reading and spelling has been investigated and discussed by numerous writers for many years. Horn and Otto stated that:

The relationships between reading and spelling are significant. Comparisons made of children's reading and spelling achievement show close correlation. Not all good readers are good spellers and not all poor spellers are poor readers, but, in the large majority of cases facility in both reading and spelling seem to provide a mutually strengthening interaction.¹

Townsend² investigated the relationships between spelling and reading comprehension, and spelling and vocabulary using scores of 2,000 children in grades three through seven. Median correlation between reading comprehension and spelling for the entire group was .51, between vocabulary and spelling .63. There was a trend for the correlations between reading comprehension and spelling to decrease over grade levels while vocabulary and spelling correlations increased. She concluded that: (1) correlations for spelling and vocabulary tend to be higher than those for spelling and reading comprehension, and (2) correlations on the secondary level were higher than those reported in most earlier studies. The investigator noted a tendency for good spellers to have superior vocabularies and to read well, and for retardation in spelling to be associated with low vocabulary and inferior reading comprehension.

Russell investigated the relationship of spelling ability to reading and vocabulary achievement for 135 pupils in grades three and five whose spelling achievement ranged from 2.0 to 7.1. Reading tests

included measures of word recognition in context and isolation and word meaning vocabulary. Russell drew several relevant inferences from this study:

1. The language arts reinforce one another.
2. Poor spelling is not necessarily caused by deficiencies in reading or vocabulary. Word recognition and vocabulary abilities seem more closely related to spelling ability than to level of comprehension in reading.
3. Spelling practice on difficult words should include work on recognition in isolation and in context.
4. There is no basis for emphasis upon learning to spell through reading; in fact, certain techniques in learning to spell may interfere with comprehension in reading.³

Morrison and Perry⁴ found that the correlation between spelling and reading for children in grades three to eight ranged from .75 to .85 with a mean correlation of .79 for the total sample of 1,007 children. The investigators suggested that the high correlation at the primary level might indicate a

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close relationship between readiness for spelling and reading.

Plessas and Petty⁵ pointed out that although good spellers were usually good readers and poor spellers were frequently poor readers not all poor spellers were poor readers. They maintained that the close relationship between reading and spelling has two significant implications for teaching poor readers: (1) children should not be expected to spell words they cannot recognize and (2) there is little evidence to suggest that spelling instruction fosters growth in reading.

Spache conducted a thorough review of the literature looking for casual factors in spelling disability. After reviewing nearly all of the major studies prior to 1941 he concluded that "...a coefficient of .60 is typical of the association between vocabulary and spelling."⁶ The investigator contended that reading vocabulary is a more significant determinant of spelling success than intelligence, particularly in the first five grades.

Gilbert^{7,8,9,10} has shown that improvement in spelling occurred during high school and college even when formal instruction in spelling was not provided. He reported that recency of words encountered in reading was an important factor in spelling improvement for ninth grade children. Poor spellers failed to profit to the same degree that good spellers did. Among college subjects, amount of gain in spelling was influenced by the type of material and purpose of the reader. The subjects showed the greatest gains on words recently encountered in reading but the gains were also significant for other words. He concluded that the discontinuance of spelling instruction in high school is justified only for good spellers.

Plessas and Ladley¹¹ reported the effects of corrective reading instruction on spelling improvement of 73 poor readers. The subjects made a significant gain in reading but did not show similar gains in spelling ability. The investigators concluded that neither improvement in word recognition ability nor recency of word encounter in reading contributed significantly to growth in spelling for retarded readers. This corroborated Gilbert's¹² finding that poor spellers and poor readers were less likely to make incidental gains in spelling from reading instruction.

Summary

Available evidence points to a close relationship between learning to read and learning to spell. This

relationship suggests that reading instruction may have a beneficial influence upon spelling growth. A close examination of the studies cited indicates that the following conclusions are warranted:

1. There is sufficient evidence to indicate that reading ability and reading instruction can promote spelling growth.
2. Recency of word-encounter in reading may aid spelling achievement for good spellers but apparently makes no significant contribution to growth in spelling for retarded readers.
3. Reading improvement has less influence on growth in spelling achievement for retarded and poorer readers than for good readers.
4. Reading vocabulary appears to be the most closely related to spelling success at elementary levels.
5. Word recognition difficulties are closely associated with poor spelling achievement.

It is well to keep in mind the warning of Betts,¹³ Yoakam,¹⁴ and Gates¹⁵ that although spelling and reading are closely related they are also quite different. Spelling is essentially an encoding process whereas reading is the inverse of the process of encoding and hence requires decoding ability.

1. Ernest Horn and Henry Otto, **Spelling Instruction A Curriculum Wide Approach**, Bureau of Laboratory Schools Publication No. 2 (Austin: University of Texas, 1954), p. 6.
2. Agatha Townsend, "An Investigation of Certain Relationships of Spelling With Reading and Academic Aptitude," **Journal of Educational Research**, 40 (February, 1947), 465-471.
3. David Harris Russell, "Spelling Ability in Relation to Reading and Vocabulary Achievement," **Elementary English Review**, 23 (January, 1946), 37.
4. Ida E. Morrison and Ida F. Perry, "Spelling and Reading Relationships With Incidence of Retardation and Acceleration," **Journal of Educational Research**, 52 (February, 1959), 222-227.
5. Gus P. Plessas and Walter T. Petty, "The Spelling Plight of the Poor Reader," **Elementary English**, 39 (May, 1962), 463-466.
6. George Spache, "Spelling Disability Correlates I-Factors Probably Causal in Spelling

- Disability," **Journal of Educational Research**, 34 (April, 1941), 574.
7. Luther C. Gilbert, "Effect of Reading on Spelling in the Ninth Grade," **School Review**, 42 (March, 1934), 197-204.
 8. Luther C. Gilbert, "A Study of the Effect of Reading on Spelling," **Journal of Education Research**, 28 (April, 1935), 570-576.
 9. Luther C. Gilbert, "Effect of Reading on Spelling in the Secondary School," **California Quarterly of Secondary Education**, 9 (April, 1934), 269-275.
 10. Luther C. Gilbert and Doris Wilcox Gilbert, "The Improvement of Spelling Through Reading," **Journal of Educational Research**, 37 (February, 1944), 13-23.
 11. Gus P. Plessas and Dortha Macie Ladley, "Spelling Ability and Poor Reading," **Elementary School Journal**, 63 (April, 1964), 404-408.
 12. Gilbert and Gilbert, *op cit*.
 13. Emmett A. Betts, "Inter-relationship of Reading and Spelling," **Elementary English Review**, 22 (January, 1945), 13-23.
 14. G. A. Yoakam, "The Relation of Reading to Spelling and Handwriting," **Report of the Fifth Annual Conference on Reading** (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg Press, 1950), pp. 72-80.
 15. Arthur I. Gates, "Reading in Relation to Spelling," **Texas Outlook**, (January, 1946), 8-10.

Some Thoughts About Spelling Instruction

BY RONALD L. CRAMER

The first purpose of this article is to ask you to consider, or perhaps reconsider, some of the spelling mythology that has impeded the teaching of spelling. The myths I shall explore are harmful for two reasons: they have no basis in reality, and they mislead teachers into focusing on unproductive explanations for spelling failure. The second purpose of this article is to describe three pillars of competent spelling: integrated reading, writing, and spelling instruction. Each has its own separate role and instructional responsibility; each has its own integrated connections that mutually strengthen spelling competency.

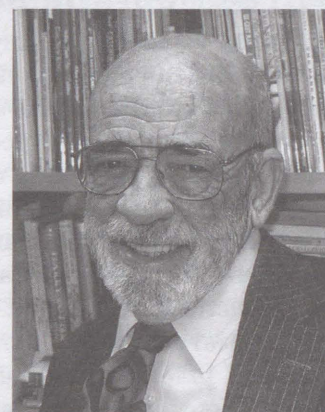
Introduction

The fundamental purpose of writing is meaning. Writers have innumerable purposes, including intent to inform, arouse, persuade, and pleasure their audience. Spelling is merely the orthography through which writers encode their meaning. Some writers are excellent spellers, some indifferent. Few give much thought to spelling. Indeed, to do so would interfere with the encoding of meaning.

Good spelling does not make for good writing; neither does poor spelling make for poor writing. Good spelling aids fluency, but it is not fundamental to good writing. The fundamental tools of writing are far more complex than accurate spelling. Nevertheless, writers look to all their tools and strive to acquire reasonable command of every tool that serves their writing, including spelling. Still, it is good to keep in mind that the accurate spelling you observe in print

may be attributed to a good editor or secretary more often than you might imagine. I expect that this article will be no exception.

Keep spelling in perspective. Readers do not read to enjoy good spelling, though they rightly expect it. I've been an avid reader for more decades than I care to reveal. Yet, I have never read a piece and said, "Wow, the spelling here is marvelous." True, good spelling makes reading smoother and gives the reader uninterrupted access to meaning. Poor spelling distracts and annoys. Writers in hot pursuit of meaning may get careless about their spelling. But this is seldom a disaster. Spell checkers and editors have a function in the writing process. The novelist Sherwood Anderson enjoyed the comments his wife and mother-in-law made as they edited his drafts. He even delighted in their mildly derogatory



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comments. Anderson knew his editors were better spellers than he. He knew something else, as well. He knew his worth as a writer did not reside in spotless mechanics.

Some might question Sherwood Anderson's hold of literacy, given the abundance of errors that appeared in early drafts. But this misunderstanding will not bear the weight of objective examination. Anderson's novels were admired by generations of authors and critics. Their admiration had nothing to do with spelling. What they admired was Anderson's unique capacity to reveal a world of meaning. Readers seek wisdom, insight, delight, pleasure, and information from writers. Accurate spelling is an adjunct to good writing because it smoothes the path to meaning. So keep spelling in perspective. It serves literacy. It is not literacy per se. If that were the case, we'd all look to the National Spelling Bee to identify our writing heroes.

Three Spelling Myths

Some say we live by our myths. If so, it is good to be aware of the myths that inform or deform teaching. Three spelling myths are examined below: Poor spellers are dumb, poor spellers are lazy, and poor spellers are learning disabled. All are based on the premise that spelling is a useful measure of spelling and literacy learning. It is not. Spelling assesses spelling and certain elements of phonetic and structural analysis. It does not tell us anything substantial about intelligence, reading, writing, or potential to learn. Spelling is an exceedingly poor measure of what really matters in literacy. Spelling is the handmaiden of reading and writing; it is not the king, queen, prince, or princess of language arts. Handmaidens do their work in the background. They are appreciated, but they do not wear the crown.

Poor Spellers are Dumb

The Patron Saint of poor spellers must be Andrew Jackson, who said, "It's a damn poor mind that can only think of one way to spell a word." I love that observation; it makes me want to shout, "Poor spellers of the world, *untie*." (It may take you a while to get that one.) Yet, in the public imagination, poor spellers are dumb, though research finds no convincing link between intelligence and spelling. Of course, poor spelling and low intelligence may reside in the same individual. But spelling simply does not measure cognitive capacity. Furthermore, most poor spellers have adequate to excellent intelligence. Most poor spellers

can become adequate or better spellers. But they need integrated language arts instruction that focuses on the three pillars of spelling: reading, writing, and systematic spelling instruction.

Are poor spellers doomed to inferior positions in society? Hardly. Poor spelling can be found in the drafts of famous writers, in the prescriptions written by physicians, and in the speeches written by public figures. Occasionally, poor spelling crops up in the public domain. Perhaps you recall the infamous *potato* incident. A vice president of the United States made a spelling error in the presence of the press. The press drew a picture of a man in high office so dumb as to add an additional vowel to the word *potato* (*potatoe*). He never lived it down. Obviously, adding a *silent e* to a word hasn't the slightest thing to do with intelligence. Never mind. Misspell a word in public and, *ipso facto*, you are dumb. It happened to Vice President Dan Quayle about 15 years ago, and the incident is still remembered and treated as a public display of dumbness. Later, his spelling miscue figured marginally in his inability to gain traction in a subsequent attempt to run for president of the United States. The first thing the press reported when the former vice president announced that he was considering running for president was, of course, the potato incident.

Even individuals one might suppose would know better, misjudge poor spellers' intelligence. Consider this scenario. A history teacher is conducting a lecture-discussion of causes of the civil war. Unexpectedly, the superintendent and chair of the Board of Education walk into the room. The teacher had put a list of words on the board, including these two misspellings: *slaverie*, *antebelum*. The lecture-discussion went well with good participation from the students. It would be nice to think that the substance of the lecture might outweigh the minor miscues. Never! The visiting dignitaries remembered and commented on the misspelled words. They focused on minor miscues and gave only marginal attention to the lecture-discussion. To them, the misspellings signaled illiteracy and inferior intelligence.

Have you ever used poor spelling to judge the literacy or intelligence of others? If you've never done it, you are a rare and admirable person. Why do we do these things? Well, one reason is we're human. But spelling miscues are a poor hook on which to hang a judgment regarding intelligence and literacy.

Poor Spellers Are Lazy

Richard Gentry, a prominent spelling expert, recalls a college professor's diagnosis of his poor spelling: "Mr. Gentry, anyone as intelligent as you are, who can't spell, is lazy!" Seventeen years removed from that uninformed diagnosis, Richard Gentry wrote one of the most widely read spelling books in recent times, *Spel is a Four Letter Word*. Gentry's book tells of his struggle with spelling. Yet, in school he worked hard on spelling, received straight A's, perfect test scores, and won third prize in the county spelling bee. Lazy? I don't think so.

I do not dispute the possibility that lack of effort contributes to lack of achievement. This is surely true. But we turn too readily to the *lazy* explanation for poor achievement, especially with young children. Every teacher has taught children who could run rings around the Energizer Bunny. Yet, these same children may achieve poorly in literacy. The *lazy* diagnosis is unproductive. It does not get to the heart of the problem. It explains nothing. Abandon it for something more diagnostic. Gentry overcame his spelling deficiencies, which he attributed to spelling instruction gone wrong. He suggests an alternative approach to learning to spell, which involves less reliance on brute memory and more reliance on activities related to integrated reading, writing, and spelling instruction.

Poor Spellers Are Learning Disabled

An intelligent young boy struggled with spelling. He never understood why he was a poor speller. Later in life, that young boy, Edmond Henderson, became a professor of reading and my teacher. Throughout his career, he pursued his interest in spelling research at the University of Virginia. His research and the research of his students constitute a significant percentage of the spelling scholarship in the past four decades. His boyhood nemesis became his life's work. Were he a schoolboy today, his problem might well be identified as a *learning disability*. The percentage of children categorized as *learning disabled* has increased every decade since the term first appeared in the 1960s. Are brain anomalies contagious like measles? Why does America have more learning-disabled children than any other western nation? I reject the brain anomaly hypotheses. I doubt that our schools are filled with children whose brain function is abnormal.

If your child can't spell, today's diagnosis might well be that your child has a *learning disability*. More

likely, if your child can't spell, he needs better and more enduring spelling instruction. Spelling instruction in some schools is not part of an organized spelling curriculum. In some cases, spelling is neglected altogether. There is little systematic, integrated spelling instruction in schools today. Further, there may be little or no spelling instruction after sixth grade, and high schools seldom teach spelling in any serious way. So, to the degree that children are poor spellers, blame it on lack of effective spelling instruction. On a positive note, most poor spellers can learn to spell adequately or better under the right instructional conditions, which I have described below.

Integrating Reading, Writing and Spelling Instruction

Introduction

Inadequate spelling instruction is the biggest roadblock to spelling success. Inadequate intelligence, laziness, or learning disabilities are not major causes of spelling deficiencies. It is true that some children struggle with spelling more than others. But even children who progress slowly can become adequate spellers. Good instruction is needed, but even good instruction will not make every child a good speller. And that is acceptable. Not every child needs to be a spelling champion. Different levels of achievement are inevitable and normal in all areas of human endeavor. Accept differences. Avoid the temptation to look for questionable and exotic explanations for poor spelling. Instead, look to good instruction.

What is good instruction? My analogy for good reading, writing, and spelling instruction harkens back to my childhood. Farmers I've known milked their cows by hand while sitting on a three-legged stool. A stool with one lonely leg will soon dump you into the muck. A two-legged stool is safer but does not provide maximum stability. What works best is a three-legged stool. Likewise, a three-legged instructional stance for teaching spelling works best: You must develop a strong reading program that exposes children to an abundance of literature. You must implement a writing program that allows children to write for extended periods of time. Finally, you must teach spelling systematically, not incidentally. While instruction must be integrated, each area requires its own instructional time and attention. The three pillars of an integrated language arts approach to spelling are briefly described below.

Reading

Traditionally, reading preceded writing in the curriculum. Writing was delayed until a suitable set of words could be correctly spelled. This delayed writing until late second or early third grade, an unacceptable delay. Invented spelling was seldom used before 1960. The great strength of an integrated language arts approach to spelling is that it allows each discipline to contribute to one another.

The connection between reading, spelling, and writing is most pronounced in the primary grades. Word study that occurs in reading instruction helps children discover patterns and relationships among words. Discovering patterns within words becomes applicable to dozens of unknown but related words. Reading contributes to spelling, but another partner is needed—writing.

Writing

Writing provides an authentic forum for *producing* the raw materials of *written* language. In the absence of writing, children do not have a genuine reason for producing written language. When reading and writing are taught together, each discipline contributes knowledge useful to the other disciplines. For instance, readers must supply the sounds that fit a given cluster of letters within words. Writers, on the other hand, have the sounds of letters in their heads, but they must supply the appropriate letters. Tracking back and forth between reading and writing strengthens the knowledge that children need to read, write, and spell. Readers are consumers of messages written by others; writers are creators of written messages. Children need to be consumers of written language and producers of their written language.

Children should write on their first day of school even if their writing is nothing more than wavy lines and strings of letters. When this is done, spelling and reading are the beneficiaries. Writing helps children discover how language is encoded and how meaning

is communicated through the written word. Through writing, children learn how letters and sounds are related and how words exhibit spelling patterns and meaning connections.

Spelling Instruction

Teach spelling systematically. It is a mistake to depend on incidental learning as a means of learning to spell. Systematic spelling instruction means teaching a core spelling vocabulary, spelling principles, and spelling strategies. Systematic spelling instruction requires specific instructional time, materials, and activities. There needs to be systematic review of words and concepts and regular assessment of progress within and across levels. Spelling must have a solid place in the language arts curriculum. Until this is accomplished, spelling will always lag behind other components of the language arts curriculum.

Systematic spelling instruction should begin in first or possibly second grade and continue until mastery of a core spelling vocabulary and basic spelling principles have been acquired. For many children, competent spelling can be achieved by the end of eighth grade or sooner. On the other hand, many children exit eighth grade without basic spelling knowledge. When this happens, the deficiency will not be addressed in high school because the high school curriculum neglects spelling. The whole language movement taught us to assume that sufficient spelling knowledge would be the natural outcome of engagement in reading and writing. This seemed plausible, but it proved not to be the case. Far too many children do not learn to spell competently because they receive little or no systematic spelling instruction. Having made that point, I am not underestimating the importance of reading and writing in learning to spell. On the contrary, reading and writing make a substantial contribution to spelling achievement. The language arts curriculum should be rich and diverse with a balance maintained between spelling instruction and reading and writing instruction.

Author's Note

I have not supplied references for this piece. I chose instead to have an informal conversation without the usual academic flourishes. Much of what I have said rests on my years of experience as a teacher and director of reading clinics. I once naively believed I might find *the truth* about teaching through research. Didn't happen. Now I see that it never will. Research can suggest possibilities, but only teachers can turn possibilities into instructional realities.