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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 in-

vestigator 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 Perry¹ 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 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 re-

ported 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.

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3. David Harris Russell, "Spelling Ability in Relation to Reading and Vocabulary Achievement," *Elementary English Review*, 23 (January, 1946), 37.
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12. Gilbert and Gilbert, *op cit*.
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