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Helping students learn to spell : a look inside a second grade classroom

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Abstract

Learning how to spell is a complex, developmental process. This research paper describes how second grade students improved their spelling development in the context of daily reading and writing. Realizing that instruction in spelling patterns and strategies is needed for most students, this paper describes how instruction was based upon the results of the Developmental Spelling Test and the students' writing samples. Four case studies will be presented in order to provide an in-depth look at the improvements that were demonstrated by the class as a whole.

Helping students learn to spell:

A look inside a second grade classroom

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Learning how to spell is a complex, developmental process. This research paper describes how second grade students improved their spelling development in the context of daily reading and writing. Realizing that instruction in spelling patterns and strategies is needed for most students, this paper describes how instruction was based upon the results of the Developmental Spelling Test and the students' writing samples. Four case studies will be presented in order to provide an in-depth look at the improvements that were demonstrated by the class as a whole.

Lying on the top of my desk, in the corner of my second grade classroom, was the book entitled <u>You Kan Red This!</u> by Sandra Wilde, a professional book about spelling and punctuation in whole language classrooms. Kaitlin, a highly observant student of mine, noticed the book as she was waiting to ask me a question (pseudonyms will be used for actual students throughout this paper). Before asking her question, she pointed to the title and with a very puzzled look asked, "Why is this spelled that way?" It was at this point that I realized she knew the conventional spellings for those words and was waiting for an explanation for why the author chose to use this title without "considering the reader" (after all, this happened to be the focus of a previous mini-lesson!).

<u>You Kan Red This!</u>, the book that caused Kaitlin to question its title, was sitting on my desk for a specific reason. I had begun to read books containing research on spelling development and spelling instruction in the classroom. My goal was to become more knowledgeable in these areas and better meet the needs of my second graders who are learning how to spell. As I read through various books and articles, I found that many teachers have questions about spelling and the role of spelling instruction in the classroom (Templeton & Morris, 1999).

Two years ago, my school district adopted a new literacy series which included spelling lists and workbooks. Prior to having this set curriculum, each classroom devised their own set of words to study during the week. Parents and teachers alike were concerned about this method and, therefore, were interested in looking at a basal series with an integrated spelling component. After using the spelling workbooks for a couple of months, I collected all of them and put them aside on a shelf (fearful of having others wonder why I was throwing out new books). The spelling workbooks helped the students "copy" the words, which should *never* be done (Gentry & Gillet,

1993). Textbooks and workbooks teach skills through meaningless practice exercises rather than in the context of daily reading and writing (Routman, 1996).

Teacher's role in spelling

The research suggests that children learn to spell in the context of meaningful reading and writing. However, while this is *necessary*, it might not be *sufficient* for some students (Zutell, 1996). Gentry (1987) states that spelling lessons are needed to *supplement* what kids learn through their reading and writing. More explicit instruction in spelling might be necessary for most students.

Teachers, therefore, have a responsibility to assist children in learning more conventionalized forms of writing (IRA, 1998). After all, the outside world expects us to be using conventional, or standard, spellings (Wilde, 1992). "The belief that mastery of spelling is a criterion of an educated person has persisted for centuries" (Heald-Taylor, 1998).

Teachers must first realize that "learning to spell is a complex process" (Gentry & Gillet, 1993). Just like learning to talk, spelling is a developmental process that gradually improves over time (Wilde, 1996). According to Gentry and Gillet (1993), children go through specific stages of invented spelling as they learn about our spelling system. The five stages, in order of progression, are: precommunicative, semiphonetic; phonetic, transitional, and conventional. Children do not progress through these stages at the same time or at the same pace, so it is necessary that instruction be appropriate to the individual learner. A holistic program starts with the learner and takes into consideration his/her developmental spelling level (Wilde, 1992).

"Determining a stage of spelling for a student is not for creating a label but serves as a starting point for planning instruction" (Bear & Templeton, 1998, p. 230). In order to quickly determine the spelling stages of my 24 second grade students, I

administered the developmental spelling test described in Gentry and Gillet (1993). According to the authors, this test is "controlled, quick to administer, easy to analyze, and generally provides the same results as painstaking analysis of numerous invented spellings taken from lengthy samples of a child's writing" (p.42). The students are orally given the following 10 words to spell and the results are then calculated: *monster, united, dress, bottom, hiked, human, eagle,* and *closed.* Each word is analyzed for its specific features, thus determining the developmental stage. A majority of spellings in a certain developmental stage is the most likely level at which the student is performing on first drafts of writing.

In order to determine the developmental spelling stage of the student, an overall understanding of each developmental stage is needed. The following explanations of each stage will assist in analyzing the student's spellings on the test:

1. *Precommunicative-* Students write random letters for words. The letters do not correspond to sounds. The student may write RTES for *monster,* for example.

2. *Semiphonetic-* One or two letters represent the word, usually the initial and/or final sounds. Knowledge of letter-sound correspondence is present. For example, E for *eagle* or M for *monster* might be given.

3. *Phonetic-*The student spells the word as it sounds, although it may be unconventional. Spellings such as EGL for *eagle* and BOTM for *bottom* might be demonstrated.

4. *Transitional-* The invented spellings indicate the student's visual memory of spelling patterns. The student also knows some basic conventions such as the final silent *e.* Look for examples such as TIPE for *type* and BOTTUM for *bottom.*

5. *Conventional-* Students at this stage have learned how to spell words conventionally, or correctly. They have internalized our English spelling system

and can demonstrate their knowledge of correct spelling patterns and silent letters, for example.

Table 1 shows examples of the types of invented spellings the student might use and the corresponding developmental levels (Gentry & Gillet, 1993, p. 44).

Table 1

Invented Spelling Examples for Each Developmental Stage

Word	Precommunicative	Semiphonetic	Phonetic	Transitional	Conventional
1. monster	random letters	MTR	MOSTR	MONSTUR	monster
2. united	random letters	U	UNITD	YOUNIGHTED	united
3. dress	random letters	JRS	JRAS	DRES	dress
4. bottom	random letters	BT	BODM	BOTTUM	bottom
5. hiked	random letters	H	HIKT	HICKED	hiked
6. human	random letters	UM	HUMN	HUMUN	human
7. eagle	random letters	EL	EGL	EGUL	eagle
8. closed	random letters	KD	KLOSD	CLOSSED	closed
9. bumped	random letters	B	BOPT	BUMPPED	bumped
10. type	random letters	TP	TIP	TIPE	type

In addition to administering the developmental spelling test, another important way to ensure that instruction is "developmentally appropriate" is to look at the student's writing (Wilde, 1992). By looking at student's writing samples, the teacher can pinpoint what spelling patterns or concepts the student needs to learn. Instruction should be for those students who are ready for it and need it (Wilde, 1992).

The instruction and activities that took place in my second grade classroom began soon after the developmental test was given and the first writing samples were reviewed. The activities and instruction that took place during those few months were based upon those findings and the professional literature I read on spelling development and spelling instruction in the classroom.

Goal of spelling in the classroom

Throughout my readings, I discovered many similarities in the research. Many authors discussed goals for spelling in the classroom. Regie Routman (1991, p. 240)

states that "our goal is to produce independent writers who are competent spellers". Sandra Wilde (1992, p. 57) suggests a "new goal for spelling curriculum: the creation of independent, competent writers, with independence coming first". She goes on to say that students can achieve this if they immerse themselves in daily reading and writing (Wilde, 1992). "Standard spelling is the consequence of writing and reading, not the access to it....standard spelling is of little consequence if you do not write. Writing comes first!" (Bean & Bouffler, 1988, p. 47). *Purposeful* writing, however, is necessary in learning to spell (Gentry, 1987). For instance, students should choose their own writing topics such as a letter to a grandparent, a creative story about a dinosaur, or a report on spiders. Students will value the process of writing if they see a "purpose" for it.

Invented spelling must be allowed for growth

Allowing children to use invented spelling while writing is one of the key ingredients in learning to spell. As Weaver (1996) suggests, "invented spelling conveys the notion that children who are first allowed to spell as best they can will naturally go through increasingly sophisticated stages in their spelling." Children should be encouraged to use invented spelling as the process enables them to think actively about letter-sound relationships (IRA, 1998). Invented spelling also promotes fluency and independence while writing first drafts (Wilde, 1992). Children are able to quickly get their thoughts down on paper without having to worry about perfect spelling (Wilde, 1996).

Developing a sense of audience

Invented spelling, though, isn't used throughout the whole writing process. As Wilde states (1992), "invented spelling is a convenience for the writer, but conventional spelling is a courtesy to the reader". Children need to see a purpose for spelling conventionally. They need to realize that someone other than the teacher will

be reading their writing and, therefore, need to have the words spelled conventionally. This sense of audience can come about as you discuss the importance of making their writing more readable. In our classroom, student's read each other's writing, creative stories were displayed in hallways and throughout the classroom, one of the local banks displayed their work, and parents read their written texts.

Student's learn to edit their writing

After the students realize that some of their writing will have an audience, they will begin to see the importance of editing their work. Teachers can help students learn how to edit their samples of writing chosen for publishing (Weaver, 1996). For example, my second graders became more independent with editing after I allowed them to take on some ownership in the process. The students were involved in the following 3-step editing process: self revision, peer revision, and teacher revision. This, of course, took place after the content was reviewed with a peer or the teacher. After the student chose to take their writing to a final copy, they were the first person to begin the editing process. First of all, they circled all of the words they weren't sure were spelled correctly. Then they checked several resources such as the dictionary, maps, books, and their personal word wall containing high-frequency words to correct any invented spellings. The next step was to consult a peer(s) that might offer some conventional spellings. Finally, students came to me in order to discuss their progress while editing, and then I would offer conventional spellings that had not been addressed yet. This process helped students gain ownership in the editing process. If I had simply fixed all their errors before the self-checking and peer editing, they would have had little incentive to proofread on their own (Routman, 1996).

Word Wall

As mentioned previously, the students in my classroom used their personal word walls while editing. These were used in addition to a classroom word wall. A

word wall is an organized collection of words that are placed on a wall or other large display area in the classroom (Cunningham, 1995). Every week, four to five words are added to our large bulletin board. The words selected are those that the children need often when reading and writing (Cunningham). The teacher and students can also work collaboratively to come up with the words to include. In my classroom, the word wall was utilized as I saw a need for the students to learn high-frequency words. While looking through several student's writing samples, I noticed that most needed some extra support in learning how to spell words such as *they*, *when*, and *because*. It is important that the word wall be used as a "tool" for learning, not just as a display, however (Fountas & Pinnell, 1998). Using high-frequency words on word walls is effective for two reasons; the students are able to focus more on spelling the less-frequent words and constructing meaning while writing, and most of the high-frequency words aren't spelled in predictable ways (Cunningham).

The word wall was highly effective for Brittany, one of four students examined in more detail later in this paper, who was a pretty good speller overall. An early writing sample indicated that she invented the spellings for 38 words out of a total of 136. Of the 38 invented spellings in this journal entry, 20 were high-frequency words. She was inventing the spellings for words such as *they* (thay), *because* (becuse and becouse), *their* (thare), *like* (lik), and *when* (wene). On the later writing sample, she invented the spellings of only 3 words out of a total of 199. None of these misspelled words were high-frequency words. As Templeton and Morris (1999) suggest, even those students who appear to be good spellers can benefit from instruction.

Word Charts

In addition to a word wall, word charts were used in our classroom. Fountas and Pinnell (1998) say that word charts help students develop new understandings as the words are grouped into categories. Many types of word charts can be used in the

classroom. In our second grade classroom, we posted word charts for themes we're learning about, words with specific sounds or patterns, and to show relationships using word webs. One example of a word chart comes from a prereading activity we completed before reading The Great Ball Game by Joseph Bruchac (1994). The following chart was completed as the students activated their prior knowledge on games that people play. The students offered several types of games as I began to write them in separate categories on the chart paper. After a few were written, a student was able to tell the class how they were being organized. From that point on, the students told me their word *and* the correct category. The students were then encouraged to add more words to the chart as they discovered them (see Table 2).

Table 2

Word Chart of Students' Responses of Games Played

basketball	Monopoly
football	Connect Four
baseball	checkers
volleyball	tennis
tether ball	bowling
kick ball	Twister
dodge ball	
softball	

While completing a word chart on *oi* and *oy*, both the position of the sound in the word and the meaning were emphasized (Bear & Templeton, 1998). After a word was orally given by a student, a brief discussion was held as to its meaning. Students were better able to remember the conventional spellings this way rather than merely telling them that the sound can either be spelled *oi* or *oy* (see Table 3).
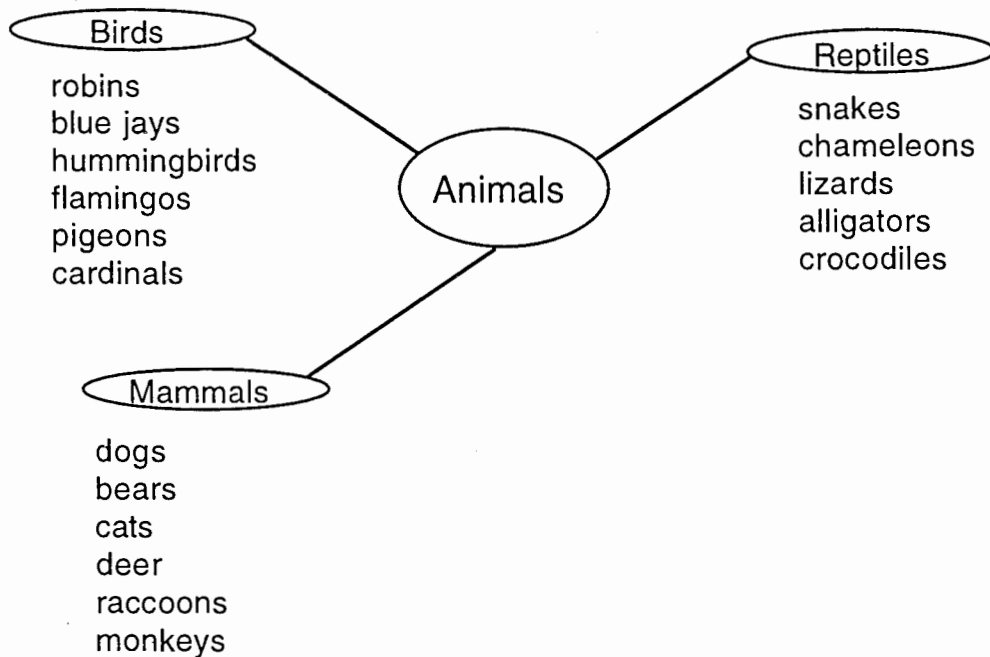
Table 3

Word Chart of Students' Responses to oi and oy Words

oi	oy
oil	toy
boil	boy
foil	joy
coin	destroy
moist	employ

The word chart, as shown in Table 4, was developed to assist the students in categorizing the different kinds of animals we were learning about in a science unit. The students supplied the information as the chart was being completed. This chart was readily available throughout the unit and used as a spelling resource while writing research projects, for example.

Table 4

Word Chart of Students' Responses to Different Kinds of Animals

Birds
robins
blue jays
hummingbirds
flamingos
pigeons
cardinals

Animals

Reptiles
snakes
chameleons
lizards
alligators
crocodiles

Mammals
dogs
bears
cats
deer
raccoons
monkeys

Mini-lessons

Children need to know that our spelling system contains lots of spelling patterns. The role of spelling instruction, therefore, should be focused on helping children discover spelling patterns (Wilde, 1992). Mini-lessons can be conducted to assist children in noticing those spelling patterns. A few mini-lessons a week can help children develop their knowledge of spelling and strategies to use (Wilde, 1996). In order to determine what spelling patterns need attention, the teacher must look at the student's writing (Wilde, 1992). For instance, some of my students were demonstrating a need for further instruction in dropping the *e* before adding the *-ing* ending. A mini-lesson was then facilitated with this small group using their dry erase boards (they love using them!). With permission from a student in the group, his actual writing was used to demonstrate the concept. A discussion began about this spelling pattern and then they wrote words such as *make*, *making*, *take*, *taking*, *have*, and *having* on their boards according to the sentence that was discussed orally.

Another example of a mini-lesson focused on the past tense *-ed,* which has three pronunciations for the same spelling. This rule is consistent enough that it can be taught at the elementary level (Wilde, 1992). After reviewing first drafts of student's writing, I noticed that several students needed to learn more about past tense words ending in *-ed*. Eric, for example, had written a story using the following invented spellings: *trapt* (trapped), *startad* (started), and *excapt* (escaped). He was phonetically spelling the ending for *trapt* and *excapt*, but visually trying to recall the *-ed* ending on *started* and came up with *-ad* instead. Eric was involved in a small group mini-lesson on the past tense *-ed* ending, and in later writing samples, he demonstrated these conventionally spelled words: *started*, *looked*, *announced*, and *closed.*

"Teaching skills in context"

The mini-lessons that occurred in my classroom happened because the individual student demonstrated a need for further instruction. Teaching skills in context is more appropriate than teaching skills in isolation, as in workbooks, as it is more meaningful to the student (Routman, 1996). Furthermore, Routman (p. 199) states, "Research demonstrates that skills taught, practiced, and tested in isolation are not used as consistently or effectively as skills taught when children are actually reading and writing". In order to plan for mini-lesson instruction, the teacher must observe students while they are writing and be aware of the kinds of invented spellings used on first drafts. Teachers can then facilitate mini-lessons when things come up in students' writing.

Look-Cover-Write-Check strategy

Because my district adopted a school-wide spelling curriculum, I couldn't ignore my responsibility in assigning weekly spelling lists. Although they are not given much emphasis in the classroom, they are somewhat worthwhile as they help children notice certain spelling patterns. In order to assist the students in learning the weekly spelling words, we charted the words according to their patterns each week and used the Look-Cover-Write-Check strategy (Parry & Hornsby, 1985). The students were given *their* spelling list to place under the flap of the manila folder. If the student did very well on the pre-test, for instance, they would learn another list of words.Students then *look* at the word, *cover* it up, *write* it down, and then *check* to see if they spelled it correctly. If the word was spelled correctly, they continued on. If the word wasn't correct, they went to the next column and started the process again. After the students have internalized this step-by-step process, they can independently progress through the steps at their own pace. This method is more appropriate than copying spelling words

over and over again (Fountas & Pinnell, 1998). According to Gentry and Gillet (1993), it helps children utilize their *visual coding mechanism*. Students who are successful at spelling "have an ability to store and retrieve the visual form of a word" (Gentry & Gillet, 1993, p. 52).

My students seemed to enjoy using this strategy to help them learn their spelling words. I heard many positive comments from students after we started using the Look-Cover-Write-Check strategy in the classroom. Stephanie said, "This really *does* help!" One day, Joseph came up to me and asked, "When are we going to do Look-Cover-Write-Check again?" I looked at him and said, "We'll do it sometime soon. Do you like doing that strategy?" He enthusiastically responded, "Yes, it's fun!" Using strategies like this in the classroom *should* be fun! In order to make this fun for the students, for example, they got to choose the color of their marker to use (the same kind of markers their teacher uses). The students also thought it was neat to take this important sheet of paper home and show their parents.

Reading helps children learn how to spell

Children first learn about spelling by being exposed to print in their environment (Gentry & Gillet, 1993). Wilde (1992) points out that the spellings of most words are "incidentally" learned through reading texts. Instruction can help children notice spelling patterns, but most of our knowledge of conventional spellings comes from seeing them in print (Wilde, 1992). Teachers must realize, then, that although instruction is necessary, children need "regular and active interactions with print" (IRA, 1998, p. 198).

In our classroom, for example, the students engaged in reading authentic texts through read alouds, shared reading, and reading workshop (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). Activities such as these should occur numerous times during the day to

promote literacy and spelling development. Hence, reading is a very important factor in helping a child become a successful speller.

However, Wilde (1992) mentions that reading *does not guarantee* spelling ability, but that spelling ability depends on reading. Some people are just more successful at "picking up spellings from reading" (Wilde, 1997). They seem to be able to visualize the spellings of words they see in print (Wilde, 1997).

Joshua, one of the case study students, was at a lower developmental level than many of the other students in the class. When conferencing during writing workshop, I asked him to tell me about his reading habits at home. He shared with me that he doesn't get to read at night because he has chores to do and then it is bedtime. Wilde (1992, p. 117) states that, "What less proficient spellers need most while their spelling is somewhat immature is a lot of reading and writing that will give them the space to explore the spelling system at their own pace". Luckily, Joshua was motivated and excited about reading throughout the year. For example, one morning after I had put out some new books about weather, he immediately went over to them and excitedly said, "Cool! Storms!" He was excited about reading; he just needed the extra support and a chance to engage in wide reading of narrative and expository texts (Bear & Templeton, 1998).

As a result of his enthusiasm to read, Joshua continued to show growth in spelling. For instance, his early writing sample indicated many invented spellings at the semiphonetic level such as *babs* (babies), *lole* (lonely), and *sey* (she). Knowledge of letter-sound correspondence and spelling patterns was not demonstrated in many of his early attempts at spelling. The later writing sample, however, contained more sophisticated invented spellings for words such as *cavs* (calves), *rilly* (really), and *somer* (summer) which, in fact, demonstrate his developing knowledge of spelling

patterns. Every sound in a word was now being represented in addition to an increased awareness of patterns such as in *hoop* (hope) and *haveing* (having). Joshua's willingness to take risks in spelling was also apparent as he invented uncommon words such as *moseun* (museum) and *magtareen* (Imaginarium).

Case study examples

For the purpose of this article, I chose four students whom I thought were representative of the various levels of development in my second grade class to follow as we improved the spelling program in our classroom. In an attempt to see how the students progressed as a result of the classroom activities and instruction, the developmental spelling test was administered on February 2 and on May 24, approximately 3 1/2 months later. The bold print in the chart indicates the child's dominant developmental stage on both testing dates (see Table 5).

Table 5

Child's Dominant Developmental Spelling Stage on Both Testing Dates

	February 2	May 24
Eric	20% conventional 30% transitional **50% phonetic**	**80% conventional** 20% transitional
Joshua	------------------- **50% transitional** 40% phonetic 10% semiphonetic	**50% conventional** 20% transitional 30% phonetic
Brittany	**70% conventional** 30% transitional	**100% conventional**
Tyler	20% conventional **50% transitional** 30% phonetic	30% conventional **50% transitional** 20% phonetic

The results of the test indicated that all of the students progressed in their spelling development. Some students even moved to the next developmental stage. This, however, cannot and was not the only means of determining growth in these four students. I also looked at writing samples from each student to quickly tabulate the percentage of conventionally spelled words used. In order to look for growth, an early writing sample and a late writing sample were chosen. Results of the writing samples are shown in Table 6.

Table 6

Percentage of Conventional versus Invented Spellings in Early and Late Writing Samples

	early	late
Eric	62% conventional 38% invented	79% conventional 21% invented
Joshua	46% conventional 54% invented	63% conventional 37% invented
Brittany	72% conventional 28% invented	98% conventional 2% invented
Tyler	60% conventional 40% invented	85% conventional 15% invented

While taking a closer look at Brittany's writing samples, I noticed significant improvement in her spelling development. For example, she had learned how to spell high-frequency words conventionally. Words such as *they*, *there*, and *because* were now spelled conventionally in the later writing sample. Brittany also showed improvement with adding endings, or suffixes, onto words correctly. She was able to conventionally spell the word *replied*, as she had learned how to change the *y* to an *i* during a previous mini-lesson. Tyler also demonstrated improvements in spelling development. In the early writing sample, he invented spellings such as *worm* (warm) and *ort* (aren't). The later writing sample indicated his improved knowledge of r-controlled vowels as he wrote *are*, *park*, and *party* conventionally. These improvements were not only found in these two students, but were also demonstrated by the other case study students and the class as a whole.

Conclusion

Children learn to spell by engaging in lots of reading and writing. Some, however, benefit from more explicit instruction in spelling such as mini-lessons and other strategies. This instruction is most beneficial when done within the context of their reading and writing rather than through skill instruction in workbooks.

Teachers can tailor instruction to fit the needs of individual students by determining their developmental level, observing what they know about spelling, and by looking at their writing. In fact, the International Reading Association states that "good teachers make instructional decisions based on their knowledge of reading and writing, current research, appropriate expectations, and their knowledge of individual children's strengths and needs" (1998, p. 207). By learning more about spelling development and instruction, teachers can help students learn the strategies they need in order to successfully continue in their spelling development.

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