The Real Magic of Spelling:

Improving Reading and Writing[[1]](#footnote-1)

*The correlation between spelling and reading is high because both depend on a common denominator: proficiency with language. The more deeply and thoroughly a student knows a word, the more likely he or she is to recognize it, spell it, define it, and use it appropriately in speech and writing.*

In the mid 19th century, spelling was the means by which children were taught to read. In the 21st century, however, spelling is the abandoned stepchild in the family of the language arts, overlooked by federal grants such as Reading First, federal and state assessment policies, state program-adoption guidelines, publishers of comprehensive instructional programs, and the educational research community. The reasons for this are many, including the dominance of the “writers’ workshop” approach to composition, in which spelling instruction is contextualized, nonsystematic, and reactive (since it often just addresses students’ errors). In addition, many assumptions about the nature of spelling—including the widespread belief that spelling is a rote visual-memory skill—are misinformed. Knowledge of spelling, contrary to many people’s expectations, is closely related to reading, writing, and vocabulary development, as they all rely on the same underlying language abilities.

Spelling is most obviously connected to writing. A consistent research finding is that poor spelling, in addition to causing the writer frustration and embarrassment, adversely affects composition and transmission of ideas On the whole, students who spell poorly write fewer words and write compositions of lower quality. Writers who struggle to remember spelling often limit themselves to words they can spell, losing expressive power. In addition, nonautomatic spelling drains attention needed for the conceptual challenges of planning, generating ideas, formulating sentences, and monitoring one’s progress. The written work of poor spellers, moreover, is judged more harshly than that of students who present neat, correctly spelled work. Readers expect accurate spelling as a courtesy of communication, and inaccurate spelling may result in poor grades or poor job evaluations.

Although not as obvious, the development of spelling is also intimately connected with the development of reading. Knowledge of speech sounds and their spellings, and fluent use of this knowledge, are necessary for both word reading and spelling. Young children become better readers and spellers when explicit instruction in speech sound awareness and sound-letter correspondence is emphasized in kindergarten and first grade.

Good spellers are almost always good readers. Spelling, however, is more difficult than reading. We generally cannot accurately spell words we cannot read. On the other hand, since most of us spend much more time reading than writing, we typically read many more words than we spell. Poor spellers need dozens of opportunities to write difficult words before then can remember them. Indeed, poor spellers (who form the majority of students in many high-poverty schools) in the intermediate and middle grades make many spelling errors that reflect poor understanding of word structure, even when they can read in the average range.

If we do learn to spell a word, the mental representation of all the letters in that word are fully specified in memory, and recall is likely to be fluent and accurate. Recognition of words “by sight” is facilitated by knowing the details of sound-letter correspondence in the spelling system. Good spellers are also familiar with the patterns and constraints of English spelling and use that knowledge to help them remember specific letters in specific words. On the other hand, general “visual” cues, such as the configuration or outside contour of a word in print, are not very helpful for either recognizing or recalling printed words.

Spelling also has a strong relationship with reading comprehension. The correlation between spelling and reading comprehension is high because both depend on a common denominator: proficiency with language. The poorer a child’s language abilities, the poorer that child’s spelling will tend to be. The more deeply and thoroughly a student knows a word, the more likely he or she is to recognize it, spell it, define it, and use it appropriately in speech and writing.

Systematic spelling lessons provide an opportunity to learn to think analytically about words and language. The attention to detail required by comparison and differentiation of words like *flush, flesh, fresh,* and *thresh* nurtures a more generalized consciousness about words that in turn encourages careful consideration of all aspects of language.

At its best, spelling instruction richly supports vocabulary and language development. Good spellers not only demonstrate a good sense of the sounds in words, they also have a good sense of the meaningful parts of words (e.g., *un- desir (e), -able)*, the roles words play in sentences

(e.g., *packed* is a past-tense verb, but *pact* is a noun), and the relationship

among words’ meanings that exist in spite of differences in their sounds (e.g., *image* and *imagination*). Precocious spellers in the Scripps National Spelling Bee display exceptional knowledge of vocabulary, etymology (history of words), and parts of speech. A wide, deep knowledge base underlies what on the surface may seem like a “simple” skill. Not all children can win spelling bees but all can benefit from knowing how spelling reflects word origin, meaning, and pronunciation.

Spelling Instruction:

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| Effective: | Ineffective: |
| Teach words with similar spelling patterns together; create patterns and associations; Latin roots | Lists of words that are structurally unrelated to each other (not spelled with similar patterns) |
| Teach rules: adding suffixes and prefixes; i before e; phonetic rules | Presenting misspelled words along with correctly spelled words and ask: *“Which one of these is spelled correctly?”* |
| Classroom visuals | Not teaching spelling at all; not holding students accountable for spelling |
| Mnemonic devices | Teaching words in isolation |
| Diagnose the reason for the misspelling: *mispronunciation? not knowing how a rule works? using the spelling words of a language other than English* | Relying on spelling quizzes rather than authentic use in writing. |
| Copying and tracing |  |

Why is Vocabulary Knowledge the Key to Reading Comprehension?

Read the following and answer the questions that follow it:

**Corandic**: Corandic is an emurient grof with many fribs; it granks from corite, which garkers excarp by glarcking the corite and starping it in tranker-clarped storbs. The tarances starp a chark, which is expanged with wortes, branking a storp. This storp is warped through several other coruses, finally frasting a pragety, blickant cracke: coranda.

Coranda is a cargurt, grinkling corandic and borigten. The corandic is nacerated from the boligen by means of voracity. This garkers finally trap a glick, bract, grupous grapant, corandic, which grants in many starps.

Questions (Main idea and supportive details):

What is corandic?

What does corandic grank from?

How do garkers excarp the tarances from the corite?

What does the slorp finally frast?

What is coranda?

Vocabulary Instruction:

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| Effective: | Ineffective: |
| Words related by topic, meaning, structure; | Lists of unrelated words; |
| Thorough: Full understanding of use: nuance, connotation, positive or negative, context, grammatical forms, spelling, synonyms and antonyms, etymology, repetition in a variety of contexts and forms, Spanish cognate, if applicable | Shallow: Memorized brief definitions |
| Consistent, revisited | Sporadic, not revisited after the quiz |
| Assessment: Authentic use in student reading and writing | Assessment: quizzes that test for brief, memorized definitions |
| Fun and games | No fun, no games |
| Purposeful selection of words (plans to use and revisit) | Too many words or too few, with no  intentionality (plans to use and revisit) |

1. from American Educator. Winter 2008-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)