Importance of Spelling

"Can't we just use spellcheckers?"

Abstract: The importance of spelling has been questioned in recent years as word processing programs are equipped with spell checkers, and some educational reformists have suggested that focusing on spelling holds back the creative processes of writing, and that students will naturally develop spelling skills through reading. Reading specialist Susan Jones, M.Ed., has researched how spelling improves reading and writing fluency and how it improves vocabulary and comprehension. Professor Jones helps SpellingCity.com as a member of the newly formed educational advisory committee. Below is her recent paper debunking some common myths about spelling and helping to establish the importance of spelling in education.

The Importance of Spelling
by Susan Jones, M. Ed.  2/2009

Spelling over the last few years has been the subject of a commonly mailed piece of Internet “wisdom.” And I quote:

Aoccdrnig to rscheearch by the Lngiusiitc Dptanmeret at Cmabrigde Uinervtisy, it deosn't mttaer in waht oredr the ltteers in a wrod are, the olny iprmoetnt tihng is taht the frist and lsat ltteer be at the rghit pclae. The rsrest can be a total mses and you can stil raed it wouthit porbelm. Tihs is bcuseae the huamn mnid deos not raed ervey lteter by istlef, but the wrod as a wlohe.

Translation: According to research by the Linguistic Department at Cambridge University, it doesn’t matter in what order the letters in a word are, the only important thing is that the first and last letter be at the right place. The rest can be a total mess and you can still read it without a problem. This is because the human mind does not read every letter by itself, but the word as a whole.

This paragraph has been widely circulated on the Internet since 2003, and it is still referred to, either as a point of interest or to defend inconsistent (poor) spelling, or choosing not to teach it. Is it because it rings of the truth that it makes scholars and educators cringe? Hardly. Among other things, there was no such research, and the words in the passage don’t follow the rule of “only the first and last words matter.” It’s a myth. It is fluent readers who can figure out this highly predictable text – and the path to fluent reading includes a firm foundation in the sounds represented by letters and their spelling.1

How do we Read?

Do we read whole words in an instant, or by sounds? The fluent reader quickly perceives whole words, but the path to fluency is through mastering the connection between letter combinations and the sounds they represent. The fact is that our letters stand for sounds, not ideas. While some still debate “whole language” versus “phonics” instruction, experts such as Priscilla Vail recognize that language has structure and texture, and our students need to develop both. "Structure refers to the nuts and bolts used in assembling or decoding the written language... phonics instruction provides this solid grounding. Texture refers to the ornamentation which gives language its color, intensity, rhythm and beauty. Whole language instruction provides texture by soaking children in literature. Structure by itself would be boring, just as free-floating texture would be flimsy.”2

Rather than relegate spelling to a back burner, spelling can and should be an integral part of language instruction for every student. It is mortar that helps students master the basics of language, especially students who may struggle with reading. Rather than dismiss it as a frill to “focus harder” on reading, teaching spelling and handwriting enables a struggling student to use different senses and strengths to learn and master the relationship between the sounds and symbols of our language, which is the backbone of reading. Other students
will be able to more deeply understand the patterns of our complex language and become master communicators.

**Spelling Helps Reading**

Learning to spell helps to cement the connection between the letters and their sounds, and learning high-frequency “sight words” to mastery level improves both reading and writing. Joshi, Treiman, Carreker and Moats describe this connection: “The correlation between spelling and reading comprehension 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.” They also note that “the major goal of the English writing system is not merely to ensure accurate pronunciation of the written word – it is to convey meaning. If words that sound the same (e.g., rain, rein and reign) were spelled the same way, their meanings would be harder to differentiate.”

Teaching spelling systematically can also dispel the myth that spelling is unpredictable and too confusing for all but those with a natural gift for it, which often happens when a “correct mistakes as they happen” approach is taken. The idea that English is too mixed up to make sense of is a myth perpetuated by lack of instruction and poor teacher preparation. Spelling is not simple, but when people understand its structure, it is perfectly decodable and not limited to people “born to spell” to understand. For example, many people struggle with spelling the word “broccoli.” Which letter should be doubled? If a student – or teacher or parent - understands the syllable types of the English language, the word makes sense. “Closed” syllables end in a consonant and have a short vowel sound. Open syllables end in a vowel. Often, a consonant is doubled so that a vowel is clearly short, including when we add suffixes. Examples are bagged, collie, and broccoli, which would be divided into syllables as broc – co – li. Perhaps it’s unfortunate that people who are naturally good at spelling and reading are likely to be teaching it; they may not have needed to have these rules explained, or perhaps don’t remember the explanations because they did not have to practice them. Understanding the rules and patterns helps the student who doesn’t intuitively pick them up and enables the teacher to clear up confusion instead of having to resort to “it’s just how it’s spelled.”

Others might acknowledge the value of learning to spell, but think that learning the rules and patterns is the stuff of drudgery. When students are practicing in ways that are effective, and getting appropriate feedback and experiencing success, practice is not drudgery. It may not be as fun as recess – but often it can be satisfying and even enjoyable, especially when technology is used creatively so that students can use their strengths with individualized lessons. For instance, students can choose games and activities at sites such as spellingcity.com to practice their words as much as they need. By including language-rich experiences with the words, students use auditory and visual pathways in the learning task. This helps students conquer the challenge of remembering the spellings of words, because the “working memory” can be used more efficiently if both the visual and auditory channels are engaged in the learning task.  

Technology is a powerful tool that can make learning easier. Some would argue that it’s powerful enough to make learning to spell unnecessary. After all, what are spell checkers for? Spell checkers are wonderful tools for the small mistakes that good spellers make and for common typographical errors such as typing “t e h” instead of “the.” In the hands of the student with good language skills, the spell checker is a real timesaver. However, it can actually interfere with the learning process. The writer must rely on starting the word correctly and getting most letters right, and the spell checker will not correct when a misspelling is another legitimate word. Therefore, the student who spells “does” as “dose” will not see the red “correct me” line, and will continue to entrench the misspelling habit, and the reader will be confused. The more advanced the writing task, the more likely we’ll need to use exactly the right word. When a college student writes “lesssing” instead of “listening,” that student has not learned to think about the relationship between the meaning and spelling of words. His writing is suffering for the lack, and perhaps his reading is as well. Spell checkers also can’t be counted on for giving the right word even when they recognize an incorrect spelling. If a writer types “definantly” instead of definitely, Microsoft Word will suggest “defiantly.” “Surpised” will yield “surpassed.” The language learner will be more confused, not less. In other words, spell checkers give us reason to teach spelling and precise word usage *more* thoroughly, not less.  

Good use, even mastery, of our complex language does not have to be a thing of the past or reserved for a few. By using the knowledge from years of research and experience and our ever-developing technological tools, we can teach each student to spell well and enable them to read and write fluently. We owe it to our students to give them the skills that are the tools to learning and communication throughout their education and their lives.

**Resources:**


