



# Research to Practice

## A Closer Look at Spelling

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When new students talk about their goals for writing, many mention concerns about their spelling ability. We know that correct spelling is just a part—a small part—of good writing, but we want to offer instruction that meets students' expressed needs. This *Research to Practice* offers an overview of current research about spelling and provides a few suggestions for developing an effective spelling program in your ABLE class (Rasinski & Padak, 2008; Rasinski, Padak, & Fawcett, in press).

### Guiding Principles

Although scholars have focused on spelling development for decades, much remains unknown about how people develop as spellers and why some people are good spellers while others struggle with spelling. Fortunately, certain widely accepted guiding principles can help you integrate spelling instruction into your reading and writing program (Bear et al., 2007; Fresch & Wheaton, 1997; Heald-Taylor, 1998; Templeton & Morris, 1999):

- Learning to spell is a complex, developmental process dependent on both maturation and experience. Adult students who have limited writing experience may, therefore, have more spelling difficulties than their more experienced peers. Knowledge about spelling begins globally and develops gradually and develops gradually as students learn to differentiate and integrate insights about relationships between letters and sounds.
- Spelling instruction should be a functional component of a writing program. Four principles can help you accomplish this well: (a) accept spelling errors, especially initially; (b) use errors diagnostically to determine patterns of students' needs. In a research review related to this point, Invernizzi and Hayes (2004) concluded that whole-group instruction in spelling that is especially ineffective for struggling spellers; (c) encourage students to work on only a few misspelled

words at a time (no more than 8-10 per week for students who attend ABLE programs regularly); and (d) help students learn to edit for spelling, especially prior to publication or sharing their written work in other ways. Spell checkers are important tools for this purpose.

### A Weekly Spelling Routine

Fresch and Wheaton (1997) describe a 5-day routine for spelling instruction. The routine is based on daily instruction, so it may need to be adapted in ABLE classes that meet less frequently. Each week, the teacher selects a spelling pattern for focus and three sets of words that follow the pattern, some easy, some of medium difficulty, and some challenging. You may find information about spelling patterns in your instructional materials. An Internet search may also be useful (e.g., <http://www.lupinworks.com/os/spelling/prefix.html>). Ideally, the pattern you choose will represent words that your students frequently "use but confuse."

Students take a traditional pretest over the words at the beginning of every week; the teacher uses the test results to determine which set of words each person will study. Each student may select a few additional words to study as well, which may not be associated with the spelling pattern. At the end of each week, pairs of students give spelling tests to each other.

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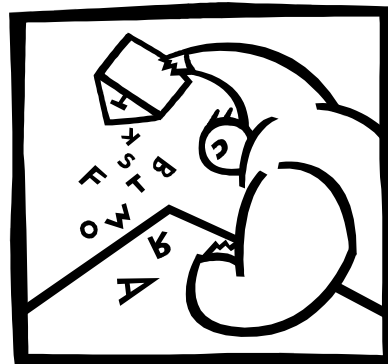
During the rest of each week, students learn their spelling words and the spelling pattern that unites them by completing word sorts (see [http://literacy.kent.edu/eureka/strategies/word\\_sorts.pdf](http://literacy.kent.edu/eureka/strategies/word_sorts.pdf)) and other word games (see “10 Ideas for Vocabulary Reinforcement” at <http://literacy.kent.edu/Oasis/Pubs/olrcnewsfall07winter08.pdf> for examples), locating the words in material they have read or written, looking for ways to use the words in their writing, exploring the origins and derivatives, and so forth. They even prepare the dictation sentences for their own spelling tests. Fesch and Wheaton (1997) summarize the innovative and workable program this way: “English is both logical and fascinating. Words are learned through using and manipulating language, not memorizing it” (p. 23).

## Concluding Thoughts

In a review of research about spelling development, Templeton and Morris (1999) comment,

*Of the few methodological studies that have been conducted, none answers to everyone’s satisfaction the question of whether spelling is learned primarily through reading and writing or primarily through the systematic examination of words. . . . What does emerge from the research is the suggestion that some examination of words is necessary for most students. (p. 108)*

A successful spelling program, therefore, offers active opportunities to play with language and to organize and categorize words in ways that allow writers to discover generalizations about written language and the relationships between letter and sounds. Most important, however, may be the motivation to spell well that develops in classrooms where students write for interested audiences.



## References

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