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Source	6 th Annual Conference of the Educational Research Association, 24 – 26 September 1992, Singapore

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Citation: Bodycott, P. (1992). Modifying the spelling curriculum to meet the needs of individual classroom learners. In K. A. Toh (Ed.), *Curriculum research and practice: Cauldron or crucible?* (pp 235-239). Singapore: Educational Research Association.

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**MODIFYING THE SPELLING CURRICULUM TO MEET THE
NEEDS OF INDIVIDUAL CLASSROOM LEARNERS**

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**Paper presented at the
Sixth Annual Conference of the
Educational Research Association, Singapore,
held in Singapore from September 24-26, 1992**

Modifying the Spelling Curriculum to Meet the Needs of Individual Classroom Learners

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Paper presented at the 6th Annual Conference of the
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Abstract

This paper reports the lessons learned from observing how one classroom teacher moulded spelling research and personal beliefs into functional classroom practice. Recent trends in language teaching approaches indicate a movement away from traditional spelling practices toward a more individual orientation to spelling instruction. This research challenges long held traditional views concerning the teacher's role and classroom practices. Individualizing spelling instruction requires students take greater responsibility in their learning process. Students, in the class observed, were trained and encouraged to take control of their learning to spell process. In so doing they were seen to develop skills which facilitated and developed their knowledge of conventional spellings, and strategies for recognising and obtaining standard conventional spellings.

The paper provides an overview of the philosophical backbone of an *individualised spelling* programme. The programme is built upon the theoretical proposition that spelling is a natural part of learning language. The pedagogical consequences of this proposition are outlined.

Introduction

Throughout periods of extended classroom observation a clear picture develops of the teaching and learning approaches adopted by a teaching professional. If the observations include frequent discussions with the teacher, further understandings are obtained through explanations of his decision-making process. If discussions also include examining the student's perceptions of the teacher and the classroom teaching approaches we gain still deeper insights into how the teacher functions.

This paper draws upon such information gathered from one teacher's classroom. Specifically it draws upon the teaching of Spelling. The data was gathered over a 12 month period. Twice weekly observations of the class and follow-up discussions were held with both teacher and pupils. The resultant data have been classified into ten categories or lessons from which we may view his approach to spelling instruction.

Lesson One: Spelling like Language is for Making Meaning

This teacher believed that spelling, like language, is used to help people make sense of the written world. Spelling was seen to assist writers to classify and organize their experiences and communicate them effectively with others.

Spelling was, in this teacher's eyes, an essential part of the meaning making process of written language. He viewed the teaching of spelling to be intrinsically related to the teaching of writing and therefore was best promoted and learned through daily writing. The content and range of writing experiences included topics from Social Studies, Science, and Maths, and were balanced by student selected free choice topics. Different styles of writing were introduced such as essays, reports and narratives. It was from the topic or field of study that students recorded class and individual spelling word banks, and from which weekly spelling lists were selected.

Lesson Two: Spelling is a Social-Contextual Activity

The teacher felt that through using language, people within the culture or society determined what was acceptable language and what was not. The same was seen to be true for spelling. Standard spellings, those which conformed to the rules of social acceptance, were determined by the people within a society. As such spellings vary from one language community to another. Spellings also vary according to the context of use. For example, a student taking notes for a Science project and the same student preparing for publishing the final report, place different emphasis on spelling. During note-taking abbreviations and not standard spellings may well be used. Whereas in preparation for going public, the student's in this class placed great importance on getting the spellings perfect.

By linking the teaching of spelling to the writing process this teacher was able to demonstrate how, throughout the process of writing, the spelling process changes. In drafting emphasis was placed upon meaning and less on spelling whereas when going public it was essential that the writing contain standard spellings. Standards preset by the society or context of use. To this end students were trained to proofread their writing for standard spellings and other associated surface features of written language.

In the course of teaching, spelling also arose as a natural topic for discussion. The teacher would stop during a Science lesson and talk about interesting spellings. The children were acutely aware of spelling and always on the look out for unusual spelling combinations. They were sensitized to the study of spellings in context, the end result being motivated readers who read like writers.

Lesson Three: Spelling is Generative

This aspect of spelling linked very closely to obtaining meaning from writing. As different contexts generated many different spellings, meaning or understanding, it was shown, could be obtained from a text, despite the spellings not always being standard. Many attempts at unknown words, through "try out" and "have-a-go" exercises generated conventional spellings. These were described as spellings which obeyed the phonological laws of the English language, but were not exactly correct. Students in this classroom were encouraged to accept the role of spelling and to recognise that there was no "right" way to spell a word just a culturally standard way.

Lesson Four: Teaching Spelling is a Dynamic Process

As indicated in Figure 1, learning to spell was viewed in this classroom as a dynamic process. Throughout the year the students and teacher developed, adapted and moulded the classroom spelling process into workable reality. Essentially the process involved three main

steps; What to do when you are unsure about the spelling? What to do when you found the word, and then Using the word? The children built upon personal "Words of Interest" lists throughout the year. If they were attempting a spelling during writing but were unsure about the standard spelling, they were encouraged to use a variety of strategies in order to obtain it. For example; think about the word carefully, say it over in their mind, say it aloud pronouncing it as clearly as they could and then to attempt spelling it the way it sounded. They thought about other words which had similar sounds and then tried repeated "have-a-goes". Generating conventional spellings until they reached a stage when they felt the word looked and sounded correct. Then, and only then were they allowed to consult the teacher. In addition, the students were expected to consult class word banks, books or their peers. The teacher emphasized that it was his responsibility to create activities and an environment which facilitated the development of each individual's spelling strategies such as locating correct spelling, it was the student's responsibility to use the skills.

Insert Figure 1 about here

The second step of the process revolved around what to do, when a standard spelling had been obtained. Each word was recorded in an interest list as illustrated in Figure 2. These lists provided a bank of individual spelling words from which the students could select to study for weekly spelling tests. The process of remembering, or learning a spelling was aided through the Look, Cover, Write and Check procedure. An outline of the weekly spelling programme follows.

Insert Figure 2 about here

Day 1 (Compulsory Activity)

T chrs cop e

Words to be revised were selected, and highlighted from the student's individual "Words of Interest" lists. The words were written on a rectangular slip of paper, handed to the teacher who edited and retained the list for his personal reference. The students were encouraged to use these words in their personal writing throughout the week, conducting the Look-Cover-Write-Review process whenever they have time.

Day 2 (Optional Activities)

Spelling activities were labelled either "compulsory" (everyone had to complete the activity) or "optional" (students could select from a list of activities). A container filled with the laminated labels of various spelling games and activities provided the teacher with a ready store of activities from which to select and place on the daily work agenda. See Hudson & O'Toole (1983), E.L.C.S.U. (1984), Bolton & Snowball (1985), and Bouffler & Bean (1989).

Day 3 (Compulsory Activity)

Proofreading

This involves reading through a teacher distributed text, checking for spelling, punctuation and grammar errors. A proofreading guide sheet (Bouffler & Bean, 1989) was included which provided a step by step break down of the proofreading process. This ensured functional practice in an activity closely linked to editing and publishing.

Day 4 (Optional Activities)

Day 5 (Compulsory Activity)

Revision

On revision day the teacher distributed his personal copies of the individual lists to reciprocal pairs. The children tested each other, corrected and initialled each others work. The completed test sheets are then checked by the teacher who recorded the results and the names of those who required individual follow-up.

In order to spell, children were inherently aware that they had to use the word in written form many times. Words selected for study were those which the students felt would be most frequently used in their writing. The teacher encouraged students to use those words as often as possible in their daily writing throughout the week.

Lesson Five: Aim for the Stars

Parents expect children to learn to talk, and so they talk. They also set up conditions which naturally assist their children in this learning process. This teacher modelled his classroom upon such conditions, adapting them to the learning of language. As such he had particularly high expectations of each individual student's spelling development in his classroom. These expectations coupled with effective need centred demonstrations assisted in the development of such an environment. His spelling programme was aimed at developing within each individual the ability to spell independently and successfully. He encouraged and demonstrated to students how they could learn from their spelling miscues.

Lesson Six: Remember Who's in Control

It was this teacher's belief that responsibility for learning was the students. He provided strategies and guidance for his students in what to do and how to gain spellings on their own. He would repeatedly say to the students, "I'm not always going to be here to give you the spelling word, you have to know what to do to get the spelling." So, therefore, responsibility for learning to spell was seen to be the students. His responsibility was in creating an environment which assisted each individual to develop skills and strategies associated with learning to spell.

The children were responsible for reviewing their personal interest lists and self-selecting words to study in detail for the following week. The number of words selected for each student varied. Some students selected 10 words, while others selected three or four words. However, the responsibility for selection was left to the individual. The number of words for each student varied depending on upon their ability. At the beginning of the year and throughout the year, there were a number of discussions which set minimum and maximum number of words to study. If the teacher felt that students could do more, then he would insist they did so.

The students were also responsible for daily practice in the look, cover, write, check procedure, for completing compulsory and optional tasks throughout the week, and for the testing, marking and recording their spelling progress.

Lesson Seven: A Spoonful of Sugar Helps

An integral part of this teacher's classroom learning process was the feedback given to the students on their spelling development. Structured feedback was provided through conferences during the language period while informal assistance was provided through roving conferences whilst students were writing. Other forms of feedback included visual records of class averages, individual graphs of progress and whole class discussions of spelling. The classroom atmosphere was one of positivism, "we can spell", "we are good spellers in this classroom." The teacher provided positive reinforcement for all student attempts and insisted that students provide similar constructive feedback when involved with each other.

Lesson Eight: Kill the Can't

The emphasis during all lessons was one of "can". The word can't had seemingly eliminated from the student's and teacher's vocabulary. Through the conferences, the demonstrations provided and his constructive evaluation, each built upon what the children could do and were attempting to do. All children, even those studying five words a week, when their peers were studying 20, believed they were good spellers. This teacher had killed the can't, his children were prepared to take risks in their writing, safe in the knowledge that their learning environment supported them whether they succeeded or failed.

Lesson Nine: Stop Teaching Spellings and Start Teaching Spelling

The focus of instruction in this classroom, that is the demonstrations and input provided by the teacher were all centred upon the process of learning to spell as opposed to simply learning a set number of spelling words. The teacher developed the children's ability to proof-read for spelling miscues in addition to developing strategies of determining, locating, and remembering new spellings. These strategies built upon the skills of the individual speller. They focused upon teaching spellers to take responsibility for their spelling and as a result subsequent spellings could be obtained independently.

Lesson Ten: Tend the Garden: Watch it Bloom

Keen gardeners are acutely aware that they need to be constantly tending their garden in order to get the best results. This classroom teacher tended his students with similar care. He treated each student as an individual, provided the necessary nourishment which fertilized their understandings and supported their development. He provided daily watering of praise, encouragement and experiences which stimulated student interest, and sustained their growth as independent spellers. He kept records of their achievements and knew from his observations when an individual required special attention, and what attention was appropriate. He celebrated his student's achievements as they blossomed into productive, independent spellers.

Conclusion

What has been learned from these lessons? By focusing attention on the individual speller's needs, by teaching the speller as opposed to teaching spellings this teacher empowered his students. He made them feel and practice like experts. He helped his students to understand that they had something to say in their writing and the means by which to say it. He developed students who understood the role of spelling. Students who could apply their skills in order to approximate and obtain standard spellings when required. Students who were not only interested in, but valued spelling and were individually prepared to have-a-go, to take risks in their learning.

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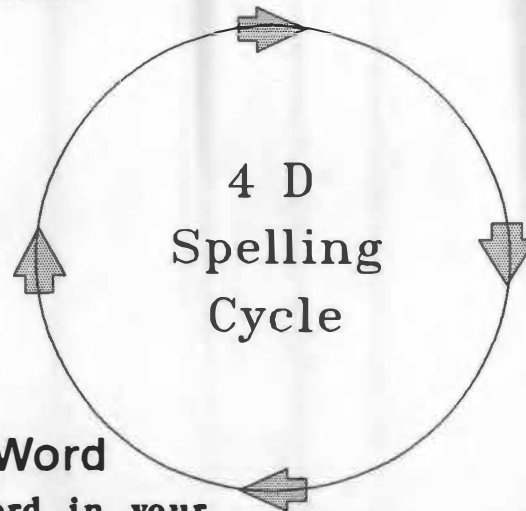
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Figure 1:

Steps and procedures in 4D's spelling cycle

Unsure about a spelling

- Think about the word carefully
- Say it over in your mind
- Say it aloud pronouncing it as clearly as you can
- Try spelling the way it sounds
- Think of other words which sound the same
- Try spelling it different ways
- Ask yourself, "Have I seen or heard this word before?"
- Check around the room
- Look in a book
- Ask someone else for their opinion
- If you think you're close, check out the dictionary
- Ask the teacher



Found the Word

- Write the word in your "interest list"
- Test yourself
- Look at the word carefully, it's size, shape, letter combinations
- When you think you can remember it
- Cover it up and write it again
- Review to see if you're correct
- Try again
- Enter the word once reviewed into your "words to use"

Use the Word

- Use the word in your writing as often as you can

Figure 2: Selected words of interest recording format

Word	Sentence	Word	Sentence
know	I <u>know</u> how to do it		