<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Title</strong></th>
<th>Facilitating the acquisition of standard English spelling by transitional spellers: a case study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Author(s)</strong></td>
<td>Anthony Seow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Source</strong></td>
<td><em>Teaching and Learning, 15</em>(1), 108-116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Published by</strong></td>
<td>Institute of Education (Singapore)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This document may be used for private study or research purpose only. This document or any part of it may not be duplicated and/or distributed without permission of the copyright owner.

The Singapore Copyright Act applies to the use of this document.
In their reading and in the speech they hear, children by the age of 6 would have come across many new words. Parents and teachers often marvel at the extent of the children's sight vocabulary and their apparent understanding of many of the new words. However, the same adults may also react in some disbelief when they see, from the children's writing, that these children spell "rather badly", and wonder what then can be done to help them become good spellers. Gentry & Henderson (1978 : 632) rightly observe that:

"English orthography is not a system that is dominated by the surface sounds of the spoken language. To learn to spell is not to get in the habit of associating sounds directly to letters. Rather, English spelling is dominated by underlying sound segments which convey meaning. Learning to spell, then, is a matter of acquiring knowledge rather than habits – in this case, knowledge of how the alphabet reflects meaningful language".

At best, English spelling may be seen as a "near optimal system for representing the spoken language" (Chomsky, 1970) since there is no one-to-one correspondence between letter and sound.

Research has indicated that there are stages of spelling development in which children tend to go through, as follows:
(1) **Pre-communicative Stage**

Children seem to randomly combine letters, numerals and other symbols to represent words. These early spellings suggest a lack of real understanding, on the spellers' part, of grapheme-sound relationships. Some typical examples of invented spelling that appear at this stage are MSOOE (for a "kind of food"), PAHIQ (for GIANT), b+BpA (for MONSTER) and 2+ BA (for TAKE).

(2) **Semi-phonetic Stage**

During the semi-phonetic stage, children are beginning to realise that letters represent sounds, and one or more letters are now being used to represent words or syllables:

- R (for ARE), DG (for DOG), CAMR (for CAMERA), HAB (for HAPPY), etc.

(3) **Phonetic Stage**

In this stage, all of the sound features encountered in a word are systematically represented. A letter or a cluster of letters is now used to represent each sound or syllable in the word being spelt. For example, PPL (for PEOPLE), CHRES (for TREES), SHUTS (for SHOOTS).

(4) **Transitional Stage**

Children rely not only on the phonological system but also on some other strategies (e.g. recourse to meaning) when they spell. Common spelling patterns (i.e. groups of letters representing sounds in English) are used, and vowels of words are fully represented. The spelling of a word closely approximates the various sounds heard in the word: BILLDINGS (for BUILDINGS), YOUNITED (for UNITED), HICHCHED (for HIKED), etc.

(5) **Standard Spelling Stage**

In the final stage, the basic spelling rules are more or less internalised and children are able to recall the standard spellings of many words with relative ease.
It is not certain that, in the acquisition of standard spelling, all children will invariably progress from one stage to another or develop at the same rate. However, it appears that children who have reached the transitional stage are developmentally ready for formal spelling instruction (DiStefano & Hagerty, 1985).

Researchers have always been interested in the kinds of strategy that good spellers employ in their attempt at mastering unfamiliar words (see e.g. Bolton & Snowball, 1993:9-10). The present case study was, in fact, motivated in part by an investigation by Radebaugh (1985) who interviewed some third and fourth grade students (ages 7-10) about their perceptions of their spelling strategies. Among the main strategies that his good spellers used for spelling difficult words were:

- Thought of possible spellings, part by part.
- "Sounded it out" one or two sounds at a time
- Visualised the setting for the word
- Visualised the word or a similar one
- Tried to hear smaller words in a larger one

The Present Case Study

Among other things, the present study incorporated some of the psycholinguistic principles governing the strategies used by good spellers (Radebaugh, 1985) into a 5-week teaching program aimed at helping Yanhua, a 6-year-old Primary 1 child, acquire conventional spelling quickly. The subject had a list of 50 words to spell (see Appendix). These words were derived from the child's school-prescribed reader. She could recognise most of these words on sight, having come across them in her reading and speech. She also appeared to know the meanings of most of the words when tested orally. Yanhua could be considered a speller in the transitional stage but, when given the list of words for her to spell, her main problem, as she put it, was that she "could not remember" how to spell the more difficult words. There are no sound pedagogical reasons here to reject the practice of teaching a child to spell words in a list. In fact, Bromley (1992:359) reported a research finding by Fitzsimmons &
Loomer (1978) that "presenting words in list form initially is a more successful method than presenting spelling words in sentences or paragraphs". (See also Lehr, 1984). As it turned out, among the more difficult words for Yanhua were frequently those that were polysyllabic – these included compound words such as GRANDMOTHER, PLAYGROUND, WATERMELONS, TOOTHPASTE, etc. – and words which contain consonant clusters occurring initially, medially or finally in a syllable, e.g. CHINESE, LIBRARY and CHURCH.

Techniques Used for Teaching Standard Spelling

Step 1: Reading aloud words in a sequence

Ten words from the spelling list were presented to the child each week. The child was then asked to read these words aloud and in the order in which they appeared in the list. Oral assistance was offered when the child's pronunciation was inaccurate. The reason for asking the child to read the words aloud was to help her associate, in the first instance, the underlying sound segments with the surface representations of the words. Words presented sequentially in list form can, in a way, help a speller visualise the words in that context when she actually spells them. As a matter of fact, Radebaugh (1985: 534) reported that one of his good spellers in trying to figure out the spelling of ARITHMETIC "visualized the word arithmetic written on her textbook".

Step 2: Extending the meanings of words through association, etc.

Spelling words can become significantly more meaningful to the speller when their meanings are extended through association, analogy, contrast, etc. For example, the word FRUITERER was explicated thus: "You eat FRUIT like apples, pears and oranges. You buy them from a FRUITERER". Similarly, HAMSTERS was made to be understood by the child as a morphological extension of the singular form HAMSTER. In trying to spell FRUITERER, the child would see the derivational (meaning) relationship between FRUITERER and FRUIT in much the same way as that between MAGICIAN – another word in
the spelling list – and MAGIC. However, abstract phonological rules apply to give somewhat different pronunciations for MAGICIAN and MAGIC. In any case, DiStefano & Hagerty (1985 : 376) contend that "techniques that focus on spelling by meaning help students see that a word's written form often relates to a more abstract or lexical (meaning) form".

**Step 3: Segmenting a word into smaller parts**

This is a major step which involved segmenting a word progressively into more and more parts at appropriate places (and not necessarily at syllable boundaries) in a number of sub-stages. The word, GRANDMOTHER, for instance, was segmented by the researcher into smaller and smaller parts in three sub-stages as follows:

(i) [GRAND] [MOTHER]

(ii) [GR] [AND] [MOTHER]

(iii) [GR] [AND] [MO] [THER]

At each sub-stage, from (i) to (iii), the various parts of the word were written on strips of paper and jumbled up. The child was then asked to unscramble the parts to form the original spelling of the word. The procedure was repeated as often as necessary until the researcher was satisfied that the speller could piece together the different constituents of a word successfully at each sub-stage. The principle behind the segmentation of a word is to expose the speller to the fact that the spelling of a word may be thought of in terms of a number of parts (or spelling patterns) rather than individual letters. Radebaugh (ibid : 535) also noted that his good spellers "seldom proceeded letter-by-letter when spelling unfamiliar words but rather broke words into smaller parts and searched for likely spellings for each part". It will be noticed that word-segmentation at any sub-stage occurred at points which would naturally allow the researcher to help the speller do a number of things for each of the sub-stages. In sub-stage (i), for example, the speller was shown that GRANDMOTHER was composed of two free morphemes, namely [GRAND] and [MOTHER]. In sub-stage (ii), the speller's attention was drawn to the
fact that there is an -AND in GR-AND. Since the child already knew, from a previous experience, how to spell MOTHER (and AND), this simple form of memory aid was devised to help the child recall the correct spelling of GR-AND. (See also Bolton & Snowball, 1993: 13). Similarly, in sub-stage (iii), analogy was brought to bear on the identity between the spelling pattern of -THER in MO-THER (a spelling word in the list) and that in other known English words such as FA-THER and BRO-THER.

By the time, the child arrived at sub-stage (iii), she would have had a number of occasions to re-combine at different levels of complexity – i.e. sub-stages (i) through (iii) – the various sound segments that constitute GRANDMOTHER. Other spelling words in the list were practised by the child in the same manner.

**Step 4: Spelling the words in writing**

This is the final step in facilitating the acquisition of standard spelling by the child. For the spelling of each word, the speller was encouraged to "sound it out, one or two sounds at a time" to herself and to "think of possible spellings, part by part", just like what a good speller would do (Radebaugh, 1985) before putting the word down in written form. Wherever possible, the child was also to try to "hear smaller words in a larger one" (e.g. FIN in FIN-GER; IN in IN-DIAN; NEIGH in NEIGH-BOLIR; PAPA in PAPA-YA, etc.).

**Final Assessment**

Having put Yanhua through a 5-week program working consistently at 10 spelling words each week, she was finally asked to write again all of the 50 words dictated to her. In the final assessment, what is important is not so much that she had a near perfect score of 48 out of 50 words spelt correctly as that she now "finds spelling easy". (Her two mistakes were *LETTUCES [for LETTUCE] and *TOOTH [for TOOTHPASTE]. When told that these two words were wrongly written, the child promptly righted them without any reference to the spelling list).
The Last Word

26 letters in the English alphabet and some 44 phonological segments in the English phonological system, when combined in certain ways, do make up an extremely large number of words. It is recognised that as young children come across unfamiliar words and attempt to spell them, the spelling task before them is often not an easy one. One would perhaps appreciate their problem more when one realises that a given grapheme, say "e", will vary in sound according to the linguistic environment in which the grapheme appears in a word: BET; HER; EASY; FIREMAN; SHE; CAGE; GIRAFFE and so forth. Lehr (1984: 219) observes that "a third of the words in the standard dictionary have more than one accepted pronunciation; more than a half have silent letters and about a sixth have double letters; many different spellings can be given most sounds; unstressed syllables characterized by the schwa or short /i/ sound are very hard to spell by sound....", which explains why the teaching of conventional spelling by the phonics method has its inherent limitations. In conjunction with the use of some memory aid, the strategy of gradually decomposing a word into smaller and smaller constituents at appropriate points which allow the learner to understand both spelling patterns and underlying meanings, and then re-integrating these sound segments to form the original word is one way to expedite the acquisition of standard spelling forms by the transitional speller. We would expect that conventional spelling could be systematically TAUGHT; we could not assume that it would be naturally CAUGHT. It is likely that in later writing, a child would only use those vocabulary items that she knows she is confident of spelling correctly.
APPENDIX

Spelling List Used in the Case Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week 1</th>
<th>Week 2</th>
<th>Week 3</th>
<th>Week 4</th>
<th>Week 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>finger</td>
<td>family</td>
<td>neighbour</td>
<td>toothpaste</td>
<td>policeman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mouth</td>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>fur;</td>
<td>garden</td>
<td>magician</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>toe</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>optician</td>
<td>milk</td>
<td>butcher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jump</td>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>fireman</td>
<td>hospital</td>
<td>teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>skip</td>
<td>playground</td>
<td>frog</td>
<td>pencil</td>
<td>Wednesday</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>play</td>
<td>market</td>
<td>potatoes</td>
<td>giraffe</td>
<td>hamsters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>swim</td>
<td>library</td>
<td>watermelons</td>
<td>cage</td>
<td>papaya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>walk</td>
<td>temple</td>
<td>tortoise</td>
<td>durian</td>
<td>delivers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>uncle</td>
<td>church</td>
<td>comb</td>
<td>lettuce</td>
<td>radio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>grandmother</td>
<td>mosque</td>
<td>brush</td>
<td>bank</td>
<td>thief</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

References


