Weekly spelling lists – are they a good idea?

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Good spelling is an extremely important skill for a literate person to possess. Accurate spelling assists readers to understand text they are reading and inaccurate spelling can make a text difficult to comprehend and be judged harshly by readers. The ability to spell well also helps with writing, as it allows the writer to devote more of their mental resources to composition rather than being distracted by how to spell words. Spelling is also important for reading, and vice versa. Reading skills such as phonemic awareness and phonics are necessary for good spelling to develop, and instruction in spelling can result in better reading (*Graham & Hebert, 2011; Graham & Santangelo, 2014; Moats, 2005*).

Over the last several decades spelling has been considered a low curriculum priority (*Pan et al., 2021*; *Sayeski, 2011*). The more mechanical aspects of writing such as spelling and handwriting have been largely abandoned in favour of higher order writing skills (*Joshi et al., 2008*). This has resulted in generations of students leaving school with below satisfactory spelling skills, leading many to consider how spelling should be taught.

Use of word lists

Traditionally, a common approach to the teaching of spelling has involved the rote learning of lists of words, with an emphasis on the visual information each word conveys. In fact, using lists of words to 'teach' spelling has persisted since early in the 20th century (*Pan et al., 2021*). If using this approach, a teacher might prepare a list of words for their students to learn for the week. This is given to the students on Monday, and they are tested on Friday. Spelling word lists may come from other areas of the curriculum, from children's own writing or from a spelling program. During the week, some light teaching may occur to practise these words, for example, copying the words out multiple times or writing the words in a sentence, but essentially there is often little, if any, in-depth instruction around the nature of the English language to assist children in their understanding of how the system works. The main problem with this type of approach is the absence of any real instruction in spelling.

Are lists always a problem?

It is important to note here that it may be a little unfair to completely dismiss the use of word lists as part of spelling instruction. The examples below show three lists of words. In Example 1, the words are seemingly random. The list includes words with many different types of phonological, orthographic and morphological features; for example, there are words with one, two, and three syllables, different digraphs (ee, ou, sh, oo, ck) and different affixes (ed, dis, ing). Lists of words that are completely orthographically unrelated promote rote learning as the main spelling strategy and force children to focus on the visual

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features of a word. It is likely that the 'instruction' that would accompany this list would involve writing the words many times using the Look, Say, Cover, Write, Check method, for example.

Example 1: Seemingly random words
rapid
jumped
disagree
outing
mushroom
neck

In Example 2, the words are organised according to a theme. Again, the words are orthographically unrelated and the list contains different examples of morphographs (Europeans, cultural, discovery). A morphograph is the spelling or orthographic representation of the smallest unit of meaning within a word. This list might be used during a history unit and students would probably practise spelling these words in the context of writing about history.

Example 2: Words organised according to a theme
history
Europeans
cultural
exploration
discovery
century

In Example 3, the words are organised according to a common suffix (ion). The spelling instruction that accompanies this list of words would include instruction in morphology where appropriate (for example, changing the bases 'act' to 'action', 'donate' to 'donation' and 'operate' to 'operation').

Example 3: Words with a common suffix
mention
station
action
fiction
donation
operation

Using lists of orthographically *unrelated* words to teach spelling, as in Examples 1 and 2, is more problematic than using lists of words that are related in some way, as in Example 3, because the amount of new content presented in Examples 1 and 2 is larger and requires more memorisation. In Example 3, an understanding of the structure of words is being built whereas in Examples 1 and 2, it would be difficult for children to notice a pattern. As can be seen in the examples above, the words presented to children has implications for spelling instruction.

How should spelling be taught?
English is considered by many to be highly irregular but research indicates that about 50% of all words can be spelled accurately based on regular letter-sound relationships. A further 34% are regular except for one sound and about 12% can be spelled using knowledge of word origin and word meaning. This leaves just 4% of English words that are truly irregular (*Joshi et al., 2008*). This may surprise those who see only exceptions to every rule or pattern, but it has important implications for the teaching of spelling. Evidence that English spelling is actually highly regular suggests that there is value in teaching spelling rules and conventions, and that spelling instruction should be language-based rather than based on rote learning of individual words.

Language-based spelling instruction occurs when children are explicitly taught linguistic concepts. This includes speech sounds, grapheme-phoneme correspondences (GPCs), word origins and morphology (meaningful parts of words) (*Joshi et al., 2008*). Children are taught to think about language and the internal structure of words rather than memorising the spellings of individual words. With this type of spelling instruction, children are able to spell many more words than it would be possible for them to memorise, and includes the words used as part of spelling instruction and the application of knowledge to novel words. There is far more empirical support for the provision of language-based spelling instruction than that based mainly on rote memorisation due to the generalising potential offered by language-based instruction (*Berninger et al., 2000; Joshi et al., 2008; Moats, 2009; Moats, 2019*).

In addition to being language-based, spelling should be taught via explicit instruction. Explicit instruction has been found to be instructionally effective in general (*Burton, Nunes, & Evangelou, 2021; Graham & Santangelo, 2014; Hughes et al., 2017; Westwood, 2022*). It is a teacher-directed approach with features such as well-sequenced lessons, clear and concise language, guided

practice, frequent student responses, cumulative review, distributed practice, and systematic (and immediate) error correction.

Error correction is an important consideration with regard to the teaching of spelling as the timing of this is often too late. It is necessary to deliver corrective feedback as soon as possible after a child makes a response (in this case, spelling a word or words) in order to facilitate high rates of success and reduce the chance of children practising errors (*Archer & Hughes, 2011*). Children should be given immediate feedback during teaching (*Ashman, 2018*) not days afterwards as is often the case with weekly spelling tests.

As well as providing explicit, language-based spelling instruction, the teaching of spelling should be integrated with reading and writing instruction, especially in the first few years of formal schooling when children are learning the alphabetic code. Many researchers have documented the close relationship between reading and writing (*Ehri, 2000*; *Graham, 2020*; *Moats, 2005*) Instruction organised in this way is more efficient as the reciprocal skills of reading and writing (including handwriting and spelling) are taught together and reinforce each other.

Conclusion

Although more traditional approaches to spelling instruction have involved weekly lists of words to be learned and then tested, it is not necessary or desirable to organise spelling instruction and assessment in this way. In order to avoid relying on memorising words as the main spelling strategy, evidence-based and language-based explicit spelling instruction should be provided to children, along with regular assessment.

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