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Newsletter

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BEYOND AUTOCORRECT: WHY SPELLING MATTERS AND HOW TO SUPPORT IT IN THE CLASSROOM

BY DR. DALIA MARTINEZ

In a time when digital devices automatically correct our spelling, it is easy to wonder whether teaching spelling is still worth valuable classroom time. This doubt is understandable if spelling is viewed simply as memorising letter sequences, but spelling is much more than that.

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Are you an education or health professional who works with young people (aged 8-15 years) with language and/or literacy difficulties? **Help researchers understand** how best to support the mental health of young people who have language and/or literacy difficulties.

MYTH:

“Using non-traditional spellings of words in text messages or on social media harms children’s spelling skills.”

FACTS:

- The evidence shows that in children aged 11-16, the use of “textisms”/ “textese” has a positive correlation with spelling accuracy.
- This relationship disappears with older age.
- Most people, including children, don't use “textisms” in formal communication.

Read here for further information.

BEYOND AUTOCORRECT: WHY SPELLING MATTERS AND HOW TO SUPPORT IT IN THE CLASSROOM

BY DR. DALIA MARTINEZ

Making the case for spelling

In a time when digital devices automatically correct our spelling, it is easy to wonder whether teaching spelling is still worth valuable classroom time. Such doubt is understandable if spelling is viewed simply as memorising letter sequences, but spelling is much more than that.

Spelling is closely connected to reading and writing. When students learn and practise spelling, they break words into sounds and connect those sounds to letters in print, strengthening their phonemic awareness and understanding of the alphabetic principle. These skills later support the reading and spelling of unfamiliar words. At the same time, spelling practice builds strong representations of words, allowing for quicker word recognition and leaving more attention available for comprehension. Spelling is also closely tied to the length and quality of writing. When students are unsure how to spell a word, they may avoid using it altogether, which can limit their use of vocabulary and lead to shorter pieces of writing. Their compositions may also become less sophisticated, as students focus their attention on figuring out the spelling of words rather than on developing and structuring their ideas.

Lastly, it's important to consider that as [spelling develops gradually](#), students' attempts can be highly informative, acting like "X-rays" that reveal where the difficulty lies. For example, spellings that are far from the target (e.g., *merifry* for *periphery*) may show difficulty hearing the sounds in words, but more plausible errors (e.g., *perifary*) suggest that students are mapping sounds to letters correctly but still need to learn the word's specific spelling. This kind of information can help guide targeted support.

Key elements for effective spelling instruction

[Explicit spelling instruction](#) has been shown to be more effective than relying only on implicit learning that occurs incidentally during reading and writing, or on informal methods such as modelling spelling during "teachable moments". Effective approaches are intentional: they focus students' attention on target words, provide repeated practice, and include immediate feedback. Explicitly teaching how sounds (phonology) and word parts (morphology) relate to spelling, as well as drawing attention to spelling patterns and rules, can support improvements that extend beyond the words that were directly taught. In addition, structured practise of specific words can greatly support the learning of [irregular spellings](#). For example, students can study a word, try to spell it from memory, check it, and revisit it across the week to strengthen learning.

Bridging research and practice at ACU: Current research project

[Nurturing spelling skills is far from trivial](#). Although instructional time is limited, this should not be a barrier to incorporating spelling practice in the classroom. At ACU, we are exploring ways to make spelling practice more efficient. In an ongoing study, we examined the cost-benefit trade-off of using adaptive word lists. These lists adjust based on student performance, removing correctly spelled words and focusing practice on those that remain challenging, with the potential to save time. Although the use of adaptive lists sounds promising, very few studies have evaluated learning outcomes of this approach compared to more traditional methods, such as fixed lists, where all words are practised equally. Without clear evidence, we need to proceed with caution. Even if adaptive lists may improve efficiency, it is not yet clear if this may come at a learning cost. The ARC Laureate research program, led by Professor Anne Castles, in collaboration with the University of Alberta in Canada, conducted a study comparing these two approaches. We are currently reviewing the results. So, what's your bet, fixed or adaptive? Stay tuned!

Learn more here:

Colenbrander, D., Wang, H. C., Arrow, T., & Castles, A. (2020). [Teaching irregular words](#): What we know, what we don't know, and where we can go from here. *Educational and Developmental Psychologist*, 37(2), 97–104.

Graham, S., & Santangelo, T. (2014). [Does spelling instruction make students better spellers, readers, and writers?](#) A meta-analytic review. *Reading and Writing*, 27, 1703–1743.

Pan, S. C., Rickard, T. C., & Bjork, R. A. (2021). [Does spelling still matter](#)—and if so, how should it be taught? Perspectives from contemporary and historical research. *Educational Psychology Review*, 33, 1523–1552.

Treiman, R. (2017) [Learning to spell words](#): Findings, theories, and issues. *Scientific Studies of Reading*, 21(4), 265–276.

Social media ban surveys Australian Centre for the Advancement of Literacy

For parents of 10-15 year olds:

Please share your views and experiences [here](#) (15 mins).



For children aged 10-15:

Please [follow this link](#) to book a survey time. Receive a **\$20 gift card** for sharing your thoughts and completing some reading activities (less than 30 mins).

