

Newsletter

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By Anna Lithgow, Dr. Danielle Colenbrander, Prof. Saskia Kohnen

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COMPARING IRREGULAR WORD INSTRUCTION STRATEGIES: MISPRONUNCIATION CORRECTION AND THE HEART-WORD METHOD BY ANNA LITHGOW, DR. DANIELLE COLENBRANDER AND PROF. SASKIA KOHNEN

Irregular words are those that contain one or more unpredictable grapheme-phoneme correspondence (GPC). This may be because the grapheme has an “unusual” pronunciation, or because the reader has not yet learnt that GPC. The English language is full of such words, many of which are very frequent, such as *was*, *said*, and *have*. Effective literacy instruction must include strategies for addressing irregular words, yet there is relatively little research examining how best to teach them. [Read the full article here.](#)

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MYTH: “No one cares about spelling errors anymore.”

FACTS:

- In job applications and other professional contexts, spelling errors can still harm or confuse a reader's perception of the applicant/writer.
- Incorrect spelling can reduce the impact and credibility of information shared in advertising, reviews, and websites.
- Paying attention to errors in students' spelling can help teachers adapt their instruction to target students' literacy learning needs.

[Read here for further information](#)

COMPARING IRREGULAR WORD INSTRUCTION STRATEGIES: MISPRONUNCIATION CORRECTION AND THE HEART-WORD METHOD

BY ANNA LITHGOW, DR. DANIELLE COLENBRANDER AND PROF. SASKIA KOHNEN

Irregular words are those that contain one or more unpredictable grapheme-phoneme correspondence (GPC). This may be because the grapheme has an “unusual” pronunciation, or because the reader has not yet learnt that GPC. The English language is full of such words, many of which are very frequent, such as *was*, *said*, and *have*.

Effective literacy instruction must include strategies for addressing irregular words, yet there is [relatively little research examining how best to teach them](#). Our study was the first to compare two instruction strategies, Mispronunciation Correction and Heart-Words, and the first to directly evaluate the effectiveness of Mispronunciation Correction for supporting spelling.

Mispronunciation Correction instruction involves generating plausible spelling-pronunciations based on regular grapheme-phoneme correspondences (e.g., pronouncing *listen* as “lis-ten”), then linking these to the correct pronunciation. In contrast, the [Heart-Word method](#) encourages children to identify the “regular” parts of a word using existing phonics knowledge (e.g., all the letters in *listen*, except for *t*), while explicitly marking atypical correspondences that must be learned “by-heart”.

These methods are thought to support orthographic mapping – the cognitive process where readers form connections between a word’s spelling, pronunciation and meaning to secure it in memory. Both strategies do this by directing attention to a word’s letter-sound relationships. However, they differ in how irregularity is handled: Heart-Word instruction involves isolating atypical elements, whereas Mispronunciation Correction involves temporarily regularising the “irregular” GPCs, [potentially providing a mnemonic bridge between spelling and pronunciation](#).

In our study, we evaluated both methods against a common homework practice: look-and-say, emphasising rote memorisation of whole-words without explicit grapheme-phoneme processing. In this “active-control” condition, students received one in-school lesson, then three at-home practices, supported by parents.

Participants were 60 six-year-old children from four UK primary schools, all of whom had received systematic phonics instruction. All children first completed look-and-say training with one set of words, then received four sessions of either Mispronunciation Correction or Heart-Word instruction with new words the following week.

Although look-and-say practice did improve children’s reading and spelling accuracy, both Mispronunciation Correction and Heart-Word training produced much larger gains. No significant differences were found between the two experimental methods; both appeared equally effective despite their different instructional emphases.

Nevertheless, Mispronunciation Correction may offer some advantages from a practical perspective. Sessions were faster to deliver, and it is possible that learners may be able to learn to use Mispronunciation Correction as a strategy they can apply independently, though we were not able to directly test this in our study. In contrast, the Heart-Word method relies more heavily on instructor guidance to identify and model atypical GPCs. Future research is needed to explore whether these instructional methods transfer beyond taught words, and whether some words are more or less suited to either strategy (for instance, *rhythm* may be tricky to regularise). More work should also explore how effective these strategies are for low-skilled or at-risk readers.

Given the high frequency of irregular words and their importance for fluent reading, identifying effective and scalable instructional strategies is essential. Overall, our findings are consistent with theoretical accounts of word learning, suggesting that approaches that facilitate orthographic mapping support children in learning to read and spell difficult words.

Learn more here:

- Lithgow, A., Kohnen, S., Barr, P., Robidoux, S., & Colenbrander, D. (2026). [Teaching Irregular Words: A Comparison of Mispronunciation Correction and Heart-Word Methods](#). *Scientific Studies of Reading*, 1-25.
- [Teaching Literacy Podcast | Episode 38: Irregular Words with Dr. Danielle Colenbrander](#)
- 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. *The Educational and Developmental Psychologist*, 37(2), 97-104.
- [Free heart-word resources | University of Florida Literacy Institute](#)
- Elbro, C., & de Jong, P. F. (2017). Orthographic learning is verbal learning: The role of spelling pronunciations. In K. Cain, D. Compton & R. Parrila (eds.), *Theories of reading development* (pp. 169-190). John Benjamins Publishing Company.



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