2020

Teaching spelling in context can also be explicit and systematic

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Abstract

This article shares a few practical insights from an intervention study that focussed on building teacher capacity for effective instruction in spelling. For the study, four schools in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) were selected to participate through a stratified random sampling process. In total, 572 students across 31 classes in Years 3 to 6 participated. Of the 31 classes, 14 were involved in a ten-week intervention while the remaining 17 classes formed a 'comparison' group whereby a 'business as usual' approach to teaching spelling was adopted.

Keywords

systematic, context, explicit, spelling, teaching, be, also, can

Disciplines

Education | Social and Behavioral Sciences

Publication Details

Teaching spelling in context can also be explicit and systematic

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This article shares a few practical insights from an intervention study that focussed on building teacher capacity for effective instruction in spelling. For the study, four schools in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) were selected to participate through a stratified random sampling process. In total, 572 students across 31 classes in Years 3 to 6 participated. Of the 31 classes, 14 were involved in a ten-week intervention while the remaining 17 classes formed a 'comparison' group whereby a 'business as usual' approach to teaching spelling was adopted.

The teachers in the intervention group participated in professional learning workshops and planning meetings facilitated by the primary researcher, before and during the intervention. The intervention design featured three overarching elements: i) teaching spelling in context; ii) explicit instruction; and iii) a systematic approach. The teachers in the comparison group ('business as usual') had self-reported approaches that were largely dominated by rote learning and incidental phonics-based tasks.

Results of this study (to be fully reported elsewhere) revealed that all intervention classes displayed statistically significant improvements in spelling scores. What follows are some highlights of the intervention design.

Teaching spelling in context

Contextualising spelling instruction involves utilising words from a range of contexts to teach specific linguistics skills or strategies. Contexts may include:
- Children's own written texts;
- Published fiction and non-fiction texts (especially those with rich and diverse vocabulary);
- Topic or subject-specific vocabulary (e.g. key words used in science, history, geography, mathematics, health or the arts disciplines).

An example of how spelling instruction can be contextualised is provided in this video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cZQQVkW0lUI

Teaching spelling explicitly

Explicit instruction enables students to learn new skills (Hattie, 2009). It involves:
- Deciding on the learning intentions and success criteria and ensuring they are transparent to the students;
- Modelling applications of new strategies, spelling 'rules' or generalisations;
- Using metalanguage (language for talking about the linguistic properties in words);
- Checking for understanding (e.g., by asking students to articulate a strategy, 'rule' or generalisation; and/or by analysing their application of spelling in writing).

When a teacher models the process of spelling as a word-formation problem-solving task, it can empower students to develop a repertoire of spelling strategies that they can articulate with clarity (Daffern & Critten, 2019). In this study, explicit episodes occurred three to four times per week for about 15–20 minutes at a time. These episodes were followed by consolidation tasks. In addition, incidental opportunities for further consolidation occurred throughout the day and across other subject areas. The lessons enabled students to inquire into how words are constructed. For example, students were guided by the teacher to hypothesise generalisations for spelling and then to test their hypotheses. An example of a structured spelling inquiry can be viewed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d_ah_9ar6qU

Teaching spelling systematically

A systematic teaching approach is one that is methodical. This intervention design:
- Was informed by Triple Word Form Theory: a non-linear perspective of spelling development that has been applied in other studies to demonstrate children's capacity to learn how to coordinate phonological, orthographic and morphological strategies (Bahr, 2015; Bahr, Silliman, Danzak, & Wilkinson, 2015; Daffern, 2016, 2017; Richards et al., 2006).
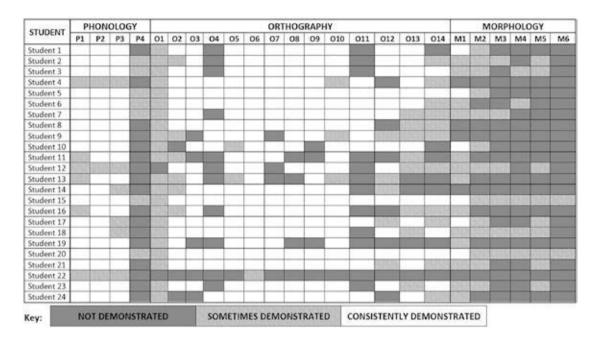- Embedded a range of assessment data to inform teaching priorities;

STUDENT	PHONOLOGY				ORTHOGRAPHY														MORPHOLOGY					
	P1	P2	P3	P4	O1	O2	O3	O4	O5	O6	O7	O8	O9	O10	O11	O12	O13	O14	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6
Student 1																								
Student 2																								
Student 3																								
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Key: NOT DEMONSTRATED   SOMETIMES DEMONSTRATED   CONSISTENTLY DEMONSTRATED

Figure 1. Illustrative sample of a coded class summary of spelling skills

- Sought to build upon prior learning and sequentially expand from simple to more complex skills.

Assessment entailed spelling error analysis, extracting words written by students from a compilation of their own texts (e.g., narrative compositions) as well as from a norm-referenced dictation task called the *Components of Spelling Test* (Daffern, 2018). Data codes were used to identify specific linguistic features (see Table 1). Spelling errors were analysed and coded to show which spelling skills were consistently demonstrated, sometimes demonstrated and not yet demonstrated (for an illustrative example, see Figure 1).

Table 1. Summary of data codes and their descriptions

Phonological data codes & descriptions	
P1	Using consonant-vowel-consonant words
P2	Comparing short vs. long vowel phonemes
P3	Using consonant blends and digraphs
P4	Encoding polysyllabic words
Orthographic data codes & descriptions	
O1	Representing long /i/ vowel (e.g., as in 'bite')
O2	Representing long /a/ vowel (e.g., as in 'late')
O3	Representing long /e/ vowel (e.g., as in 'feed')
O4	Representing long /o/ vowel (e.g., as in 'rope')
O5	-ar letter patterns (e.g. as in 'far')
O6	Diphthongs /oi/oy/ and /ou/ough/ (e.g., as in 'coin' and 'shout')
O7	-er, -ir, -ur, -our letter patterns
O8	Representing long /ew/ vowel phoneme (e.g., as in 'new')
09	Representing /aw/ vowel phoneme (e.g., as in 'hawk' and 'tall')
O10	Complex consonant clusters /str/ and /shr/
O11	Complex consonant clusters /kn/
O12	Complex consonant clusters /tch/ and /dge/
O13	Syllable juncture consonant doublets
O14	Unaccented final syllables
Morphological data codes & descriptions	
M1	Inflected suffixes
M2	Derivational suffixes
M3	Morpheme juncture schwas
M4	Homophones
M5	Greek & Latin root words
M6	Assimilated prefixes

Note. Table adapted from Daffern (2018, pp. 33–34)

Establishing routines

Frequent explicit teaching episodes can improve outcomes (Graham & Santangelo, 2014). In this intervention design, several small-group explicit teaching episodes were implemented each week. The explicit teaching component of the intervention design included three overarching components: i) a focus on phonology (speech sound structures in words) ii) a focus on orthography (letter-pattern structures in words); and iii) a focus on morphology (meaning-based structures in words, including

Table 2. Extract from a weekly planner

Day 1: Focus on phonology	Data code: P4 (see Figures 2 and 3) (for selected students)	Explicit teaching: 15 minutes Independent: 15 minutes
Explicit teaching • Introduce polysyllabic words – use examples; • Read book, 'Andy Webb: Artist' by Maree Coote (Figure 2); • Notice and highlight polysyllabic words in the book; • Students note down 3 words from the book onto a personal whiteboard; • Choose one word from the book (e.g., 'composition'). Identify the syllables. **Independent work (or during literacy rotation)** Students construct a 3-syllable, 4-syllable and 5-syllable word table in Google Classroom using their own reading materials (Figure 3).		
Where to next: Students add new polysyllabic words to a class word wall, drawing from relevant words being studied in other disciplines such as science and history.		
Day 2: Focus on orthography	Data code: 05 (see Figure 4) (for selected students)	Explicit teaching: 15 minutes Independent: 15 minutes
Explicit teaching • Introduce letter pattern 'ar'; • Read book, 'The Garbage Barge' by Jonah Winter; • Notice and highlight words in the book with the 'ar' letter pattern; • Discuss the different phonemes for this pattern; • Begin to construct a sorting table on poster paper; **Independent work (or during literacy rotation)** Students work on an 'ar' word inquiry by using own reading material to locate and sort 'ar' words according to the phoneme.		
Where to next: Write a range of these words as sentences and look and listen carefully at the pronunciation.		
Day 3: Focus on morphology	Data code: M4 (See Figure 5) (for selected students)	Explicit teaching: 15 minutes Independent: 15 minutes
• Introduce homophones – give an example and a definition; • Read book, 'Did you say Pears' by Arlene Aldam; • Notice any words that might be homophones; • List the words from the book that are homophones. **Independent work (or during literacy rotation)** Students use their own texts to find homophones – they put these in a sentence, stating the matching homophone.		
Where to next: Students share their work with a buddy and offer feedback. Students work on a homophone cloze, choosing the correct homophone for the sentence.		

morpheme origins). The three components were taught each week. While the duration of each teaching episode was short, the learning was focussed and informed by ongoing formative assessment (see, for example, Table 2). This meant that grouping configurations were not necessarily static across a given week or over several weeks. In addition, opportunities for consolidation were provided throughout the day (e.g., during literacy rotations).

Conclusion

In a given class, the diversity of spelling skills among children can be large. Each child will display a unique spelling profile. Such diversity poses a challenge when seeking to meet the needs of all students. This vignette highlights that it is possible to meet diverse student needs in spelling through carefully planned, contextualised and explicit linguistic inquiries. A systematic approach is one that is carefully planned, drawing on a collection

Figure 2. The learning focus is contextualised by reading a suitable literary text

Figure 3. A range of books are made available for a word hunt task

Figure 4. Students create a table of sorted -ar words

Figure 5. Students locate homophones

of assessment data to inform teaching priorities. Spelling error analysis was a crucial enabler in the systematic approach used in this study. Explicit teaching should occur regularly, and it requires the use of metalanguage to help students understand specific linguistic properties in words and learn how to apply a range of strategies to spell increasingly complex words. Furthermore, connecting the components of spelling through a range of meaningful contexts allows for consolidation. In turn, this helps students retain and apply newly learned understandings of the linguistic properties in words when writing and reading.
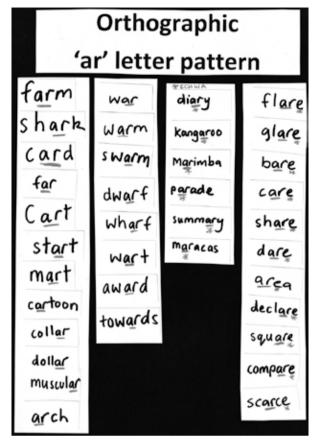
Note. The students shown in the YouTube demonstration videos were not part of the intervention study.

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Tessa Daffern is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Education at the University of Wollongong. Her current research explores the teaching and learning of writing and spelling, and it is driven by her passion for empowering teachers to develop contemporary and innovative teaching practices. Tessa was the recipient of the Australian Literacy Educators' Association Doctoral Thesis Award (2016), and she enjoys working with school teachers to develop inquiry approaches to spelling. Email: tdaffern@uow.edu.au

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Luke Ryan is a Year 5 teacher at Hawker School in Canberra. Luke is welcoming of students and staff alike and enjoys collaborative teaching. He has many strengths as an educator, including presenting engaging and fun filled learning opportunities. Fellow teachers love listening to Luke read to students, using incredible voices and accents to bring characters to life.