

Can knowing and learning spelling patterns ensure accelerated progress in spelling?

Orchard Primary School, Upper Key Stage 2

Abstract

The aim of this study was to find out if knowing and learning spelling patterns can ensure accelerated progress in spelling. To trial its effectiveness, 10% of the lowest spellers in Years 5 and 6 were selected to complete an extended writing task. This was used to calculate the percentage of correctly spelt words to form a baseline. An adult was trained to conduct daily spelling sessions, lasting no more than 15 minutes. In the first four sessions of the week, pupils were introduced to a spelling pattern, practised identifying the pattern within words and sentences and applied the knowledge of the spelling pattern to spell other words. The final session of the week was used to recap on all the spelling patterns and words taught in that week and pupils were tested on their knowledge of patterns and spelling of unfamiliar. After 10 weeks, pupils completed another extended writing task, which was also used to calculate the percentage of correctly spelt words and compared with the baseline to measure impact. Weekly class spelling scores were also used as secondary data to further inform the conclusion.

Introduction

Following several discussions in phase meetings and analysis of the spelling data, it became quite noticeable that a group of pupils were consistently receiving low spelling scores. Spelling was recognised as an essential part of communication, supporting the development of reading and overall literacy. It also makes up for twenty nine percent of the Year 6 English Grammar, Punctuation and Spelling test.

At Orchard, weekly spelling words are displayed in front of every class and pupils are encouraged throughout the week to apply these verbally and within written outcomes. Handwriting sessions are used for pupils to practise writing spelling vocabulary individually and within sentences. Pupils are also given a weekly spelling list as part of homework to rote learn vocabulary using the 'look, copy, cover and write', method before taking a quick spelling test at the beginning of the following week.

Research suggests traditional spelling instructions, in most cases, was based on rote memorisation of an assigned list of words selected by the teacher or a spelling scheme that emphasised visual memorisation of the most common irregular sound/symbol correspondences (Robinson, 2005; Robinson et al., 2000; Schlagal, 2007; Templeton & Morris, 2000). This type of practice has earned traditional spelling instruction a reputation for being tedious.

Patterns are an effective and efficient way to teach regular and predictable words in English (Dehaene, 2009). From birth, a part of the brain, perceives linguistic contrasts, paying attention to the rhythm and sounds of language. During this first year, the infant brain seeks out patterns in language, by extracting, sorting, and classifying segments of speech (Dehanene, 2009). Spelling becomes possible when a child understands that words are made up of speech sounds and that letters represent these sounds. As knowledge of this principle becomes more sophisticated, children notice additional patterns in the way letters, syllables, word endings, prefixes, word roots, and suffixes are used during reading and spelling (IDA, 2011). Spelling instruction that explores the patterns of English word structure, word origin, and word meaning is effective as children learn best through active involvement and practice with words, which allow them to discern and learn word and letter patterns for themselves. Furthermore, research indicates that our brains are inclined to be pattern detectors and therefore effective spelling instruction should emphasise opportunities to explore, organise and identify patterns and one way of teaching predictable patterns is through word study.

Word study, based on research by Henderson (1990) and Templeton and Bear (1992), provides pupil with opportunities to investigate and understand the patterns in words. Pupils are encouraged to compare and contrast features in words through sorting, recognising patterns and discovering them in their reading and writing. Pupils are then tested based on pattern knowledge rather than their ability to memorise single words. Word study can enable pupils to use their acquired knowledge of patterns to correctly spell new and unfamiliar words.

Research Process

The research was co-ordinated by the Upper Key Stage Two Phase Leader and a Learning Support Assistant. The spelling intervention was delivered daily to six low attaining pupils from Years 5 and 6 for a maximum of twelve weeks. Planning was devised for each session (see appendix 3) and over the course of twelve weeks, pupils explored patterns appropriate to their age group. Before the intervention could commence, all pupils had to complete an extended piece of writing. This was used to calculate the percentage of correct spelling and form a baseline.

Sessions began with the introduction/review of a spelling pattern (see appendix 3). Similar to word study, pupils took part in a range of short activities exploring the spelling pattern and this included: sorting words, identifying the pattern within words and sentences and contributing other words with the same pattern. All participants looked forward to attending their daily spelling intervention as they expressed high level of enthusiasm and engagement. At the end of every week, pupils were not only tested on the words they have learnt that week, but also on their ability to transfer their knowledge of a pattern to spell new and unfamiliar words.

At the end of the research, all participants in the study completed another extended write, which was used to calculate the percentage of correct spellings and compare with the baseline, drawing conclusions. In addition, pupils' in class weekly spelling scores from the beginning of the year was compared to scores later on in the year.

Findings

The results show half the number of trialled pupils, have made good progress (fig. 1). Those who regularly attended the spelling sessions and have displayed high levels of engagement have made more perceptible progress. This research has proven to inspire some pupils more than others. As the study went on, pupils showed increase in engagement, confidence and contributed more in sessions.

The weekly spelling scores at the start of the year were consistently below the expected. However, this gradually improved towards the end of the year, for most of the pupils (fig. 2). Pupils displayed a more positive attitude towards spelling tasks. According to one of the class teachers, "At the beginning of the year, pupils were less motivated, disinterested and were not consistently completing the spelling homework task. However, over the course of the year, their change in attitude towards spellings was more conspicuous and they were more consistently completing spellings tasks and looking forward to weekly spelling sessions.

Despite the data (fig. 1) showing some pupils not making progress from the starting point, the spelling intervention enabled pupils to become more confident, feel motivated and take more pride in their learning. Pupil that did not make progress, are known to the school as having significant learning difficulties, especially in reading and writing. Furthermore, even though these pupils did not score a higher percentage in their post research writing, other written outcomes during that week, suggests no major concerns over spellings.

Fig. 1 Percentage of correct spellings pre and post action research.

Pupil	Correct words (%), pre action research	Correct words (%), post action research
LW	66.15	84.90
KS	91.01	88.23
JK	87.27	89.79
JR	66.15	85.93
LV	89.13	85.41
EA	65.57	63.03

Fig. 2 Average spelling scores at different times of the academic year.

Pupil	Average of first three weeks spelling scores	Average of last three weeks spelling scores
LW	5.6	7
KS	3.66	3.33
JK	1	3.66
JR	3	6.33
LV	5.33	6.66
EA	5	3.33

Impact and Conclusion

In conclusion, more than half of the pupils involved in the research project made progress from their starting point. Those, who attended the intervention each day, made better progress. The planning provided, was systematic and easy to follow. Each session was short but effective, giving the pupils enough time and opportunities to explore spelling patterns and study words, identifying patterns within words and using this knowledge to spell new words.

Despite not all participants making the desired progress, the research project enabled pupils to display a great level of engagement and enthusiasm in every session, thus improving their confidence and perception of spelling. Furthermore, class teachers have reported, that the intervention has had a positive impact on the children's attitude towards spellings in class and as part of homework throughout the duration of this research. The adult who led each session commented, "Most of the students enjoyed having the extra support in spelling and writing the words into a sentence and having group discussions".

If this research was to be conducted again, it would require some small changes. Firstly, pupils in Year 5 and 6 would have separate sessions and these would be personalised to their age group. In additions, sessions would commence at the beginning of the day, enabling pupils to discover spelling pattern in their reading and writing sessions later on.

One strategy for the teaching of spelling vocabulary is through handwriting sessions, which typically involves writing a few lines consisting of the spelling pattern and a few words. They are also given a vocabulary list to rote learn using the 'look, copy, cover and write', method before taking a quick spelling test at the beginning of the following week. To improve the standard of spellings further, a similar approach to the action research needs to be taken, where pupils are given daily, in-depth opportunities to explore the spelling pattern within words and apply their knowledge of it to spell other words and discover the pattern within their reading. Such opportunities can be easily embedded in handwriting and spelling sessions and literacy starter activities.

References

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