

Supporting Young Children's Writing Development Through Encouraging Developmental Spelling

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Children who grow up in environments where they see adults using literate language (reading and writing) model after the adults and experiment with writing words.

(G. Bissex, *Gny At Wrk*, 2004; D. Taylor, *Beginning to Read and the Spin Doctors of Science*, 1998)

They make lists (of their toys,
menus for restaurants, items to buy
at the store.)

They include writing in their play:

- Taking orders at restaurants.
- Writing down messages as secretaries.

They send mail to friends -- writing
“notes” and “letters” to others.

Donald Graves has found that when American children start school, over 80% of the children believe that they know how to write but less than 30% believe they know how to read.

(D. Graves & L. Bridges Bird, *Bring Life into Learning: Create a Lasting Literacy*, 1999; C. Avery & D. Graves, *And with a Light Touch: Learning about Reading, Writing, and Teaching with First Graders*, 2002)

Why?

- Because reading and writing are part of language, which children pick up developmentally, through interactions in environments where they hear and see it being used.
- Because writing comes from within us, and uses what we know about how words work in whatever written system we have been exposed to.

Children who are read stories, from an early age, see how words in books.

Children look at signs in their environment, particularly those that are important to them –

e.g., MacDonalds' golden arches,
Favorite candy wrappings and cereal boxes,
Road signs – STOP, EXIT

Adults often encourage children to say their ABC's and recognize the different letters.

Our responsibility, as early childhood teachers, librarians, and parents is to build on the confidence that children have as writers and encourage them to take risks.

We need to realize that learning to spell, similar to learning to read, is a developmental process.

Children learn through play – they experiment with written language through their play.

As young children are learning to write, adults should encourage them to write whatever they wish to say, without worrying about whether or not they are using standard spelling.

Researchers who have studied children's early writing efforts and documented the developmental changes refer to these as "invented spellings."

Teachers often call these "developmental spellings" or "temporary spellings" because they know that these spellings will change developmentally, moving toward standard spelling.

The issue is that English, an alphabetic system, has “borrowed” words from many different languages. These include:

Old English and Middle English – “awe,” “blaze,”
“fever,” “yesterday”

French and Old French – “ballet,” “obey,”
“oxygen,” “plateau”

German, Old Dutch and High German – “hard,”
“king,” “standard,” “wash”

Greek and Late Greek – “drama,” “hymn,”
“photograph,” “skeleton”

Latin, Vulgar Latin and Late Latin – “calendar,”
“introduce,” “particular,” “repeat”

Spanish – “barbeque,” “fiesta,” “guitar”

Therefore, English spelling does not always have a one-to-one correspondence between the sound and the symbols. For example:

- The sound of /f/ is sometimes written with an F and sometimes written with a Ph (face, phone).
- The letter S has several sounds: /s/ as in see, /z/ as in has, /sh/ as in sugar.
- The letters C and G have hard sounds as in “cake” and “game” and soft sounds as in “city” and “gentle.”

The letters that represent vowels are even more complex. For example:

- All vowels (a,e,i,o,u) have short and long vowel sounds (eg., cap/cape, and clam/claim).
- Y and W sometimes function as vowels.
- Vowels that are followed by an R have sounds that are affected by where the R is formed in the mouth (far, fer, fir, for, fur).
- The letters “ow” and “ou” both have the diphthong sound of /ow/ as in “cow” and “couch,” but can also have the sound of long o as in “row” and “though.”

Children's "developmental spellings" come from their knowledge of the *phonological system* of oral language, which is based on the sounds they hear and use in speech. Researchers call this using their "graphophonetic knowledge."

“Standard spellings,” those found in English dictionaries, come from our knowledge of the *orthographic system* of written language, which is what is used for literate forms of language and uses “morphemic knowledge.”

- For example, our eyes pick up the similarity of the meaning of the words, “nations” and “national,” even though the A in these two words is pronounced differently, they both contain the same morpheme, “nation.”
- This is why word plurals are spelled the same, using the letter S as a morpheme, even when they are pronounced differently as in “books” and “toys.”

Contrary to what it may seem intuitively, we learn to spell after we learn to read, not the other way around.

- Children can be taught to memorize spellings, but these are just memorizations.
- If memorized spellings don't fit with children's developmental understandings of how written words work, they do not become a part of the child's schema for written words.
- We often forget what we have memorized if we have not connected it to what we already know.

For example, This was written by a 4 years, 9 months old Singaporean girl. Even though she could remember how to spell her recent spelling words, “moon,” “night,” and “bright,” this girl needed her mother’s help to spell “the,” “is,” and “at.” The child also labeled the sentences “1” and “2.”

Researchers who have studied children's developmental progression moving from temporary to standard spellings have consistently identified similar stages, even though they are not consistent in the labels they have assigned to these stages.

(D. Bear, S. Templeton, M. Invernizzi & F. Johnson, *Words Their Way: Word Study for Phonics, Vocabulary, and Spelling Instruction*, 2007).

The developmental stages of children's spelling have been studied and described by several scholars. I will focus on those described by Richard Gentry (*Spell ... is a Four-Letter Word*, 1989; *Breaking the Code: The New Science of Beginning Reading and Writing*, 2006) since he has provided some of the most extensive research on children's developmental spelling.

Stages of Children's Developmental Spelling (Temporary Spellings)

Scribble Writing



Precommunicative

b + B p A =
monster

PAHle = giant

Semi-phonetic Developmental Spelling

MSR = monster

DG = dog

P = pie

ILVU = I love you

Phonetic Developmental Spelling

PPL = people

FRE = three

RLR = roller

Transitional Developmental Spelling

highcked = hiked

camed = came

tode = toad

the = the

Standard Developmental Spelling

hiked = hiked

toad = toad

came = came

the = the

There are always some high frequency words that children need to learn to spell as sight words because they are used often and are sometimes not phonetic.

Children encounter high frequency words often in reading and use them often in their writing. Some of these words, such as “mummy,” “daddy” and “love,” children pick up quickly. Some they need to see on “word walls” and to practice.

(P. Cunningham, *Phonics They Use*, 2008)

Even before they can read, children who live in literate environments understand much about written language.

Marie Clay (*What Did I Write? Beginning Writing Behaviour*, 1975) has described how English speaking children's early writing indicates what children know about written language and spelling.

Young children know that written words are “signs” for ideas and are different from pictures.

The examples is a 3 years, 5 months old Singaporean girl who said that this is a letter to her cousin. It says, “Dear Ma.” The girl explained that the curly lines are a snake and the circles are a “few letters.”

Young children understand that writing is generative. A few letters can be arranged in different ways to become many different words, and a few words can be used to make up many sentences.

The example is a 3 years, 11 months Singaporean girl who explained, “That’s me. We go shopping.” She said that she wrote the word “me” many times to show that they went to many places.

Young Children know that writing is flexible. The same letter can be written in many ways (capital letters, lower case, manuscript, cursive) and even in different directions on the paper.

The example is a 5 year old girl who wrote her name from left to right, but wrote the nursery rhyme from right to left.

Young children often experiment with how writing is arranged on the page.

Young Children need to learn that white spaces indicate boundaries between words.

Some children experiment using dots for spaces between words.

By encouraging children to use their temporary spellings, they will write about what they know and have experienced.

- Their writing will not be restricted only to those words they are comfortable spelling.
- They will be willing to take risks.
- We adults can learn about what they are thinking and hear their voices in their writing.

After the class went apple picking each first grader wrote his or her own story about the experience. This published book starts: “I went apple picking.”

The voice of the child is strongly evident on the following pages: “I picked an apple.”
“I hate apples but I still like picking them.”

And, as children get practice in writing, they become more and more fluent, move to standard spelling in natural ways, and come to think of themselves as authors.

This first grader started writing her story in September about going to Florida to visit her grandmother. The story (written in developmental spelling) says: “My grandmother was waiting for me. When she saw me she ran up to me. I ran up to her. I hugged her.”

Children work on their stories over a long period of time. This is the last page (numbered in the 30's) of the Florida story completed in February. When reading this story to a visitor, the child commented, "Look, I am in standard spelling now."

Analyzing children's independent writings and spellings can provide a window into what children know and understand about how written English works.

Analyze Child's Knowledge of Sentences and Paragraphs

- Number of sentences
- Use of spaces between words
- Length of sentences
- Appropriateness of sentences
(incomplete, complete, run-ons)

The example is a 6 years, 0 months old Singaporean girl who likes to read. She asked for no help when writing this.

The writing includes speech bubbles where the man holding the gun is saying: "*ha ha*," the first girl is saying, "*there is a bad guy*," and the second girl is saying, "*what's the mater*."

Analyze Child's Knowledge of Punctuation and Capitalization

- Appropriate use of punctuation
- Types of punctuation used
- Appropriate use of capitalization

Analyze Child's Knowledge of Grammar

- Noun/verb agreement
- Appropriate verb usage and tense
- Use of articles (the, a, an)

Analyze Child's Knowledge of Spelling and Use of Developmental Spellings

- *Precommunicative* (letter strings that have no connection to real words)
- *Semi-phonetic* (one or two letters per word and sometimes per syllables within the word, usually only consonants. Letter names sometimes represent the sound.)
- *Phonetic* (all the sounds within the word are represented by one or two consonants for each syllable and sometimes vowels)

More Spelling Analyses

- *Transitional* (all sounds within the word are represented. Vowel sounds are included although not always spelled appropriately. Some words, particularly high frequency words are spelled in standard form.)
- *Standard* (appropriate dictionary spellings for most words)
- Make note of the high frequency words that are spelled in standard spelling.

Analyze Child's Knowledge and Use of Vocabulary

- Number of different words**
- Extensive use of vocabulary**
- Use of descriptive words**

Analyze Child's Application of Voice and Understanding of Audience

- Voice of child is evident (give examples)**
- Child's writing indicates an awareness of writing for an audience**
- Writing indicates child's awareness of storybook voice (give examples)**

Analyze Child's Ability to Tell a Story

- Contains a clear sequence
- Includes a beginning, middle and end.

More
Temporary Spellings
and
Children's Independent Writing
to Analyze

The piece to analyze is written by a 5 years, 3 months old Singaporean boy in K2.

He wrote from left to right , with a return sweep for each line.

While writing, he verbalized this story: “101 more years to go.”

And, “When you touch it out you can fry an egg on the stone.”

The piece to analyze is written by a 5 year old boy in K1.

The “sw” at the end of the second line is the beginning of “sweets” which he then wrote on the next line, because he did not have enough room to complete the word.

The piece to analyze is written by a Singaporean 5 year old girl.

She needed assistance in thinking about what to write about and in sounding out words.

The piece to analyze is written by a Singaporean 5 years, 6 months girl in K2, who speaks both Mandarin and English. This was written independently. The last sentence says, “I like the day but mommy does not.”

The piece to analyze was written by a Singaporean 5 year old boy, in Primary 1 who is fluent in English and Burmese.

The piece to analyze was written by a Singaporean 7 years, 6 month old girl in Primary 2 who speaks English and Cantonese and who reads at a 5th grade level.