Assessing Children's Spelling

Ruth McQuirter Scott

How can I evaluate my students' spelling skills when the curriculum doesn't even tell me what to teach? This question was posed during an in-service session I provided for teachers not long after the introduction of a new Language curriculum to Ontario schools in 1997. Although the curriculum document mentions spelling at each grade level, the expectations are quite generic and do not show much variation from grade to grade. If assessment and evaluation are to be tied to instruction, how can teachers, in the absence of clear benchmarks, be sure their reporting practices are valid?

The following suggestions do not provide definitive answers about what constitutes a level 3 or 4 in spelling at each grade level. They do, however, present a number of strategies teachers can use when assessing a child's spelling development. By employing a combination of these approaches, the teacher can develop a profile of the child's spelling skills that will be more comprehensive and meaningful than any one evaluation instrument, whether it be a standardized measure such as the WRAT or weekly spelling quizzes. The information in this profile can then be used by teachers with greater confidence for purposes of instruction and reporting.

1. Be aware of how children learn to spell.

There has been ample research since the early 1980's tracing children's spelling development. The work of Henderson (1981;1990), Gentry (1993), and Templeton (1985), among others, describes the process of learning to spell across grade levels, and can be used by teachers to assess the writing samples of children. These researchers point to increasingly sophisticated strategies used by children as they master the concepts underlying the spelling system of English. A variety of professional texts present these findings in ways applicable to the classroom (Gentry, 1993; Phenix & Scott-Dunne, 1991; Scott, 1993; Tarasoff, 1990, 1992).

Most reputable spelling programs authorized for use in Ontario schools are based on the research referred to above. The scope and sequence outlined for each grade level in student texts usually parallels the general developmental sequence described by cognitive psychologists such as Henderson (1990), Read (1970) and Beers (1977). Whether or not a teacher or school district decides to use a published spelling program, a glance at the tables of contents will help teachers set realistic expectations for their grade level. These decisions will then provide some guidelines for determining whether specific students are spelling within the range of skills typical for that grade.

2. Use student writing as a primary assessment tool.

Gentry (1993, p.39) maintains that "each time a child or adult invents a spelling, he or she produces a telling snapshot of how the mind conceives of spelling." When teachers go beyond simply marking spelling attempts as correct or incorrect, they open themselves to a richer understanding of their students' spelling development.

Kelli, age 8, writes a thank you note to her aunt. "You'r garden party was fun. It was the best party ever." It would be easy to circle the attempts "You'r" and "eaver" as incorrect and leave it at that. By looking at these spellings analytically, however, we learn more about Kelli as a speller. Her attempt to spell "Your" as "You'r" shows that Kelli is aware of the use of an apostrophe to spell some words. She isn't sure how this pattern works, but her experimentation is more sophisticated than that of the child who sounds the word out and writes "Yor." Similarly, Kelli's spelling of "ever" as "eaver" suggests she knows the short e sound is sometimes spelled with the vowel combination ea, as in "heaven." She is unaware that this pattern for spelling short e is not found at the beginning of words, but at least she is thinking about how the spelling system works.

When teachers begin to assess their students' spelling attempts within a developmental framework, they realize that the quality of a child's misspelling is often more revealing than whether or not the spelling is correct.

3. Gather samples of writing from a variety of sources.

There are ample opportunities for teachers to observe the spelling development of their students. Each of the following categories provides an important perspective on spelling assessment.

a. Unedited writing:

By viewing a child's everyday work, early drafts in writing folders, journal entries, and so forth, the teacher can see what the child intuitively knows about the spelling system as well as the extent of the child's "spelling vocabulary." Of course, these pieces should not be "marked" for spelling,
but they do provide a rich
source of assessment infor-
mation.

b. Polished writing:
A piece of writing that has
been taken through the stages of the writing process should
contain very few spelling
errors. The state of editing can
reveal how well the child is
able to proofread, the care
taken to do so, and the general
level of vocabulary used.

Some children may have
error-free writing, but have
used only simple, easily
spelled words. Instead of
trying to spell frustrated, for
example, they may substitute
the single-syllable word mad.

If a child’s written vocabulary
is significantly less sophisti-
cated than his or her oral lan-
guage, it may be a clue about insecurities around spelling.

c. Dictated words:
The advantage of dictating
words from teacher-selected
lists is that age-appropriate
words can be included. Fur-
thermore, if a spelling text is a
source of these lists, they are
likely to reflect various spell-
ing concepts. Each unit is of-
ften based on a concept such as
vowel patterns, adding end-
ings, and so forth. Other avail-
able lists may be comprised of
frequently used or misspelled
words at various grade levels.

Teachers can also dictate
words related to themes, con-
tent areas, or word walls com-
piled with the students. When
such lists are dictated, chil-
dren are forced to move bey-
on the simple words they
may choose to use in their
writing and to apply spelling
strategies to words they are
unsure of how to spell.

When using lists as a source
of spelling assessment, it is often
helpful to conduct a pre-test in
which the words are dictated be-
fore the children have a chance to
study them. This strategy has a
number of advantages. It shows
the teacher the child’s current
knowledge of these words and the
strategies the child employs to
spell unfamiliar words. It also
helps to isolate the words the
child needs to study, thereby
making the learning period more
efficient. The class can then iden-
tify difficult parts of each word
and brainstorm strategies for
spelling them correctly. A
post-test can then focus on im-
provement from the pre-test and
identify words still needing to be
studied.

4. Use a cloze procedure to see
patterns of errors.
The cloze strategy for noting mis-
spellings helps teachers see pat-
terns in their students’ spelling
attempts. Instead of marking a re-
response as either correct or incor-
correct, recopy the correct let-
ters and leave spaces for the others. For
example, ned (need) becomes ne _ d,
basketball (basketball) becomes bask _ ball, and so forth. By observing
a sampling of a child’s spelling er-
ors scored in this way, the
teacher can see a picture emerg-
ing. Questions such as the fol-
loowing can guide these observa-
ions:
• Are all sounds represented?
• Are spellings of sounds phoneti-
cally acceptable? e.g. wuz for was
is phonetically accurate, al-
though misspelled.
• Does the attempt contain the cor-
cert number of syllables?
• Are there problems with reversal
of letters?
• Are errors typically at the begin-
ing/middle/end of words?
• Are morphemes spelled cor-
rectly? e.g. -ed for past tense; -s or
-es for plural
• Are silent letters routinely omit-
ed?

5. Assess spelling growth over
time
If Gentry is correct in describing
spelling attempts as “snapshots of
how the mind conceives of spell-
ing,” then a collection of writing
gathered over time can serve as an
album of spelling growth.

Teachers can apply the same cloze
procedures described above to
look for patterns of spelling errors
at various times in the school
year and note how these patterns
change. In most cases, the patterns
will reveal increasingly sophisti-
cated strategies for handling the
complexities of the English spell-
ing system. The child, for exam-
ple, who spells jumped in
September as jump, but a few
months later spells all regular pas-
tenses with the -ed morpheme,
have made a significant leap in
spelling development. She has
discarded her hypothesis that
words are spelled just as they
sound, and has understood that
certain word parts, such as the -ed
marker for past tenses, are used to
signify meaning even if they do
not sound as they are spelled. It is
this understanding that allows the
child to spell the past tense of
jumped as -ed even though it
sounds like /t/.

• Do schwa vowels (vowels in un-
stressed syllables) create prob-
lems? e.g. helmet.

The cloze strategy can be em-
ployed in many aspects of the
writing program. In editing
conferences, teachers can point out
spelling errors in draft pieces
without resorting to circling
errors. This will help children zero
in on the nature of the misspell-
ing. When word lists are dictated
in pre-test conditions, the cloze
procedure helps students isolate
the features of the word that need
to be studied and usually reas-
ures them that most of the letters
have been spelled correctly.
Another way of assessing spelling growth is to take an unedited passage of each child's writing from early in the school year and dictate the same passage several months later. By examining both the number and quality of misspellings at the two time periods, teachers can catch a glimpse of how the child's spelling strategies have progressed. This information would provide an excellent vehicle for parent/teacher conferences and would also serve as a helpful discussion starter between the teacher and the student.

6. Encourage students to reflect on their own spelling development

Many of the teaching strategies described previously can be adapted for student use. It is important that children learn to take responsibility for their own spelling growth and to develop both a "spelling conscience" (a sense that spelling matters) and a "spelling consciousness" (a metacognitive understanding of their spelling strategies). Over time, children can become the best assessors of their own spelling growth.

The following suggestions will help to involve students in a meaningful way in spelling assessment.

- Use editing conferences and day-to-day writing situations to engage in conversations with individual students about their spelling.

If a child spells climb as clime, show him which letters are correct using the cloze procedure (clim_..), and acknowledge that his attempt makes sense when sounding out the word. Ask him why he decided to spell the word this way. If he does not know the correct spelling, either let him find it elsewhere, or provide it and explain the challenge of the silent b. Ask if he can think of a strategy for remembering this word in the future (say the word as if the b is sounded; link it with other words ending in silent b). Note this word for future use with the class on a Word Wall or list of frequently misspelled words.

- Model the use of a variety of spelling strategies with the whole class.

When words are encountered throughout the day, in everyday writing, content subjects, spelling texts, or themes, ask students to suggest approaches to remembering the correct spelling. Every teacher periodically struggles with spelling; rather than covering up by substituting an easier word, enlist the help of students to come up with "tricks" to recall the difficult parts of the word. These quick discussions will enhance each student's metacognitive awareness of the spelling system and the processes involved in learning specific words.

- Instruct students in the use of the cloze procedure to highlight the features of words they have misspelled.

Alternatively, have spelling partners use cloze to edit one another's writing or mark pre and post-tests in dictated lists. Then have students recopy the words correctly and highlight in a different colour the letters that gave them difficulty. These goals will reflect the nature of the classroom language program and the needs of the students. Some children may set specific targets for correctly spelling words on weekly spelling tests. Others may try to eliminate certain errors in their everyday writing. Still others may make a commitment to proofread their drafts more diligently when polishing their work. In each case, the student should set the goal and monitor progress toward attaining it.

Conclusion

The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 1-8: Language is vague regarding specific grade-by-grade expectations for spelling. Nevertheless, teachers are expected to assess this skill in their students, and are held accountable for effective spelling instruction. The suggestions in this article provide a framework for assessment of spelling that is based on extensive research on the developmental nature of learning to spell. By using a variety of sources to gather information about student spelling, teachers will be able to create a comprehensive spelling profile for each student, and the information can then be used to plan and modify instruction and to communicate effectively with parents.

continued on pg. 28


continued from pg. 22

Assessing Children’s Spelling
Ruth McQuirter Scott

References


The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 1-8: Language (1997).