

The Role of Spelling and Word Knowledge in ELL Literacy

By Bertha Pérez, Ed.D. & Ellen Riojas Clark, Ph.D.

Within English literacy learning, what is the role of spelling and word knowledge for English language learners (ELLs)? Good spelling can help ELLs learn letter/sound correspondence and vocabulary, and develop automaticity in reading and writing words. Research points to a relationship between word knowledge and reading achievement (Blachowicz, et al. 2006). For ELLs, vocabulary appears to have a greater impact on reading than other components, including oral language (Proctor, et al., 2006).

Word knowledge, in particular academic vocabulary, is needed to be successful in reading, math, and other subjects, and schooling as a whole. Academic vocabulary is often decontextualized; it is the language of school, of academic discourse, and of texts. Academic vocabulary includes derivational word forms (e.g., adverbials), conditional/prepositional forms, and words that express relationships and give clues to syntax. The **Spelling Connections** activities suggested for ELLs build academic vocabulary.

The words learned by spelling patterns and relationships can assist ELLs in developing a rich vocabulary that supports reading and enhances writing.

Spelling Connections incorporates research findings from studies of ELLs' English literacy development. These studies suggest that ELL reading success in grades K–I can be predicted by phonological awareness (Geva & Yaghouh-Zadeh, 2006; Lafrance & Gottardo, 2005), development of the alphabetic principle (Manis, et al., 2004), and word knowledge (August, et al., 2005). In grades 2–6, ELL reading success can be predicted by fluency, the ability to read words with automaticity (Baker & Good, 1995), and by vocabulary, a major contributor to comprehension (August, et al., 2005; Lesaux, et al., 2006).

Through the systematic study of related words, students begin to see that English, like all other languages, is rule-governed. Words learned by spelling patterns and relationships can assist ELLs in developing a rich vocabulary that supports reading and enhances writing.

Pronunciation of Spelling Words and ELLs

Learning to spell words is important to vocabulary development, and proper pronunciation leads to better spelling: "... students need to see, hear, and say unfamiliar words whose meanings are being learned because this strengthens their memory for spellings, pronunciations, and meanings of the new words" (Rosenthal & Ehri, 2008, p. 189). Demanding proper pronunciation can be frustrating and stigmatizing for many ELLs. We offer a word of caution. Teachers must model good pronunciation and should frequently ask students to pronounce the word because this leads to better spelling. However, teachers

should allow for approximations. For example, some Japanese-speakers may not pronounce the *l* or *r* and Spanish-speakers may sound an *e* before words beginning with *s*. Correct spelling can be attained with approximate pronunciations, and over time, children will assess mispronunciations and learn to compensate. Pronouncing words is about helping children spell and develop word knowledge, not about reducing their native accent.

Differentiated Instruction by ELL Levels

Spelling Connections provides differentiated instruction based on ELL levels. The ELL support is extensive, systematic, and sustained.

Beginning Level Second language acquisition research suggests that some ELLs may have a "quiet period" during which they are listening, rehearsing mentally, and not attempting to produce the new language. For some, this quiet period is a few weeks to a few months; for others, it can extend for many months. Children working with linguistic partners can support each other in understanding lesson expectations and word meanings. By encouraging children to use their native language to understand word meanings, they can focus on English pronunciation and spelling. Beginning-level activities provide multiple concrete strategies: the use of real objects and pictures, gestures, pantomime, and a variety of research-based ELL strategies, such as Total Physical Response (TPR). Students can illustrate or physically demonstrate, as in action verbs, the meaning of spelling words.

The Role of Spelling and Word Knowledge in ELL Literacy (continued)



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Intermediate Level At the intermediate level, ELLs can use their conversational English to learn academic language and can be expected to produce approximate pronunciations. Students can work with partners to assist each other in interpreting meanings (using their native language when appropriate) and for pronunciation and oral language activities. The focus continues on activities that are concrete and contextualized. Activities also stress the use of the spelling words for different purposes, such as storytelling, and writing notes, letters, poetry, and short stories.

Advanced Level As ELLs demonstrate more understanding and speak conversational and academic English, more stress can be placed on identifying, contrasting, and categorizing specific phonemic elements of words and word meanings. Many popular second language activities, such as telephone use, riddles, and playing Simon Says are included to encourage language production and as fun ways for students to use the spelling words.

Advanced-High Level Activities at this level are more challenging. ELLs are asked to compare and contrast words, categorize words, and work with analogies and derivatives. More partner and independent activities are suggested to explore further spelling patterns and lesson elements, word associations, and meanings. Many activities also challenge students to incorporate spelling words in writing for different purposes such as science, social studies, or creative writing.

Support for Spanish Speakers

Support for Spanish speakers uniquely encompasses two components: comparing languages and cognates. In the comparing languages section, teachers

gain knowledge about possible linguistic problems and transfers. This important teacher information helps avoid frustrating children over correct word pronunciations, especially at the beginning and intermediate levels.

The cognate section will assist Spanish speakers to develop deeper understanding of the English spelling words. By making associations with the Spanish cognate, the student examines root elements and origins to develop a nuanced understanding of words by comparing English and Spanish meanings. Also, by comparing the phonemic and morphological (prefixes, word endings, and so on) elements of the English and Spanish words, spelling abilities will be reinforced. The cognates selected have been carefully researched and although there are some whose meanings are variants (what some consider false cognates), the student is asked to identify differences and to investigate the changing meaning of words. The work with cognates is most important because it focuses on academic language.

This is groundbreaking work for a spelling program.

Spelling is key for ELLs because of the ways in which it addresses letter/sound correspondence, vocabulary, and automatic word recognition—all integrated throughout **Spelling Connections**. ●

A complete list of references cited can be found at www.zaner-bloser.com.

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