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USING A SPELLING SURVEY TO DEVELOP BASIC WRITERS' LINGUISTIC AWARENESS: A RESPONSE TO ANN B. DOBIE

Ann Dobie in "Orthographic Theory and Practice, or How to Teach Spelling," *Journal of Basic Writing*, Fall 1986, focuses on a persistent concern for basic writing instructors—students' spelling errors and remediation. After briefly discussing spelling reform and research, Dobie presents a course plan designed to improve spelling performance with fifteen to twenty minutes of instruction and skill work each day.

The premise for Dobie's plan reflects some of the current notions about effective spelling instruction. Using students' errors as a starting point for instruction is sound; and some of the activities she recommends, particularly the use of word groups and mnemonics, will be helpful to basic writers. However, most of her activities are not integrated within the framework of current orthographic theory and practice. She never explains how current views influence instruction for basic writers and error analysis. Her most recent reference is 1976. She omits several landmark studies from the late 1970s and early 1980s which discuss students' acquisition and use of orthographic knowledge (Henderson and Beers; Templeton; Frith).

Furthermore, while Dobie comments that spelling instruction must take an inductive approach "in the context of general language study (43)," she focuses on a "skill and drill" approach. Instead of encouraging students to discover their own error patterns, she groups their errors according to skill activities. The learning principles behind many of the activities Dobie suggests reinforce low-order memory tasks that involve repetition and sensory learning.

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Also, Dobie emphasizes the importance of phonological knowledge and learning techniques that involve the auditory sense—an inappropriate approach for poor spellers who typically rely too heavily on “how words sound.” She suggests using phonics and dictation activities with nonsense words so students learn that they can “depend on their ears to some degree” (47).

I would argue that effective approach to error analysis and spelling instruction for basic writers must be based on research which describes English orthography as a complex but highly regular writing system. Studies conducted by Chomsky and Halle in 1968 indicate that written English represents linguistic information at the levels of sound, meaning, and syntax. Although English spelling represents sounds to some degree, it more often reflects the structural patterns and underlying meaning of words (Becker, Dixon, and Anderson-Inman 2). Many words similar in meaning are similar in spelling. Predictable phonetic variations are not usually represented in order to maintain the meaning connection among related words. To illustrate, although “courage” and “courageous” differ phonetically, they are similar in spelling.

Some spelling difficulties can be explained, therefore, in terms of limited linguistic knowledge of the different levels of the writing system (Frith 283) and/or a breakdown in the composing process. Poor spellers seem to be locked into a limited number of strategies which reflect a lack of linguistic awareness and affect fluency. According to two studies I completed in 1983 and 1987, poor spellers have not made the qualitative shift to higher level strategies which draw on underlying levels of linguistic information. Unlike good spellers, they lack an implicit understanding of the morphemic and syntactic constraints placed on English spelling.

A qualitative analysis of spelling errors provides valuable information about the rules and strategies students draw on while composing, and about their writing behavior. When students analyze their strategies and look for patterns in their errors, they begin to see the “logic of their mistakes” (Shaughnessy 13). As students determine the source or cause of their errors, as well as the type of error, they realize that their errors are systematic, rather than random. More importantly, they learn to control their errors and develop a variety of effective spelling strategies necessary for fluent writing.

A simple yet effective approach, I have found, involves using an informal survey that helps students analyze their strategies and errors to develop a sense of linguistic awareness (Anderson, forthcoming). The survey instrument appears in the Appendix of this essay. Since correct spelling requires a high degree of linguistic skill and a combination of strategies, the first five items in the survey focus on different strategies used by effective spellers: sound; rules; analogies, or words related in meaning or structure; the dictionary; and visual information. The sixth and seventh questions focus on proofreading, or self-correcting strategies used during the editing stage. The rest of the questions focus on an error classification scheme which involves seven general categories of words that often prove troublesome for basic writers: (1) words with silent

letters; (2) words with unstressed vowels or schwas (ə); (3) words with prefixes; (4) words with Latin or Greek roots; (5) words with suffixes; (6) homonym forms; (7) common words and phrases, including transitions (Anderson, forthcoming). These error categories were determined on the basis of a preliminary study which analyzed the spelling errors of 55 basic writers enrolled in a developmental English course during the fall quarter of 1983.

Students complete the survey after they have written two or three papers and listed all of their errors. However, the instructor may wish to administer the survey, or part of it, midway through a term. Since the survey is designed to encourage self-assessment and error analysis, students simply check the appropriate column under "always," "frequently," "occasionally," and "never."

After students complete the survey and determine their dominant strategies and error patterns, instructors can plan appropriate activities and instruction. To illustrate, students who frequently misspell words with silent letters and unstressed vowels are likely trying to spell words according "to the way they sound." Like young writers who rely on sound-letter correspondences, their strategies are limited to surface level information. They are not aware of the morphological principles and underlying patterns inherent in the writing system.

Instructors can help these students understand the importance of silent letters by pointing out the role of silent letters in maintaining the meaning connection between related words. For example, the silent "b" in bomb is pronounced in "bombard." As students make connections between related words with silent letters, they learn a key principle in English spelling: SPELLING REFLECTS MEANING. They are no longer forced to memorize individual words, as they develop a systematic means of dealing with large segments of vocabulary (Chomsky and Halle 65). More importantly, they begin to identify patterns so they can start making some appropriate generalizations about pattern principles in the writing system.

Many poor spellers who rely on sound also make a variety of errors when spelling words with affixes, particularly when the addition of a suffix results in a change in pronunciation, as in "divine" and "divinity." Such students need systematic instruction that will help them make connections between related words and frequent patterns, such as "console" and "consolation," where a long vowel is shortened with the addition of a suffix. These students also need instruction in patterns with a change in pronunciation and the stress of a derivative, such as "explain" and "explanation" where a change occurs in both the pronunciation and spelling.

Furthermore, students who misspell words with affixes, particularly suffixes, seem to have problems with spelling rules. They either fail to use appropriate rules because they are unaware that the writing system is largely rule-governed and/or they overgeneralize rules. Such students can benefit from some explicit instruction in some of the spelling rules concerning affixation, such as maintaining the base of a word when

adding a prefix, and keeping the final “e” when adding a suffix beginning with a consonant. I want to emphasize, however, the application of appropriate rules in meaningful writing, rather than in rote memorization tasks or drill activities.

Because many poor writers are also poor readers with limited vocabularies, they are often unfamiliar with the basic structure and meaning of words. Instructors can extend students’ existing vocabularies by introducing them to the etymology of the writing system as well as some of the more commonly occurring Latin and Greek roots and combining forms. For example, instructors can present some of the frequently used Latin roots, such as *duct* (to lead); *fac, fic* (to make); and *pos* (to put). Instructors may wish, however, to introduce students to the Greek numerical prefixes first, since they are easier to isolate and identify than many of the Latin roots.

Many students have problems spelling homonym forms because these students concentrate on sound, or phonological information. They can benefit from a review of homonyms and commonly confused words. The students also can use reminders about the importance of context and syntactic information in selecting the appropriate form. The use of mnemonics might also help students distinguish between different forms (e.g., the word dessert has two s’s because it’s super sweet).

Common words and phrases, including transitions, are another source of frequent errors for basic writers. Since they usually do very little reading, basic writers often do not develop a memory for correct forms. They sometimes join or separate words and phrases in unconventional ways, producing “eventhough” and “further more.” In addition, they often do not attend to the sequence of letters, so they frequently transpose letters: “certian” and “esle.”

Because visual information is an important aspect of accurate spelling and the development of effective strategies (Barron; Frith; Marsh, et al; Simon and Simon), instructors must help students improve their visual memories. Instructors can encourage students to make flash cards of demon words the students consistently misspell. Students can then review the cards so that they can recognize and then produce the correct forms in their writing.

Finally, I have found that many basic writers make numerous errors because of poor and/or inappropriate proofreading habits. Students try to correct as they write and become hypercorrectors, developing a labored, jerky writing style. To become fluent writers they must learn to separate the production and revising process from the proofreading process. Instructors need to provide students with the time and opportunities to become more reflective writers so that they can develop self-correcting strategies. Some students persist in making errors simply because they run out of time and do not proofread their final drafts. Once students can identify their error patterns, they can quickly circle or mark words they think are incorrect in their drafts, and they can check those words when they proofread. Instructors can also demonstrate specific proofreading techniques that help students recognize their errors. One

of the most effective techniques involves using a 3 x 5 notecard with a slit or window cut in the middle. Another involves using a half sheet of paper. Both techniques are helpful because they force students to slow down and look at a few words or a line at a time. Students need also to acquire a sense of doubt which will motivate them to refer to the dictionary when they are unsure of a spelling.

In summary, an instructional program for basic writers with spelling problems must be carefully integrated into the context of general language study, and such a program must be based upon current research on the writing system. Rather than simply marking errors and drilling on a list of problem words, students need to analyze their strategies and errors qualitatively. As students begin to monitor their writing and analyze their errors, they develop a sense of linguistic awareness and make useful generalizations about the underlying patterns and regularities in the writing system. They also acquire a variety of strategies which can be transferred to new words and can improve the students' fluency in writing.

Appendix 1

Spelling Survey

	ALWAYS	FREQUENTLY	OCCASIONALLY	NEVER
1. Do you try to spell words the way you think they sound?				
2. Do you try to use spelling rules when appropriate?				
3. If you cannot spell a word, do you consider the meaning or structure of the word?				
4. If you cannot spell a word, do you consider the spelling of a related word or a word in the same family?				
5. Do you use a dictionary or wordbook rather than a thesaurus?				
6. Can you tell if a word you've written doesn't "look right"?				
7. Do you take time to proofread specifically for spelling errors as you write?				
8. Do you take time to proofread specifically for spelling errors as you edit?				
9. a. Do you keep a current list of misspelled words?				
b. Do you frequently misspell the same words?				
10. Do you notice any pattern in your misspelled words?				
a. Words with silent letters				
b. Words with unstressed vowels				
c. Words with prefixes				
d. Words with suffixes				
e. Words with a Latin or Greek root				
f. Homonym forms				
g. Common words and phrases, including transitions				

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