

# Solving the Spelling Problem

BY DENNIS PETERSON

We have all had such a student—the one who studies Thursday night for the spelling test, takes it on Friday, and perhaps does well (or not!), but then he misspells those same words in a writing assignment on Monday.

The problem of poor spelling seems to be ubiquitous. It is apparent at all grade levels and in practically every school. When poor spelling is uncorrected for many students, they carry it with them into the work world or college classroom, where employers and professors must face it.

In frustration, we teachers often make excuses. “Some people just aren’t good spellers,” one teacher excuses the problem, “just as some people aren’t good at math or history. The ability to spell well is a gift.”

“Her brothers weren’t good spellers, either,” another teacher might say, concluding that poor spelling must have a genetic cause.

What is the real cause? What is the solution? And how can the Christian school teacher apply that solution?

These are all questions that are worth our consideration. To address the problem, however, we must recognize its magnitude, acknowledge the causes, and then discover and apply the solutions.

## The Problem Stated

According to the National Adult Literacy Survey (The American Literacy Council, 1992), “Between 21 percent and 23 percent of American adults [40.4 million people] are functioning at the lowest level of spelling. . . . An additional 25 to 28 percent . . . 50 million American adults, are functioning at level 2” meaning that their skills are “more varied” but “still quite limited.”

These statistics represent nearly half of all adults; the situation is no better among school-aged children. Perhaps they are somewhat better in many Christian schools, but we must recognize that at best we still have a serious spelling problem among our students. Phonics expert Rudolf Flesch (1955) lamented, “They can’t read; they can’t spell. Not only that, they can’t even *learn to spell* properly.”

The problem of poor spelling is serious. Misspellings are, at least, distracting. More importantly, they can lead to misunderstandings, harm one’s credibility, imply that one does not care enough to ensure accuracy, and lead some people to conclude that perhaps one does not care about the quality of even more important matters. Many people tend to equate spelling ability with intelligence—or lack thereof—just as many

people equate a Southern or Midwestern farm accent with ignorance. Although neither assumption is necessarily valid, the stigma affects one's image or reputation and often determines what one can achieve in life.

But is it a hopeless case? Do we resign ourselves to having bad spellers among us, as Christ said of the poor, always? Do we continue to go through life denigrating and berating—or excusing—the poor spellers and blaming others for their predicament? Do we continue to pass them along to the next higher grade, hoping that somewhere between our class and graduation someone will manage miraculously to “get through to” them and teach them how to spell?

No, it is not a hopeless case, and no, we don't have to resign ourselves to having poor spellers as a matter of course. Not if we understand the factors that contribute to poor spelling and take the steps necessary to solve the problem.

## **The Contributing Factors Postulated**

No single cause can be cited for every poor speller's predicament. Rather, a plethora of factors contribute to the problem. For some people, one factor is predominant; for other people, several factors are involved in creating their problem. An understanding of each factor will help teachers identify poor spellers, diagnose their predominating factors, and apply a proper solution.

## **Intelligence and Organizational Skills**

Marilyn vos Savant (2000) writes, “When your spelling is perfect, it is invisible—the reader has no reason to notice it unless it's wrong. But when it goes wrong, it spurs strong associations in the mind of the reader, even when he or she isn't aware of them. These associations run from major (like a lack of general intelligence) to minor (such as a lack of attention to detail), but they nearly always cause the reader to form a negative view about the writer's inherent abilities, and they certainly cast an unflattering light on the written piece as a whole.”

Although many people, knowingly or subconsciously, equate spelling ability with intelligence, that association does not seem to be validated by facts. “Spelling ability has nothing to do with intelligence,” Sorsby (1996) declared. “It has a lot to do with developing a familiarity with words, an ability to recognize them and, equally important, a similar ability to recognize when they don't ‘look right.’ ”

Although good spelling is a mark of a well-educated person, and the opposite can cost one a job, a raise, or a promotion, it is not necessarily a sign of low intelligence not to spell well.

Rather, vos Savant (2000) indicates that spelling ability is more closely related to “our organizational habits and other personality traits than our intelligence.” Proving her claim, she found in a survey of 42,603 readers that “If you're a top speller, you're more

likely to be more intelligent than average, better able to follow instructions than average, and more organized than average. On the other hand, if you're a bottom speller, your general intelligence and ability to follow directions are *not likely* to be lower than average, but you are *more likely* to be less organized. This result suggests it is possible that a lack of organization drags a speller down."

Savant makes the following conclusions concerning intelligence and organizational skills as they influence spelling ability:

- "We can safely say that excellent spelling ability nearly always indicates high intelligence; however, high intelligence doesn't necessarily produce excellent spelling ability."
- "Likewise, we can safely say that low intelligence nearly always produces poor spelling ability; however, poor spelling ability doesn't always indicate low intelligence."

In essence, she says, "The difference between a poor speller and a good speller may be . . . a few counterproductive (but perhaps reversible) habits."

Flesch (1955) tended to agree. Students "can't even *learn to spell* properly," he wrote, "because they have been equipped with mental habits that are almost impossible to break."

## **Pronunciation and Hearing Problems**

Some students' spelling difficulties might stem from the fact that they pronounce words incorrectly, and that problem might result, in turn, because they do not hear the proper pronunciations of those words. That "wrong hearing" might be because their peers do not know how to pronounce the words properly or because they have an auditory impairment. Either way, they pronounce what they "hear," and they spell the same way—incorrectly. For example, the child hears "reg'lar"—and spells it that way because he does not hear the second syllable, "reg-u-lar." Or he says or spells "re-canize" because he does not hear "re-cog-nize."

According to vos Savant (2000), Margaret Snowling concludes that "deficits in phonological (sound-to-spelling) processing . . . have a more devastating effect upon spelling development than other sorts of cognitive difficulty, including low intelligence." For this reason, good spellers tend to rely on phonological skills whereas poor spellers rely heavily on visual memory skills. Students with good phonological skills, therefore, tend to do much better in spelling bees than do spellers who rely on their visual skills.

## **Vision Problems**

Some students' poor spelling might be the result of impaired vision. If they cannot focus properly on the words in the textbook, their reading and spelling skills will be

affected. If they cannot see what is written on the overhead transparencies, the chalkboard, or the marker board, they are likely to misspell many of the words. Sometimes merely moving the student closer to the front of the classroom will result in dramatic changes in the quality of their work. At other times, corrective lenses might be the answer.

### **Laziness and Lack of Self-Discipline or Self-Esteem**

One must beware of broadbrushing poor spellers as lazy, but for some students this problem might very well be a major contributing factor. The best spellers tend to be self-motivated, self-disciplined, and largely self-directed in their learning. Poor spellers, on the other hand, tend to lack such motivational qualities. They tend to look for the “easy way out,” avoiding troublesome words and guessing at the spelling of those they must face. This tendency is only complicated if the student has poor self-esteem.

One of the author’s own daughters manifested this tendency of seeking an easy way out. As a poor reader, she struggled with even simple words. Whenever she encountered a difficult word, she either skipped it, guessed at it, or sounded out the first syllable and then blurted out the first similar-starting word that came to her mind. Because none of her friends or fellow students seemed to struggle as she did, she developed an inferiority complex, which only exacerbated the situation.

Lazy students tend not to proofread their work. They rush through it, get it done—at whatever quality—and move on to something else. They are reluctant to use a dictionary to look up spellings or meanings. They are indifferent to the desirability of precise thinking, organizational skills, and proper pronunciation, all of which are important for good spelling.

### **Problems Inherent in the Language**

English is one of the most difficult modern languages to learn to spell because of the evolution of word pronunciations over the centuries; the existence of many silent letters; the plethora of homonyms; the numerous rules for adding prefixes and suffixes, creating plural forms, and hyphenating words; and the hodge-podge of words from other languages that comprise it.

English has forty-four elementary sounds (phonemes) but only twenty-six letters to represent those sounds. That fact makes correct spelling especially difficult. Even if one learns well the basic phonetic sounds, the many nonphonetic and aberrational spellings inherent to English make spelling difficult.

Add to these difficulties the differences in spelling of terms in British English and American English, and it spells trouble for the best linguist. Even good students often struggle with these natural problems inherent in the language.

## Contributions of Modern Society

Hearing, vision, and pronunciation problems; intelligence levels and organizational skills; and laziness and self-esteem are all internal factors that influence one's spelling skills. But other factors, no less real, are external to the student.

Madison Avenue's influence is seen in the ubiquitous intentional misspellings created for advertisements. Modern advertising has introduced such gems as "Duz," "tuff," "cheez," "foto," "brite," and "Krispy Kreme." Chic-fil-A's ads, featuring the poor-spelling cows, offer such examples as "stuff" and "chikin." Perhaps readers have heard of the student whose teacher asked him to spell *relief*, and he responded, "R-O-L-A-I-D-S."

The technological explosion that brought us E-mail and instant messaging is also contributing to poor spelling with numerous examples of "computerese" and shortcuts. What might be appropriate for taking personal notes or writing on instant messaging (IM) is becoming the norm for what is supposed to pass for formal writing. The Internet, especially E-mail, vos Savant (2000) contends, "instead of raising the standards of personal communication . . . has lowered them."

Another technological capability that is exacerbating the spelling problem is software that allows one to spell check one's spelling and grammar. Students use the capability, which is fine, but they quickly become over reliant on it, expecting it to catch every spelling error. What they fail to realize, however, is that the spell checker is restricted to a relatively small number of words in its internal dictionary, that it cannot distinguish between homonyms and/or correctly spelled but improperly used words, or that sometimes the spell/grammar checker is simply wrong!

"The spell-checker," vos Savant (2000) warns, "can be used as a crutch, in which case it is a hindrance to learning, or it can be used as an aid to improvement: it depends on whether the user takes a passive or active role in the process."

## The Solutions Suggested

"Knowing that good—and bad—spellers are made, not born, is the first important step toward spelling improvement," vos Savant (2000) states, "because it allows us to take control of this aspect of language in a way that we may not have fully realized was possible."

Hearing, speech, and pronunciation problems can be diagnosed and treated. Organizational and thinking skills can be taught. Self-esteem can be improved. Laziness can be overcome. All of these contributors to poor spelling can be solved—but only if they are recognized and addressed.

Four strategies are generally advocated for addressing spelling: rule based (e.g., phonics), multiple efforts (i.e., trial and error), resource based (i.e., dictionary skills training), and brute force (i.e., perseverance, “do or die trying”). Although all four are involved to some degree in an effective spelling program, the rule-based approach seems to be the single most effective strategy.

According to Darch, Kim, Johnson, and James (2000), rule-based instruction focuses on “teaching students spelling rules in which they utilized phonemic and morphemic strategies to spell words.” These researchers also found it to be even more effective to incorporate “traditional instruction,” that is, “providing an array of spelling activities (e.g., introducing the words in the context of story, defining the meaning of words, sentence writing, and dictionary skill training) to teach spelling words.”

According to their study, “students with learning disabilities learned spelling words more effectively when the rule-based teaching and correction procedures were employed in three different probes and one post-test.” Furthermore, “students with learning disabilities who received instruction based on a rule-based strategy approach displayed significant spelling achievement gains when compared to visual imagery methods.”

According to the AVKO Educational Research Foundation (2000), reading ability helps predict spelling success. Good readers tend to be good spellers; poor readers tend to be poor spellers. Therefore, one could assume that a good reading program will produce not only good readers but also better spellers.

Flesch (1955) tended to agree when he wrote, “Reading and spelling are two sides of the same thing, and the trouble starts as soon as you separate the two. The only way to teach reading is by teaching spelling *at the same time*.” And his preferred method of teaching reading, of course, was phonics.

## **Practical Helps Offered**

The key to teaching proper spelling is to begin early and keep developing the skill, introducing and illustrating and giving practice in applying new rules; throughout the educational process. We must not be content to focus on spelling in only the lower elementary grades; we must continue to emphasize spelling all the way through high school.

The following ideas will help the classroom teacher make the task more effective (and a little less tedious and more enjoyable for the students!).

1. Give the students a solid foundation in phonics.
2. Provide instruction in both auditory and verbal skills. Offer activities that use more than one sense (ideally, *all* senses).

3. Encourage students to say the words aloud as they spell them.
4. Use frequent dictation activities, which help the students attune their ears to hear the individual letters and syllables. These activities help develop both spelling and listening skills. Don't repeat words during an oral spelling test; force the students to listen closely!
5. Provide plenty of practice.
6. In teaching spelling rules, focus first on those that have *no* exceptions, then move to those with *few* exceptions, and finally to those with *many* exceptions. State the rules clearly, review them regularly, and practice them often, using many examples to illustrate them. Above all, ensure that the students apply them. Marsand and Griffith (1974) warn, "Memorizing the rules will not be of much help unless you apply them."
7. Encourage the use of easily remembered helps such as, "Write *i* before *e*, except after *c*, or when sounded like *a*, as in 'neighbor' and 'weigh.' "
8. Emphasize handwriting legibility in students' writing activities.
9. Encourage reading.
10. Have the students keep a notebook of their misspelled words or words that have given them trouble. Review them periodically, and practice spelling them regularly.
11. Help students develop the habit of looking up words whenever they are uncertain of their correct spellings.
12. Teach, enforce, and encourage rigorous proofreading.
13. Provide opportunities for students to check their own (or others') work. AVKO (2000) states, "Of all the spelling techniques currently employed, immediate student self-correction is generally the most effective."
14. "Make the spelling words relevant. Learn spelling within a context." (Hamilton Public Library, 2004). Introduce words that they are actually using in their current reading or study or that are in the news. Use words that include subjects that are of interest to them.
15. Study the etymology of words and roots, prefixes, and suffixes; and encourage students to learn the meanings of words.
16. Help students to form a mental picture of individual syllables and then to fit those pieces together into whole words.

17. Provide both intrinsic and extrinsic motivational rewards for successful spelling. Do not punish poor spelling; encourage correct spelling.
18. Play crossword and Scrabble-type games to increase spelling ability and increase vocabulary.
19. Emphasize spelling across the curriculum and at all grade levels. Stout (1989) states,

“Spelling, vocabulary, reading, and writing should work together. As a child learns meanings, stretching his vocabulary, he understands more of what he reads. When he writes, he now has more words to choose from to find that perfect word. And because he has learned to spell by seeing and using patterns, he can come up with a word that he hasn’t been taught, just because it makes sense. If spelling is only something the child sees as a random list of words to spell correctly on Friday’s test, he will miss all of these benefits.”

## Conclusion

In many of our schools today, formal spelling instruction ceases in the upper elementary grades. In many other schools, spelling instruction is isolated as “the English teacher’s job,” and teachers of other subjects complain bitterly about students’ inability to spell correctly—but, feeling helpless, they do nothing about it.

Perhaps it is time to address the problem at all levels and across the entire curriculum. The solution lies not in merely following the right rules in laying the right foundation in the early elementary grades; it lies in reinforcing those lessons throughout the child’s educational career. It requires a team effort by *everyone*.

Max Rafferty (1970) offered the following words of wisdom, which we all would do well to heed if we are serious about solving the spelling problem:

“Teach your pupils the letters of the alphabet.

“Then teach them the sound of those letters.

“Then teach them to combine those sounds into syllables.

“Then teach them to sound out whole words from the printed page.

“They’ll read, all right.”

And they’ll *spell and write* correctly, too!



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