

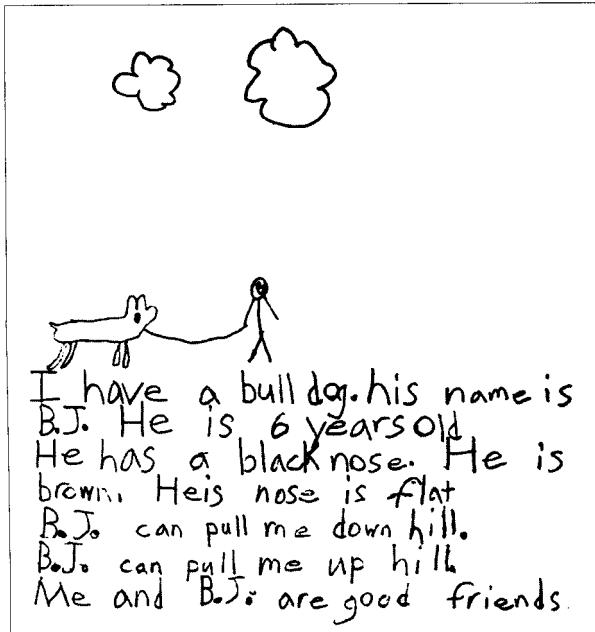
Chapter 1

Spelling—What's All the Fuss?

Spelling. What does that single word call to mind? Many of us think of spelling drills, writing each word five times, making a sentence with each word, and writing a paragraph with those sentences. Maybe you remember exercises *A, B, C, D*, a practice test on Wednesday, and the real test on Friday (unless you scored 100 percent on the practice test). You may recall spelling bees or that red *sp* mark inside the circle hovering above some word on your page.

Perhaps the lenses we use to view spelling are somewhat foggy or out of focus since we remember spelling drills, exercises, and tests, as do most adults. Our educational histories tremendously influence our adult perceptions of any situation that involves teaching and learning. Our histories also limit our own abilities to assess our personal learning. For example, if we consider ourselves decent spellers today, remembering those drills, exercises, and tests, we are very likely to attribute our knowledge to that style of instruction.

Consider the story below written by Carl, a second grader.



I have a bull dog. his name is B. J. He is 6 years old
He has a black nose. He is brown. Heis nose is flat
B. J. can pull me down hill.
B. J. can pull me up hill.
Me and B. J. are good friends.

What are your immediate reactions to this piece? What do you notice? Take a few moments and jot down your first thoughts in the space below.

FIRST REACTIONS:

Look again at Carl's piece and think about Carl's teacher. What would you say the teacher values in Carl's writing? Make a list of those things and indicate the evidence you find in Carl's piece:

Now consider this piece from seven-year-old Jason, also a second grader.

201 Stepp Street
Marion, N.C. 28752

Dear Ms. Goff
Thank you for playing the piano for us. You played the piano very good. I like music class. Are we good singers? I will like to learn how to play the piano. Thank you for coming. It was inbarusing to be infrut of every body. You are a very good singer. Who tolt you to play the piano? We like you. Have you ever ben in the hospitle? I love you
Love,
Jason

201 Stepp Street
Marion, NC 28752

Dear Ms. Goff,

Thank you for playing the piano for us. You played the piano very good. I like music class. Are we good singers? I will like to learn how to play the piano. Thank you for coming. It was inbarusing to be infrut of every body. You are a very good singer. Who tolt you to play the piano? We like you. Have you ever ben in the hospitle? I love you.

Love,
Jason

What are your immediate reactions to this piece? What do you notice? Take a few moments and jot down your first reactions in the space below.

FIRST REACTIONS:

Now look again at Jason's piece and think about his teacher. What would you say Jason's teacher values in writing? Make a list of those things and indicate the evidence you find in Jason's piece.

As you read Carl's story you probably noticed the neatness, the conventional spellings, the spacing between words, and the use of punctuation. You may be thinking that this is a pretty good piece to get from a second-grade student. Look closely. Carl does have the conventions present in his writing, but at what cost? Whose voice is heard? What evidence do we have of his use of strategies for using language to express the experiences and ideas of his life? Look more closely. Read the piece aloud. Who do you hear in the piece? Is it the voice of a child? Or does it sound more like the pages of a primary reading program?

As you read Jason's story you probably noticed all the spelling "errors" immediately. That's what most adults notice. By looking into the familiar face of "error," however, we fail to see into the reflective eyes of approximation. Jason's piece has all the qualities we so cherish in Carl's story. Look closely and you will see the letter formation, the spacing between words, the use of capitalization and punctuation. It's all there and it is used conventionally.

One surface difference is the spelling. Look more closely. Did you notice that there were 82 words in Jason's story? Did you also notice that of the 82 words there were 53 different words? Did you notice that of the 53 different words 46 were spelled conventionally? That's right—there were only 7 constructed spellings! There are words very similar to those used by Carl, words such as *are*, *is*, *the*, *I*. Now note the words for which Jason constructed a spelling, words such as *embarrassing*, *singer*, *taught*,

hospital. When would most children meet these words in a traditional spelling program? How would they be encountered? Would they spill over into the writing of individual children? Why are they missing from Carl's writing?

You may find it interesting to know that Carl, whose piece was written in *April* of his second-grade year, had come to know reading through a basal reading program. He had come to know spelling through a spelling book with daily exercises and a weekly spelling list. Writing meant responding to a teacher-selected topic. Notice the similarity between Carl's written language and the "language" of many preprimer, primer, and early readers in a basal program.

Jason, whose piece was written in *September* of his second-grade year, had come to know reading through the words of the authors of children's literature. He had come to know spelling as an outgrowth of his writing, which was a way of finding information and sharing new insights and stories. Jason had power over words, a power that let him say what he wanted to just as he would in speech. In his letter to the music teacher, Jason focused on the message, telling what he felt was important and appropriate, using the words he chose to express those ideas. In his writing, Jason controls convention to say what he wants to say. Carl, on the other hand, limits his choice of words to those he can spell.

What is important about the stories of Carl and Jason? They help us gain new lenses for looking at children's work. Through these lenses we can see into the thoughts and language of the child's own life and begin to understand the world from the child's frame of reference. It enables us to stop staring into the familiar face of "error" and counting the "misspelled" words, "haphazardly used" punctuation marks, and "random" capital letters. It enables us, instead, to look deep into the reflective eyes of approximation and see the child's growing understanding of voice, audience, and the purposes for writing. We see the child's movement toward controlling convention rather than being controlled by it so that the child can *say what he wants to say as a writer*.

It is clear that writers are greatly influenced by what they read. Frank Smith (1988) put it this way: "We learn from the company we keep." This is evident in the work of Carl and Jason. Carl writes in the style of the basal readers he knows, and Jason finds his own voice to express his knowledge. What gives Jason the ability to put his voice on paper? Ralph Fletcher (1993) contends that writers need mentors and that the best mentors young writers can have are the authors of children's literature. Jason learns through reading that writing is an act of expressing what you know. He has had numerous demonstrations of how language works in reading, writing, listening, and speaking. He is comfortable with his knowledge, his language, and his ability to control written language well enough to communicate. Jason's level of comfort, his willingness to risk constructing a spelling for words he wants to write, comes from his assurance that his teacher will look past "error" and into the reflective eyes of approximation.

Spelling As an Extension of Children's Language Development

We have begun to see some changes in how schools approach the beginnings of reading with the attention given to emergent literacy. We now need to extend that acceptance of world knowledge, language competence, and concepts about print developed before schooling to our classroom practices with spelling.

We can't change our educational histories but we can begin to think about spelling as an extension of children's overall language development. Children do not learn oral language in one school year. Nor do they learn to listen and speak through a series of lessons arbitrarily ordered into an artificial hierarchy of scope and sequence. Instead, children become producers and consumers of oral language via their initiation into a community where significant persons around them produce and consume language. In such a setting, children are spoken to as if they understand, and they approximate the language used around

them to communicate their own needs and thoughts. As individuals, children are treated as language users, fully competent members of the community. When children approximate language conventions in speech, adults tend to focus on communication. Adults restate a child's speech, ask questions for clarification, or respond normally as if to signal that the child's approximation is an appropriate and acceptable form. In each case the focus is on exchange of information, the construction of shared meanings. In short, the child is treated as a speaker. If this process begins at birth and forever continues in the development of oral language, should we not expect that it will be true of written language as well?

Because our educational histories limit our ability to view language learning as a natural process, we attempt to structure written language learning into discrete stages which can easily be organized into a series of lessons. We attempt to make school for our children what we remember it being for ourselves. It is important to note that, as *developmental stages* have been identified, there has been a tendency to organize curriculum and instruction around those stages and their characteristics. Such thinking about discrete stages tends to undermine the notion that there can indeed be continuous progress through normal development, and forces unrealistic expectations for some children.

There is also danger in trying to identify children's *levels* so as to instruct them through that level and on to the next. This line of thinking assumes that when one *new stage* begins, all previous ones have been forever completed, and those ahead are yet beyond reach and should become the next goal for instruction. This is not to say that there is no predictable pattern of development in moving from a child's first scribbles to conventional spelling in the process of becoming a competent writer. It is just that we cannot assume that spelling develops in a lock-step progression from one stage to the next. For example, functional writing (including constructed spellings) is a strategy that all writers use all of their lives. It is not a stage a writer outgrows with convention being the end goal. We do not, through a series of lessons, activities, or assignments,

move a child along the continuum and through the stages to produce a writer who controls spelling by a given target date or grade in school.

If gaining control of conventional spelling does not proceed in a neat progression of stages, then how do competent writers learn to spell? Smith (1988) contends that "[t]here is only one way for anyone to become a speller and that is to find out and remember correct, i.e., conventional spellings." According to Smith, the only way it is possible for adults to write the scores of thousands of words they know is that they learned these spellings from *reading*: "The source of the information that makes us writers and speakers must lie in the language of other people, accessible only through reading and in listening to speech." Competent writers *did not* learn to spell the thousands of words they know *one at a time*. There were no single moments when competent writers suddenly came to own the spelling of each individual word they know, though most traditional spelling instruction is based on this false, one-word-at-a-time assumption.

At issue is the role of the adult in the natural development of the child's progression toward conventional spelling. We are less concerned with developing *competent spellers* than we are with developing *competent writers*. Therefore, it is more important to determine the strategies used by writers to produce spellings of words they need to communicate than to peg individuals as working at a particular level of development. Sandra Wilde (1989, 1992) contends that we should observe children's spelling strategies to gain insight into how spelling works in general and how individual children learn to control spelling as they grow into competent writers. To this end, Wilde (1989) states that as we look at children's spellings we must be guided by these four principles:

1. Spelling is evaluated on the basis of *natural writing* rather than tests.

2. Spelling is evaluated *analytically* rather than as merely right or wrong.
3. Spelling is looked at in terms of children's *strategies* rather than in isolation.
4. The teacher should evaluate spelling as an *informed professional* rather than as a mechanical test scorer.

This frame would have us focus on *how* children arrive at the spellings of words (conventional or not) rather than concentrating on whether the child arrived at the *correct* spelling. Among the primary goals of such a program would be to develop competent writers who use spelling to communicate—writers who learn to control conventions rather than being controlled by conventions. Toward this goal, Wilde (1989, 1992) identified five spelling strategies used by writers that must be valued by adults. From lower to higher level, these strategies are:

- **Placeholder:** "I just wrote it that way."
- **Human Resource:** "How do you spell *people*?"
- **Textual Resource:** "I need the dictionary."
- **Generation, Monitoring, and Revision:** "Say is *s-a-y*, huh?"
- **Ownership:** "I know how to spell *rodeo*."

Higher-level strategies reflect an increasing reliance on one's own resources as a speller, yet may not produce more conventional spelling. Higher-level does not imply better.

Similarly, Bouffler (1984) has identified the following ten strategies:

1. Spelling as it sounds

This refers to what is generally known as phonetic spelling and is based on the assumption of a direct letter-sound relationship, e.g., "stashon" (*station*); "sisers" (scissors).

2. Spelling as it sounds out

This strategy was identified as being used by children but was not seen used by adults. It involves the exaggeration of sound, so the phonetic features not normally represented are heard and represented, e.g. "huw" (*who*); "hafh" (*half*).

3. Spelling as it articulates

This strategy makes use of the articulatory aspects of sound, particularly place of articulation. Sounds are represented on the basis of where they are made, e.g., "brif" (*brief*); "chridagen" (*tried again*).

4. Spelling as it means

This strategy represents semantic rather than phonological units. It underlies much standard spelling, e.g., *sign-signal*; *nation-nationality*. Non-standard example: "wasuponatim" (*Once upon a time*).

5. Spelling as it looks

All spelling involves this strategy to some extent. As its name suggests, it uses graphic patterning, or visual memory, e.g., "oen" (*one*); "shcool" (*school*); "nigt" (*night*).

6. Spelling by analogy

This strategy is based on the principle that what has been learned in one situation can be applied to another, e.g., "realistick" (*realistic*); "reskyou" (*rescue*).

7. Spelling by linguistic content

The spelling of a word may be affected by the linguistic environment in which it occurs. It is not altogether

surprising to find *any* written immediately under the word *envelope* as *eny*.

8. Spelling by reference to authority

The authority may be other children, adults, or other writers (i.e., other written books or material). When other books, such as the dictionary, are used, we must employ all or some of the other strategies to find the word we are trying to write.

9. Opting for an alternative surface structure

If we do not know how to spell a word, we use a word we know we can spell.

10. Placing the onus on the reader

This strategy is used when text is handwritten. The writer makes the spelling indeterminate and leaves it to the reader to decide whether, for example, it is *ie* or *ei*.

Broadening the repertoires of spelling strategies employed by writers enables them to become more independent. Independence leads to more powerful writing. From this perspective, one role of the adult is to provide children with continuous demonstrations of various strategies for spelling. Consider the natural way adults tend to provide such support in the development of oral language. In this progression, adults provide demonstrations of language functions and forms, engage the child in conversations (uses of oral language), and respond to the child's approximations, giving the child further demonstrations regarding both function and form (Cambourne 1988; Cochrane, Cochrane, Scalena, and Buchanan 1984).

If we believe that spelling is part of writing, and that writing is part of the child's overall language development, we would approach spelling development in much the same way we would any facet of language development. Toward that goal we would encourage and support purposeful

writing in the classroom. We would encourage children to attempt spellings independently before seeking assistance from an adult. The classroom would be filled with print resources and no strategy would be considered off-limits. And, as Wilde (1989) suggests, all strategies would be supported; no one strategy would be looked upon as being "better" than another. Strategies would be employed as they are needed. Children would write frequently for their own purposes using the words they select as those most appropriate for expressing their ideas.

To teach from this perspective, the teacher must know children, their histories, their personalities, and their development. It is only from this knowledge that we can teach into what the child knows and is trying to do. It becomes our responsibility as teachers to determine what the child *can* do and to use that information to make decisions about what to teach and how to teach it. Teaching then becomes a cycle of *research, decide, teach* (Calkins 1994). Our goal would be to help children grow into the hope we have for them as competent writers in their lives beyond our classrooms.

As professional educators, our assumptions about how children learn directly influence our classroom practices and our interactions with and expectations of the children we teach. We believe that children learn most naturally under the following conditions (Cambourne 1988, 33; Cambourne and Turbill 1991):

- **Immersion:** Learners need to be immersed in texts of all kinds.
- **Demonstration:** Learners need to receive many demonstrations of how texts are constructed and used.
- **Engagement:** Engagement occurs when learners are convinced that: (1) they are potential "doers" or "performers" of the demonstrations they are observing; (2) they will further the purposes of their lives by engaging with these observed demonstrations; (3) they can engage and try to emulate without fear of physical or psychological hurt if their attempts are not fully "correct."

- **Expectation:** Expectations of those to whom learners are bonded are powerful coercers of behavior. We achieve; we fail if we expect to fail; we are more likely to engage with demonstrations of those whom we regard as significant and who hold high expectations for us.
- **Responsibility:** Learners need to make their own decisions about when, how, and what "bits" to learn in any learning task. Learners who lose the ability to make decisions are "depowered."
- **Use:** Learners need time and opportunity to use, employ, and practice their developing control in functional, realistic, non-artificial ways.
- **Approximation:** Learners must be free to approximate the desired model—"mistakes" are essential for learning to occur.
- **Response:** Learners must receive "feedback" from exchanges with more knowledgeable "others." Response must be relevant, appropriate, timely, readily available, nonthreatening, with no strings attached.

What Does This Look Like in the Classroom?

When children are immersed in demonstrations of how texts are constructed and used, the classroom becomes a place where written language permeates the curriculum. Children are constantly using writing for various purposes such as making entries in writer's notebooks, jotting notes for their project files, documenting the growth of a plant on the window sill, or signing in each morning as they arrive. For example, consider the functions of language identified by Halliday (1975) and the classroom possibilities they imply.

Functions of Oral Language	Examples	Classroom Possibilities
INSTRUMENTAL LANGUAGE (communicating basic needs, gaining information, and solving problems)	<p>“I’m thirsty; I need a drink of water.”</p> <p>“I’m starting over because messed up.”</p> <p>“Please give me some yellow paint.”</p>	sign-up sheet, catalog order, grocery list, wish list, planning list, business letter, memorandums, proposals
REGULATORY LANGUAGE (controlling behavior of others and the world around you)	<p>“You put your truck over there and put a load on it and then bring it back to the warehouse.”</p>	directions, labels, rules for a game, signs, rules and regulations, procedures, advertisements
INTERACTIONAL LANGUAGE (language to establish and maintain relationships with others)	<p>“Will you play a song with me?”</p> <p>“Let me help you find the book about Mars.”</p> <p>“Joe, will you read with me, please?”</p>	personal letters, jokes, and riddles, greeting cards, notes, invitations
PERSONAL LANGUAGE (language to develop and maintain one’s own unique identity; say “who you are”)	<p>“We went to my cousin’s house last night.”</p> <p>“That was a scary story.”</p> <p>“I can finally ride my bike!”</p>	journals, diaries, autobiographies, eyewitness accounts, trip logs, editorials
INFORMATIVE LANGUAGE (language to represent the world to others; impart what one knows)	<p>“Blue and yellow make green.”</p> <p>“Not all newborn animals have their eyes closed.”</p> <p>“Electricity made the bell ring.”</p> <p>“The nails are heavier than the chips.”</p>	news articles, concept books, science logs, recipes, directions, posters, maps, booklets
HEURISTIC LANGUAGE (language to speculate and predict what will happen)	<p>“Do you think the butterfly’s wings are inside the caterpillar?”</p> <p>“I wonder if this will float.”</p> <p>“Where does the sun go at night?”</p>	question charts, hypotheses, reflective journals, exit slips
AESTHETIC LANGUAGE (language for its own sake, to express imagination, to play and have fun)	<p>“I’m the mommy. Come home now.”</p> <p>“Once upon a time . . .”</p>	fiction tales, plays and skits, fairy tales, poetry

Language functions adapted from M. A. K. Halliday (1975). *Explorations in the functions of language*. London: Edward Arnold. Examples from North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (1989). *Grades 1 and 2 Assessment: Communication Skills*. Raleigh, North Carolina. Classroom possibilities from Norma A. Kimzey, Western Regional Technical Assistance Center-NCDPI, workshop handout.

In addition to engaging children in the many functional uses of language, it is important to bathe them in the language of authors they admire and introduce them to many new authors. Authors of children's literature (picture books, chapter books, poetry, nonfiction, etc.) become the mentors for student writers in the classroom. Language is one of several sign systems through which children construct new knowledge and express their understanding and questions. It is their questions that guide their inquiries and projects, it is their experiences in the world and with the language of authors that give rise to their topics, and it is the opportunity to use language in relevant ways that provides them with an awareness of and need for the conventions of written language. If we don't have children writing for their own purposes, we will not know what they can do or why they do it that way. We cannot assess the strategies used by children if all they know of writing is filling in the blanks, copying off the board, and mindlessly proceeding through the exercises in a workbook. Until children take risks with language to say the things they have a need to say, we will not have windows into their understanding of how language works.