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The Relationship between Spelling, Writing, Reading and Comprehension

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INTRODUCTION

English is a phonetic language. Approximately 300 million people have English as their primary language and as many more make use of it. It is fast becoming an international means of communication. This is basically because English has the largest and richest vocabulary, simple inflections and no genders and is, except for spelling, the easiest developed language to learn. The key to teaching English is to directly teach English phonics and combine it with the elements of the language thus integrating the teaching of speech, writing, spelling and reading (Spalding 1990). The auditory elements of speech sounds should not be separated from the more basic oral-motor activity that produces them (Lindamood & Lindamood 1975, p 4).

SPELLING

In spelling lessons, the relationship of each sound in any spoken word to the written symbol, the phonogram, is essential so that the logic of the language is revealed. The use of all four sensory channels of the brain (hearing, saying, writing and seeing) is vital in order to prevent or overcome the tendency to reverse or confuse letters, the major handicap in reading and writing. This multisensorial approach makes constant use of the control by the mind of the muscles of the voice and those of the hand - kinaesthetic control. It is of prime importance to combine the kinaesthetic skill of writing with the hearing, saying, seeing and oral-motor feedback of phonograms and of words in the spelling lesson, and well in advance of any undertaking of reading from books. No other method can fix sooner or more securely in memory than words that can be written and read at a glance, thus building a sight vocabulary. **Spelling is the key to both good writing and reading of the language.** True spelling is writing from the spoken word. This is the way of thinking which everyone must use to write a sentence. The teaching of phonics and the analysis of the sounds and the composition of words properly belongs in the teaching of written spelling. The purpose of reading is to learn what the author has to say, not to learn phonics.

The failings of most phonics programs is that they neglect spelling and do not teach the saying and writing of the 45 basic sounds which are represented by the 70 phonograms of the language **before** trying to read. They also assume adequate phonological processing skills. Any program that fails to address auditory conceptualisation deficits will be ineffective in teaching learning disabled students to become independent self-monitoring and self-correcting readers and spellers.

Therefore, the core method to teach the sound / symbol association is to say the sounds and feel them while writing the letter / letters. These are then combined into words. Pronunciation of a written or printed word must be taught in conjunction with spelling. Meaning is best taught by modelling the use of the word in simple sentences.

WRITING

Handwriting is a complex perceptual-motor skill. The first stage in handwriting is to retrieve a specific sequence of strokes (motor pattern) from long term memory. The second stage incorporates the specifications of parameters such as size, speed and accuracy. The final stage is the execution of the program. Here the appropriate number of motor units are recruited to carry out the movements for the desired outcome. These processes are executed sequentially, however, letters are not often written as isolated units, but rather form parts of words. Fluent writing, therefore, necessitates parallel processing in addition to sequential processing. Once established, spatio-temporal motor programs are said to be able to produce a smooth, accurate product and possess the quality of energy efficiency.

Many people fail to realise the importance of teaching the correct formation of the letters and numbers from the very start of teaching the written language. Unless children write correctly, they do not see the correct symbols for the sounds, and motor patterns once established are difficult to correct. Small errors prevent children from learning to write easily, legibly and neatly. They require careful and continued teaching of all the techniques and for those struggling, extensive practice. In writing, the brain directs the hand. This cannot be done correctly unless there is a thorough knowledge of how each letter and number is made.

Precise techniques for good easy handwriting and for accurate pronunciation must be taught from the very start because of the great importance of learning phonograms and words by writing them directly from hearing and saying them aloud. It is also necessary to ensure that poor motor patterns are not established since they are hard to break. Manuscript (print) is always taught to beginners (Kindergarten) because its close resemblance to print enables students who can write a word from dictation to recognise it at a glance when they see it in print. The writing process does the most to unite speech, spelling and reading. Thus, the teaching of handwriting and written spelling should precede reading from books.

Handwriting problems vary in terms of severity, cause and impact. The handwriting of most LD individuals is variable in terms of letter formation, size, slant, spacing, speed, duration of intra-task (letter or word) pauses, and recorded velocity profiles. This is because they have not yet developed stable and reproducible motor programs for writing movements.

It is interesting to note that no clear relationship between grip and writing speed and accuracy has been demonstrated. The relationship between grip and writing endurance has yet to be studied and may be critical to functional performance. It may well be that certain grips lead to the development of excessive muscular tension and early fatigue.

When teaching handwriting, it is important to guide the learner through the movement with verbal and physical prompting. The use of visual and kinaesthetic feedback is important, particularly in the early stages of acquisition, for the detection of errors and the on-going development of an "invariant" program. Allowing adequate time for practice is of vital importance in order to ensure that students reach the point of automaticity. This is reached when the program can carry out long strings of movement in the absence of attention, allowing the learner to attend to other aspects of the environment such as listening, comprehension, spelling and composition. Children with LD's typically have a history of reading/spelling and/or writing problems. Frustration and/or anxiety often leads to avoidance behaviour. It is therefore important to approach handwriting in a way in which it makes sense to them - explicit instructions, encouragement for small improvements and forgiveness for less than perfect work!

VOCABULARY

A good vocabulary is necessary for accurate thinking. "We speak not only to tell other people what we think, but to tell ourselves what we think. Speech is part of thought" (Hughlings-Jackson). A good written vocabulary is essential to logical, sequential reasoning. Words are most effectively taught in the spelling lessons, and in order of their frequency of use in the language (not in categories). The importance of spelling rules must be taught by examples, when they are met in the writing of words being studied. Words written from dictation in a normal conversational voice force children to think about what they are doing and apply the rules they have learned. Each word is followed by a meaningful sentence containing that word. This develops the habit of the mind needed for writing a sentence. These serve as standards for the types of sentences required in their own verbal and written sentences. The mental work habit of analysing any new word into its phonograms and sounds is of high value in all other studies. It is the basis upon which the student's advanced education in most other subjects depends.

The contrast between the process of reading and writing needs to be understood. In writing, saying the sounds of a phonogram or syllable precedes the writing of it to permit the mind to direct the hand in forming the correct phonogram/s. In reading, the eyes must see first the phonograms in proper sequence, then take these to the mind to interpret them before saying the word. The eyes must be on what is being read.

The formal education of children should be centred on developing their ability to reason, to think for themselves and on inculcating a desire to learn. This ability along with the desire to read well written books that expand the student's horizons and knowledge of life is one, if not the major goal of language teaching. Teach from the best written books at every level. Fine books fill the minds of children with a wealth of knowledge - of character and philosophy, of history and science, of humour and wit.

READING

It is essential to read to students daily and have them read aloud to you. How children read aloud tells you what they are doing when they read silently. Children often insert or substitute their own words, or omit words in reading. Reading aloud reveals this bad habit. This teaches the important habit of reading accurately and is vital in mathematics and other subjects for that matter. Much practice is needed to develop the habit of reading accurately. Reading aloud also develops the habit of precise enunciation and improves both vocabulary and grammar. This practice in the skills of reading as well as learning to get the ideas from the printed page is essential. Correct meanings can only be learned from accurate reading. A knowledge of phonics is a prerequisite to accurate reading. The knowledge obtained in spelling leads to fluent and accurate reading.

A good reader is self-monitoring and self-correcting, able to flow across the page and extract meaning from content. Good readers are competent in three areas: auditory (word attack), visual (sight words) and language (vocabulary, syntax, semantics).

Encourage children to savour the language because it produces satisfying pictures in the mind's eye. Take time to appreciate the well- turned phrase, to admire or censure a happening, to read again a part that is especially worthy. In these ways children develop a taste for good literature and become more discerning in their choice of reading materials. Reading needs to be directed, individualised and made the gateway to knowledge and wisdom.

GRAMMAR

Teaching grammar is essential in order to analyse and identify the grammatical parts of almost any sentence. The understanding of grammar aids a pupil's ability to write. Basic grammar should begin in Grade 1 and is an integral part of the spelling process. The teacher needs to model grammatically accurate sentences and read to her students from well written books.

COMPREHENSION

The ultimate reason for reading or listening to verbal language is to get meaning, to comprehend, to interpret, to reason. However, before attention to comprehension can begin, reading must be automatic and fluent. The keys to good comprehension are: the ability to decode fluently, the ability to activate background knowledge and the extent of vocabulary development. Improving comprehension by teaching students to visualise and verbalise is critical to the development of the skills summarised below.

CONCLUSION

The early mastery of a good vocabulary for both reading and writing becomes more urgent every year. Until it is learned it is almost impossible to teach even a rudimentary understanding of the rapidly changing scientific and mechanical world with which we now have to cope. The early years are the most receptive ones for rapidly acquiring the basic elements of English, and this permits early study in other fields of education, where understanding the laws of nature helps develop the student's reasoning faculty. This latter goal relies on a fund of knowledge and an extensive vocabulary with which to think and to express one's thoughts on paper and verbally. The communication gap, which blocks understandings everywhere today, is little more than the inability of many people to express themselves clearly in English.

For more information or to make an appointment please contact us on (02) 9637 9998 during business hours.

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