The Benefits of Invented Spelling

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Abstract

The use of invented spelling has long been a controversial practice in the education world. However, recent research shows that invented spelling helps children develop both their phonemic awareness and orthography skills. It becomes the most useful in developing these skills when the child is shown how to correctly spell a word after their own invented spelling is created. Invented spelling can also give children more freedom in their writing by not forcing them to focus so intently on spelling words correctly. This allows students to write with more creativity and to use a greater variety of vocabulary words. Teaching children using invented spelling techniques can also help children learn to read at a faster rate.
The Benefits of Invented Spelling

The practice and teaching of invented spelling has been a source of controversy among parents, classroom teachers, and school administrators for several decades. Invented spelling, also known as *developmental spelling*, *transitional spelling*, and *temporary spelling* (Kolodziel and Columbia, 2005), results from a child’s own experimentation with words and print, often before they can actually read (Ouellette and Senechal, 2008). Children begin by using non-alphabetic markings and gradually increase in their ability to spell words using correct phonology and finally using correct orthography. For example, children may begin by spelling the word “lady” using only the initial consonant sound they hear, “L”. They may then progress to spelling it “LD” when they are able to recognize both consonant sounds and then “LAD” when they learn vowels and vowel sounds. Eventually, through teaching children the correct orthographic rules of the English language, educators believe that children will learn to spell the word conventionally (Ouellette and Senechal, 2008). Because English orthography is difficult and has so many rules with exceptions, it creates a low probability of initially producing correct spelling for students beginning invented spelling (Rieben et al, 2005). This causes many parents great concern when their children continuously come home from school carrying work with incorrect spelling. However, recent research shows that the practice of invented spelling can aid students in the acquisition of phonemic awareness skills and orthography skills, and can provide children with many other benefits that will be very useful to them in their future reading and writing experiences.
The best technique for teaching spelling in the eyes of the education system changed frequently throughout the history of the United States. During early Colonial times, spelling was the core subject taught to students, and the only subject that was accompanied with its very own textbook. During this period in history, teachers taught spelling through memorization, and drilled spelling words over and over again. Educators believed that these routine drills played a key role in developing the intellectual functions of the brain. In the later part of the nineteenth century, psychologists determined that drilling difficult words may not be developmentally appropriate for young students, and that educators should choose spelling lists based on the usefulness of the word. Then, in the 1970’s, a researcher by the name of Charles Read determined that a child’s spelling ability was developmentally based, and children were not ready to spell conventionally right away. The time when a child is able to write, but has not yet learned many of the conventional rules and techniques associated with the English language, is known as invented spelling (Kolodziel and Columbia, 2005).

Children typically go through five stages of spelling cognition, and the use of invented spelling can help children reach the final and most advanced stage of spelling more quickly than they may have if they had not been taught through invented spelling. The first stage is known as prephonetic spelling. In this stage, children use letters, symbols or scribbles to represent the text, and the direction of the print is usually either incorrect or nonexistent. As implied by the name “prephonetic”, the letters, symbols and scribbles have no phonetic relation to the word. The second stage of spelling is known as the semi-phonetic stage. In the semi-phonetic stage, children begin to use graphemes to represent some of the sounds in words, but they mostly use consonants and rarely include vowel sounds in their spelling. Children also spell words such as “are” and “you” by using their corresponding letter in the second stage (“R” and “U”). The third
stage is known as the phonetic stage, and children first begin to spell words the way that they sound during this stage. By this time, students can usually assign a grapheme to correspond with each phoneme, although vowel sounds are inaccurate. Students also begin to distinguish between words during this stage, and add spaces between the words in their writing. Children learn or discover most of the spelling patterns of the English language by the fourth stage, or transitional stage, of spelling. However, children often over-generalize these patterns because of the vast number of exceptions to rules in the English language. By the time the children reach the conventional spelling stage, the fifth and final stage of the spelling process, the child spells almost all of the words correctly (Kolodziel and Columbia, 2005).

Students acquire phonemic awareness skills through learning invented spelling techniques. Phonemic awareness refers to the awareness of phonemes (sounds) within a word (Ouellette and Senechal, 2008). Recent research indicates that a strong correlation exists between a child’s level of phonemic awareness and their ability to read (Ouellette and Senechal, 2008). In an experiment conducted by C. Silva and M. Alves Martins of the Instituto Superior de Psicologia Aplicada in Portugal, experimenters divided thirty children with no formal training in reading into two groups. The experimental group used a method designed to restructure the children’s invented spelling, while the control group did some drawings (Silva and Martins, 2003). At the end of the experiment, all of the children in the experimental group produced phonemic spellings of words in a posttest, while only two children in the control group were able to do so (Silva and Martins, 2003). Researchers concluded that the use of invented spelling fostered a use of phonemic procedures in the children’s spelling (Silva and Martins, 2003).

In yet another study conducted by Gene Ouellette of Mount Allison University and Monique Senechal of Carlton University, 145 kindergarten students were divided into three
groups (Ouellette and Senechal, 2008). In addition to a group trained in invented spelling and a control group, there was another group added that was trained explicitly in phonemic awareness (Ouellette and Senechal, 2008). Interestingly, both the invented spelling and phonemic awareness groups performed equally as well on the phonemic awareness section of the posttest, and both groups performed significantly better than the control group on phonemic awareness skills (Ouellette and Senechal, 2008). Based on these two studies, it becomes evident that invented spelling plays a positive role in developing a child’s phonemic awareness skills.

Another way in which invented spelling can aid students is through the acquisition of orthography skills. The term orthography refers to the ability to visually recognize symbols and patterns within words (Ouellette and Senechal, 2008). The Ouellette and Senechal study previously mentioned as showing a correlation between invented spelling and phonemic awareness also showed that invented spelling created an implicit awareness in children of the English orthographic rule that all words must contain a vowel (Ouellette and Senechal, 2008). However, a study conducted by Laurence Rieben, Laidislas Ntamakiliro, and Brana Gonthier of the University of Geneva and Michel Fayol of the University of Blaise Pascal Clermont showed that although invented spelling is useful in developing orthography skills, it only becomes useful when the children are provided with feedback on the correct orthographic spellings of their invented spellings (Rieben et al., 2005). For this study, children were divided into four groups: invented spelling, copied spelling, invented spelling with feedback on correct orthography, and a control (Rieben et al., 2005). In the invented spelling with feedback group, children were told “You invented a way of spelling this word, but this word is written in a different way in books. I’ll show you now how it is written in books” (Rieben et al., 2005). As researchers predicted, the invented spelling with corrective feedback performed significantly better than all of the other
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groups in the orthography posttests. However, in orthography related tasks, neither the invented spelling nor copied spelling groups performed better than the control group (Rieben et al. 2005). These results show that invented spelling is most effective when children are also shown the correct spelling of the words, after they have already attempted to spell the word on their own. This way, children can apply their knowledge of phonemes and the sounds that letters make while still being aware that not all words in the English language follow a pattern.

While proven to provide the benefits of an increase in student knowledge in phonemic awareness and orthography, invented spelling also presents many additional benefits. Children write with a greater amount of creativity when taught invented spelling techniques. When children don’t have to worry so much about spelling each word correctly, they write with much more freedom. They no longer limit themselves to writing using words that they know how to spell, so the vocabulary in their stories can become much more interesting. A child too afraid to misspell a word may also in turn be too afraid to express new ideas, while a student willing to take a risk and spell a word incorrectly will have an easier time getting his or her ideas down on paper. The student’s writing becomes positively affected when he or she focus on the message and the meaning of what she or he writes, as opposed to focusing on spelling and other conventions. (Kolodziel and Columbia, 2005). The researchers state that “ultimately, children who engage in the writing process in an environment with fewer constraints become more successful as writers because of their ability to independently explore and experiment with language” (213).

Allowing children to experiment with invented spelling can also assist children with learning how to read. In the Ouellette and Senechal study, the group of students who were taught invented spelling while being given developmentally appropriate feedback were able to
read significantly more words in a “learn-to-read” task than the other groups of students. During the learn-to-read task, researchers gave children a pretest of 10 decodable words that they were encouraged to sound and stretch out using their current phonemic knowledge. After receiving instruction in one of the experiment groups or in the control groups, experimenters asked the children to read the words again. Because of the significant improvement in the invented spelling with developmentally appropriate feedback group, Ouellette and Senechal determined that there was “evidence that improvements in invented spelling can bring about an advantage in learning how to read” (908).

The way children learn how to spell has evolved throughout the history of the United States. It went from being a subject of routine drills and memorization to encouraging students to experiment with their own ideas as to how things are spelled. There are five stages of spelling that a child will go through before he or she is generally able to spell most words correctly: prephonetic, semi-phonetic, phonetic, transitional, and conventional. Although it is still somewhat controversial among educators and parents because of the vast amount of misspellings that may initially occur, the practice of invented spelling is the most widely accepted way to teach spelling to children in today’s schools. Invented spelling aids students in the acquisition of phonemic awareness and orthography skills. It also provides students with many other benefits, such as learning how to read faster, and allowing students to be more creative in their writing and to get their ideas out with more freedom.
Resources


