

Notes from a Primary Teacher on Teaching with Real Spelling

With thanks to Lyn Anderson



The following is a letter from Lyn Anderson, a friend who is an amazing primary teacher who has worked to understand the writing system with the help of Real Spelling and other resources, and to refine her literacy instruction to the youngest learners. I asked her to share some of her thoughts to teachers who might be just starting this process.

I have an interesting side note to this that I don't think Lyn would mind me adding. She was in the school where I was teaching when I first ran into Real Spelling. At first Lyn was quite hesitant with regard to Real Spelling. She told me that she saw the value for older children, but her initial sense was that what she saw in Real Spelling wouldn't work so well for the younger grades. She did, however, take a serious look, and more and more saw things happen in her class that started to get her look at things differently.

Perhaps these thoughts from a teacher who has gone through this learning experience will give you some sparks for your own learning and teaching about English spelling.

Hi Pete,

Sorry haven't answered this sooner! Gosh there is so much to tell you about teaching Real Spelling with younger kids. I have learnt an enormous amount the past few years and one of the most important things I think I relate to other teachers is that young kids are very, very capable of the high level thinking required from Real Spelling. I think Melvyn also advocates this often too. So my first advice to the teachers you are working with is don't underestimate the children, no matter what the age!!

I think another tough aspect is helping teachers (especially early elementary) to understand the real aspects of phonology...there is definitely an obsession with letter/sound correspondence, 'phonics', 'sounding out', hearing sounds etc. with early elementary teachers (I used to be one of them too!). Practical examples and modelling of how to teach phonology in the classroom I think are very worthwhile.

- young children need to be actively involved in any Real Spelling lesson. At the beginning I used to write very detailed lessons so I knew exactly what I was going to say.
- the lessons should be short, precise and specific, with frequent consolidation in different ways.

Pre-school/Kindergarten

- teach the alphabet letter names, through games, using their own names.

- teach the vowel letters first, emphasising the importance of these 6 letters right from the beginning—for example one kinder class I introduced the vowels with a 'fishing game'. All letters face down on carpet (vowels had a magnet on them)...consequently I 'caught' all the vowels, then put the vowels in the right order, modelling how to say the names, wrote them and again repeated how to say their names, modelled on my fingers/hand (in Kit K A-writing and recognising the vowels), search for vowels in kids names, etc. Reintroduce concept in as many different ways as possible with the youngest children.
- teach the children how to write the alphabet letters correctly (with real script) right from the beginning using motor/auditory cues (the kids verbalise as they write—again see in Kit KA)
- teach kids to always verbalise when they are spelling or writing the alphabet letters (I call it 'talking to your brain aloud'). This is a crucial strategy for children with learning issues, especially with dyslexia—one of the most powerful strategies I have seen actually work.
- play lots of oral word games with young children to identify the base (every day if possible).

Kinder/grade 1/grade 2

Introduce some important graphemes (with younger children I refer to the graphemes as 'teams of letters') from an early age: <igh> <ay> <ee> <ar>
Here is an example—(it is best if you can actually model this in front of the teachers with a group of children!)

1. settle children in front of you with an easel, write and verbalise <igh> and say /i/ (I never use the word <sound>, just say it), repeat a few times and by this time the children should start to join in with you.
2. "This is a team of letters we can use to write /i/, that's its only job but there are other ways to write /i/". Repeat again—write and verbalise, have children say <igh>  /i/.
3. "I'm going to build a word with this team of letters." Write the letter <h> before <igh>, always spell aloud as you write. "We usually use the letter <h> for /h" (I don't know the correct phonetic symbol, also explain about the symbols < > and / /). Children practice tasting /h/...at this stage very important that children are not saying /huh/ but verbalising it correctly...children to touch where the sound is coming from. More information in KIT K L—early phonetics: tasting for consonants. Continue to reinforce that we usually use the letter <h> for /h/

4. spell (aloud) and write the word <high> and then read the word...talk about the meaning...have children physically show the meaning (active involvement).
5. repeat again but add <s>, again go through the process of how it tastes not /suh/ but /ssss/. Find where the noise/sound is coming from. Depending on the age of the children this is probably enough for one lesson...
6. Could have small groups spelling and writing <igh> and building some words as in lesson.
7. Continue on in subsequent days, revisiting concepts from previous day and gradually building more words.
8. Following week could introduce a phonological matrix (as in Kit K G-phonological matrices) and model how to build the words from left and right. I would always teach the grapheme first before introducing the matrix.

Written Morphology-grade 1/2

1. Introduce the concept of words belonging to a family with a base by orally giving them a list of 4/5 words and kids had to figure out the base. The kids loved this game and I did this orally for a week until I was sure most students had grasped the concept. Lots of discussion on meanings of words too.
2. Then following week write and spell the base and then added a suffix in the form of a word sum. (play + ed played). Lots of opportunities for students to work in small groups to investigate the word families of a given base (bases that did not require a change). This was a very successful strategy especially for the younger children working alongside the older children.
3. This is about the time I introduce the individual spelling as an opportunity to write and spell with word sums. I gear the spelling challenges to the ability of the individual kids. Each student has a list of spelling words, which I take from their writing. I write the word sum for each word (if necessary) and the kids learn the words by writing and spelling aloud three times (with the word sum). These words are used for investigations during the week-word families etc.
4. Once the students had established a clear understanding of the structure of a word we looked more closely at the suffixes and investigate the differences between the suffixes (boring and interesting). Make a class chart which is of course is an ongoing project as we discover more suffixes.
5. During these investigations the students will come across prefixes -these can be added to a large chart too.
6. I found it was important to revisit the morphemes, word family concept quite regularly to ensure understanding.

7. We also did an intensive investigation on the graphemes representing /a/ resulting in a large class chart which we refer to very often. Plenty of opportunities came from this to practice word structure and spelling conventions already introduced.

Real Spelling activities with teachers

1. Investigate the graphemes (teams of letters) you can write for /f/. (we did this at our last Real Spelling workshop with the teachers from our school).
2. Draw up a table like this, work in groups to come up with the different graphemes to represent /f/ -model how to chart the circumstances (initial, medial, final)-have to prove the circumstance with a word. Develop the chart together after small group work. See KIT 2 E-using the grapheme <ugh> for the phoneme /f/. You can also use any grapheme or phoneme for this activity. Also phonology of <c> (KIT K D) is a great theme to work with teachers.

graphemes	initial	medial	final
<ph>	yes <phonology>	yes <telephone>	no

3. Use 'sight' words to emphasize the importance of morphology and etymology. Take the word <was> and the teachers problem solve why it is spelt with an <a> not an <o>. Emphasis there is a reason for the spelling of every English word. Why is <my> spelt with a <y>? I teach this concept to young children very early on the year because invariably they will always spell it as <mi>. There are a lot of great examples from the so called 'sight' vocab. (one-belongs to the family of only, alone; their-belongs to the family of they, them; two-belongs to twice, twenty, twelve, twine.)

3. Learning from Love (KIT 1 K) is another great activity to do with teachers.

These are some of my thoughts and if I think of anything else I will e-mail. The teachers are more than welcome to contact me. Good luck and I hope all goes well. Very exciting what you and Sus are doing with Wordworks.

Cheers,

Lyn

I responded to Lyn with much interest, and asked if she would discuss her use of dictionaries more. Here is what she sent back...

hi Pete,

In regards to the use of dictionaries, I introduce them very early on in the year...and we have lots of them. I often look up words in the Etymology dictionary throughout the day so that very soon the kids are quite used to me saying, "let's find out where this word comes from?"!!! As we have such an international class the kids just love to know that English words have some connection with their own language. As soon as the kids are building word families in the written form (usually in small groups at beginning of school year) they use a dictionary to see if there are any other words to add to the word family. Actually not much preparation beforehand...the problem solving they go through to, first, find the base and then to identify other words in the family is quite amazing..lots of questions and interesting things come out of this especially if they find a base that is similar in spelling. It can however be a noisy activity but well worth it...the noise is mainly great discussion between the kids! Of course we help them if they are struggling to find the base. Working in pairs, with one dictionary between them, is a good way to do this. This has been successful for grade 1/2 and 2. The kids I teach are now very independent when searching for words. Also, every 'word investigation' requires the kids to use the dictionary for additional words...this happens at least twice a week.

In Kindergarten I used the dictionary frequently in front of the whole class (make a big fuss about it etc...such an important book) and in small groups, always with an adult. Together we look up a base (usually find the page and the kids have to search for the base on that page) with their own dictionary (kinder kids all need to have 'hands on') to help them become familiar with how to use it. Or you can mark the page with a post it and the base written on the post it for reference. Kinder kids love dictionaries and not the picture ones they want the real ones! I will let you know which dictionaries are the best for the younger children.