Reading & Spelling are reversible processes & need to be explicitly taught

By Jacqui Edwards

A structured, evidence-based phonics program is the best method of teaching students to read and spell. The sounds in English, and the different ways of spelling them, are introduced in a controlled and graduated way so that the students develop an understanding of how our language works.[1] Teachers give students a range of activities to help students to learn how to spell, but are the activities helping students to learn the sounds in English and how we write them?

Learning to spell and read words is not a rote process of memorising letter strings of increasing length. [2]

Any spelling activity that purely relies on visual memory (Look, Say, Cover, Write, Check (LSCWC), word shapes, rainbow letters, curly letter words), or using only the names of alphabet letters is asking students to visually remember the shape of the word or the order of the letters and not analyse the sounds. This puts unnecessary load on the visual memory of students, when a more effective strategy is to spell words by sound, understanding the spelling patterns and generalisations that we have in English. [3] Some irregular words need to be learnt by rote but the majority of our language can be decoded, if we know (and teach) the code. Developing word attack skills using sounds in spelling will help students to spell when attempting unknown words. Linnea Ehri, a researcher in reading and spelling development, developed a model of reading and spelling phases and found "that automatic recognition of words is dependent on and facilitated by knowledge of phoneme-grapheme correspondences (phonics)." [4] The automatic part of spelling comes from practice and revision and the knowledge comes from analysing the sounds in words and how they are written.

Alphabetic writing represents the sounds we hear in words by means of letters. For reading, learners reconstruct the word by blending the sounds represented by the letters. For spelling, they translate the sounds in words into letters. Although letters often give us more than sounds, their links with sounds are their most consistent and important feature, and there is some link with sound in every word. [5]

Any internet search for spelling activities will come up with a whole host of activities, spelling contract ideas and worksheets. Teachers also may have a bank of activities that they have collected over the years. The challenge is to be discerning and think critically about those activities so that students are supported in learning spelling by sound/letter correspondences and have enough practice and revision for those letter-sound patterns to become automatic.

Look for, or create, spelling lists that are phonic based. The list will have a target sound that you are teaching. For younger students, the lists may contain only 1 way of spelling that target sound. For students who are learning alternate spellings, there may be more than 1 way to spell the target sound in the same list. Students with learning difficulties may need to focus on one way of spelling a sound and also revise previous sounds. Older students may have some lists that are based on morphemes. Many structured phonics programs, like Jolly Phonics/ Grammar or Sounds~Write, already have lists provided which will contain a target sound, revision words from previous weeks and a couple of sight words. * If you are following the Jolly Grammar, prepared lists are taught each week, the Sound Waves program has lists that are differentiated e.g. the list on page 15, level 1, will be the same on page 15, level 6 but with more alternatives.

Below are some examples of spelling practice activities to help students analyse the sounds in words and how they are represented. Allow lots of opportunity to practice the new spelling of the sound and "go beyond the list" in activities like word sorts, so that students can generalise the spelling pattern taught.

Once these activities are taught, they can easily be part of a spelling contract or activity table/station. Activities can be tactile, colourful, active and creative, focussing on the sounds in words. Students of all ages benefit from using concrete materials. Vocabulary building activities help the students make connections between words and concepts familiar to them.
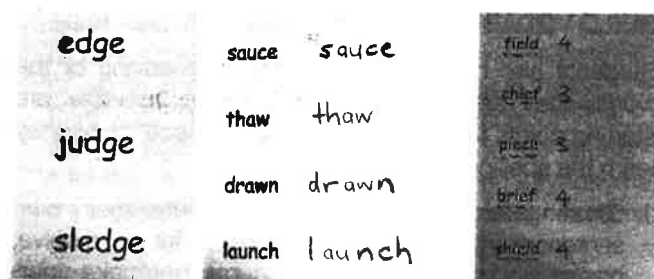
So now…it's over to you. Here's the challenge. How can you make the activities and games that you already have in your repertoire help your students spell using sounds? Be colourful, be creative, be active and also be aware and targeted in your tasks so that your students develop good foundations in reading and spelling based on the sounds in our language and how we represent them.

ANALYSE THE SOUNDS IN WORDS

1. **Highlighting the phoneme** - one of the first activities with any phonic spelling list. Highlight and notice the letter/s that make the target sound. Break out the highlighter, the gel pens, glitter pens - any whizz bang, high interest stationery you have!

2. **Colour phonemes** (instead of rainbow letters) - Students write out each word with the target sound in a different colour. This could also be easily done on the computer for older students.

3. **Counting sounds** - Dots and smiles. Each phoneme (sound) is marked or counted with a dot. The letters in a digraph can be linked (smile) so that the student recognises that 2 - 4 letters can represent 1 sound.

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edge

judge

sledge

sauce	sauce
thaw	thaw
drawn	drawn
launch	launch

field	4
chief	3
piece	3
brief	4
shield	4

4. **Sound mapping** (Sound boxes, Elkonin boxes, dashes) The student reads the word, segments it, counting the sounds on their fingers. The

Sound boxes

f	ie	l	d
ch	ie	f	
p	ie	ce	

student draws a dash or highlights a box for each sound they hear in the word. The student writes the word by placing a sound on the dashes or in the boxes. There may be more than one letter on a dash or in a box as English has combinations of letters that make single sounds. Find more ideas with sounds boxes: http://www.readingrockets.org/strategies/elkonin boxes. Another useful resources is "Phonics and Spelling through Phoneme-Grapheme Mapping" by Kathryn Grace, particularly useful when analysing split digraphs, more complex spelling patterns and morphology in middle to upper primary.
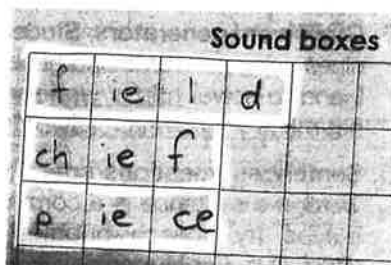
5. **Syllables**. Students use a technique like chin drops or robot talk to segment their word into syllables. For a more active task, jump or stamp or use percussion to split the syllables, then record findings. Students with learning difficulties can be scaffolded with techniques to break longer words into manageable chunks using syllables. Felts and counters is one idea from our Autumn 2017 Newsletter. Recording dashes for syllables, and dots for sounds within the syllables, is another good support scaffold. For more on the different types of syllables go to www.speld-sa.org.au/images/Articles/Things-to-know-about-syllables.pdf

symbol

sym/bol

sympathy

sym/pa/th/y
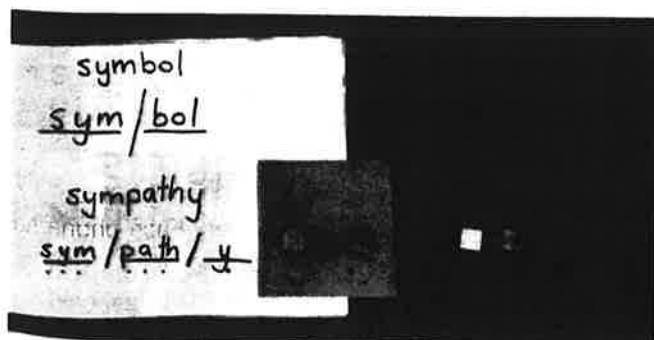
6. **Word sorts**. Students write their words onto cards and then can perform any number of word sorts -
   * target phoneme,
   * alphabetical order,
   * syllable,
   * initial sound,
   * final sound,
   * short or long vowel,
   * number of sounds,...The sorting is endless!

What a great opportunity for students to discuss their sorting reasons in class sharing time at the end of the lesson. A wonderful way to consolidate learning and give others in the class ideas about ways to analyse words.

Go beyond the list - For easily downloadable word lists sorted by sound visit the Spelfabet website. [6] Sue Lloyd, author of Jolly Phonics, also provides a free word bank that can be used with the introduction of sounds in Jolly Phonics. [7] and some really useful free cards that can be used in reading and spelling games – already prepared for you to print off and use. [8]
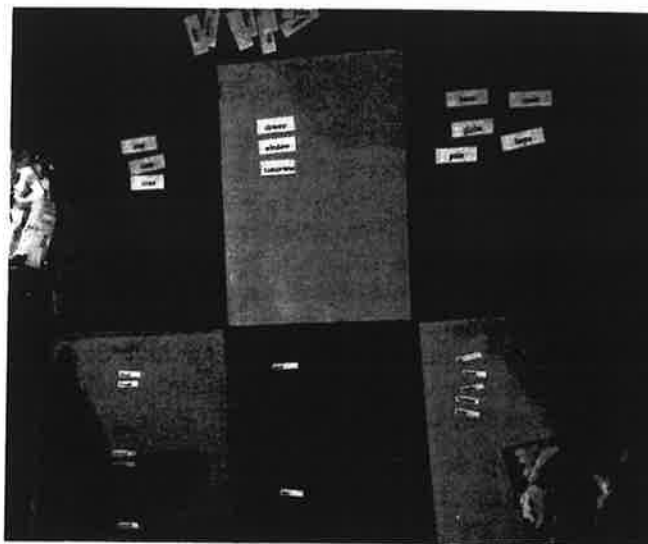
7. **Word building** – Students build their words using letter tiles or milk bottle tops or Jolly Phonics magnetic letters (linked digraphs). School Start Spelling case, developed by Sharona Edwards, available through SPELD SA, has easy to use magnetic tiles within a whiteboard case.