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ABSTRACT

This research report relates to one aspect of a longitudinal study conducted into children's spelling development during the first three years of formal schooling. The study aimed to monitor the development of conventional spelling in the unaided writing of children 5-7 years of age attending one of six schools in Great Britain and to consider the results in relation to the perceived approach to the teaching of writing and spelling which was claimed by the schools. It was hypothesized that teaching approach, gender and cohort might influence this development, and that children would improve as writers and spellers over time. The research is set within the theoretical context of constructivism, with young children seen as active participants in the process of literacy development, not passively assimilating a body of adult knowledge, but actively working out for themselves how the writing system is organized and used. This study was premised upon the beliefs that spelling is a complex cognitive process and that successful learning of spelling can lead to automatic and conventional spelling production requiring little or no conscious effort. This report focuses on the naturalistic element of the study. Children's unaided writing was obtained termly (that is, on a total of nine occasions over a three year period) and was analyzed using the Child Language Data Exchange System. Findings suggest that children across all six schools made progress in similar ways and at similar rates in relation to all of the dependent variables. (Contains 14 references.) (RS)

**International Reading Association
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New Orleans, 2001**

**To what extent does teaching
approach affect the development of
conventional spelling in young
children?**

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Summary Research Report: To what extent does teaching approach affect the development of conventional spelling in young children?

1. Abstract

This research report relates to one aspect of a longitudinal study conducted into children's spelling development during the first three years of formal schooling. The study aimed to monitor the development of conventional spelling in the unaided writing of children aged 5-7 years of age and to consider the results in relation to the perceived approach to the teaching of writing and spelling which was claimed by the schools. It was hypothesised that teaching approach, gender and cohort might influence this development, and that children would improve as writers and spellers over time.

The research is set within the theoretical context of constructivism, with young children seen as active participants in the process of literacy development, not passively assimilating a body of adult knowledge, but actively working out for themselves how the writing system is organised and used. This study was premised upon the beliefs that spelling is a complex cognitive process (e.g. Flower & Hayes, 1994) and that successful learning of spelling can lead to automatic and conventional spelling production requiring little or no conscious effort. The hypotheses to be explored were derived from theories of writing as a socio-psycholinguistic process which hold that even beginning writers are active theory builders and hypothesis testers (Barnes, 1992; Harste, 1994).

The study had a naturalistic element in that children's unaided writing was obtained termly and was analysed using the Child Language Data Exchange System (MacWhinney, 1991) and an experimental element

involving an annual spelling test. This report focuses on the naturalistic element of the study. Children's unaided writing was obtained termly (that is, on a total of nine occasions over a three year period) and was analysed using the Child Language Data Exchange System (MacWhinney, 1991).

2. Introduction

As schools in Great Britain differ in the nature and the speed of their response to changing or evolving theories of learning, it was possible at the time of this study to identify a range of approaches to the teaching of writing. Some schools maintained a "traditional" approach to the teaching of writing, using a combination of tracing, over-writing and copy-writing. Other schools adopted a more generative approach to the teaching of writing which evolved following research into writing development (Clay, 1975; Ferreiro and Teberosky, 1982; Harste, Woodward and Burke, 1984; Calkins, 1986; Read, 1986; National Writing Project 1985-89). This approach is termed "developmental" in this study. Other schools adopted approaches which might be considered along a continuum between these two.

3. Method

Six schools were selected for the study. Two schools formed the sample relating to a "developmental" approach, two represented a "traditional" approach, and a further two schools were selected from those identifying themselves as having an "eclectic" approach. All children starting these schools in one academic year were studied for a total of three years, with termly unaided writing samples collected and analysed. The data presented relates to a total of

114 children. The study also looked at the variables of sex and cohort, plus occasion of testing.

Four of the dependent variables considered in the study will be the focus of this paper. These were

DV 2 the total number of words produced in the writing sample

DV 3 the number of different words written

DV 4 the total number of correctly spelt words written

DV 5 the number of different correctly spelt words written.

4. Results

Two of the major findings of the study were as follows:

- ◆ The similarities between children were noteworthy. Regardless of sex, cohort, and teaching approach professed by the schools, children select a similar wide range of words to use, and tend to spell the same words correctly.
- ◆ The approach to the teaching of writing and spelling professed by schools had an effect on children's spelling development in relation to only one variable, the number of different correct spellings. In relation to the other variables, teaching approach was found to have no significant effect.

In considering the dependent variables 2 and 3, no significant differences were found between the various approaches to teaching in relation to either the total number of words written or the total number of different words written. It might have been expected that the emphasis within the developmental schools on the use of writing as a means of communication might have led to the children in these schools writing more freely than in those adopting a traditional approach. Clarke's work (1988) for example, would seem to suggest that the

children in schools adopting a developmental approach might write more freely and produce more words, but this was not found to be the case.

Approach did, however, have some impact on the children's ability to spell correctly, in relation to the number of different correctly spelt words written (DV 5), and this difference was significant at the 5% probability level. Closer examination of the data shows that the traditional approach led to the highest mean scores, the developmental approach to the second highest mean scores, and the eclectic approach resulted in the lowest means. However, no significant difference was found in relation to DV 4, the total number of correctly spelt words.

Overall, the results indicated that the method of instruction adopted within schools has some effect on children's spelling development, particularly in relation to the development of the number of different correct spellings produced (DV5). However, although the traditional approach achieved the best results in relation to DV5, there was no overall consistency as to which approach was most successful in relation to each of the other dependent variables. Also, no significant relationship was found to exist between approach to teaching and children's overall writing development as measured by DV 2, DV 3 and DV 4.

5. Discussion

It could be argued that a teacher's philosophy, whether implicit or explicit, would affect the teaching approach adopted within classrooms. It was hypothesised that approach might influence the way in which children learned, and the study was focused in schools which clearly stated their approach to the teaching of writing. This enabled a comparison of those schools which used

copying as a major means of teaching children to write (traditional) with those adopting more recently advocated approaches which encourage experimentation and exploration (developmental). The eclectic category used a mixture of approaches.

The results indicate that the method of instruction adopted within schools appears to have little significant effect on children's spelling development. What might this mean?

- ◆ It could mean that the differences between teaching approaches did not actually exist. Although each of the schools professed to have an agreed approach to teaching which was published in a policy statement, it could have been that this policy was not implemented by those teachers employed at the school or that individual teachers might not have actually applied the stated methods in their classrooms consistently.

"Results of research assessing different teaching methods raise an important question: Did the actual teaching conform to the formulaic labels attached to the methods being compared?"

(Rosenblatt, 1994, p.1087)

- ◆ It could be that the timing of this study led to some difficulties in drawing clear conclusions. During the course of the research, the National Curriculum was being implemented in British primary schools. This required all teachers to adopt some 'developmental' aspects of writing into classroom practice, so the stated differences which may have been in place at the start of the study may have been slowly blurred during the final years of the research.

- ◆ It could mean that teaching method has no effect on children's learning - that children learn in spite of what is done to them and make use of such instruction in a way which suits them.

"A method may help or hinder, facilitate or complicate, but not create learning. Obtaining knowledge is the result of the learner's own activity"
(Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982, p.15).

Such a conclusion would challenge the basic thinking behind our current educational systems, which assume that pedagogical methods have a direct impact upon children's learning.

6. Conclusion

The children across all six schools (representing three approaches to teaching) made progress in similar ways and at similar rates in relation to all of the dependent variables. This may indicate that there is a natural 'pattern' in learning to write and spell which is similar to that of learning to speak and which applies to all children? Temple Nathan, Burris and Temple (1988) consider that all children go through similar stages of development

"Even when they are not taught about writing, most children make essentially the same discoveries about it, in essentially the same order"
(Temple et al, 1988, p.2).

Although most educationalists and the media generally put forward the view that teaching methods do affect learning, some writers have offered an alternative opinion. Downing's quote relates to reading, but could equally well be directed at writing.

"In other words, reading is a skill, and therefore, no matter what framework of teaching methods and materials we set reading in, its essential psychological features assert themselves. The brain processes that determine the course of skill development operate constantly in learners despite the variety of methods and materials used in reading instruction"
(Downing, 1984, p.34).

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