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Current Approach to Teaching Spelling is Challenged

Research By Speech-Language Pathologists Demonstrates That Spelling Is A Language - Not A Memorization - Skill
National Spelling Bee Slated For May

ROCKVILLE, Md., May 7 /PRNewswire-USNewswire/ -- Research by speech-language pathologists demonstrates the benefits for improvements in reading, writing, and spelling when using a powerful language-based approach called word study.

The research, which has appeared in a journal of the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA), is particularly noteworthy now on the eve of the National Spelling Bee finals which are slated for May 30 and 31.

Word Study involves the encoding (spelling) and decoding (reading) of words using knowledge of their linguistic properties. Some National Spelling Bee champions have been using a similar tactic for years, although teachers and schools have been slow to replace the old-fashioned visual memory approach to spelling with this newer and more holistic one.

"The reality is that properly taught spelling instruction in our nation's classrooms is a crucial component to increasing reading and academic success for all students," according to Dr. Kenn Apel, Professor of Communication Disorders and speech-language pathologist at Florida State University, Tallahassee who, along with colleague Dr. Julie Masterson, has conducted research using the word study approach.

"Using word study to teach spelling has shown to be highly effective for improving reading skills," Dr. Apel explains. "To be a good speller, students must think about several aspects of words: Sounds (How many sounds do I hear in a word?); patterns of letters (What do I know about the way the long a vowel sound can be spelled?); and meaning (If I spell magic this way, maybe I should use that spelling to spell magician.)" This ability to conduct word study improves both spelling and reading.

Adding to the research of others, Dr. Apel's research suggests that if the educational system presented spelling as a language skill rather than a memorization skill, there could be positive impact on literacy, general academics and overall success in school.

"It's kind of ironic that the National Spelling Bee is held in May, the same month when Better Hearing and Speech Month is observed," Dr. Apel notes. "Facility with language is so helpful to being a good speller."

"Misconceptions about spelling often get in the way of students receiving the proper instruction," cites Dr. Apel, noting three common

myths that interfere with students' understanding of the importance of spelling:

Myth 1. Spelling is less important than other subjects.

Many classroom teachers let misspelled words go uncorrected in writing assignments and don't count spelling toward the students' grades. Research has shown that when children are shown how our English spelling system is based on sounds, patterns, and meanings, they not only improve their spelling skills, but they also improve in reading, reading comprehension, and writing composition skills.

Myth 2. Technology such as spell checkers has made learning to spell obsolete.

Students falsely believe that spell checkers will catch and correct their mistakes. In fact, some research findings suggest they only catch 63% of spelling errors. Over reliance on spell checkers may interfere with the development of spelling ability. To be a good speller, you must think about sounds, patterns of letters, and meaning. National Spelling Bee competitors are used to thinking about spelling in this way and recognize the importance of sound, pattern, and meaning.

Myth 3. Spelling is nothing more than a visual, rote memorization skill.

Remember the old drill: the teacher gives you 20 words to learn on Monday. You practice writing and memorizing them all week and take a quiz on Friday. For most of us, the rote memorization of spelling words had no relevance to other areas of the curriculum. Spelling involves much more than the memorization of arbitrary word patterns.

Dr. Apel's research appeared in the ASHA's Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in the Schools journal. An ASHA Fellow, he has conducted research on spoken and written language and literacy abilities for the past two decades. Currently, his research focuses on the underlying linguistic components that support the development of reading and spelling, including morphological awareness and orthographic learning.

The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) is the national professional, scientific, and credentialing association for more than 127,000 audiologists, speech-language pathologists, and speech, language, and hearing scientists. Speech-language pathologists identify, assess, and treat speech and language problems.

"Top Ten Ways Parents Can Help Their Children Become Better Spellers."

1. Encourage your child's teacher to teach their students to think about the sounds, patterns, and meanings that determine why words are spelled as they are.
2. When your child brings home her weekly spelling list, ask them to look for patterns that occur across words.
3. Help your child group words together according to the same pattern.
4. When your child asks you how to spell a word, don't automatically spell it. Ask your child to think about the sounds in the word, the letter patterns of other words that are similar, and the meaning of the word.
5. When spelling a word, encourage your child to say the individual sounds (not the letter names) as they write the corresponding letters. We say sounds and we write letters.
6. When you are helping your child learn or spell a word, associate it

with a word they know how to spell (How do you spell broach? Well, it rhymes or sounds a lot like coach. Use coach to help you spell broach.)

7. When your child needs to spell a long word, encourage them to think of smaller chunks within the word that have meaning (comfortable: well, I know how to spell comfort, and I know "able" is often spelled as a-b-l-e. Let's try that).
8. When reading to your child, point out patterns that occur across words ("Look! The 'e' at the end of bike and cake make the 'i' and 'a' say their names!") Encourage your child to look for other words with the same pattern.
9. Point out how words that are related by meaning often use the same base or roots (Hey! Magician and magic have similar meanings. I see magic in magician even though I don't hear it in there).
10. Don't dismiss spelling as something that can be corrected by spellcheckers. It can't be.

SOURCE American Speech-Language-Hearing Association

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