

Spelling: The new American Idol?

(May 1, 2007) We might be what you call “language nerds.” Watching last season’s prime-time major network debut of the Scripps National Spelling Bee finals and cheering its finalists was as exciting for us as it was for others watching Taylor Hicks and Katharine McPhee belt out their final songs on American Idol.

Our excitement, however, was tempered by our concern about the public’s lack of awareness about the importance of spelling. Does America realize, we wondered, that spelling is so much more than the latest reality TV phenomenon? And how many classroom teachers, we asked ourselves, realize that good spelling skills are so much more than a “ticket” to Hollywood?

The real reality is that properly-taught spelling instruction in our nation’s classrooms is the “ticket” to reading and academic success for all students. The sad reality is that most of our students are not receiving proper spelling instruction.

The 2007 Scripps National Spelling Bee finals will be televised May 30 & 31 on ABC TV... and this year it's promising to be a more exciting cultural phenomenon than American Idol. Of course, American Idol is a bit lackluster this year – unless you want to talk about Sanjaya – but that's another story for another column and we digress! Being the forever-optimistic language nerds that we are, we are hopeful that this season’s spelling bee will provide the opportunity to enlighten the public about the language basis of spelling and to clear up some common misconceptions about spelling, including the belief that spelling is less important than other educational subjects, that technology such as spell checkers has further diminished the importance of spelling, and that spelling is nothing more than a visual, rote-memorization skill.

These misconceptions about spelling are not unique to parents and students. Unfortunately, many of our classroom teachers also hold these same misconceptions. This is likely due to the way that spelling historically has been taught in this country. For most students in U.S. schools, learning to spell is a dreaded rote memory task, a chore that has to be accomplished for the *Friday Test*. Most students will spend their week practicing multiple writings of their spelling words during class time throughout the week, with encouragement to practice at home, and a final spelling test on Friday. For most students, spelling has no relevance to other areas of the academic curriculum, and they see little reward for spelling words like *ursprache*. Their views and attitudes about spelling are reinforced when misspelled words in their writing assignments go uncorrected by their teachers or, worse yet, when students are told by their teachers that spelling doesn’t count toward their grade. And in today’s techno-centric world, students and teachers alike have adopted an even more lackadaisical attitude about spelling because they falsely believe that a spell checker will catch and correct their misspellings.

In fact, spell checkers detect only 63% of spelling errors and over-reliance on such tools actually may interfere with the development of spelling ability. Spelling involves much more than rote memorization of arbitrary word patterns. To be a good speller, one must think about sounds (How many sounds do I hear in that word?), patterns of letters (What do I know about ways the “long a” vowel sound can be spelled?), and meaning (If I spell *magic* this way, maybe I should use that spelling to help me spell *magician*). Of course, this way of thinking is not news to many of

the successful spellers in the National Spelling Bee. When you hear them ask about pronunciation, word origin, definitions, etc, it is obvious they know the importance of sound, patterns, and meanings. If all of our teachers recognized that spelling is a language skill, all our students could be taught this way. If all of our students were taught this way, they would recognize how regular spelling is, and they would be empowered to be good spellers.

But the real reward for good spelling skills is that unlocking the power of language through the proper study of spelling significantly improves reading and writing. Researchers have reported that when children are shown how our English spelling system is based on sounds, patterns, and meanings, they not only improve in their spelling skills, they also improve in their reading, reading comprehension, and writing composition skills. In fact, this language-based method of spelling instruction has been shown to be more effective than reading instruction for improving reading skills. In other words, if we change the way we view and teach spelling so that all students see and learn it as a language skill – not a visual memorization skill – the impact on literacy and general academics can be great and the impact on career success perhaps even greater (84% of U.S. executives polled said just one or two errors in a resume are enough to remove a candidate from consideration for a job).

True, it takes a great deal of time and effort to become a finalist for the Bee. But good spelling skills do not have to be reserved only for those who are willing to spend hours preparing for a competition. Good spelling is a skill that is in the grasp of all; it is one we should encourage all students to seize. By understanding the way words work students gain power – power to read and power to write.

Parents and educators can make this happen. Write to your school boards about strengthening classroom spelling instruction for all students, take spelling more seriously, get remedial help for children who need it and seek out specialists who understand the importance of spelling and the proper ways to teach spelling, and help children understand that good spelling is for everyone and poor spelling is an impediment for future education and employment opportunities.

Yes, some may call us language nerds. But we are proud of that label. Spelling, as a language skill, is a powerful tool. We need to get that tool into the hands of our youth in a logical way. As public awareness about spelling grows, spelling may very soon become the next American Idol. We wonder what the judges would think. We're pretty sure Simon would say, "America got it right this time!"

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