

# The Relationship of Skills in Reading and in Spelling\*

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ALL teachers realize that reading skills and spelling skills are related. Most good readers are good spellers and most good spellers are good readers. So, if we keep in mind how people learn to read words, we can better understand how they learn to spell words. If we see the relationships between reading words and spelling words, we can build spelling skill when we teach reading and we can build and strengthen reading skills when we teach spelling.

## 'Look-and-say' method

If a teacher shows a non-reading child a word and tells him what it is, he may remember it and be able to say it whenever he sees it again. He does not, in this case, need to know the names or the sounds of the letters. If he sees another word which looks much like the one the teacher showed him, he may mistake it for the one he knows. He has learned, rather uncertainly, to recognize a word by its shape, or pattern, or configuration. We say the teacher has taught him by a look-and-say method.

Now we know that this is a useful method to introduce children to the skills of reading. We know, too, that some children seem to learn very well in this way. These children seem, with little instruction, to look carefully, not only at the total word configuration, but at the word parts. They note likenesses and differences in word forms. They seem to be able to visualize or to form clear images of some words. Because of these abilities they can often write many of the words they have learned to read. Later, when words become longer and look much like other words, such children may often misspell words which they can read easily. So, although the common look-and-

say method of teaching word-recognition in reading is useful, and although it carries over into spelling when a child's writing needs are limited to relatively few words of simple patterns, nobody can long depend entirely upon this word recognition skill to serve his spelling needs.

Conversely, when children have to learn to spell certain words and do so by memorizing the sequence of the letters, they do not materially strengthen their word recognition skills in reading. Obviously, they can already recognize many more words than they can spell. Their early spelling experiences deal with words which have long ceased to be recognition problems to them. If they do not, they have no business trying to spell them.

The use of context is also a useful and familiar device for unlocking some words in reading but has no direct relationship with spelling.

## Sound blending and structural analysis

The two other groups of word recognition skills taught in reading are the sound blending techniques and the syllabication, or structural analysis skills. Sound blending means any system of associating a visual symbol, such as a letter or combination of letters, with a sound.

There is a little point here to review the various arguments about whether we shall teach children phonics. If phonics means a system of associating visual symbols with sound, the position is arbitrarily taken here that no human being can become competently literate in the English language unless he can use such a body of skills. At any rate, every basal reading series which is currently used in this country includes suggestions for the teaching of sound blending skills in reading. How are the sound blending skills as taught in reading related to the spelling skills?

When a child sees a word which he does not recognize by its total configuration or which he cannot guess precisely from the context, he may do several things. He may, if he knows consonant sounds, think the consonant sound to get suggestion as to what the word might be. He may combine context clue with beginning consonant sound and guess what the word is. He may note that the word is like one he knows except for the beginning or final consonant and substitute the consonant sound he sees. Or he may — audibly or silently — blend the sound values of the visual symbols individually and approximate a pronunciation of the word.

Now it is obvious that these skills will be useful to him in spelling as well as in reading. When he comes to an unfamiliar word in reading, the visual symbols — the letters — are before his eyes and he

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needs to supply the sound — or 'think' the sounds. When he needs to spell a word the auditory symbols — the sounds — are known, and he needs to supply the visual symbols — the letters.

Although all the sound blending skills in reading will help the child in spelling, some will be more useful than others. A knowledge of beginning and final consonant sounds, for example, will enable a child to begin or to end a word correctly when he spells it. Thus when teachers teach children to spell, they will often ask the child to say and listen to the beginning and ending sounds of the word. We can readily see, then, that the commonly used word recognition device of substituting a beginning or final consonant will help build spelling power.

But when we spell, we need more than the beginning and final consonant sounds. We know that we can utter no syllable without a vowel sound. Hence, to get effective power in spelling a child needs to know the vowel sounds. As a matter of fact, he needs them in reading also to develop his word recognition skills to a point of real usefulness. We must remember too that when we refer to sounds we mean the short vowel sounds, the long vowel sounds, the "a" followed by "r" or "ll," the au-aw, oi-oy, ow-ou, and other combinations.

#### **Auditory-visual relationships important**

The need for accurate and precise association between visual forms and sounds is, of course, more pressing in spelling than in reading. In recognizing words in reading we can use configuration and context clues and use them in combination with more rudimentary sound blending skills. In spelling these devices or combinations do not apply. In reading we can approximate the pronunciation of a word and guess the word if we come close enough. In spelling, an approximation is not enough. If we err but once we are wrong. Therefore, if children are taught in spelling to listen for the sound elements in words and if they are taught the common visual representations which stand for those sounds, they develop a useful power beyond visual memory to guide their spelling. If they learn these auditory-visual relationships in spelling, where the need for precision is greater, their application in reading is a relatively simple reversal of the process. As a matter of fact, word recognition skills can be taught more appropriately and effectively during spelling instruction than during reading activity. In studying spelling, minute scrutiny of word parts is desirable; in reading we are after meaning — not word analysis.

#### **Look at words discriminately**

At this point the objection is commonly made that, as many English words are not phonetic, the learning

of auditory-visual relationships is not only useless, but is confusing and leads to spelling errors. It should, however, be obvious that deviations from regular phonetic patterns do not limit the usefulness of the device. Thus when a child scrutinizes a word he wishes to learn to spell, he may observe that it is spelled phonetically — that is, it is spelled as he expects it to be spelled. He notes this fact and tries to remember to spell it phonetically when the need arises. If, on the other hand, the word deviates from regular phonetic pattern — that is, it is not spelled as he expects it to be spelled, he notes the nature of the deviation. In other words, he looks discriminately at the word. Looking at a word discriminately means that we observe agreement with or deviation from our body of phonetic generalizations.

Thus as children encounter unfamiliar word in reading and as they apply sound blending techniques competently to unlock them, they are obliged to look at the words discriminately. And that is what we really mean when we say we study spelling — to look discriminately. When a child has been taught the basic body of auditory-visual relationships he quite naturally learns to spell most words which are word recognition problems for him in reading. If teachers teach effective word recognition skills beyond the level of the beginning and final consonant substitution technique, they are tooling them with the body of generalizations which are indispensable to the discriminating scrutiny which is the basis of spelling power. Conversely, when children learn to analyze words they need to spell, they strengthen and refine their word perception skills for reading.

The mastery of the structural analysis skills in reading — recognizing compounds, seeing common prefixes and suffixes as units, detecting root words, dividing words into syllables — clearly contributes to the growth of the analytical skill which is required in learning to spell multisyllabic words for spelling purposes when, again, we observe agreement with or deviation from expected multisyllabic patterns.

#### **Similar skill clusters**

If these observations are valid, we may explore more thoroughly the possibilities of using the teaching time we have for spelling to teach the sound blending and structural analysis skills for reading. There is still some confusion as to just when and how we shall teach word perception skills during the typical reading period. If we teach children to look discriminately at words, as here defined, they will strengthen spelling skills whenever they look at print symbols for any purpose. At any rate, there is some evidence to show that we can give children greater competence in both spelling and reading when we make the relationships of these similar skill clusters more apparent.