

Spelling and the Middle School English Language Learner

The purpose of this column is to highlight the most critical issues of teaching spelling to English Language Learners (ELLs). At the end of the column is a list of helpful resources that expand on this topic and that provide teachers with information about how to accommodate spelling/word study instruction for English Language Learners.

In order to address spelling instruction most effectively for ELLs, middle school English/language arts teachers will be successful if they attend to these issues:

- Knowledge of the characteristics of the English spelling system (these have been addressed in previous columns)
- Assessment of spelling knowledge
- Familiarization, as much as possible, with the characteristics of the languages our ELLs speak—the sounds, spelling system, and syntax of these languages
- Effective instructional practice

Knowledge of the Characteristics of English Spelling. In order to appreciate the levels on which the spelling system of English operates, teachers must step away from the expectation that English spelling is highly irregular because it doesn't represent sounds in a consistent manner. English is more consistent in representing sound than is often realized, but it also represents *meaning* quite consistently through its consistent spelling of prefixes, suffixes, and most base words and Latin and Greek

word roots. For example, note how the sounds change in the base word *resign* when the suffix *-ation* is added (*resignation*) but that the spelling of the base—*r-e-s-i-g-n*—does not change, serving to visually preserve the meaning relationship that is shared by the two words. (See this column in March 2002 *VM* for a fuller discussion of this and other characteristics of English spelling.)

Older English Language Learners who are literate in their first language and whose first language has a Romance base (for example, Spanish) can first become aware of this consistent spelling of meaningful word parts by noting the similar spelling of Latin and Greek cognates. Comparing and contrasting Spanish and English words such as *teléfono/telephone*, *número/number*, and *sorpresa/surprise* are particularly helpful in this case. (*Editor's note:* Alleen and Don Nilsen explore this idea in their article on p. 27 of this issue.)

Assessment. Middle schoolers acquiring English as a new language are also negotiating to various degrees the different sound and meaning features represented by the English spelling system. By administering a *qualitative spelling inventory*, teachers can learn much about ELL students' sensitivity to and awareness of English phonology and spelling and how these relate to students' native languages (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 2004). To date, most of the work in ELL spelling assessment has focused on Spanish, but the value of a qualitative spelling inventory for revealing what any ELL knows about English, regardless of native language, is invaluable. In general, the assessment will confirm other assessment information concerning students' level of proficiency in spoken and written English and inform teachers about where to begin spelling instruc-

tion—with single-syllable words and the consonant and vowel patterns within them or polysyllabic words with less attention to individual sounds.

The ELL's dominant language significantly influences the first strategies he or she applies to English. For example, a student whose home language is Spanish and who has learned the names of letters in the English alphabet may spell *bed* and *ship* as *bad* and *sep*, respectively. Why? Because Spanish does not have the sounds of *short e* and *short i*, so this student perceives these sounds very much like the sounds in Spanish with which he is familiar—the *e* represented in *leche*, for example, and the *i* in *frio*. So, he uses the English letter *a*, whose name is closest to the more familiar Spanish sound, to spell the short *e* sound; he uses the English letter *e*, whose name is closest to the Spanish sound, to spell the short *i* sound.

Becoming Familiar with the Language(s) of Your English Language Learners. This doesn't mean teachers must learn all the languages spoken in a classroom; rather, work for passing familiarity with the sounds, spelling system, and syntax of the languages. This familiarity will support teachers' interpretation of the results of the qualitative spelling inventory and help them determine more precisely where to begin spelling instruction.

Spelling systems, for example, vary along a continuum from primarily sound-based to primarily pattern- and meaning-based. Spanish and Italian, for example, are primarily sound-based, honoring a fairly straightforward correspondence between letters and sounds; English and French, on the other hand—though representing many words in a straightforward alphabetic manner—are primarily pattern- and meaning-based. A number of Asian languages have an alphabetic base, for example Korean and Hmong, while others such as Chinese are primarily meaning-based.

Effective Instructional Practice. Just as with native speakers of English, learning to spell for ELLs is not just memorizing words, but rather understanding *patterns* that apply to a large number of words.

Once teachers have determined the spelling level for each of their ELL students, it's a good idea to plan instruction following more, rather than less, the scope and sequence of spelling instruction that is appropriate for native English speakers (see this column, September 2002). As with most native-English-speaking students, ELLs who are moving beyond the beginning phase of literacy development in English will need time to explore and learn about spelling patterns within single-syllable words. It helps them focus on the sounds in English and the consonant and vowel patterns that represent those sounds; it also forms the basis for a strategy they can use to decode longer, polysyllabic words in English. Good instructional practices for spelling development include pretesting spelling words to be examined during the week; engaging students in categorizing words through word sorts and writing sorts; offering word hunts; keeping a journal of interesting words.

Our ELL students' development in literacy critically depends on their learning how English printed words work, and this is precisely what appropriate spelling instruction provides. Undeniably, providing this instruction is a challenge for middle school teachers, but the potential for student engagement and learning is well worth the commitment.

Resources for Assessing and Teaching Spelling with ELLs

- Bear, D. R., Invernizzi, M., Templeton, S., & Johnston, F. (2004). *Words their way: Word study for phonics, vocabulary, and spelling instruction* (3rd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill/Prentice-Hall.
- Birch, B. M. (2002). *English L2 reading: Getting to the bottom*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Consortium on Reading Excellence. (1999). ESL spelling inventory. In *Assessing reading: Multiple measures*. Novato, CA: Arena.
- Honig, B., Diamond, L., Gutlohn, L. (2000). *Teaching reading sourcebook for kindergarten through eighth grade*. Novato, CA: Arena.
- Kress, J. E. (1993). *The ESL teacher's book of lists*. West Nyack, NY: The Center for Applied Research in Education.