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AN EXPERIMENT IN TEACHING SPELLING

By MARTHA J. FULTON
Paterson, N. J.

Aside from the teaching of Reading, perhaps, no other study in the curriculum of school education leads to more discussion than the subject of Spelling.

Many tests of spelling ability of school children have been made in the past few years with results varying as widely as the prejudices of the experimenters; in one instance the test seems to show absolutely no benefit from the years of spelling-book "grind;" in another the spelling drill shows appreciable results. The chief difficulty lies in the interpretation of the results, a difficulty which would disappear if the tests were of methods rather than mere results. Experiments in spelling, such as were made in the Horace Mann School of Columbia University, in which the conditions were carefully controlled so that there need be no ambiguity in the interpretation of the results, are needed to guide the class teachers in the selection of a method or methods.

No method should be established in a classroom without a preliminary, carefully-controlled experiment to determine what is best adapted to the children individually.

A professor in one of the leading universities of New York City has declared that a child learns to spell when simply assigned a lesson and told to study the words, leaving the method used entirely with the child itself. This might prove satisfactory in a few instances where the children are naturally good spellers. There are many, however, who lack this ability to picture the word, and for these some form of drill seems necessary.

To determine the exact benefit, if any, arising from persistent drill in spelling words the following experiment was made with a 4-B Grade in a public school where the children in attendance are of average ability.

One hundred words were taught in two weeks (ten school days), ten each day, using this procedure:

I. Write word upon the board.

This presents to the child an opportunity to visualize the given word, or, expressed differently, to enable the child to form a visual image of the word before him. The basis for this lies in the fact that a large per cent of children learn best by the process of "seeing."

II. Explain meaning of the word.

Many words are entirely lost to the child for want of a thorough understanding. When the meaning of a word is clear in the mind of a child, the successive appearances of that word make a far greater impression than if it is unknown. This is aided by the next step:

III. Children use the word in a sentence.

Knowledge becomes useful when one possesses the ability to apply it. A child takes a greater amount of interest in words that he

can use freely, taking his own vocabulary as a means to support the new word.

IV. The children write word ten times and while writing say each letter aloud.

Most individuals can learn more readily and retain longer the words gained by writing and talking at the same time. The letters are made to implant a mental word picture in the minds of the children, through the ears for those with "audile" memories, and from the lips and fingers for those with "motile" memories.

V. Emphasize by intonation of voice or by colored chalk on black-board the difficult parts of the word.

A thing is better remembered when it reaches the mind with greater intensity than ordinarily. If the "hard" part of the word, for instance, the "yg" in "hygiene," stands out prominently and is memorized thereby the other parts tend to go along with it.

At the end of the ten days drill a test in the one hundred words was given with the result as shown in column I, table I.

TABLE I

Number of pupil	I Spelling with drill	II Three weeks later	III Spelling without drill	IV Three weeks later
1.....	100	100	78	64
2.....	100	98	74	68
3.....	100	100	94	94
4.....	100	100	86	84
5.....	100	98	86	80
6.....	100	100	54	40
7.....	100	100	72	60
8.....	100	100	86	80
9.....	100	98	90	92
10.....	100	98	72	68
11.....	100	98	80	80
12.....	100	98	84	86
13.....	98	100	82	74
14.....	98	98	78	70
15.....	100	100	88	72
16.....	94	100	74	70
17.....	98	96	72	72
18.....	98	94	92	92
19.....	98	90	64	60
20.....	98	92	46	40
21.....	98	90	70	68
22.....	98	88	44	40
23.....	96	100	70	66
24.....	96	94	58	50
25.....	96	96	64	60
26.....	94	88	68	68
27.....	94	96	58	50
28.....	90	90	54	50
Average.....	98	96	73	68
Average deviation...	1.9	3.4	11.2	11.8

Following this a group of one hundred words of similar difficulty (all the words were taken from Hick's Champion Speller, pp. 40-41) was given the children during ten school days with no directions except to "study the lesson." The children were "heard" in their spelling each day and the next lesson assigned, but no effort was made to teach the spelling. A test of these words at the end of the ten days produced the results shown in Column III.

Three weeks after the test of the first group of words (no mention of them having been made in the meanwhile) another test was made to see what per cent of the words had been retained. The results are shown in column II. A test of the second group three weeks later produced the results shown in column IV.

Table II shows the number of children who fell below, remained stationary or increased their averages after the three weeks interval. The few cases of increase are due probably to the children having accidentally seen the words in reading or otherwise and thus become familiar with them. It will be seen that not only was there a 25% loss in spelling ability when the drill was stopped, but the ability to retain over a long period of time was affected in 25% of the children.

TABLE II

Summarized from columns I and II of Table I:

With drill.....	Below in the second.....	14 or	50%
	Same in both.....	10 or	36%
	Above in the second.....	4 or	14%
		<hr/>	<hr/>
		28	100%

Summarized from columns III and IV of Table I:

Without drill.....	Below in the second.....	21 or	75%
	Same in both.....	5 or	17%
	Above in the second.....	2 or	8%
		<hr/>	<hr/>
		28	100%

DAILY RESULTS, ALL PUPILS

With drill.....	99%
Without drill.....	78%

CONCLUSIONS

The results of this experiment may be summarized in the following statements:

- I. Spelling drill is necessary in any class where the children vary in ability.
- II. The best results are obtained by presenting the words in as many ways as possible.
 1. Spelling orally.
 2. Visualization of words.
 3. The combination of writing and talking.
 4. The correlation of word with its meaning, to fix a permanent impression.
- III. Constant drill.
- IV. Awakening of interest.

By presenting devices which will appeal to children of various stages of intellectuality.
- V. Actual Supervision.

Methods of study should be given to the children and continually supervised by teacher.