

Dictation and Spelling, Grade 1

Dictation and Spelling

What is dictation and why do we teach it?

Dictation requires students to listen carefully as a word or words in a sentence are pronounced, and then write the words. In order to write the words correctly, students must first hear the individual sounds, associate those sounds with specific spellings, and then produce the written spelling. These steps constitute a complex series of abilities and skills.

Across evaluations of beginning reading programs, emphasis on writing activities is repeatedly shown to result in improved gain in early reading achievement (Adams, 1990). Reading and writing work hand in hand. By learning to recognize the spellings of the different speech sounds of the language, students learn to read. By learning to listen to the sounds of the language and assign the appropriate spellings to those sounds, students learn to spell.

Spellings + Speech Sounds = Reading

Speech Sounds + Spellings = Writing/Spelling

The purpose of dictation is to teach the students to spell words based on the sounds they hear. Dictation gives students a powerful strategy for spelling and subsequently for writing.

As part of explicit and systematic instruction in phonics, dictation reinforces and solidifies the students' growing understanding of the alphabetic principle. It requires that they use their knowledge of sounds and symbols not only to read, but also to write words. Through dictation, students learn to reflect thoughtfully on the words they hear in order to segment the sounds and then assign spellings to those sounds.

As an instructional strategy, dictation and spelling give students a vast advantage over spelling instruction that is based solely on memorization. The students quickly learn that there is no need to memorize most words they need to spell—they can sound them out to themselves and write the spellings for the sounds they hear. This understanding alone gives students a level of comfort with spelling that cannot be achieved otherwise.

The stages of spelling development

Children generally pass through a fairly defined set of stages on their way to becoming good readers and writers. These can be characterized as follows:

Prealphabetic Stage

The child:

- Knows that print conveys meaning but has no understanding of how that is done.
- Randomly uses familiar letters with no association to words or meanings.
- Has little or no phonemic awareness.
- Has no understanding of the alphabetic principle.

Early Alphabetic Stage

The child:

- Is beginning to grasp the alphabetic principle.

- Has a heavy reliance on letter names.
- Uses consonants almost exclusively and leaves out more subtle speech sounds entirely.
- Has a growing understanding of phonemic awareness.

Later Alphabetic Stage

The child:

- Is becoming aware that all speech sounds need to be represented.
- Has a growing ability to sound out and represent those sounds.
- Has a growing understanding of patterns of print although little or no understanding of the more complex spelling patterns.

Orthographic Stage

The child:

- Is actively learning each of the sound/spelling correspondences.
- Has a growing ability to sound out words and assign the correct spellings and is becoming more secure.

(Based on Moats, 2000)

In the prealphabetic stage, children understand that print conveys meaning but have no understanding of the alphabetic principle—that letters represent speech sounds. At this point in their development, young writers may randomly write familiar letters and then simply say what they mean. The letters written generally have no connection to the words the child is saying. The child knows that letters—print—hold meaning but has no idea how that meaning is assigned.

As young readers/writers become more aware of how language works, they begin to learn the alphabetic principle. In this early alphabetic stage, they are learning the alphabet and the letter names. Spelling is generally based on that understanding of letter names. The children don't have the insight that words are made up of discrete sounds that are mapped onto letters. For example, *people* may be spelled *pl*.

As this early alphabetic stage matures and becomes the later alphabetic stage, children learn that they must represent all of the sounds in the order in which they are heard in a word. At this stage, spelling can be and usually is a laborious process. The child must repeat the word over and over again in order to hear all of the sounds and think of the letter(s) that might represent the sounds. There is still a heavy reliance on the letter names and little understanding that some sounds have multiple spellings. The word *my* is more likely to be spelled *mi* than *my*. *Sidewill* most likely be spelled *sid*.

Once children start to learn the actual spellings of the different speech sounds, assigning the correct spelling to each sound becomes important. This is spelling as it is traditionally thought of. Being able to spell correctly is vital for both reading and writing. Once children learn standard spellings, they can depend on them in their reading. They can begin recognizing chunks—reliable spelling patterns that appear repeatedly. This allows them to gain fluency in their reading and writing. They learn to recognize the patterns and assign the proper sounds to them automatically, or they can identify the specific sounds in words and assign their spellings. Without this automaticity, there can be no fluency in reading or writing. Fluency frees the learner up to focus on meaning.

Early spelling in *Open Court Reading* and *SRA Imagine It!*

Early spelling experiences in *Open Court Reading* and *SRA Imagine It!* generally take two forms: invented spelling and dictation.

Invented spelling

Invented spelling is not taught. It is a stage the children go through as they learn to become readers and writers (see early alphabetic stage and later alphabetic stage, above). Invented spelling allows children to communicate their ideas by using sounds and their notion of the letters that represent those sounds to write words. By creating their own spellings, children become engaged in thinking about the sounds of words in relation to their written representations.

Encouraging beginning writers to write words as they hear them has a number of benefits.

First, encouraging children to write words as they think they are spelled, rather than insisting on correct spelling, gives them the freedom to use their entire spoken vocabulary in their writing. This is liberating for the children and promotes much more involved and complex writing. It would be inaccurate to say that children using invented spelling are not concerned about proper spelling—they are. When using invented spelling, children think carefully about how each word sounds and how each word should be spelled. They clearly demonstrate their growing knowledge of the language. The effort they put into thinking about the sounds of the language as they write directly correlates to their reading growth and achievement (Adams, 1990).

Second, encouraging children to write the words as they hear them reinforces the idea that print represents the sounds of the language. The children learn to attend carefully to the sounds of the words they are trying to write. As they become more knowledgeable about the alphabetic principle and the connection between sounds and letters, their spellings more closely approximate the actual spelling of the words and, for phonetically regular words, their spellings become effortlessly correct.

Third, in thoughtfully attending to the sounds of the words they are trying to write, children start using analogy in order to write words they have not written before. For example, if they know how to spell the word *ball* and want to write the word *tall*, they might make an analogy that allows them to write the new word—if *ball* is spelled *b,a,l,l*, and *ball* and *tall* sound alike, then maybe they are spelled alike. This strategy works well for many words.

Consequently, invented spelling can be an invaluable component of children's early development as readers and writers (Adams & Bruck, 1995; Adams, Treiman, & Pressley, 1998). Invented spelling is also a valuable informal assessment tool.

Throughout the early development of reading and writing skills, the students' writing—if they are allowed to experiment and invent spellings—can provide the teacher with invaluable evidence of both growth and any apparent problems in their phonemic awareness—their ability to hear the individual phonemes. As children develop phonemic awareness and later learn individual sound/spelling correspondences, their growing knowledge will show itself in their ability to correctly represent the spellings that map onto the words they say and read (Moats, 1997; Shefelbine, 1995).

Teaching dictation

Once students using *Open Court Reading* and *SRA Imagine It!* start to learn specific sound/symbol relationships, dictation is used to help them learn to encode as well as decode words. This formally begins in first grade.

This is the students' introduction to correct spelling. As noted earlier, learning to spell correctly is directly related to success in being able to rapidly decode words since it reinforces sound/spelling connections. Direct instruction in spelling is necessary simply because although the translation of spelling to sound is fairly reliable—the letter *n* is a reliable representation of the phoneme /n/—the reverse is only somewhat reliable: although /n/ can be spelled multiple ways (*n*, *kn*_, *orgn*), knowing that the spelling *kn*_ can only come at the beginning of a word or syllable can help children figure out which spelling to use. Research has shown that the experience of seeing an unfamiliar word in print is far superior to hearing the same word spelled (Adams, 1990). The dictation activities in *Open Court Reading* and *SRA Imagine It!* are designed to give students the experience of hearing words containing the patterns of spellings they are learning and seeing those patterns in print.

Since encoding, or spelling, is a difficult task, students are introduced to it with considerable support from the teacher. The teacher gradually removes this support as students gain confidence in their ability to hear and represent the sounds of the language. The steps in this progression are:

The Word-Building Game

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Sounds-in-Sequence Dictation (isolated words and sentences)

Whole-Word Dictation (isolated words and sentences)

The Word-Building Game

The Word-Building Game introduces students to dictation. In this game, students use Letter Cards—the spellings they have already learned—to build words. Each word in a set of words differs by only one sound and one spelling. For example:

| | |
|------|---|
| am | |
| at | substitute <i>t</i> for <i>m</i> |
| sat | add <i>s</i> to the beginning of the word <i>at</i> |
| mat | substitute <i>m</i> for <i>s</i> |
| mast | add <i>s</i> before the <i>t</i> |

The teacher pronounces each word, uses it in a sentence to make sure her students know the word's meaning, and repeats the word. The students are required to listen carefully and then make the substitution or addition that they hear from word to word. As an additional support and strategy, the teacher asks the children to point out each **Sound/Spelling Card** as a sound is identified and the spelling indicated. Since this takes place early in first grade, the students are not required to write the letters. Using cards instead of writing the spellings frees the students to focus on the sounds and letters without requiring the additional effort of writing, which sometimes breaks the child's concentration. Although use of the **Letter Cards** is recommended, the Word-Building Game can also be done as a pencil-and-paper activity.

Sounds-in-Sequence Dictation

Sounds-in-sequence dictation is a pencil-and-paper activity in which words are pronounced, used in a sentence, repeated by the teacher and the students, and finally segmented into discrete sounds. The teacher pronounces a word and uses it in a sentence to make sure the students know the word. The teacher then repeats the word, the students say the word, and together they break the word into component sounds and connect those sounds to the spellings. The difference between sounds-in-sequence dictation and the Word Building Game is that children *write* the spellings. Again, the teacher asks the children to point out each **Sound/Spelling Card** as a sound is identified and the spelling indicated. For example:

| | |
|-----------------|---|
| Teacher: | <i>lap</i> . The kitten sat in my lap. <i>Lap</i> . |
|-----------------|---|

| | |
|------------------|---|
| Students: | <i>lap.</i> |
| Teacher: | What is the first sound you hear in the word <i>lap</i> ? |
| Students: | <i>/l/</i> |
| Teacher: | What <i>Sound/Spelling Card</i> represents the sound <i>/l/</i> ? |
| Students: | Lion. |
| Teacher: | What's the spelling? |
| Students: | <i>l</i> |
| Teacher: | Write <i>l</i> . |
| Teacher: | What is the second sound you hear in the word <i>lap</i> ? |
| Students: | <i>/a/</i> |

This process continues until the complete word is spelled. The teacher then writes the word on the board (or asks a student to write it) and the children proofread their own work.

In this way, students are given every possible support in their beginning spelling and are taught to use the **Sound/Spelling Cards** to help them spell. In addition, proofreading helps children identify any mistakes and correct them immediately. They are assured of success and grow in confidence.

Whole-Word Dictation

As students grow in their ability to spell words with confidence, the teacher can remove some of his or her support. In whole-word dictation the teacher pronounces the word, uses it in a sentence, pronounces the word again, and asks the students to pronounce it. With whole-word dictation, it is the students' responsibility to think through the individual sounds of the words and then to write the spellings. Initially, the teacher reminds the students to think about each sound they hear in the word, check the **Sound/Spelling Cards**, and then write the spelling. Students are always encouraged to take responsibility for their work. Again, each word is proofread and students make any necessary corrections.

Sentence Dictation

Just as students learn to spell individual words, they also learn to use the spelling strategy to write sentences. In sentence dictation, the teacher reads the sentence and the children repeat it. Initially, each word is then spelled using the sounds-in-sequence routine. As the students become more confident and capable, sentences are read and the

children write them using the whole-word routine. As stated earlier, the purpose of dictation activities is to show students that they have strategies to use in spelling words. By moving from the dictation of words to the dictation of sentences, the teacher shows students that these strategies can be used beyond the relatively artificial experience of spelling lessons.

The high-frequency sight words that students are learning are incorporated into the dictation sentences. These words are simply pronounced and the children spell them. They have been posted on the High-Frequency Word Bank in the classroom so the children can check them, just as they can check the **Sound/Spelling Cards** for the spellings of the sounds. The strategies learned in dictation can and should be used in all of their writing. Sentence dictation helps to bridge the gap between spelling "activities" and spelling as an everyday activity.

Proofreading

Proofreading is an integral component of all dictation lessons. The children are encouraged to become responsible for their own work. Students are taught to check their work and correct or improve as needed. This practice reinforces their role as a judge of their own learning. After the teacher dictates each line and the students spell the words, either the teacher or one of the students writes the correct spelling of each word on the board. The children then check their word against the correct example, checking not only for correct spelling but also for correct letter formation. If they find an error or a badly formed letter, they circle it and write the correction above it. In this way, they can see what they did wrong and what the correct spelling or letter formation is. Students are encouraged to decide for themselves if they could have done a better job of writing than they did. In addition to proofreading for correct spelling of each of the words within a sentence, they are also responsible for correct punctuation and capitalization of the sentence. This is an effective reinforcement of any mechanics instruction they have received.

Proofreading becomes routine for students as they go through the grades. They become accustomed to checking their own work not only to evaluate its correctness, but also to check on its presentation. In doing so, they learn to accept responsibility for their role as learners.

Conclusion

Writing activities such as dictation reinforce students' knowledge of sound/spelling relationships and common letter sequences. As a result, such practice enhances reading proficiency (Adams & Bruck, 1995; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Dictation practice also helps children develop a spelling strategy and integrate reading and writing. It provides an opportunity to introduce proofreading, a critical skill that children will use whenever they write. As students learn to reflect on the sounds in words and connect them to the appropriate spellings through dictation and spelling, they develop writing fluency.

During dictation, students apply sound/spelling relationships by writing words as the teacher says them; however, the emphasis on these dictation activities is learning—not testing. Students are encouraged to ask for help and use the **Sound/Spelling Cards** as often as needed. By using dictation as a teaching device rather than an assessment tool, teachers show students the importance of listening carefully, without inflicting the pressures associated with "testing." Dictation and spelling also provides the teacher with an ideal opportunity to monitor the children's understanding of segmentation, their knowledge of sound/spelling connections, and their ability to proofread and evaluate their own work, all critical steps for developing writing fluency and independence. Daily dictation sessions enable students to make the connection between decoding (reading) and encoding (writing) so that they can see and understand the cumulative effects of all that they learn.