

# Extending Children's Spelling Strategies

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## Aim

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To investigate the medium-term effectiveness of raising spelling achievement through teaching the structure and process of cued spelling.

## Dimensions of this Case Study

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Two classes of 20 Year 6 children were used for the project study and control groups.

## Summary of Findings for this Case Study

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- Children involved in a cued spelling project improved their spelling attainment over time.
- Those who acted as *helpers* continued to improve spelling attainment in the six months after the project.
- Pupils who acted as *spellers* maintained their improved test scores, but did not continue to improve post-intervention.
- Children in the cued spelling study group were more independent in their approach to spelling at the end of the project, than they had been at the beginning. They used dictionaries more frequently, and mentioned discoveries about spelling patterns and word meaning on a regular basis.
- After the project, children in the cued spelling study group articulated more strategies for checking, learning and recalling a spelling, than children in the control group. Study pupils explained independent strategies, whereas control group children remained heavily reliant on asking their teacher for spellings.

## Background

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Wilberforce Primary School is a two form entry school serving the City of Westminster Council Mozart Estate, in Queen's Park, London. It is a multicultural school, where 72% of pupils speak English as an additional language.

Work to improve literacy is a key issue, and consistency in the teaching of spelling is something that the school is working towards.

This research project aimed to investigate cued spelling as a potential way of achieving these end results.

## Elements of Cued Spelling

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Cued spelling is a multi-sensory approach to the teaching and learning of spelling, run as a thrice weekly project for six weeks. Each session lasts for approximately fifteen minutes. Children are trained by a teacher to work in pairs. The pairs consist of a *helper*, the stronger speller of the two, and a *speller*, the weaker spelling partner.

The helper assists the speller in learning how to spell words, following a ten step procedure. At the end of each session, the helper gives the speller a test to assess the short term recall of the day's spellings.

The ten steps are as follows:

1. Pupils select a word to learn/are given target words;
2. Pairs check correct spelling using a dictionary, and enter the word in their spelling diaries;
3. Pairs read the word together, the speller reads the word alone;
4. Speller and helper choose cue together;
5. Pairs repeat cues aloud;
6. Speller says cues, while helper writes word;
7. Helper says cues, while speller writes word;
8. Speller writes word quickly, and says cues aloud;
9. Speller writes word quickly;
10. Speller reads word aloud.

## Project rationale

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Initial studies of the cued spelling approach provided encouraging results, with mean gains of 0.69 of a year in terms of spelling age per child reported after the six week project, (Marlin, 1997).

This piece of research investigated children's spelling attainment pre-project, at the end of the intervention, and six months later. This was to monitor any wash-out effects which may have occurred. Wash-out is always a concern after a period of intensive teaching, where children appear to have made significant improvement. The term refers to the tailing-off of improvement once the intensive teaching period is over. Unless children retain the achievement gained during the teaching provision, it calls into question the validity of this mode of instruction.

The post-intervention spelling attainment of those children who acted in a facilitating capacity - the *helpers* - was also measured. Their time could only be justified educationally if they improved at a rate equal to the children they were helping.

## The Teacher's Role

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### Assessment

At the beginning of the project, the children's spelling was assessed using a standardised test. The results from this were used to rank the study group children in terms of spelling achievement. A line was drawn midway down the ranked list, with the highest scoring half becoming *helpers*, and the lower scoring children becoming *spellers*. The top *helper* was paired with the top *speller*, and so-on down the list.

### Planning

Each session, pupils were given two words to learn which illustrated a grammatical or phonological rule of the week. The underlying rule was not made explicit to the children, thus providing an opportunity for active discovery through investigation and discussion. Once these words had been learnt, *spellers* chose words they felt would be useful to learn, and worked on these with their *helper*. This was a completely free choice, and did not have to relate to the teacher-given words.

The purpose of this was to structure the project in a balanced way regarding children's freedom of choice, and teacher-given direction. Thus, it was hoped that children would remain motivated, yet also be guided through some particular language trends useful to their spelling development.

## Teacher Intervention

The ten steps of cued spelling were demonstrated to the class, following a discussion about difficulties the children were having with some spellings. It was explained to the children that those who were finding spelling tricky had been paired with somebody who could help them practise and learn different spellings.

The demonstration was repeated the following day, and children were given time to practise the process. Posters explaining the cued spelling steps were displayed around the classroom as aide-memoirs.

Once the project was underway, teacher intervention focused on one or two pairs of children at a time. The main direction of input was to talk with the children, asking them about what they were doing, and guide them in making generalisations from the words they were learning to other words displaying similar characteristics. This was particularly useful in raising the awareness of word categories and spelling patterns for the *helpers*.

Once the session finished, children were invited to report back to the class, and demonstrate some cues that had been helpful. The teaching focus was then to help children generate alternative cues, so that a variety of cues was modelled regularly.

## Assessment

When the cued spelling project ended, children were reassessed, in order to judge the success of the intervention. For the purpose of the research study, this was repeated after six months had passed.

# Results

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## Attainment

Children, both in the project group and in the control group, improved their spelling test scores during the intervention phase of the project. There was no significant difference in improvement

between the two groups of children. This was replicated in the follow-up test after six months had passed. Similarly, it was not possible to detect a marked difference between the project and control groups' spelling when analysing their creative writing.

Within the study group, a difference between test scores of *spellers* and *helpers* emerged. The *helpers'* spelling attainment continued to improve during the six months after the intervention, whereas the *spellers'* test scores remained the same as they had been at the end of the intervention period.

## Attitude

From class teacher observations and interviews with the pupils involved in the study, both in the cued spelling and control groups, a marked difference in attitude was evident.

After the cued spelling project had finished, children in the cued spelling class, were more confident both about the spellings that they knew, and about ways of finding out and learning new spellings.

There was increased independent use of dictionaries in the cued spelling class, and children were less reliant on others for information. When they did ask one another how to spell a word, the spelling was written down for them by the other child. This contrasted with behaviour observed before the project began, when children would spell the word orally, letter by letter. Pupils were seen putting a circle around the 'tricky bit' of a word, to help their friend remember the spelling.

Once the child had copied the word down, they were focusing on it as if committing it to memory. When asked what they were doing, they said that they were "*seeing what it looked like*," "*looking at the shapes*," and "*trying to remember it for next time*."

There was no evidence from the control group of such a change in the spelling behaviour of pupils.

## Learning Strategies

Further evidence of the effectiveness of teaching cued spelling emerged during interviews with the children.

Pupils from the control group class articulated reliance on a limited range of strategies. They named "*splitting the word up*" most frequently when asked how they learnt and remembered words. Pupils

whose spelling achievement was higher stated "*I just know them*" and "*I don't really know,*" when questioned.

Children in the cued spelling project class were able to discuss a wider range of techniques. The majority of children were able to name three or four alternatives. They stated "*I think of something else that's got that word in it,*" "*I learn the word, say if it was similar to something, I could learn it,*" "*I would look it up in the dictionary,*" and listed approaches to memorising such as "*I would write it out four or five times,*" "*I'd use it a lot of times,*" and "*I'd put it up in a room so I could see it and remember it.*"

These changes in attitude and learning strategies were noted post intervention, and six months later.

## Conclusions

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Test score evidence did not indicate a significant difference between the spelling attainment of the cued spelling group as a whole and the control group. However, the difference in attitude and developing learning strategies between groups warrants further attention, as does the improving spelling scores of the *helpers* six months after the cued spelling intervention.

A correlation is evident between the teaching of cued spelling and improvement in children's learning. This developed to a point where pupils in the cued spelling group were able to discuss the spellings of words, use a dictionary speedily and confidently, generalise using grammatical and phonological spelling rules, and commit spellings to memory on a regular basis.

It may be concluded that pupils who acted as *helpers* were more able to generalise about the approach used, beyond the boundaries of the project, and so continued to improve their spelling scores six months post-intervention. The cued spelling project honed and sharpened the skills of these pupils, and introduced them to an even wider range of strategies which they could then apply independently.

## Contact

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The role specific to the *helpers*, involved regular explanation to their partner. These children were put in a situation each session where they had to articulate explanations and rehearse rules for the benefit of their *speller*. The specific nature of cued spelling ensured that they were wrestling with a variety of approaches regularly. Since they already had an age-appropriate spelling vocabulary, they had an established backdrop of knowledge on which to hang their new-found techniques.

Although the use of improved skills was not reflected in the *spellers'* test scores after six months, they were still articulating them during interviews, and observed using these strategies in the classroom.

The above reflection on the attainment of the *helpers* points to the suggestion that as their spelling vocabulary grows, they may be able to capitalise on their recently acquired confidence and approach, and progress to higher spelling attainment.

As always with a small scale study, these conclusions must be approached with caution. If the contribution that cued spelling could make as a teaching tool for Key Stage 2 is to be fully evaluated, then further research with a larger sample of children and teachers is needed.

## Further Reading

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Marlin, H., *Cued Spelling Research Findings*, Teacher Training Agency, London (1997).

Perfetti, C.A., Rieben, L., & Fayol, M., (Eds.), *Learning to Spell. Research Theory and Practice Across Languages*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, New Jersey (1997).

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Topping, K., *Paired Reading, Spelling and Writing*, Cassell, London (1995).