

Explicit spelling instruction drives literacy

Reading and spelling don't come easily for all children



JENNIFER **DEMPSEY**

I was the third-grade spelling bee champion in my small, rural New Jersey elementary school. My teacher awarded me with a pocket-size thesaurus for my accomplishment.

My classmates and I spent months memorizing lists of disconnected words with no analysis or reflection of spelling patterns, rules, etymology, or morphology. While rote memorization allowed me to take home the coveted thesaurus, for most students, this practice does not support the processes underlying literacy acquisition. Many children will need direct and explicit spelling instruction to spell (and write), even if their reading is at or above grade level. Learning to spell is more complicated than reading because spelling requires complete and accurate word memories.

When explicitly taught the rules and patterns of the English language, approximately 84 percent of all words can be spelled accurately by sound-symbol correspondence patterns alone. But English has a great many words, and this leaves at least 100,000 more that could be spelled correctly if other information was considered, such as word meaning and origin. It would take an additional twenty years after the spelling bee for me to learn about the fascinating rules and patterns of the English language.



Breaking it down to the basic elements

I was a wide-eyed and eager student teacher nearing the completion of my master's degree in Elementary Education with a focus in Montessori Studies. The lower elementary classroom I was placed in had been led by a master guide trained in primary through upper elementary. She created a wonderfully rich environment where students collaborated in concentrated work and inquisitive research, fulfilling their intrinsic desire to learn. During my first week in the classroom, she called the second-year students to the lesson table to explore why some one-syllable words with the ending /ch/ sound were spelled with a "tch." I personally could not answer why, and I was intrigued by this approach to word study and spelling. As a young child, I never learned the rules of spelling. Witnessing the enthusiasm and excitement firsthand as students gained a deeper understanding

of our language motivated me to begin my comprehensive study and apprenticeship in Orton-Gillingham and structured literacy practices.

Orton-Gillingham (OG) is an approach used to teach literacy that was first developed to assist students with demonstrated reading, writing, and spelling difficulties. It originated in the 1920s by Samuel T. Orton, a neuropsychologist and pathologist who worked with patients with brain damage, and Anna Gillingham, an educator, and psychologist. Together they created a multisensory learning strategy that involved the integration of visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learning pathways for reading instruction. Early attention was focused on children with language processing difficulties, but the approach began to be utilized for

continues >

all students learning to read, write, and spell.

Due to the limited amount of high-quality research on this topic, a review of meta-analyses shows mixed outcomes regarding the efficacy of the Orton-Gillingham approach as a whole. However, one analysis does show positive results for certain elements of the approach. In a 2006 literature review of twelve studies focusing on the effectiveness of the approach with students in elementary school through college, positive results were found for word reading, word attack/decoding, spelling, and comprehension. Substantial research demonstrates the importance of explicit spelling instruction within a structured literacy framework, which is a critical component of OG.

Learning to spell words supports the construction of high-quality lexical representations (quick and automatic retrieval of word meaning), an essential driver of literacy acquisition. The English writing system is complex, with 26 letters producing 44 sounds. Explicit instruction in spelling and reading allows students to strengthen their application of patterns and rules

of the English language. Studies with second and third-grade students found moderate to large effects on students' reading when encoding skills provided spelling instruction that was sequenced from easier to more difficult

straightforward grapheme-to-phoneme correspondence. On the other hand, the English language employs a deep or opaque orthography—the relationship between graphemes and phonemes is much less direct. While

Many children will need direct and explicit instruction to spell (and write), even if their reading is at or above grade level

(Blachman et al., 2004). Therefore, it becomes essential that educators enhance literacy skills with spelling lessons that include explicit instruction of carefully selected words. The goal is to make sense of words by selectively referencing the factors that explain why a word is written the way it is (Spear-Swerling, 2022).

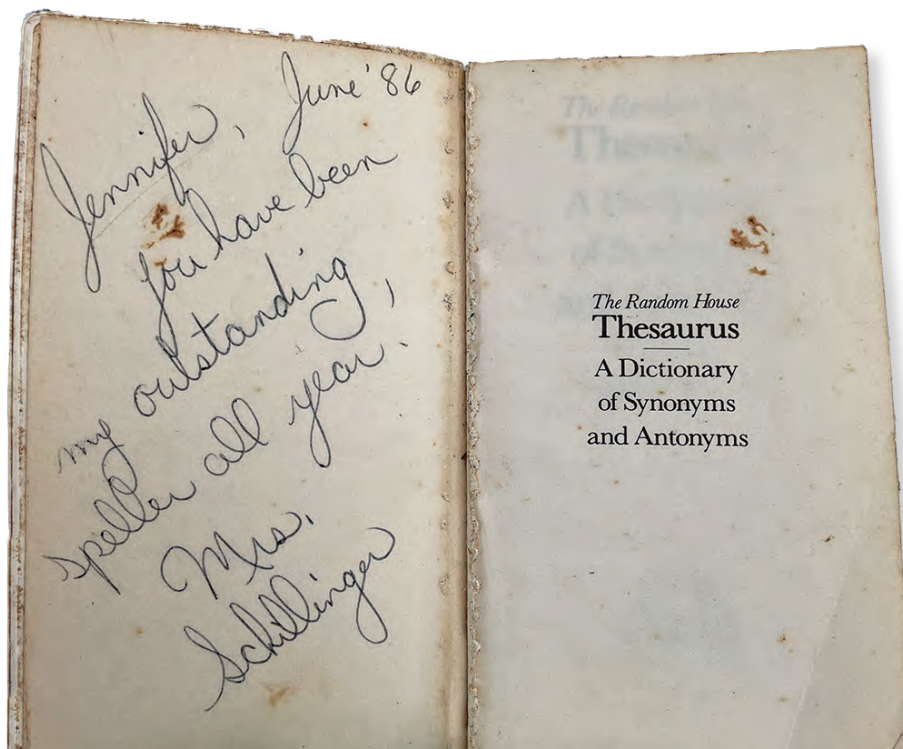
Dr. Montessori's development of language lessons and materials was based on Italian orthography, which is shallow (i.e., mostly phonetic and extremely predictable). There is a direct,

English is comprised of 84 percent predictable rules and patterns, it contains many more complex codes that must be explicitly taught. For this reason, I have implemented structured literacy approaches in my Montessori lower elementary environment for many years.

The Orton-Gillingham approach and Montessori method, both scientifically based, share many commonalities. They both emphasize systematic, cumulative, explicit, and diagnostic instruction and multi-sensory techniques. Considering the research-supported benefits and the similarities between the Orton-Gillingham approach and the Montessori method, I have found great success and ease of implementation by utilizing the OG approach in my lower elementary classroom. Structured literacy approaches like Orton-Gillingham should contain the following general principles:

Systematic and cumulative instruction: Lessons build upon prior knowledge. The order of lessons begins with the most basic concepts and becomes more complex. Lessons always spiral back and include a review of previously taught concepts. A planned scope and sequence is followed.

Explicit Instruction: "I Do, We Do, You Do" (Similar to the three-period



continues >

lesson). The deliberate use of scaffolding begins with lots of teacher support and then weans the child to become more independent. Instruction is intentional and explicit and includes modeling and immediate corrective feedback—lots of student engagement.

Diagnostic: Lessons are individualized and differentiated. Guides are continuously diagnosing the needs of the students. Differentiation occurs within groups based on careful monitoring.

Multimodal: To enhance learning, implement the visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learning pathways simultaneously. Lessons utilize hands-on manipulatives and techniques.

It's easy to see how these criteria are present in Montessori pedagogy and curriculum.

How does this approach unfurl in my lower elementary classroom?

I pull differentiated groups for a lesson on Monday. Each week the groups focus on a spelling rule or pattern as I work through the scope and sequence. The introductory lesson introduces the topic, the students talk about the rule or pattern through guided discovery, and they record it in their spelling books. First-year students have lots of practice finger tapping to stretch the sounds of the word as they write the words in their books. First-year students also utilize a keyword chart to aid in the recall of letter sounds. I also teach them big body gestures to remember vowel sounds and digraphs. When I introduce a new concept, I teach them the movements, and we do the movements together. Over time, using a gradual release of responsibility, the students use the motion with only an initial prompt.

All students receive one or two review words from the previous lesson and two to three heart words. Second and third-year students are only given five words accompanying the rule or



The work journal could also be a good place for spelling practice.

pattern in the introductory lesson. First years are given ten. Early in the year, first-year students utilize Elkonin boxes with bingo chips to demonstrate the number of sounds they hear. Later in the year, it is no longer needed, so the scaffolding crutch is removed. All friends air write and discuss the irregular components of the heart words before writing on paper.

Throughout the rest of the week, students may work with the words through word sorts, phonics exercises on paper, Waseca rainbow boxes, dictation sentences with accompanying illustrations (for first years), and reading and working with the words in text passages.

On Friday, the students have a quiz. First-year friends are quizzed on all ten words from the rule or pattern we studied, the review words from previous concepts, and the heart words. Second and third-year friends are quizzed on the five words I provided them on Monday, plus five other words that follow the rule or pattern, the review words, and the heart words. The “mystery” words that I ask the students to spell on Friday eliminate the rote memorization process and allow for a deeper understanding of the rule or pattern of that week.

The importance of explicit spelling instruction should not be overlooked in the Montessori environment. For young

children, research indicates that spelling supports learning to read. For older children, learning about the meaningful relationships between words will likely contribute to vocabulary growth and reading comprehension.

Do not hesitate to implement practices and approaches because you wonder, “is this Montessori?” It is possible and acceptable to honor and uphold the Montessori pedagogy while implementing instruction not explicitly mentioned in our albums. As Dr. Montessori stated in *The Formation of Man*, “The basis of the reform of education and society which is a necessity of our times must be built upon scientific study.” We must remember that Dr. Montessori was a scientist first and foremost. We should be compelled to utilize instructional practices rooted in scientific research in our environments. Explicit spelling instruction can be integrative, fun, authentic, and purposeful!

Jennifer Dempsey, M.Ed., is a lower elementary guide at the Montessori School of Maui and a doctoral student in the Reading Science program at Mount St. Joseph University.

MontessoriPublic

MontessoriPublic, the communications and advocacy platform for public Montessori is a publication of

NATIONAL CENTER for MONTESSORI in the PUBLIC SECTOR

Subscribe at montessoripublic.org

Noncommercial reproduction of this material is permitted and encouraged. Consult authors for rights to copyrighted articles.

Copyright 2023 National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector