The following article draws on a talk given by British author Eileen Stirling during her recent visit to Brisbane. Eileen, a “teacher and writer specializing in adolescent dyslexia”, has taught adolescents in a private school in Wales and has written several books including Help for the Dyslexic Adolescent and Spelling Revisited. The term dyslexia is used throughout this article because of the common usage of this word in Britain.

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The main aspects of Eileen’s talk covered:

- the importance of spelling
- knowledge necessary for spelling
- flexible approaches to the learning and teaching of spelling
- ways of teaching of spelling so that students gain a high degree of mastery of communicating in the written language

The teenagers referred to by Eileen during her talk are eleven to nineteen year olds, mainly boys - a group “who had failed to acquire the basic language skills of reading, writing, spelling and sometimes speech, despite normal intelligence, regular school attendance and no discernible problems of sight, hearing or emotional deprivation.” In addition, they had been assessed as being dyslexic or having dyslexic-type problems by qualified professionals administering standardized tests.

A. The importance of spelling for users of the English language.

Today the importance and emphasis on accurate spelling is rising with use of computers and word processing. This contrasts with a quotation from Pickwick Papers by Charles Dickens. "Do you spell it with a 'V' or 'W'?" enquired the judge. "That depends upon the taste and fancy of the speller, my Lord." replied Sam.

It is only very recently that spelling has been conventional. Evidence of this recency is shown by Bill Bryson, author of English English and American English, who recorded eighty different ways of spelling Shakespeare’s name. Shakespeare himself used six!

So why do we pretend that spelling is fixed and concrete?

We need to remember, as both teachers and parents, why we spell. We spell to communicate in writing. It is a tool to enable us to communicate easily in writing. Spelling does matter because we think it matters but it is a tool and a tool doesn’t have to be “state of the art” to be effective. Spelling is one of the few skills we acquire where to be good, we have to be 100% right. What other skill requires you to be 100% good at it?

Each of us has a spelling ceiling. How many of us can automatically and with a 100% accuracy spell words such as millenium, diarrhoea, eczema or chihuahua?

Accurate spelling is considered important today. Examiners require it. Governments of many countries are also placing considerable emphasis on accuracy in spelling. Accuracy in spelling is often extremely difficult and a permanent problem for the learner with dyslexia. Bad spelling is annoying. Written work must be immediately readable but not a work of art. We don’t go to look at it in a gallery!

We can’t expect students with dyslexia to be perfect at spelling so what can be done about it?

We need to think differently about spelling. Why? Because spelling is a tool for communication.

B. Basic knowledge necessary for spelling the English language.

The student needs a set of basic concepts and skills to use when learning spelling. These concepts and skills are:

1. Discrimination, orientation and knowledge of the visual similarity and differences among letters of the alphabet e.g. m n u w --- b d p q --- x k.

2. Create and remember all the letters. A knowledge of the sounds, the names and the shapes of the letters is necessary in remembering them.

3. Vowels. It is important for students with dyslexia to realise that out of the alphabet of the 26 letters five are vowels and two, y and w are semi-vowels e.g. in ‘law’ w is a vowel, not a consonant. It is important to know that these five vowels and two semi-vowels are important letters and that they cause many of the problems for students.

4. Recognition of the use of principles. Principles are more appropriate, more flexible and more user-friendly than rules. Know that effective rules for spelling do not really exist. Principles permit the presentation of spelling in a more positive way.

5. Spelling is fluid and subject to change. The use of ph to represent the sound f is changing to f in writing.
Chemists have decided to change the spelling of “sulphur” to “sulfur”. This change is filtering down but has not yet reached school.

C. Approaching the learning/teaching of spelling.

- Show positive attitudes to spelling.
- Look at the spelling situation positively.
- Encourage the student to have a positive outlook.

Some positive points to note when considering spelling are:

1. A student with severe dyslexia can spell most “bits” of most words accurately. When teaching or discussing spelling achievement recognize that most parts of most words are spelled correctly.

2. Give spelling a different name, call it “orthography”. It is accurate, sounds important and offers a new start.

3. Change examination procedures. Examinations which have an extra five marks for spelling punctuation and grammar which students can earn are good news for students with dyslexia because after the five marks are lost, as they most certainly will be, the answers then have to be marked on the content.

D. Ways of teaching so that students with dyslexia gain a high degree of mastery of the spelling of the English language.

Priorities when teaching are:

1. Teach spelling logically.

For example, the word ‘edge’.

**Teacher:** Say the word slowly out loud. What do you hear first?

**Student:** ‘e’.

**Teacher:** What can you hear next?

**Student:** ‘dg’ - I don’t think that’s enough.

**Teacher:** What do you think you could do?

**Student:** I’ll put an ‘e’ on the end.

Logical spelling is not perfect spelling.

If spelling is written logically it means that students are communicating. It is especially useful for examination purposes for older children. Logical spelling works more quickly with younger children because they don’t have so many bad habits.

The use of a rating scale allows the teacher to communicate the current spelling situation. Using a scale of 0 to 10 explain that the minute a student can spell logically, the rating on the scale is seven. It is then possible “to add the icing on the cake.” This approach builds understanding and confidence.

2. Teach categories of words.

(a) Small everyday common words. These are words which often do not follow the principles of English spelling, for example, words like *people, many or friend.*

These words can be recorded in a book. The purpose of the book is to provide a set of relevant words to study, to underline parts to note, to add any words found difficult so that the student gradually becomes familiar with the words. It is well known that mistakes in small words show up more than those in long words. So if possible short words should be accurate.

(b) Words that always appear starting with capital letters. These are proper nouns, names, geographical locations, historical dates, authors of books, characters in books. This list has a pragmatic purpose. If a teacher or examiner expects accuracy in spelling these words, then the student must be able to spell these words.

(c) Words to be copied. Copying is very difficult for a student with dyslexia, with copying from the blackboard particularly difficult. A dyslexic student can’t retain the whole word in his visual memory and needs to look up frequently. In so doing the student loses the place and consequently the word is copied incorrectly. When copying from books the student can use a finger as a marker and has the opportunity to copy correctly.

3. Teach generalization.

At this older age it is important that students with dyslexia learn how to generalize, that is, how to work things out for themselves. It is necessary to point out that it is not possible or sensible to learn the spelling of every word in the English language. A student needs to be able to consider the possibilities and to say it is likely to be $x\, y$ or $x$.

4. Teach students independent learning strategies.

If students can learn to think for themselves they are much more likely to work things out for themselves. The result is they are much more likely to remember the strategy.

Example: Write up a list of words and ask what they have in common.

- cat
- cent
- city
- cut
- cot
- cycle

**Teacher:** What do they have in common?

**Student:** They all begin with $c$ and four of them end in $t$.

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