

Spelling It Out

Direct instruction is the best way to teach children how to spell.

By Lynn Hatfield

From observations in the classroom, looking at samples of daily work and analyzing the results of standardized achievement tests, it became apparent that there was an urgent need to address the poorly-developed spelling skills at this K-6 elementary school. As a result, we enrolled all 471 students in grades 1 to 6 in a two-year, school-wide spelling improvement program using **Spelling Mastery**, a component of **Direct Instruction Systems for Teaching and Remediation (DISTAR)**, published by **Science Research Associates**.

In most programs, a spelling pattern, rule or unit is taught, practised and tested during a weekly unit, and no other skills are taught or practised during that time. In **Spelling Mastery**, each lesson is made up of several tracks, including work on more than one skill, pattern or rule. A track extends over a period of several weeks, providing students more time to acquire and master the program objective. The emphasis is placed on the student's learning intelligent behaviour rather than specific pieces of information by rote memorization.

A major assumption underlying **Spelling Mastery** is that the most effective medium for teaching spelling is the teacher, not self study, computers, audiotapes or unguided discovery. **Spelling Mastery** promotes a great deal of discovery — about words that are related by structure and meaning — and the discovery comes about because the teacher lays a solid foundation and does not rely on chance.

Because the **Spelling Mastery** manual suggested that homogeneous groupings were most effective, cross-grade groups were established using the program's placement tests. The pupils assembled with their instructors for one 20-minute lesson daily. Independent measures of progress were

obtained throughout the pilot project by administration of the Morrison McCall Spelling Tests.

Here are a few highlights.

- The greatest progress was made by primary students, with 92% of all grade 1 students achieving above grade level after one year and four months in the program. Post-test scores for grade 1 pupils averaged grade 4.0, with a range of scores from grade 1.9 to 7.5. Only 8 of 118 primary pupils did not score at or above grade level.
- The grade 2 students went from an average pre-test score of grade 2.5 to grade 3.8 with a range of post-test scores from grade 2.2 to 7.0. Growth in one year was as much as 3.7 grade levels.
- Grade 3 students scored an average of grade 4.9 after one year and five months in the program, with a range of post-test scores from grade 1.7 to 8.0.
- In the junior division, 46% of all students scored above grade level. Post-test scores ranged from grade 2.3 to 10.5. *Every pupil made gains of more than one year, five months in a year and a half*, with some gaining from three to four full grade levels of achievement in that time.

Like most schools, we experienced a fair amount of turnover in the school population. After five months in the program, 31 students left the school, while 85 new admissions were enrolled during the pilot project. As well, there were 28 transient students who attended for one term or less.

In addition, 130 students were in a program for remediation of reading, speech and language, or behavioural difficulties. They included special education students identified as

learning-disabled, vision-impaired, language-delayed or behaviorally-disordered, as well as slow learners, under-achievers, and pupils for whom English was a second language. No one was excluded from the **Spelling Mastery Pilot Project**.

Grade	Above Grade Level	At Grade Level	Below Grade Level
1	108	2	8
2	50	8	17
3	40	3	20
4	38	1	34
5	24	1	36
6	29	4	41

These results confirm what the research tells us.

First, teachers are effective when they:

- structure the learning experience;
- proceed in small steps but at a rapid pace;
- give clear instructions and detailed explanations;
- have a high frequency of questions and overt, active practice;
- give feedback and corrections; and
- practise until students have a success rate of 90%.

Secondly, our pilot project confirms the words of Bonita Grossen in *Effective School Practices, Winter 1996*: "In the history of education, no educational model has ever been documented to achieve such positive results with such consistency as Direct Instruction."

(Mrs. Hatfield was the principal of Parkview School in Lindsay, Ontario at the time of the pilot project, and she is now looking forward to retirement in June. Until then, Mrs. Hatfield can be reached at the Trillium Lakelands District Education Centre, 705-324-5300, Ext. 100.)