The Importance of Invented Spelling

PreK paleontologists at the Early Language and Literacy Initiative (ELLI) Lab School at Stepping Stones Museum sketched their dinosaur find and labeled the parts: body

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(BDE), face (FS), neck (NAK), feet (FET), and tail (TL). This demonstrates the sophisticated writing progression from random squiggles and letters to associating sounds with letters.

Just as students pass through developmental stages on their way to mastering reading, they also move through predictable stages as they internalize the rules of spelling. Students' spelling is a window into their understanding of phonemic awareness, sound-letter associations (phonics or "code"), spelling patterns (orthographic representations), and meaning. By understanding the characteristics of each stage, teachers can better support their students' progress with instruction that reinforces their knowledge and helps propel them to proficiency.

From Scribbles to Letters: Emergent Spelling

This complex developmental progression can be most clearly seen in the earliest or "Emergent" stage of Developmental Spelling as students discover the alphabetic principle. Emergent spelling coincides with emerging literacy as PreK through K-aged children discover language, reading, writing, and books. Over time, as students become more aware of environmental print, their prephonetic writing and spelling moves away from random scribbles and begins to look more like mock letters, then random strings of letters—often those found in their names. As children develop phonemic awareness (the ability to distinguish individual speech sounds) and gain some knowledge of the alphabet, they transition to representing sounds with letters or "invented spelling." See the example below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Print Level</th>
<th>Sentence Form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phonetic</td>
<td>I wnt tu c e an lft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semiphonetic</td>
<td>I W T C A L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Random letter string</td>
<td>XXXOOZZZAA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I want to see an elephant.
What is Your Student Learning During Developmental Spelling?

Consider invented spelling as a key learning step in the continuum towards correct, conventional spelling. To invent a spelling one must be able to identify and sequence phonemes in spoken words. It is a type of self-instruction in phonemic awareness, letter-sound knowledge, and concepts of print.

"Invented spelling is sometimes criticized because it appears that students are learning bad habits by misspelling words, but researchers have confirmed that students grow more quickly in phonemic awareness, phonics, and spelling when they use invented spelling as long as they are also receiving spelling instruction (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). As students learn more about spelling, their invented spellings become more sophisticated to reflect their new knowledge, even if the words are still spelled incorrectly, and increasingly students spell more and more words correctly as they move through the stages of spelling development" (Thompson, G.E. Stages of Spelling Development. http://www.education.com/reference/article/stages-spelling-development/).

How to Teach Beginning Literacy and Writing

Preschool children who are encouraged to express themselves on paper, without feeling too constrained for correct spelling and proper handwriting, have a better understanding that writing has real purpose (Sulzby, 1985). Consider the following points when planning instruction:

- Build the four skills of language learning with activities that promote listening, speaking, reading, and writing.
- Focus on constructing meaning.
- Accept all of your students' attempts at writing. The important thing is for them not to develop the fear of being wrong!
- Expand children’s vocabulary by discussing word meanings.
- Foster independence by using a gradual release of responsibility—I do. We do. You do.
Benefits of Developmental Spelling

The benefits of developmental spelling are many, especially for children who come to school less ready than their peers. For these students, developmental spelling reinforces phonemic awareness and the phonetic (sound-based) relationship between spoken and written words (Clarke, 1989). Teachers can observe students as their understanding of the alphabetic principle evolves through developmental spelling. In addition, research has demonstrated the following:

- Developmental spelling scores in mid-kindergarten predicted mid-first-grade reading scores (Mann, Tobin & Wilson, 1987; Morris & Perney, 1984).
- In another study comparing two groups—invited spellers vs. correct spellers—invited spellers were stronger readers by mid first grade and the lowest achievers had made the greatest gains (Clarke, 1988).
- Invented spelling promotes children’s interest in learning about what words say and how they are spelled (Adams, 1994).

If you haven't considered the value of invented spelling, try it in your own classroom! Click on "Spelling" in Literacy How's Reading Wheel to learn more.

Adapted from the presentation, "Developmental Writing," Laura Raynolds, Ph.D., October 5, 2016.