

### Dissemination

SEN GEST Course, Leicester University,  
6 February 1997.

School Improvement Conference (SIN),  
Leicestershire LEA, 20 February 1997.

INSET in school.

### Further reading

Brierley, M., Hutchinson, P., Topping K., and Walker, C., "Reciprocal peer tutored cued spelling with ten year olds", in *Paired Learning* 5, 1989.

McNeill, C., *Peer Tutoring/A Winning Way for All*, The Centre for Citizenship Studies in Education, University of Leicester, Kingfisher Network Ed. Press, 1993.

Topping, K., *The Peer Tutoring Handbook promoting co-operative learning*, Croom Helm, 1987.

Torbe M., *Teaching and Learning Spelling*, Ward Lock Educational, 1996.

Vernon, P.E., *Graded Word Spelling Test*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1996.

Watkins G. and Hunter-Carsch M., "Prompt spelling: A practical approach to paired spelling", in *Support for Learning*, Vol. 10 No 3, 1995.

## Improving written vocabulary through paired spelling

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### AIM

*To investigate paired spelling as a means of improving written vocabulary.*

### SUMMARY OF FINDINGS FOR THIS CASE STUDY

- ★ Cued spelling in pairs is a procedure that is easily learned and flexible for a wide range of ages.
- ★ It is failure-free as progress is measured against self-target setting.
- ★ It enables pupils to develop less teacher-dependent methods for improving their spelling.
- ★ It can improve pupils' overall spelling at the same time as encouraging them to take risks and attempt to spell difficult words rather than giving up.
- ★ It helps pupils identify their own learning style.
- ★ It promotes co-operative learning and leads to increased confidence.
- ★ It encourages pupils to use more descriptive language, continuing speech and qualifying phrases to aid description in their writing.

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*A research project commissioned by the Teacher Training Agency  
as part of the Teacher Research Grant Scheme 1996/97*

## Cued spelling

Cued spelling is a method to aid the learning of spelling using collaborative cues or prompts, such as rhyme, word association and abbreviation.

Teachers draw up spelling sheets with five columns containing different types of words. The cued spelling procedure involves ten steps and is displayed prominently, as are the different types of cues, so that children can refer to them easily. At the beginning of each week, children check which words on the list they can spell and ask their partner to give them a quick test. Every day from Monday to Thursday each child chooses one word from each column of the spelling sheet and writes it on their diary sheet. They use the ten steps and the cues to learn their five words each day. On Friday, partners review their 20 words from the week with a quick test. If any words are incorrectly spelt they repeat the procedure until they are spelt correctly.

## The research

The first three weeks of the project – Step One – concentrated on confidence building. Each week children were given lists of words, a diary sheet, and an “I can spell” sheet.

In the last three weeks – Step Two – pupils were encouraged to be more independent and to take risks. They were given the same sheets with different words, but had to check the number of words on the sheet that they could already spell. This enabled pupils to target words they found more difficult to spell, work at their own level and include more words of their own choice. Initially, pairs worked their five words a day for 30 minutes, but as the procedure

became more familiar, the time was reduced to 15 minutes a day.

Observations revealed that by the second day most pupils were familiar with the ten steps approach and that by the fourth day all were using the procedure without difficulty.

*“Pupils in the test group were using less teacher-dependent methods to improve spellings.”*

## Pupils’ attitude, independence and learning styles

Before Step One and after Step Two, interviews were held with five pupils from both the test and control groups. Questionnaires were given to the test group after Step Two.

The first interviews showed that children in both groups relied heavily on help from teachers and parents with spelling. When pupils were asked who helped them with their spelling, a standard reply was: “My mum, dad and my teacher helped me.”

When asked the same questions in the later interviews the test group cited adults, peers and self as people who could help them with spellings. For example:

“My friends help me.”

“Everyone helps me.”

“Miss and my partner help me.”

The control group still mentioned adult support only. Pupils in the test group were using less teacher-dependent methods to improve spellings.

The questionnaires from the test group revealed that ten pupils preferred cued spelling, five were non-committal and two preferred to work individually. When asked what they thought of cued spelling in pairs, the replies included:

“I like it because it teaches me lots of different cues.”

“I think cued spelling is great.”

“I think that cued spelling is a good way of learning a new word.”

Other responses were:

“I don’t think it is as good as the old way.”

“I don’t think it is good as splitting the word up.”

Acknowledging that peoples’ learning styles vary and that some children prefer to work alone, cued spelling can still be used and adapted to suit the needs of individual learners.

*“Using cued spelling in pairs allowed learning to take place using visual, auditory and movement senses.”*

## Self-esteem

In order to build confidence, pupils were initially given some words on the list which all pupils could spell easily. This also helped children become confident using the ten steps and varying the spelling cue.

Weekly spelling tests revealed that no pupil scored less than 50% in the first three weeks. Similar scores were seen in the last three week. Because children were more confident, they were prepared to take risks and attempt to spell a difficult word rather than give up.

## Writing/literacy

The post-SATs English tests provide evidence that there was more descriptive language, more continuous speech and more qualifying phrases to aid description in the second piece of writing. One of the children who had not expressed a positive perception of cued spelling had achieved Level Three in his second piece of writing and Level Two in his first.

There was no perceptible decrease in spelling errors in the second piece of writing, but this could be because in the second piece pupils were choosing more complex words. A more detailed analysis of the writing itself would be needed to establish a significant difference. On analysing the pre- and post-SATs writing, it was perceived that the writing had improved. This could be because the post-SATs testing was a second attempt at the task.

## Spelling ages

Pupils were tested at the beginning and end of the programme using Vernon. The spelling ages revealed an average improvement of 0.69 of a year for the test group as compared to 0.566 of a year for the control group. Sixteen out of 18 children in the test group made a minimum improvement of six months, whereas in the control group 15 out of 19 showed a minimum improvement of three months.

The major improvement in the control group’s spelling may be due to the fact that spelling was being targeted in school and unconsciously more emphasis was placed on it by the staff involved.

## Research focus and aims

Previous research into cued spelling has shown that after six weeks’ participation, the average test gain was 0.65 years. (Brierley, Hutchinson, Topping and Walker, 1989). The aim of this research was to:

- ★ improve classroom practice regarding the teaching of spelling at Key Stage 2;
- ★ demonstrate that improved spelling by pupils leads to an increase in vocabulary and improved content of writing;
- ★ show that an increase in attainment gives pupils greater confidence.

Using cued spelling in pairs allowed learning to take place using visual, auditory and movement senses; thus pupils were able to develop a particular learning style.

## Data collection

In this study Vernon was employed because it gave a spelling age for each pupil and an improvement could easily be identified. The SATs English Tests for Writing were used as the criteria for the level descriptors, and this provided a good indication of pupils’ ability. Discussions with Helen Newton, lecturer at Leicester University, made us aware of the work that had been undertaken by Topping (1987) on cued spelling techniques. This approach was adapted to suit the current needs of the school by linking it to pairs of pupils, independence and target setting.

An interview schedule and questionnaire were drawn up. Interviews were conducted with individual children before and after the project; five pupils were selected at random from both the control and test group. The questionnaire contained the same questions as the interview schedule and was given to the remaining pupils in the test group at the end of the project.

The diaries and test sheets were collected on a weekly basis and a summary of pupils’ progress was registered. The Vernon test and SATs English test were administered at the beginning and end of the project and analysed to compare results.

*“By the fourth day all were using the procedure without difficulty.”*