
Research suggests that learning to spell English orthography is a complex, knowledge-based process that evolves developmentally over time (Henderson, 1990; Templeton & Morris, 1999). Average first and second grade students generally move through three stages while learning how to spell, although not at the same pace: *semi-phonetic stage*, the *letter-name stage*, and the *within-word pattern stage*. In any classroom you are likely to find students at different stages of development. For example, since second grade spelling instruction builds on the word knowledge introduced in first grade, it is important for students to build a firm foundation of the former before mastering the latter.

As an experienced second-grade teacher with a MA degree in reading education, Judy Brown realized that many of her second-grade students were not developmentally ready to master the spelling curriculum in second grade and decided to implement a differentiated spelling curriculum in her second-grade classroom. This study is a description of that instruction and a test of the effectiveness of this differentiated curriculum on the spelling achievement of her students.

The researchers (Brown & Morris, 2005) implemented the differentiated spelling instruction by first administering first- and second-grade levels from a developmental spelling inventory (Schlagal, 1992) and using the percentage correct scores as well as the quality of the spelling errors to determine on-grade and below-grade level spelling groups. The researchers determined that 30% correct on the second grade words was the cut-off point where students’ spelling quality deteriorated significantly. Thus, the on-grade level spelling group consisted of 12 students who scored above 30% on the pretest, and the below-grade level spelling group consisted of 7 students who scored 30% or below on the pretest.

Weekly instruction consisted of self-corrected pretest, word sorting, word games, word searches, notebook word-writing, and weekly spelling test. A consistent and similar schedule of instructional activities was followed by both spelling groups; the only thing that differed was the words being studied. The on-grade level spelling group worked out of the list of words in the second-grade spelling book (Houghton Mifflin Spelling and Vocabulary, 1990), and they progressed in that book through unit 36 by the end of the year. The below-grade level spelling group began the year by studying first-grade words (Morris, Tyner, & Perney, 2000), and then after 15 weeks they moved into the same second-grade speller, beginning with unit 7 and finishing with unit 28 by the end of the year.

The researchers administered first-, second-, and third-grade levels from Schlagal’s (1992) developmental spelling inventory at the end of the year for the posttest and analyzed the data for patterns of growth in the two instructional groups. All students preformed well on the first-, second-, and third-grade level words on the posttest, indicating that overall the differentiated spelling instruction was effective for all the students. More importantly, when looking at the below-grade level spelling group’s
scores, it is evident that their end-of-the-year scores approximate the scores of the on-grade level group (on-grade first = 94 compared to below-grade first = 93; on-grade second = 73 compared to below-grade second = 62; on-grade third = 56 compared to below-grade third = 47). This is astonishing given that the groups’ scores differed so much at the beginning of the year.

Results of this study show that low-achieving (below-grade level) spellers can catch up to average-achieving (on-grade level) spellers with appropriate differentiated spelling instruction that is meaningful and embedded in a total language arts program where students read books at appropriate instructional levels and engage in meaningful writing.