Adult spelling strategies

VIRGINIA M. HOLMES & NAOMI MALONE
Department of Psychology, University of Melbourne, Parkville, Vic. 3010, Australia

Abstract. The goal of this study was to investigate how adult English speakers, who are good readers, but who differ in spelling ability, remember word-specific spelling information. In the first experiment, participants learned the spellings of words they had previously misspelled, while “thinking out loud”. The main strategies observed in order of popularity were: letter rehearsal, overpronunciation, comparison of the remembered and the correct spelling, morphological analysis and visualisation. All strategies produced good learning success for the better spellers, but weaker spellers had less success with overpronunciation, comparison and morphological analysis. In a second experiment, when participants were shown their misspelling and the correct spelling, and instructed to use either overpronunciation or comparison to learn the correct spelling, learning success was independent of spelling ability. However, sequential verbal memory ability was associated with greater success in using overpronunciation, and sequential visual memory ability with greater success in using comparison. The findings provide new insight into the types of strategies that advanced learners use spontaneously to memorise arbitrary letter sequences, as well as revealing how effective the strategies are.

Key words: Adult spelling, Spelling strategies, Visual memory, Verbal memory, Think-aloud procedure

Introduction

The most efficient path to spelling mastery in a language with an alphabetic orthography, such as English, is through phonological skill: learning to segment spoken words into individual phonemes and determining how these phonemes relate to appropriate graphemes (Bradley & Bryant, 1983; Byrne & Fielding-Barnsley, 1989; Caravolas, Hulme & Snowling, 2001; Snowling, 1980). However, as learners encounter the same written words repeatedly, they begin to store information about spellings of individual words in lexical memory. Learners’ early orthographic representations may contain only a skeleton of ‘essential’ graphemes, which, while allowing the word to be distinguished from others in the lexicon, will not permit fully precise spelling (Ehri, 1986; Funnell, 1992; Perfetti, 1991, 1997; Share, 1995).
Increasingly, English learners need to store what Frith (1980, 1985) has termed “word-specific” orthographic information about individual words. In some cases, the additional information necessary to reproduce all the letters correctly may be stored in what Ehri (1980, 1986, 1997) has called “orthographic footnotes”. These may include spelling analogies with other words, helpful information about the word’s morphological derivation and explicit mnemonic devices.

Many advanced learners have considerable difficulty remembering word-specific spelling information, especially for long words, whereas others seem to have little trouble. Those who have problems usually have a good grasp of typical phoneme–grapheme correspondences, so that when their spellings are incorrect, they are phonologically appropriate. For example, such poor spellers might misspell commitment as committment or primitive as primative (Burden, 1992; Holmes & Carruthers, 1998; Holmes & Castles, 2001; Holmes & Ng, 1993). Because their orthographic representations, although incomplete, indistinct or even wrong, are adequate to prevent the words being confused with others in the lexicon during reading, these individuals can often read the words they cannot spell. Thus, they can be thought of as “unexpectedly poor” spellers, to use Frith’s (1980) expression.

Our general goal in this study was to investigate how adults who are good readers but who differ in spelling ability remember word-specific spelling information. One way to do this is to try to reveal the strategies they use to learn and remember spellings. In investigations of spelling strategies used by beginning learners, the concern has been largely to show how phoneme–grapheme correspondences develop (Dreyer, Luke & Melican, 1995; Rittle-Johnson & Siegler, 1999; Steffler, Varnhagen, Friesen & Treiman, 1998; Varnhagen, 1995). There seems to have been very little systematic research on the strategies used by older spellers. Our focus was on spelling of words which have no close orthographic neighbours and for which morphological knowledge is either absent, unhelpful or not usually readily available. Thus, we were interested to see what kinds of procedures people would use to commit apparently arbitrary spelling information to memory.

A few clues about possible strategies can be gleaned from previous research. Logan, Olson and Lindsey (1989) provided some qualitative data from querying a group of children who were finalists in a North American National Spelling Bee. The two major strategies reported by the champion spellers were “sheer repetition and concentrating on letter sequence”, and “visual memory”, which they described as “picturing the word ‘in their head’ and then attempting to remember what the word looks like”. Evidence suggests that a variety of types of instruction