

Spelling bees: a tool for improving literacy?

Nathaniel Swain says rote learning of spelling alone is not great for literacy development

It is not often that commercial television aims to celebrate a love for words, spelling, and grammar. But Channel 10's Great Australian Spelling Bee may have done more harm than good for the teaching of spelling in Australian classrooms.

The show was a competition between precocious 8- to 13-year-olds, required to spell increasingly difficult words out-loud in a high-pressure, high-anxiety environment. Inspired by US National Spelling Bee, the difference between winners and losers were spelling words we wouldn't dream of attempting.

How would you go spelling feuilletton, stichomythia, cymotrichous, or appoggiatura? More importantly, do you know the meaning of

these words, and could you use them in a sentence?

Challenging and insightful, or obscure and essentially pointless? In isolation, spelling bees encourage endless memorisation of complex, low-frequency words, and are a distraction from the core elements of good spelling education.

An American tradition

America has a long history of spelling bees, starting in 1925 when a group of newspapers sponsored the competition. Since then, the Scripps National Spelling Bee has held increasingly cut-throat competitions every year.

With ESPN covering the spelling bees for the last two decades, Americans can watch the brightest young spellers every year. During Australia's spelling show, many schools caught the spelling bee hype, with mini spelling bees popping up in many of the classrooms I visited. But was this change for the better?

Promoting the wrong literacy skills

The problem with spelling bees is their emphasis on memorisation. The Scripps National Spelling Bee does involve some vocabulary questions in the earlier rounds, but the focus remains on the

oral spelling of increasingly obscure words. Successful competitors need repetitive and deliberate practice to win. Essentially, the kids have to memorise hundreds, if not thousands of words.



Spelling instruction should also encourage an interest and love of words and their power!

What is really important for spelling instruction is teaching students about word morphology (root words, prefixes, suffixes), etymology (word origins), phonics (spelling patterns), and semantics (word meanings, including multiple meanings). While some competitors do use these aspects of word study to win, the spelling bee does not emphasise this, and often this focus on understanding the history, structure, spelling patterns, and multiple meanings of words is missing in Australian classrooms.

Literacy teaching does involve repetitive practice to master the code, but this is merely a means to an end. Spelling instruction should also encourage an interest and love of words and their power!

In later years, students learn much of their advanced vocabulary from reading and writing experiences. Teachers should also provide explicit instruction in vocabulary for general learning (Tier 2 Words) and particular topics (Tier 3 Words). Crucially, students should always learn words according to their structure, meaning and function, as well as their spelling.

Education is more than memorisation

Just like the repetitive practice needed for



spelling bees, some products claim that their daily “brain exercises” will improve cognitive function. The growing market of brain training games and apps reflects the proliferation of pseudoscience to create and exploit new markets.

Lumosity uses the analogy of physical exercise to explain how practising daily “neuropsychological tasks” can improve your “mental fitness”. In recent years, companies like Lumosity have lost legal battles defending their use of such claims. Some studies do show that repeated practice on brain training will improve performance on those particular tasks. But there is no evidence that this makes changes to brain function in the real world, so what is the point?

Teachers should not drill students to regurgitate rote-learned information, without a clear purpose in mind. Education is a process that involves both the gathering of information, and the exchange and negotiation of meaning. Learning should not be promoted as a form of fitness, because education is not like working out. While repeated practice is important for mastering underlying skills, it is merely a means to an end.

What about kids with learning difficulties?

I would argue that spelling bees can dishearten kids who struggle with spelling. Students with specific learning difficulties, like developmental language disorder and dyslexia, struggle to master the spelling and reading of words at a much more fundamental level. However, if a student's only difficulty is poor spelling, that is hardly a barrier to their academic or professional success. Recent research has shown the potential for technology to compensate for such difficulties. We all use spellcheck on a daily basis to help us spell low frequency words.

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Spend more time reading and writing stories

In my opinion, The Great Australian Spelling Bee attempted to make literacy education entertaining, by missing the point of it altogether. The purpose of

literacy is to masterfully use the code to create and share meaning, not to endlessly memorise spellings or facts ad nauseum. Mindlessly studying for spelling bees (without exploring the richness of word meanings and history) wastes the opportunity to make spelling instruction effective and meaningful. After all, what is the point of spelling the word “insouciant” correctly, if I don't know what it means and thus can't use it to express my indifference to spelling bees?

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