

## Developing Highly Effective Learning through Action Research 2021-22

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### Action Research question/Focus...

**How can we improve students' spelling ability and confidence using 'That Spelling Thing'?**

HCC6 Focus Area – Feedback/Modelling

Undeniably, reading fluency and spelling are intrinsically linked and 'once a child's spelling skills have improved, so too will their reading fluency because they will be able to recognise more words without hesitation' (Spangenberg, 2008). However, the latter is often overlooked. Prompted by a conversation at a Year 7 Parents evening, where it became apparent that being 'good at English' was very much equated (by both parent and child) to 'being good at spelling', we realised that the English SDP has done little to address this aside from the occasional spattering of literacy marking symbols on final assessments.

### Why trial an alternative approach to spelling?

- 2019 data already showed that 1 in 4 students left primary school unable to read fluently, rising to 2 in 5 disadvantaged students. Covid implications and loss of learning will have only worsened current outcomes.
- 'When a child's spelling ability falls below that of same-age peers, it can undermine his or her confidence and result in poor performance at school. They can be reluctant to participate in group activities and are at risk of suffering from low self-esteem.' (Lennox Morrison, BBC Work Life, 2017)
- 'Common spelling strategies like 'Look/Cover/Write/Check' rely on memorising a string of individual letters... this method favours the highly motivated and doesn't provide enough support for those students who need more structure to remember how to spell the thousands of words required to write fluently' (Millar, 2018)
- 'Saying that accurate spelling isn't important as long as an examiner can get the gist of the written work seems very short-sighted as, beyond school and exams, the world of work also has standards for spelling. This means there's an element of social justice in making sure everyone, regardless of natural ability and home support, can spell both inside and outside the classroom.' (Millar, 2018)

Because 'a successful spelling and vocabulary program incorporates both explicit teaching and investigative activities' (Bush, 2008), I decided to explore the 'That Spelling Thing' programme – the offspring of the well-established 'That Reading Thing' intervention which HCC will be implementing from September 2022. TST is an evidence-based method using the 'bones of English' - phonics and morphology - to support memory, ensure accuracy and increase vocabulary. It involves: checking everyone can say and use the word, starting with the everyday root, asking how many syllables are in the word and tapping these out on extended fingers, writing a grapheme for each sound, saying the words or syllables as you write (initially 'building the word' with puzzle pieces, asking (not telling) which bits need extra concentration and then 'bundling' to aid memory and extend vocabulary.

### Evidence Base...

A pre-trial student voice panel made it acutely aware that students care about spelling: 'If you can't spell the language, you can't understand it either', 'not being able to spell knocks my confidence and makes me anxious', 'my writing isn't as exciting as I want it to be because I can't spell the words I want to use, so I don't use them' and 'not being able to spell is infuriating and embarrassing; misspelling things all the time gives me low self-esteem'. I applied the TST method in a stand-alone lesson with two Year 7 classes, both containing students with spelling ages ranging from below 5 years old to 17+ years old. A spelling test of 5 difficult words was conducted at the start of the lesson, the method modelled and practised, and then the test was repeated at the end.

### Outcomes of my action research project...

No students in Group 1 scored full marks on test 1 but 16 of them (61% of the class) scored 5/5 on test 2 after applying the TST method. In Group 2, 45% of students achieved full marks on test 2 (after only 1 student having done so previously). The Teaching Assistant present also participated, improving his score from 2 to 5, which the class applauded in celebration. Combining results from the pupil survey completed afterwards, approximately 85% of students said they enjoyed taking part and found the method helpful, 79% said they preferred it to traditional methods such as 'Look/Cover/Write/Check', 11% increased their score on test 2 by 4 points out of 5 and 79% said they would like to use this method in other subjects.

### What have you learnt from doing this action research project?

Students want to spell more accurately across all subject disciplines. A post-trial student voice panel suggested 'other subject teachers say spelling doesn't matter but it does.' One child asserted 'teachers in other subjects *should* pick up our spelling errors because how else will we get it right when it matters?' The majority of students described the TST method (involving 'less guessing until we got it right') as 'fun and interactive' and felt that 'breaking down the syllables bit by bit really helped'; 'it felt good to be able to spell words I didn't think I could spell!' Though limited in scope, the trial has demonstrated how spelling needs to be part of a classroom culture with oracy at its foundation; 'it becomes a conversation rather than a lesson – one that can be initiated by students as well as teachers' (thatsspellingthing.com). Students would definitely welcome the TST approach, which would have more impact if embedded into the curriculum across subjects and used little and often, rather than as stand-alone lessons. Spellings of specific tier 2 and 3 words could be addressed via quick starters, building teachers' literacy skills as well. The weakest student spellers would, however, definitely require the intensive, one-to-one 'That Reading Thing' intervention alongside these whole-class spelling episodes for them to access the drills and make meaningful progress.