

# **Cued Spelling: A powerful technique for parent and peer tutoring**

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Word Filename: Cued Spelling RT

Figure 1 attached as separate Word file: CS Flowchart

Figure 2 attached as separate Word file: CS Diary

Appendix 1 attached as a separate Word file: CS Mnemonic Strategies

## **Footnote**

Cued Spelling Resources are available at  
<http://www.dundee.ac.uk/psychology/TRW/>

The Paired Reading and Paired Learning Bulletins are available on microfiche from ERIC (1985 ED285124, 1986 ED285125, 1987 ED285126, 1988 ED298429, 1989 ED313656).

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Spelling is a curriculum area which is neglected and controversial at the same time. Few teachers enjoy teaching spelling and fewer children enjoy learning it. The range of strategies, materials and methods available to teachers is probably smaller and less varied than in any other basic skills area. Yet government and employers keep asserting the importance they attach to spelling.

There is less than full agreement about how specific spelling instruction should be integrated within the whole language approach. From a visual orientation, work on word patterns and word clusters is often popular - but the skills may not be retained and generalised to free writing. For other teachers, phonic strategies are the main method of choice - yet less than half of the words in the English language are phonically regular. With older children, spelling rules come more into play - but the complexity of our language means a vast number of rules and exceptions need to be remembered and applied.

Just as with learning to read, there are many different pathways to becoming a competent speller. Turner and Quinn (1986) found that younger children tended to rely on auditory information irrespective of the nature of the word, while for older children visual information produced better results. They concluded: "the learner must draw on several strategies ... no single strategy can be used to overcome all irregularities in written English".

As with reading, over-teaching in any specific narrow instructional channel can do more harm than good - particularly where the type of instruction does not correspond to the child's strongest sensory modality and/or learning style. Teachers still sometimes try to teach all children to spell in the way they themselves spell successfully - but of course this is not the best way for all (or perhaps even many) of the children. However, most teachers have no time to analyse the individual spelling profile of every child in the class and prescribe and manage a wide range of individual spelling programmes.

One possible solution is to help children to manage their own learning. As one of the strands in your spelling instruction programme you can adopt methods which free the children to follow their own favoured pathways, yet within a strongly supportive general framework. You can do this in an interactive way which involves the children in evaluating for themselves the success of their own strategies. This is what Cued Spelling is all about.

Cued Spelling is essentially a technique for use by non-teachers, which is different from, but complementary to, regular teacher-directed classroom instruction in spelling. The method is set in the context of research and thinking on spelling.

## Research Background

Teaching styles which encourage children to work out the learning strategies which are most effective for themselves are increasingly favoured (e.g. Pressley, 1990; Scheid, 1993). Scruggs and his co-workers have carried out a series of experiments on "mnemonic strategies" (e.g. Scruggs and Laufenberg, 1986) which show the importance of enhancing recall by representations meaningful to the individual. These workers found such strategies more effective in terms of immediate and delayed recall of spellings than a direct instruction spelling programme (Veit, et al., 1986). In a similar vein, Wong (1986) developed a successful self-monitoring strategy for children, while emphasising that they also needed to be taught specific information about words.

Coupled with these trends is the growth in organising teaching and learning in co-operative, interactive ways (e.g. Topping, 1988; Slavin, 1990). However, this is not easy in the area of spelling, which is still sometimes taught in a very old-fashioned way even in classrooms where the rest of the curriculum is delivered very differently.

Intensive rote learning of high-frequency commonly mis-spelt words is now out of favour. Much more prominence is currently given to relating instruction to developmental stages in children's spelling errors, identifying existing levels of knowledge and building instructional sequences controlling the increasing complexity of the task (Read, 1975; Henderson & Beers, 1980; Gentry, 1982; Cummings, 1988; Henderson, 1990; Templeton & Bear, 1992). Various spelling error analysis methods have been devised to help teachers in this regard (e.g. Gable, et al., 1988; Schlagel, 1989; Hepburn, 1991). However, hard-pressed teachers sometimes resort to the highly notional "developmental sequences" found in basal spelling series. In any case, overall developmental tendencies do not relate directly to each individual spelling by each individual student.

This has led to approaches designed to extend children's transferable spelling skills via learning to spell words chosen by the child as of high interest as well as utility. Research suggests that where children select their own spelling words, the self-selected words are usually longer and more complex than those chosen by the teacher, but are retained to at least the same degree (e.g. Michael, 1986). Similarly, Gettinger (1985) found that children with specific spelling problems made better progress when they were actively involved in a learning strategy than when similar routines were imposed by teachers.

Schunk (1987) also stressed the importance for motivation of students' being able to set their own learning goals. In the United Kingdom, Moseley (1987) reported another teaching approach involving child self-selection of spelling words. He noted that many existing spelling programmes suffered from three main weaknesses: (a) a lack of generalisation of skills from mere study of spelling patterns, (b) introduction of skills in teaching sequences based on opinion and "average" developmental sequences rather than analyses of children's actual errors, and (c) a lack of flexibility, so students found little interest or relevance in the tasks presented. Individualised self-managed learning of spelling skills could help to resolve these problems.

Cued Spelling is a user-friendly and durable procedure designed to do exactly this, for use in pairs. The pairs might be parent and child working at home, or two children working together in school in a peer tutoring format. In the latter case, the children

can be of the same age and spelling competence, or different in these respects. Likewise, they may remain in role as tutor and tutee, or roles may reverse at intervals. Cued Spelling is ideal for whole-class peer tutoring.

### **The Cued Spelling Technique**

The basic structure of the technique comprises 10 Steps, 4 Points to Remember and 2 Reviews, as illustrated in Figure 1.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

The 10 Steps and 4 Points apply to every individual target word worked upon by the pair, while the 'Speed Review' covers all target words for a particular session and the 'Mastery Review' covers all the target words for one week or a longer period if desired.

The child (tutee) chooses high interest target words (Step 1). These words may be "collected" by the student from a variety of curricular areas, or selected by the student from a pool prescribed by the teacher - perhaps of clusters or groupings allied to developmental spelling stages or of high frequency common error words or both. The pair check the spelling of the word, put a master version in their Cued Spelling Diary and usually also add it to the top of a piece of paper on which subsequent attempts will be made (Step 2). The pair then read the word out loud together. Then the tutee reads the word aloud alone, ensuring that the word can be articulated properly (Step 3).

The tutee then chooses Cues (prompts or reminders) to enable him or her to remember the written structure of the word (Step 4). These Cues may be phonic sounds, letter names, syllables or other fragments or 'chunks' of words. Or they may be quite idiosyncratic - some cues which tutees find humorous and therefore memorable can seem quite eccentric to the tutor or the class teacher! Tutees are encouraged to consider and choose Cues which fit well with their own cognitive structures, i.e. make sense and are memorable to them. Thus, although a parent or peer tutor might make suggestions or stimulate imagination, the decision on Cueing rests wholly with the child. The nature of the chosen Cues is of course sometimes likely to reflect recent class spelling instruction - but if it does not, so be it. A handout for pairs elaborating Cueing methods is reproduced in Appendix 1.

Once Cues are decided upon, the pair say the Cues out loud simultaneously (Step 5). The tutee then says the Cues out loud while the tutor writes the word down on scrap paper to this 'dictation'(Step 6). Thus the tutee is provided with a demonstration or model of the required behaviour. At Step 7, the tutor says the Cues out loud while the tutee writes the word down. At Step 8, the tutee says the Cues and writes the word simultaneously.

At Step 9, the tutor has the tutee write the word as fast as possible (the tutee may or may not decide to recite the Cues out loud at this Step, but may well recite them sub-vocally). At Step 10, the tutee again reads the word out loud as a reminder of the meaningful context in which the target word hopefully has remained embedded.

The 4 Points cover aspects of the technique relevant to its practical application. At every attempt at writing a target word, the tutor should ensure previous attempts on

the work paper are covered up, to avoid the possibility of direct copying. Every time there is a written attempt on a target word, the tutee checks the attempt and the tutor only intervenes if the tutee proves unable to check his or her own attempt accurately. (The importance of self-correction has been underlined by many educators, e.g. Miller 1987).

If tutees have written a word incorrectly, they should cross it out vigorously. When an attempt on a word is incorrect, the correction procedure is merely that the pair returns to redo the previous Step. Tutors should praise at various junctures which are specified quite clearly. These details of the nature of praise and the criteria for its application are intended to promote higher frequency and regularity of praise, as well as more effective use of it.

At the end of each tutoring session, there is a 'Speed Review'. The tutor dictates all the target words for that session in random order and the tutee has to write them as fast and accurately as possible. The tutee then self-checks all the words with the 'master version' in the Cued Spelling Diary. Target words which are incorrect at Speed Review must have the 10 Steps applied again, perhaps with the choice of different Cues. Tutee evaluation of the effectiveness of the Cues chosen is thus automatic. In fact, tutees make only a small proportion of errors at Speed Review and the requirement to re-apply the 10 Steps is not as onerous as it sounds.

At the end of each week, a 'Mastery Review' is conducted. The tutee must write all the target words for the whole week as fast and accurately as possible from dictation in random order. At Mastery Review it is left to the pair to negotiate for themselves what they wish to do about errors. Many pairs choose to include failed words in the next week's target words.

While the method may seem complex on first reading, seven-year-old children have been successfully trained in its use in about one hour. The technique has been designed and structured to be highly interactive. In operation it seems democratic rather than didactic. It provides a framework to "scaffold" self-managed learning.

Cued Spelling should not of course be used in isolation - it is intended to be merely one possible strand in a multi-faceted programme of spelling instruction. Its flexibility allows teachers to link it closely with other strands of the spelling programme. It does have advantages not necessarily shared by other forms of instruction.

### **Advantages**

Cued Spelling contains little that is new. It incorporates well-known methods and aspects of accepted "good practice". The assembly is as important as the components. It was designed as a coherent package, structured and flexible at the same time.

The technique is "failure-free", to eliminate student anxiety and promote self-confidence. Swift error correction and support procedures are therefore inbuilt. The technique is also very flexible, useful to students of a wide range of age and ability with word sets of infinite variety and complexity.

Students are encouraged to self-select interesting and motivating individualised material - some both want and need to master quite specialised vocabulary in the

first instance. Additionally, students largely control the procedure, deciding themselves about the degree of support they require at any moment.

Modelling is included to give students a perfect example of correct performance which they can copy. Being left to work everything out alone often results in a high error rate, over-frequent correction and considerable faulty learning.

Praise is essential, for social reinforcement of correct responses but also to promote tutor behaviour incompatible with damaging criticism. The strong emphasis on understanding is essential for the task to be purposeful for the tutee.

The technique promotes fluency, eliminating stopping and starting and pondering at length about particular words. Thus the steps in the technique are very small incremental stages (i.e. be finely task-analysed). A Pair should be able to work through the steps very quickly on easy words, but this should not become boring and frustrating on the longest words.

Students have individual attention and immediate feedback from their tutors, unlikely to be otherwise obtainable. With improved support, motivation and concentration, students work on a larger number of words than in more traditional approaches, increasing the amount of practice.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, the technique is clear, straightforward and enjoyable. Both tutor and tutee are easily trained in its use. Neither one of the Pair subsequently becomes confused, anxious or bad-tempered about their spelling work together.

Many of these advantages are in line with research on self-efficacy and motivated learning (e.g. Schunk, 1987). Regularity and frequency of success is as important as amount of success. Students with difficulties may over-attribute failure to their own inadequacy rather than to deficiencies in teaching. Students need to see that success is the result of their own efforts rather than an excess of support or random chance. Verbalisation by the student has been shown to facilitate strategic encoding and retention in learning and to promote systematic working. Regularity, frequency and immediacy of feedback are particularly important when students are faced with very complex tasks or handicapped by learning disabilities.

There is a wide gulf between learning to write a word accurately during rote learning or a tutoring session and being able to write it at a different time in a totally different context (e.g. during some creative free writing). The emphasis in Cued Spelling on speeded performance is drawn from the concept of 'fluency' in Precision Teaching, to promote generalisation to other contexts and times.

Naturally, the method is not just intended to help children remember lists of words. As students create their own Cues they must think about the auditory and visual structure of the word. It may well be this self-directed interaction rather than the Cue itself which improves retention of the word. With experience and by making connections with taught spelling knowledge, students more readily perceive consistencies in word structures.

Cued Spelling thus provides a framework within which the student can "make sense of spelling" - but make their own sense of it. Spelling is of course conceptual as well

as perceptual, and students need to form predictive concepts about how words work. As the interactive procedures of Cued Spelling involve them in comparing and contrasting, they may organise and integrate these concepts for themselves more effectively.

## **Effectiveness**

The initial reports on Cued Spelling were of a descriptive nature. Emerson (1988) used the technique with four parents who tutored their own children at home. Scoble (1988) described how an Adult Literacy student was tutored by his wife and subsequently reported on the progress of fourteen similar pairs (Scoble, 1989). All three reports noted excellent results at Mastery Review. Harrison (1989) described the extension of the method to peer tutoring between Adult Literacy students in a class situation.

Subsequent research looked increasingly at whether Cued Spelling resulted in generalised improvements in spelling beyond the specific words studied, i.e. whether students showed evidence of developing more effective predictive concepts about how English spelling was structured.

The most popular application of Cued Spelling became peer tutoring. Oxley & Topping (1990) described how 8 seven- and eight-year-old pupils were tutored by 8 nine-year-old pupils in the same class in a small rural school. Striking social benefits were noted and the children spontaneously generalised peer tutoring to other curricular areas. Subjective feedback from both tutors and tutees was very positive and the self-concept as a speller (Vincent & Claydon, 1981) of both tutees and tutors showed a marked positive shift compared to that of non-participant children. Results on norm-referenced tests of spelling (Young, 1976, Vincent & Claydon, 1981) were equivocal, since although the scores of both tutees and tutors were strikingly improved at post-test, so were those of non-participant children in the same class.

Peer tutored Cued Spelling in a class-wide, same-age, same-ability reciprocal tutoring format was reported by Brierley, Hutchinson, Topping and Walker (1989). In all 75 children aged 9-10 years in three classes participated. Tutor and tutee roles changed each week. All the children were trained in a single group meeting. Mastery Review scores averaged 80% and the average norm-referenced test gain (Daniels and Diack, 1979) was 0.65 years of spelling age in six weeks. Subjective feedback from the children was very positive. Improved spelling self-concept was reported on a questionnaire by 84% of the children.

A study of parent tutored Cued Spelling with 8-year-old mixed ability children was carried out by France, Topping & Revell (1993). On test (Daniels and Diack, 1979) the 22 Cued Spellers gained at 2.8 times the rate of a comparison group of more able spellers. The children felt Cued Spelling was easy to learn to do and that it improved their spelling.

To control for the possible effects of extra attention and time on task, Watt and Topping (1993) compared Cued Spelling with "traditional spelling homework" (involving equal tutor attention and equal time on spelling tasks). They also compared parent and peer tutored Cued Spelling and assessed the generalisation of Cued Spelling effects into continuous free writing. On test (Vernon, 1977), Cued Spellers gained over 2 months of spelling age per calendar month, while the

comparison group gained only half a month. Mastery Review scores averaged 93% correct. Parent and peer tutoring seemed equally effective. Improved spelling self-concept was reported on a questionnaire by 85% of the Cued Spellers and 91% reported a higher rate of self-correction. Better self-correction was also reported by 88% of the parents and 3 out of 4 class teachers. In samples of writing collected before and after the project, the average number of spelling errors per page reduced from 8.5 to 4.6 for the Cued Spellers and from 3.7 to 2.1 for the comparison children. The C.S. group averaged 1.7 specific improvements in free writing per child while the comparison group averaged 1.2.

## Organisation

- Training is essential and tutors and tutees are trained together in their pairs.
- Give pairs a '10 Steps' chart (see Figure 1) to refer to (you may also wish to use overheads).
- Give Cued Spelling Diaries (Figure 2) to each pair, each page including space to write the master version of up to 10 words on all days of the week, boxes to record daily Speed Review and weekly Mastery Review scores and spaces for comments from tutor (daily) and teacher (weekly).

### INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

- Give a talk on the method and also a demonstration, preferably on video for ease of viewing in a group.
- Use a chalkboard and solicit from the group different words and different cueing strategies for each word. Make the point that there are many different cueing strategies and no "right" ones, only those effective and ineffective for the individual concerned. Relate this to recent classroom instruction in spelling.
- Have pairs practise directly with the tutee's own words (chosen before the meeting), using the paper, pencils and dictionaries you have provided.
- Provide individualised feedback and further coaching as necessary.
- Ask the pair to use the technique on about five words per day (minimum time 15 minutes) for 3 days per week for the next 6 weeks. Let them do more if they like!
- Encourage tutees to choose words from their school spelling books, graded free writing, relevant project work, and displays of common problem words or groups of words selected as developmentally appropriate by the teacher. Have them collect these (in a CS "collecting book") so they always have a pool of suitable words from which to choose.
- Keep a watch on the words chosen, since some tutees might choose words they already know, while others may choose some extremely difficult words of very doubtful long-term utility. Neither will do much to help the development of generalised understanding about the structure of words. A very simple initial rule can be "3 for everyday use and 2 just for fun".



- If you use Cued Spelling in a reciprocal peer tutoring format where both members of the pair are of equal spelling ability make sure that the master version of the word is looked up in the dictionary and copied correctly into the CS Diary. (In reciprocal tutoring, the fact that everyone gets to be a tutor is good for the self-esteem of both members of the pair. Of course, both end up learning their partner's words as well as their own.)
- You might have a further class session on "Cueing", elaborating different approaches (see Appendix 1). Encourage comparing and contrasting to help children perceive, relate and map regularities.
- Vet any creative adaptations a pair start making to the method very carefully for effectiveness and mutual acceptability.
- Partners can be swapped at a later stage to increase novelty and widen the social effects of the tutoring.
- Remember Cued Spelling makes you more of a teacher - a co-ordinator of effective learning experiences in and out of school. The organisation of a project, running a training session and carefully monitoring the activities involved all demand sophisticated professional skills.
- Remember Cued Spelling can save you time. Close teacher observation during peer tutored Cued Spelling can prove invaluable for assessment purposes.

## **Discussion**

Teachers sometimes have worries about the Cued Spelling method before trying it out. They may wonder if the method promotes "mere memorization" or supports spelling exclusively by "Cues". In practice, the children end up remembering the words but not usually the Cues. As they become more used to the method, their Cues become more systematic and reflective of the regularities in our language as well as their own favoured learning style. Their powers of prediction of regularities in new words are certainly increased. The evaluation results showing generalisation of improved spelling capability to the completely new words in norm-referenced spelling tests are a clear indication of that.

Children don't have any worries about Cued Spelling before they try it out. They are always receptive to something new. After they have tried it, if they complain at all, they will voice two main difficulties. One is finding words and the other is finding Cues. Promoting the "collection" of words is important. If the teacher has chosen to set a ceiling of difficulty on words chosen, the most competent Pairs may soon feel they can spell everything below that ceiling and frustration can set in. All pairs will have difficulty in finding effective and interesting Cues for some words. Occasional whole-class sessions on Cueing can be held, for brainstorming good Cues for such words and relating Cueing to spelling instruction in school about the properties of words. A "good" Cue is one which is effective in scaffolding retention of the chosen word in the long term and helps the tutee develop predictive concepts about regularities in the English language. This is not the same as "how teacher would remember it".

Learning to spell can be dreary, mechanical and demotivating. But it need not be. Spelling can also be absorbed in a learner-managed, interactive, sociable way which is fun. You can teach spelling by providing a high degree of supportive surface structure for students within which they generate self-directed individualised learning. Cued Spelling is such a method. This frees them to follow their own favoured pathways and evaluate the success or otherwise of their meta-cognitive strategies on a word by word basis. Try it - the children will like it.

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