

MAKING MEANING IN READING AND SPELLING

Gaining meaning is the goal of both reading and spelling. Ultimately being able to create meaning from what we read depends on how quickly and efficiently we recognize the printed words on the page. To make sense of these words we also rely on our underlying language skills, on rich vocabulary knowledge and our ability to 'tap into' our understandings of the world around us. When learning to spell, an understanding of the relationship between meaning and spelling provides us with a reliable and strong foundation for written English.

Reading for Meaning

Reading for meaning is all important. We must create opportunities as well as reasons for children to read for meaning, even when the text is simple or the child's reading is limited to a few words. A wonderful example of how this can be achieved is presented in the delightful book for young children *Cat In, Dog Out*. Here simple text (only the four words of the title are used) is supported by appealing illustrations, enabling children to develop a sense of mastery over the text and at the same time motivating them to go on learning. For a young child, "reading" the labels on the drawers in order to put the clothes away in the right place, or understanding the handwritten note left on the fridge door telling what time mum will be home for dinner, are early examples of how the ability to read for meaning is both useful and empowering.

As a young child learns to read, he or she will soon confront unfamiliar words. In this situation the teacher will often encourage the child to use a number of 'Reading Cues' saying such things as "Does this sentence make sense?" or "Read to the end of the sentence and see what might fit in." or "Is that the way we say it in English." These "reading cues" are in fact special language/thinking skills which involve awareness of various aspects of language such as sentence structure, correct grammar and alternative word meanings. As skilled readers we integrate the use of these cues as required and do so largely unconsciously. Unfortunately we also tend to take them for granted.

Knowing how and when to use these 'Reading Cues' is not really such a simple task for a young reader. Children will need plenty of practice as this kind of meta- language task depends on experience, explicit teaching and the maturation of the child's thinking skills. It is also important that this practice takes place in conjunction with activities to build up decoding skills. For example, in the sentence *I can run and h_ _*. The child will be better able to fill in the gap with the word *hop* if they also have strong sound-letter knowledge.

Reading Comprehension Questions

It is a common classroom activity to check that the passage has been understood by asking students a variety of questions after they have finished reading a passage. Some of these

questions will target the recall of factual details from the passage and others will require piecing together information or reading 'between the lines', to capture the intended but inferred meaning. Sometimes however adults confuse this testing of reading comprehension with the teaching of reading comprehension. They are not one and the same and as a consequence the teaching of reading comprehension strategies is sometimes neglected.

Parents and teachers play an important role in showing students a range of strategies for making meaning, for example :

- how to find the information
- how to scan the headings and look for key words
- which parts of the text provided the clues to meaning
- which words might have a specific meaning in this context
- how to engage in some "self questioning" prior to, during and after the reading activity.

Parents can also play a part in assisting the child to make meaning. During story times stop at various times in the oral reading and model a 'Think Aloud' strategy, sharing with the child your own thoughts and strategies about what you think is happening and encouraging your child to join in with their own comments.

Vocabulary

Vocabulary knowledge is also a major contributor to Making Meaning. Research has consistently shown a strong link between receptive vocabulary and reading comprehension in the early years of schooling. A student with a rich understanding of word meanings and an extensive network of word associations and links to other concepts can draw on this underlying knowledge when making sense of reading. As many words in the English language have multiple meanings, good readers must have the flexibility to swap if their first understanding of a word takes them down wrong track. For example - I will go *back*. I want you to *back* up the driveway. Will you *back* me up. As many sentences can not be interpreted literally a student will need to ask "What could the words mean in this context?"

Making meaning in spelling

English is an alphabetic language. That is, the letters in the written form of English match up with the sounds of the spoken form. However many people are quick to "criticize" written English, saying that its spelling is overwhelmingly confusing and citing irregularities such as the different sounds made by the letters *ough* in the words *rough*, *through*, *bought*, and *dough*. So when we teach young children to read and spell it is important that we all understand the nature of the language in a more comprehensive way.

There are **three areas** that help us to understand the "**regularity**" of written English. Firstly, English is an Alphabetic language. Understanding the relationship between sounds and letters is crucial to the development of early decoding skills and hence to reading

comprehension. In previous Newsletters we have addressed some of the ways to build positive literacy experiences so that children develop good **Phonological Awareness** skills (Newsletter 21) and learn strong and reliable **sound-letter links** (Newsletter 22). In Newsletters 9 and 15 we looked at the second aspect of regularity - that is the ability to recognize and use the **rime patterns of English orthography**. In this article about Making Meaning we need to examine the third area of 'regularity' in written English - the relationship between spelling and meaning.

Looking more closely at words and how they show meaning

Morphemes are the building blocks of vocabulary. They are also the smallest pieces of English that have meaning. **Free morphemes** are whole words such as *man, walk, bird* or *play* which can stand alone in meaning. Words can also be joined together with other morphemes to change the meaning - *mankind, birdcage, and playback*.

Bound morphemes such as *s, ed, ing, er* mean nothing by themselves but can be used with words (morphemes) such as *play* to change the meaning of the word - *plays, played, playing, player, playful*.

When we use morphemes we can change the meaning category, such as noun, adverb, verb, adjective. For example adding the morpheme *ment* changes the verb *amuse* to a noun *amusement*.

What do these words have in common?

signal, signature, signs, significance, signify, signatory, insignificant, signet

If we look at these words closely we find that not only do they share in part, the same spelling pattern, but they are all related in meaning from the base word *sign*.

Shane Templeton has written a lot about this spelling - meaning connection. He explains that words that are related in meaning are often related in spelling as well, despite changes in the pronunciation. For example *define, definition*. These words share the common spelling *defin* - and this provides a clue about the correct spelling of the longer word *definition*.

Without such knowledge we may be tempted to spell it as we say it - *defanition*.

Understanding this relationship between meaning and spelling is an enormous advantage when we encounter unfamiliar words in reading and offers students an important key for discovering how to spell hundreds of new words built from words that they already know.

Origins of words

The English language employs an enormous array of words. Diana Hanbury King who has worked with dyslexic students since 1950, encourages teachers to learn more about the origins of English so that they can teach their students to unlock a regularity not only of sounds and letters but also of meaning. She describes the rich origins of English in Anglo-Saxon/Germanic, Latin and Greek languages. In addition, English has been enriched by the borrowing of many words from French and Italian vocabulary.

- Anglo-Saxon words are usually short with irregular spelling. They commonly have more than one meaning and often appear in English idioms. For example *fire*: She got all *fired* up about the issue.
- Anglo-Saxon words make up most of the common sight words but interestingly in total account for less than 1% of English vocabulary.
- Latin and Greek words are more phonetically regular. This regularity goes beyond a one to one match between sounds and letters - into the realm of prefixes, suffixes and the meaning of the root word.
- For example, look how these prefixes are used in the following words.

trans - meaning *across*

- *transparent*
- *transplant*
- *transport*
- *translate*

pre - meaning *before*

- prepare*
- preheat*
- preview*
- prehistoric*

The links between oral language and literacy learning may appear to be fundamental and obvious. However the complexity of the process of learning to read and spell is very easy to underestimate. It is important to ensure that children acquire the necessary skills to equip them to become independent readers and writers. Helping students appreciate **the use of meaning in reading and writing** makes English seem more straightforward and interesting and less "crazy".

Further reading:

Hanbury King, D. 2000. **English Isn't Crazy!** The elements of our language and how to teach them. York Press.

Rubenstein, Gillian & James, Ann. **Dog In, Cat Out.** (i991). Omnibus Books, Norwood, South Australia

Templeton, S. **Spelling. Logical, Learnable - and Critical.** The ASHA Leader Feb.19, 2002.