

## The Role of Spelling in Vocabulary Instruction

By Linda Farrell, Michael Hunter, Tina Osenga  
Founding Partners, Readsters

The research article reviewed in this newsletter is “Spellings of Words: A Neglected Facilitator of Vocabulary Learning” by Linnea C. Ehri & Julie Rosenthal. This article focuses on an often ignored, yet important, aspect of vocabulary instruction: the inclusion of a word’s spelling. In our workshops, we have shared Ehri & Rosenthal’s research and received positive responses from teachers.

In our work, we show teachers how to include the relationship between a word’s spelling and pronunciation when introducing students to a new word. Teachers report that, indeed, this practice does increase students’ retention of both the word’s pronunciation and meaning. Perhaps the most gratifying response we got was from a high school physics teacher. He reported that his students’ retention of vocabulary words improved noticeably after he attended one of our workshops. He attributed the improvement to changing his teaching to include showing a vocabulary word’s spelling, relating it to the word’s pronunciation, making sure that all students pronounce the word at least eight times, and creating student-friendly definitions with the class. The highlighted research article supports the notion that reviewing a word’s spelling helps students retain the word’s pronunciation and meaning over time.

It is clear that learning vocabulary, especially academic vocabulary, is essential to reading ability and success in school. Ehri & Rosenthal make the point that the essence of teaching vocabulary is currently considered to be a process of associating the meaning and pronunciation of words in a student’s memory. However, vocabulary researchers have not paid much attention to what spelling might add to learning new vocabulary. Unfortunately, this lack of research impacts classroom practice. Teachers may not think to include a review of the word’s spelling during vocabulary instruction.

Ehri & Rosenthal provide evidence that seeing the spelling of a vocabulary word enhances the student’s memory of the word’s pronunciation and meaning. They examine studies of students in grades 1 through 4. The authors also conducted their own studies with 2<sup>nd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> graders. The findings are that when a word’s spelling is connected to its pronunciation and meaning a student’s ability to remember the word’s meaning is enhanced.

Not surprisingly, students who are stronger readers benefit more than poorer readers from seeing spellings when learning new vocabulary words. Ehri & Rosenthal speculate that this may be the case because stronger readers have better letter-sound knowledge and can more easily relate larger syllabic units to pronunciation. This gives stronger readers an advantage when forming connections in memory between a multi-syllabic word’s spelling, pronunciation, and meaning.

One other item of interest from the article is an explanation of the value of exposure to spellings of words for ELL students. Many English phonemes are not in the ELL student's native language. Relating a spoken word to its spelling can help to clarify the pronunciation. This clarification can provide more precise memories of a word's pronunciation than if the word is heard without seeing its spelling.

Teachers in all content areas would be wise to consider these findings, especially as students encounter subject-specific vocabulary. Learning the spellings of words will result in improved retention of a word's pronunciation and meaning for many students. Try this simple way to add more power to your vocabulary instruction: guide students to relate a new word's pronunciation to its spelling.

## References

Ehri, L. and Rosenthal, J. (2007). Spellings of words: A neglected facilitator of vocabulary learning. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 39(4), 389–409.