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BRIEF REPORTS AND SUMMARIES

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Do We Need to Teach Spelling? The Relationship Between Spelling and Voluntary Reading Among Community College ESL Students

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■ It has been suggested that reading contributes to spelling competence (Ehri, 1986; Krashen, 1985; Smith, 1982b; see also Goodman, Smith, Meredith, & Goodman, 1987). Experimental studies indicate that readers can improve their spelling by exposure to words in texts (Gilbert, 1934, 1935). In addition, consistent correlations have been found between performance on tests of reading comprehension and tests of spelling ability (Hammill & McNutt, 1980). Although this relationship can be interpreted as showing the relevance of spelling ability to reading, it is also consistent with the hypothesis that reading experience causes improvement in both reading and spelling ability.

The three studies described here were an attempt to determine whether a relationship exists between spelling competence and voluntary reading for ESL students at the community college level. If such a relationship could be demonstrated, it would provide additional support for the hypothesis that reading contributes to spelling ability.

METHOD

Three separate studies were conducted. The second study was done to see whether the results of the first study would hold for different test words. The third was done to determine whether first language had an effect. The subjects were students enrolled in intermediate-level ESL classes at Valley College in Los Angeles. (*Intermediate* is defined here as advanced enough to enroll in regular subject-matter classes taught in English.) Students qualified for this level by passing the previous level or

by scoring between 30 and 37 on the Comprehensive English Language Test (Harris & Palmer, 1970), a test of listening comprehension, structure, and vocabulary that does not measure spelling proficiency. Students in this level do not receive formal spelling instruction, but they are penalized for misspelled words on their written work, and occasional spelling lessons are provided by some instructors. Subjects in the first two studies were members of intact classes ($N = 30$ and 15, respectively). Two additional intact classes were combined for the third study ($N = 78$); a larger sample was considered desirable so that a sufficient number of different first languages could be included.

In all three studies, subjects were first given a dictation and were then asked to fill out a questionnaire probing their voluntary reading. The dictation used in Studies 1 and 3 consisted of 103 words and was taken from *Learning American English* (Taylor, 1956, p. 87). In Study 2, an 85-word passage from *Whaddaya Say? Guided Practice in Relaxed English* (Weinstein, 1982, p. 13) was used. The passage was read twice, and students simply recorded what they heard. They were given time to check their work after the passage was read. Students' scores were simply the number of words misspelled. If the same word was used and misspelled more than once, it was counted as only one spelling error. Students were aware that spelling accuracy was the focus of the activity.

After doing the dictation, subjects filled out a questionnaire developed by the first author to probe their current voluntary reading (see Figure 1). They were given one point for each item checked. The same questionnaire was used in all three studies.

RESULTS

In all three studies a significant negative correlation was found between questionnaire results and spelling errors: Those who reported more free reading tended to make fewer errors (see Table 1). All three correlations were statistically significant, but not significantly different from each other (for Studies 1 and 2, $z = .245$; for Studies 2 and 3, $z = .442$; for Studies 1 and 3, $z = .232$).

Oller and Ziahosseiny (1971) reported that college ESL students who spoke languages with Roman scripts made slightly more errors in English spelling on a dictation test than did students who were speakers of languages with non-Roman scripts. Differences were significant, but small. To determine the possible influence of first language, in Study 3 we kept a record of students' first language. The following first languages were represented: Spanish, Vietnamese, Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Hebrew, Farsi, Armenian, Arabic, French, German, and Slovak. For statistical analysis, languages written with Roman alphabets were coded as *1*, whereas languages with non-Roman alphabets were coded as *0*. No difference was found in spelling performance between speakers of languages with Roman alphabets and speakers of languages with non-Roman alphabets ($r = -.097$, n.s.).

FIGURE 1
Spelling Questionnaire

Do you read any of these English language newspapers?

	Yes	No
Los Angeles Times	_____	_____
Herald Examiner	_____	_____
Daily News	_____	_____
USA Today	_____	_____
National Enquirer	_____	_____
Globe	_____	_____
Star	_____	_____
Other	_____	_____

(One point scored for each newspaper checked.)

Do you read English language magazines? Yes _____ No _____

Name of magazine _____

_____

_____

(One point scored for each magazine listed.)

Do you read children's books in English? Yes _____ No _____
(One point scored for yes answer.)

Do you read novels in English? Yes _____ No _____
(One point scored for yes answer.)

Do you read anything else in English other than your textbook?
If so, what is it? _____
(One point scored for yes answer.)

The combined effect of reading and first language was analyzed using multiple regression (see Table 2), which reveals the effect of each of the independent variables when the other is held constant. The regression coefficient (b) for reading is significantly different from zero ($t = 3.055$, $p < .01$), but the coefficient for first language is not ($t = 0.1494$, n.s.). Inspection of the *betas* (standardized regression coefficients) shows that reported voluntary reading has a much larger effect on spelling than does first language. In addition, incorporating first language into the analysis does very little for our ability to predict spelling scores. Alone, current reading habits account for 11.83% of the variance in spelling in Study 3 (R^2, or $-.344^2$). Adding first language allows us to account for about 11.86% of the variance in spelling (R^2 in Table 2), less than 0.03% more.

A separate analysis of Spanish-speaking subjects in Study 3 resulted in a very similar relationship between reading and spelling ($r = -.323$, $p < .05$; $n = 30$), confirming that the effect of reading is independent of any effect of first language.

TABLE 1

The Relationship Between Reported Free Reading and Spelling Performance

Study	N	Reading score		Spelling errors		r
		M	SD	M	SD	
1	30	4.0	2.59	8.3	6.54	−.415*
2	15	5.8	2.21	5.7	3.99	−.473*
3	78	4.2	2.38	7.3	5.14	−.344**

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

TABLE 2

Regression Coefficients for Spelling Achievement

Variable	b	beta
Report of current reading	−.737	−.400
First language	−.171	−.017
$R^2 = .1186$		
($F = 5.06$, $p < .01$)		

Note: *b* = regression coefficient; *beta* = standardized regression coefficient.

DISCUSSION

Correlations do not imply causality. Our results might mean that reading experience is responsible for spelling ability or that spelling ability underlies reading ability, which in turn results in more free reading. They could also mean that reading and spelling influence each other.

The hypothesis that spelling competence aids and thus encourages reading runs into trouble in the face of Smith's (1982a) arguments that spelling "has only a minimal role in reading" (p. 143). Smith presents evidence that word identification does not require previous letter identification and that knowledge of the features necessary for word identification and "the identification of meaning" from texts is built up by meaningful reading.

If free reading causes improvement in spelling ability, we must explain why the correlations found here are so modest; current reading habits account for only 22.4% of the variance in spelling in the study yielding the highest correlation, Study 2. One possible explanation, consistent with the hypothesis that reading causes improvement in spelling ability, is that our measures were not sufficiently sensitive. The reading questionnaire probed only current voluntary reading, not previous reading in the first or second language, and may not have given enough weight to certain kinds

of reading. Also, the dictation test may not have probed a wide enough variety of words.

Of course, it is possible that other variables play an important role. Candidates include level of literacy in the primary language, perceptual/memory factors, degree of concern with proper spelling, and amount and kind of spelling instruction (for strong arguments against the view that spelling competence comes primarily from writing, see Smith, 1981).

The fact that the measures used were so crude, yet our results so consistent, makes our results, in our view, all the more interesting. A more extensive test of spelling and a measure of reading that takes into account students' past history of voluntary reading might produce stronger results.

Our results suggest that voluntary reading will help spelling and lead to what is at worst a harmless implication: Students should be encouraged to do pleasure reading on their own. Besides spelling, there is good evidence that voluntary reading leads to improvement in many areas of language, including reading ability, vocabulary, grammar, and writing style (Krashen, 1985; Smith, 1982a, 1982b).

However, even if improved spelling ability results from reading, this does not imply that extensive reading will result in perfect spelling. If Goodman (1982) and Smith (1982a) are correct, fluent readers do not need to pay attention to every bit of visual information, but only need enough to confirm their predictions. Thus, even excellent readers may have some gaps. (Most readers of this article, we predict, are good, but perhaps not perfect, spellers.) A spelling dictionary or spelling-checker program may be the best way of dealing with occasional demons.[1]

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The Effect of ESL Students' Perceptions of Their Cognitive Strategies on Reading Achievement

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■ Although a few studies have investigated the cognitive reading strategies used by Hispanic ESL students (Block, 1986; Knight, Padron, & Waxman, 1985), the effect of these students' use of strategies on reading achievement has not been specifically examined. Furthermore, most of these studies have used think-aloud procedures and verbal reports to identify reading strategies, a methodology that has been questioned because students sometimes have difficulty assessing metacognitive processes (Afflerbach & Johnston, 1984; Ericsson & Simon, 1984).

On the other hand, a few studies have successfully used self-report instruments to identify the cognitive reading strategies used by students (Hahn, 1984; Paris & Myers, 1981). These instruments, however, have not been used with Hispanic ESL students, nor have they specifically examined the relationship between students' reported use of cognitive reading strategies and performance on measures of reading comprehension.

METHOD

The sample in the present study consisted of 82 students who were randomly selected from the population of Hispanic ESL students in the third, fourth, and fifth grades of a public elementary school in a small