The new version of the Sounds-Write manual

For Sounds-Write trainees who trained before the introduction of the new version of manual (September 2013), you may want to know what has changed. You will be pleased to note that most of the changes are to the format. Any changes of substance are contained in what follows. In planning work you may find that colleagues trained after September 2013 have manuals with different page numbers from the original. You will also find that we have made other changes, which are outlined below.

Most of the changes are minor. For example, we have changed the convention of using speech marks to represent sounds to using forward slashes. Thus, where the first sound in the word 'ship' was represented as 'sh', it is now represented as /sh/.

Unit 11 of the Initial Code now includes the opportunity to introduce Lesson 6 at an early stage using the spelling alternatives covered in the Initial Code. For example, in the new manual at the end of the Initial Code, teachers may want to teach formally what has already been introduced implicitly: the fact that there is more than one way of spelling a sound. The sound /k/ is taught as < c > and < k > in Units 3 and 5 respectively. By the time pupils reach Unit 11 and < ck > has been taught, teachers may want to use the approach used in Lesson 6 to make overt what pupils have previously been sensitised to. Similarly, in the new manual, the spelling alternative < le > for the sound /l/ is taught explicitly alongside < l > and < ll >; and, the spelling alternative < tch > for the sound /ch/ has also been added.

Perhaps the most important change has been the decision to make the sounds /ae/ and /ee/ the first two units in the Extended Code [previously in Units 2 and 3] and to move the grapheme unit focusing on the spelling < o > to Unit 5 [previously Unit 1] after the spelling alternatives to the sound /oe/ have been introduced in Unit 4. Other than that the order of the sound-spelling correspondences remains the same: thus Unit 1 is now /ae/, Unit 2 is /ee/, Unit 3 is the grapheme lesson for < ea >, Unit 4 is /oe/ and Unit 5 is the grapheme lesson < o >.

Dozens of polysyllabic words that have a bearing on discrete areas of the curriculum, such as mathematics, science and literature, have also been added. We have also added two new items to the theory section; these now follow:

Letters don't 'make' or 'say' sounds!

Very many teaching practitioners have developed the habit of saying that letters 'make' or 'say' sounds. They don't! Letters or, to use more accurate vocabulary, spellings *represent* sounds in the English language.

It may appear that this is a trivial point but, in fact, it underpins the whole orientation of the alphabetic code: sounds in speech precede the written representations of them. Humans

make sounds; the spellings represent them. Letters or spellings do not *have* or *possess* any agency or power of their own. The writing system was invented to represent sounds in the language and the writing system is symbolic. It is also arbitrary: there is no particular reason why we represent the sound /o/ as in 'hot' by the spelling <o> (except for the fact that the English alphabet is derived mainly from Latin).

This may seem to be of merely theoretical significance. It isn't! It has profoundly practical implications because when, at an early stage in their reading and writing development, young children are coming to grips with the writing system and they are told that the spellings 'make' sounds, they are left wondering where all these sounds come from. When this is compounded by the kind of unstructured teaching that tells them that the spelling <a> 'makes' the sound /a/ in 'mat', the sound /o/ in 'wasp', the sound /or/ in 'water', the sound /ae/ in 'baby', or even the sound /e/ as in 'many', they can easily jump to the conclusion that there is 'no rhyme nor reason' to the way reading and writing works. It appears to them as if the spelling <a> can represent any sound and, furthermore, that there is no logic to what they are trying to learn.

This isn't of course the case. There are very common patterns in the English language that are remarkably consistent. For example, after the sound /w/, we very often spell the sound /o/ with the spelling <a>, as in 'was', 'swan', 'watch', and so on. Similarly, the spelling of the sound /or / before the sound /l/ is often spelled with the spelling <a>, as in 'wall', 'also', and others. The same is true for many other patterns.

You may think that young children would have difficulty understanding the role of symbols in representing sounds but, even at an early age, children are coming to terms with symbolic language: that something can stand for something else. This understanding is usually developed through symbolic play, followed by drawing, and then on to what Vygotsky referred to as the second-order symbolism of writing. So, by the time the child is ready to begin school, for most pupils, teaching them that spelling symbols represent sounds in their speech and that the sounds in their speech can be represented by spelling symbols is something that is perfectly easy to grasp.

The importance of practice

We want beginning readers to become experts insomuch as they know how the writing system works in relation to the sounds of the language and they are able to use that knowledge to become fluent readers and writers. For that to happen, beginning readers need practice: practice in connecting sounds to spellings and spellings to sounds; practice in performing the skills of segmenting, blending and phoneme manipulation; and practice in understanding the levels of conceptual understanding which underpin the writing system.

Surprisingly, what the research is able to tell us quite convincingly is that measures of basic mental capacities, such as IQ tests and the like, are not accurate predictors of becoming

highly adept at any given activity or skill in any specific area of attainment. We also know that the difference between high achievers and less proficient individuals in a domain is almost always attributable to the quality and length of their training

(K. Anders Ericsson, et al, *Cambridge Handbook of Expertise and Expert Performance*, p 10).

What this means is that with high quality instruction and a great deal of practice, novices can become experts. The development of expertise in learning to read and spell can be achieved if pupils are given clear goals and are taught to understand *what* as well as *why* they are learning; feedback on the quality of their performance; the opportunity for repeated practice.

Feltovich et al have pointed out that '[b]ehavioral studies of skill acquisition have demonstrated that automaticity is central to the development of expertise, and practice is the means to automaticity.' (Ericsson, K.A., Feltovich, P., and Prietula, M.J., in K. Anders Ericsson et al, *Cambridge Handbook of Expertise and Expert Performance*, p 53). Automaticity also allows individuals to perform tasks simultaneously: when decoding and encoding have reached the stage of automaticity, greater cognitive resources can be allocated to higher order processes of comprehension and text integration; on the other hand, when reading is a painstaking and laborious process, reading for meaning can be greatly impaired.

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