Suggestions for the development of a whole-school spelling policy

In most schools the teaching of spelling skills is regarded as the responsibility of the English Department but virtually all teachers have some written work to mark. Despite the increase in computer-based work, where spellcheckers are available, many assignments and most exams are still handwritten. Recently many exam boards have said they are tightening their standards and penalizing poor spelling.

Therefore the teaching of spelling is still important. By developing and following a consistent approach across the whole school, teachers can not only contribute to their students' spelling improvement but also ease their own marking load by reducing the number of mistakes made.

The following suggestions could be considered:

- Encourage all students to keep a personal spelling log: a small notebook - or blank pages in a student planner - in which they record any words they need to learn. They should keep this notebook with them at all times and to use it for any problem spellings, in all subjects, not just English.

- Remind students frequently that the majority of the spellings they need are often likely to be found in whatever text-book, worksheet etc. is in use. Careful reference to source material will avoid the initial error which can lead to the wrong image of a word becoming fixed in the student's visual memory.

- Consider the value of producing word-processed 'Spelling Banks' i.e. lists of words specific to any subject and any topic - a task which could be shared amongst members of each subject department. Five or ten minutes spent looking at a "Word Bank" at the start of a new topic will not only help with spelling but will provide an opportunity to familiarise less able students with any new reading vocabulary for that topic. Students could retain the lists for the period of that topic and be encouraged to refer to them whenever necessary. Again, by avoiding the mistakes in the first place, the students are more likely to remember the correct spellings.

- Decide on a consistent approach to identifying errors, for example, underline the mistake and put '*sp*' in the margin. (It can be helpful to students if the part of the word which is wrong is the part underlined.)

- Make sure the students know what is required of them in terms of 'spelling corrections'. Many students get confused because different teachers - perhaps even within the same subject - have different requirements. A suggested approach:

- o If students have had access to the words (e.g. in the text-book or in a 'Spelling Bank' provided) they should be advised to find the words and correct them themselves.

- o For other words it would be helpful if teachers, (time permitting!) were to write the correct spellings for the students and then remind them that these words need practice. This would be particularly helpful if the error is not in the start of the word - when the advice 'Look it up in a dictionary' would be of little use.

- o Learning spellings can be done by the traditional methods such as 'Look, Say, Cover, Write, Check'. Spellzone has an interactive version of this. Students can upload their own personal word lists and use them with a variety of games to aid learning.
  As Spellzone is an online program, this can also be done at home.

- o The least able spellers, who make many mistakes in each piece of work, are unlikely to benefit from correcting all of them; their memory would be overloaded and they would probably remember nothing. In these cases it is better to target a few - say three - of the most common words and make sure these are learned thoroughly.

- Remember, dictionaries are only useful when a student knows the correct letters at the start of a word. If your school allows the use of electronic devices in class, some students find computer-based spell-checkers useful. These are best used *before* the event, to ensure that the correct word is written, rather than being used later for corrections. They should still add such words to their personal spelling log for later practice.

- Rather than interrupt the flow of a piece of writing to check on an unfamiliar word, some students with spelling difficulties benefit from keeping a pencil to hand and quickly switching to that for any words they are unsure of. They can then go back later and look up all those words at the same time. In general, though, it is advisable to avoid the errors in the first place, so that only the correct version of the word is used.

- Many students need frequent reminders to re-read their work to check it. We all know how difficult it is to proof-read our own writing, yet somehow we expect our students to do it. They need to be given tips on effective proof-reading e.g. check again after a time gap; when checking specifically for spelling, look at one line at a time, working from the bottom up; look for words which don't 'look' right.

Some of the above ideas could be put forward for discussion at a staff development day. As a practical follow-up to the theoretical introduction, teachers could work in their own departments to start compiling the "Spelling Banks" referred to above.

A staff development session on spelling could include some input from your Learning Support department on marking the written work of the least able pupils.   This could also be an opportunity to alert staff to the possibility of undiagnosed specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia. About one person in ten has this problem to some degree and one in 25 is affected seriously enough to need extra help. At secondary level the most significant indicator of dyslexia is usually poor spelling. In contrast, dyslexics often have good ability in subjects requiring spatial skills e.g. the sciences and Design/Technology. If teachers notice students whose written work is unexpectedly poor in comparison with their oral or practical performance, they are advised to alert the Special Educational Needs Coordinator.

How Spellzone fits into a Whole School Spelling Policy

Spellzone is an online spelling course specially written for older students: teenage to adult.
It provides a complete course, teaching all the spelling rules with interactive practice at each stage.
All teaching points are clearly explained and follow a logical framework.

The full course will be useful for those who have noticeable spelling problems but Spellzone is also useful as a 'dip-in' resource for any student who has unfamiliar words to learn. Students can upload their own personal word lists and use them with all the Spellzone games. Spellzone is an online course that can be used outside school, so spelling practice can be set as a homework assignment.

Teachers of all subjects can upload word lists on any specific topic. This can be an ideal tool for the creation of the "Spelling Banks". There is a dictionary with sound and a translation feature, making it accessible to students whose first language is not English.

For further information, please see the Spellzone Guide.

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