

Children's strategies for reading and spelling irregular words

A summary for teachers

Background: As children's reading and spelling skills develop, they will invariably make mistakes when reading (e.g., reading 'pint' to rhyme with 'mint') or spelling (e.g., spelling 'circle' as 'serkul' or 'circel'). These mistakes will be found particularly with irregular words (i.e., words that don't follow simple letter-sound rules, e.g., yacht, tuna). These errors reveal a lot about the strategies children are using to read and spell unfamiliar words.

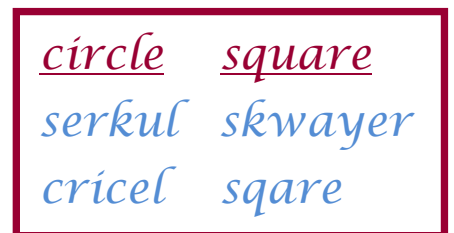
Aims: To examine 1) variation in children's reading and spelling strategies; 2) the effectiveness of these strategies for reading and spelling; 3) the skills predicting strategy use.

Participants: 172 children (aged 6 – 8) completed assessments measuring their vocabulary knowledge, reading frequency, decoding skill (nonword reading, e.g., kisp, tegwop), orthographic processing skill (identify correct spelling: yacht-yot, wosp-wasp) and standardised tests of word reading (a, in table) and spelling (b) and irregular word reading (c) and spelling (d). Analysis of reading (~2,000) and spelling (~2,400) errors on the irregular word reading and spelling task were carried out.

Name of strategy:	Phonological reading strategy	Orthographic reading strategy	Phonological spelling strategy	Orthographic spelling strategy
Description of strategy:	Strong reliance on letter-sound rules to read	Reading errors visually similar to word	Strong reliance on letter-sound rules to spell	Spelling errors visually similar to word
Examples of strategy:	'mild' read to rhyme with 'build'; 'pint' rhyme with 'mint'	'broad' read as 'board'; 'wart' read as 'want'	'tuna' spelt as 'choona'; 'once' spelt as 'wuns'	'knife' spelt as 'knif'; 'once' spelt as 'onse'
Effectiveness of strategy	a = .65*, c = .66*	a = -.34*, c = -.35*	b = .02, d = -.18*	b = .49*, d = .53*

Effectiveness of strategy = strength of the relationship between children's use of that strategy and their performance on assessments of reading and spelling. 0 = no relationship, 1 = perfect relationship, * = statistically significant

Results: Children who relied more strongly on letter-sound rules (phonological strategy) for reading unfamiliar words performed better on assessments of word reading. Children who had a better visual representation of the word and used this (orthographic strategy) performed better on assessments of spelling.



In addition, children's skills predicted their choice of strategy. For example, for reading, children with better decoding skills were more likely to use the more effective phonological reading strategy and less likely to use the less effective orthographic reading strategy (see academic paper for more details, including results for spelling).

Discussion and implications for education: As a phonological reading strategy was found to be associated with higher levels of reading attainment, this suggests that teaching this strategy, and the decoding skills to use this strategy successfully, is important. Spelling, on the other hand, is reliant on children having a strong visual representation of the word. This visual representation may be acquired naturally through the process of reading or may be formally taught.

Academic paper: McGeown, S., Medford, E., & Moxon, G. (2011). Individual differences in children's reading and spelling strategies and the skills supporting strategy use. *Learning and Individual Differences*, 28, 75-81.