

SPECIFIC LEARNING DIFFICULTIES

UNIT 13

ASSESSING WRITING

Learning Objectives

Trainees will:

- Know and understand the principles of assessing writing
- Be able to conduct a spelling error analysis for a pupil
- Be able to assess handwriting speed
- Be able to assess handwriting legibility.

ONLINE RESOURCES

The content and tasks throughout these PDFs are supported by online resources that are designed to facilitate and supplement your training experience.

Links to these are signposted where appropriate. The resources use graphics and interactive elements to:

- Highlight salient points
- Provide at-a-glance content summaries
- Introduce further points of interest
- Offer visual context
- Break down and clearly present the different stages and elements of processes, tasks, practices, and theories

The online resources offer great benefits, both for concurrent use alongside the PDFs, or as post-reading revision and planning aids.

Please note that the resources cannot be used in isolation without referencing the PDFs. Their purpose is to complement and support your training process, rather than lead it.

You should complete any learning or teaching tasks and additional reading detailed in this PDF to make full use of the Advanced training materials for autism; dyslexia; speech, language and communication; emotional, social and behavioural difficulties; moderate learning difficulties.

To find out more about the resources, how they work, and how they can enhance your training, visit the homepage at: www.education.gov.uk/lamb

The first resource for this unit can be found here: www.education.gov.uk/lamb/spld/assessing-writing/intro

Principles for assessing writing

When assessing writing the not-so-simple view of writing (Berninger & Amtmann, 2003), which was discussed in the unit on Learning to Write, must inform the approach. Each pupil will have an individual profile of strengths and difficulties based on the three areas of: text generation, transcription and executive functions, plus contributions from working memory. Assessment of working memory has already been addressed in unit 2, so this unit focuses on assessing handwriting and spelling with some comments on assessing aspects of composition.

Analysing spelling errors

Collecting and analysing spelling errors is a useful way to identify the difficulties a pupil might be having in spelling. This approach needs to be used with caution since research suggests that 75+ errors need to be collected before discernable patterns of difficulty might be evident (Howell, Fox & Morehead, 1993). Errors would need to be collected from a number of different sources since pupils do tend to spell differently depending on the demands of a task. Pupils tend to get more spellings correct in the predictable and limited context of a spelling test. When writing a story, report or other composition many more errors are likely to be seen since the pupil is trying to orchestrate more skills at the same time.

See online resource:

www.education.gov.uk/lamb/spld/assessing-writing/analysing-spelling-errors

To assist correct analysis it is obviously essential that the target word (word the pupil was trying to spell) is known. When analysing a pupil's spelling errors it is often useful to ask the pupil how they made a particular spelling choice. This gives a greater degree of understanding of their approach and needs.

Spellings analysis can be used to:

- Plan work for whole class or group teaching based on common mistakes
- Develop individual targets and teaching programmes
- Adjust future medium term planning to prevent common mistakes.

Errors can be classified into three broad groups,

1. Those that are as a result of insufficient knowledge of sounds and letters (phonological errors)
2. Those that result from insufficient knowledge of irregular words (orthographic errors)
3. Those that result from insufficient knowledge of morphemes (the smallest units of meaning in words-see unit 3 for further explanation).

Fig 4.1 Spelling errors

Error type	Description	Examples
Phonological errors (errors in analysis of sounds)	<p>Phonetic Errors: contain all speech sounds but spelled incorrectly. Easy to read.</p> <p>Semi-phonetic Errors: all or most consonant sounds represented, vowel often omitted. Can be identified in context.</p> <p>Non-Phonetic Errors: do not sound like target word and difficult to identify even in context.</p>	<p>frend, sed, wos</p> <p>went=wnt comfortable=cumfrtbl</p> <p>house = AmT</p>
Orthographic errors (errors with letter order or selection)	<p>Irregular Errors: errors spelling irregular parts of words.</p> <p>Vowel Errors: Selecting the wrong vowel spelling</p>	<p>friend=freind, said=siad.</p> <p>rode=road, sor=saw</p>
Morphological errors (errors in use of morphemes)	<p>Pupils do not know the spelling/grammar rule that should be applied</p> <p>Lack of knowledge about word roots and derivations (roots are spelled differently)</p>	<p>walked = walkt</p> <p>critic and criticism might be spelt as critic and criticism</p>

Activity 1

Take the sheets for Activity 1, copy them and cut out each 'card'. Now with a colleague sort the cards with spelling errors into groups according to the type of error you think is being made: phonological, orthographic, or morphological. You will need to explain each of these categories to each other and say why you have placed each error in the category you chose.

Activity 2

Identify a pupil whose spelling is weak and collect errors from different sources: free writing, spelling tests etc. Remember that Howell Fox and Morgan's (1993) research suggests that around 75 errors are needed to identify true patterns of difficulty, so aim to collect as many as possible.

Now, with your colleague, analyse these errors in terms of the three broad types described above, ideally asking the pupil about their spelling choices on a recent piece of work. Write the results of your assessment on the skills profile part 2 available with this unit. After discussion with your colleague about what the pupil knows about spelling and what they need to be taught make some recommendations for teaching approaches and pupil learning targets.

There are many standardised tests used in school to assess spelling.

Assessing handwriting

Since writing speed is known to make a significant impact upon pupil outcomes (Berninger & Fuller, 1992) it is useful to consider how handwriting speed could be assessed. If you are assessing for access arrangements you will need to use a standardised test such as the DASH (detailed assessment of speed of handwriting available from Pearson). However for most other purposes the following assessment that is freely available on the PATOSS website would suffice. The test is suitable for pupils in year 7 or above and requires pupils to write on a chosen subject for 20 minutes, after 2 minutes planning time. Erasers are not used and any corrections should be made by crossing out with one line only. Results are calculated based on the number of the number of words written in the time allowed. For pupils who have been taught to touch type it would be useful to compare typing speed with handwriting speed using a similar method. This assessment approach is only suitable for pupils in year seven or above.

Activity 3

For those working in secondary schools only.

Identify a pupil whose handwriting speed is of concern and use the handwriting speed assessment. If the pupil also uses touch typing, compare the amount written in the handwriting test with that written in the same conditions when touch typing. Enter the results on the skills profile part 2 available with this unit and discuss them with your colleague, describing how the assessment was carried out and what the implications might be for the pupil in class and in examinations.

Handwriting speed assessment results

Year	Average Letters min/Average words	Average words/min
7	52.6	14.0
8	54.8	14.3
9	60.8	15.6
10	56.9	14.7
11	64.9	16.1

Penny Allcock on Patoss website

Handwriting legibility must also be assessed and can be done easily with pupils of any age who have begun to handwrite. This can be assessed in part based on observations of the pupil writing, analysis of free writing samples, or setting up specific tasks such as writing the alphabet.

Activity 4

Try the assessment activities in the table below to assess the handwriting legibility of a pupil whose handwriting is of concern. Enter the results on the skills profile part 2 available with this unit. Share your analysis with your colleague, showing them the piece of work and the aspects assessed.

Fig 2 Handwriting legibility assessment

Focus	Task	Outcome
Letter formation (capitals and lower case)	Ask the pupil to write the alphabet from memory in both capital and lower case letters on lined paper (wider lines for younger pupils). Observe how they write each letter. (For young pupils or those who do not know the alphabet they may copy an example)	Which letters are correctly formed? Which letters need to be taught? Are ascenders and descenders correct? Does the pupil know which letters are capitals or lower case?
Spacing	Collect samples of a pupil's free writing.	Judge whether or not spacing between words sentences, lines or paragraphs is appropriate. Ask yourself how this compares with other pupils of the same age.
How writing is arranged on the line	Collect samples of a pupil's free writing	Is the writing placed consistently on the line? Does it fall away or rise above the line?
Use of margins	Collect samples of a pupil's free writing	Does the writing begin at the margin? Does each line begin at the margin and continue to the end of the line?
Excessive/too little pressure	Collect samples of a pupil's free writing and observe the pupil when writing.	Does the pupil grip the pencil so hard knuckles are white or the hand becomes tired? Does writing go 'through' the paper, creating a raised impression? Does the pupil press too lightly and make very feint marks?
Placement of ascenders and descenders	Collect samples of a pupil's free writing or from alphabet task.	Are 'tall' letters consistently tall? Are letters that should hang below the line, consistently below the line?
Size	Collect samples of a pupil's free writing	Are letters consistently sized, are all letter 'a' for instance the same size and relate in size correctly to other letters?
Joins, if cursive script is used	Collect samples of a pupil's free writing	Are horizontal and diagonal joins used correctly?
Left or right handed?	Observe pupil when writing	
Paper/book positioned correctly?	Observe pupil when writing	Right-handers: 10-20 degrees to the right. Left-handers: 30 degrees to the left.
Posture	Observe pupil when writing	Does the pupil sit up straight with their feet flat on the floor, bottom well back in the chair, and use their non-writing

Pupils whose difficulties with handwriting are severe and do not relate to spelling or attention difficulties may need further assessment, support and advice from another professional such as an occupational therapist. Some pupils with the most severe difficulties in legibility and or handwriting speed may have dyspraxia.

Assessing composition

Once difficulties with spelling and handwriting have been assessed it is important to consider aspects of writing related to composition. This is a complex area, underpinned by oral language skills, (Connely, Dockrell & Barnett 2010) pragmatic language skills (understanding the needs of the audience) and working memory (Berninger & Amtmann 2003). Since vocabulary development is a building block for text generation, assessing vocabulary is a good starting point for teachers. A judgement about vocabulary can be made informally through observations of the pupil participating in speaking and listening activities, using structures such as assessing pupil progress (APP) or more formally through using a standardised test such as the BPVS (British picture vocabulary scale). This test is suitable for 3-16 year olds and tests only receptive vocabulary (the words a pupil understands). A pupil's performance regarding the vocabulary they use when speaking or writing might be quite different.

For a teacher composition is most easily assessed through existing assessing pupil progress (APP) systems against national curriculum levels and assessment focuses.

Activity 5

1. Using the information gathered about a pupil in activities 4.2, 4.3 and 4.4 above to compile a case study to present to colleagues. When presenting the case study ensure that you explain how all assessments were carried out and their purpose.
2. Share the assessment resources with the same colleagues and show them how to carry out a handwriting and spelling assessment on a pupil they work with. Ask each of them to carry out one assessment.
3. As a group consider the strengths and weaknesses identified for each pupil assessed, and discuss possible interventions (for more details see unit 6).
4. With your colleagues consider how these assessment approaches could be used in your school/department and how results might be shared effectively with parents and other professionals.

Useful websites

Patoss for handwriting speed test: http://www.patoss-dyslexia.org/Handwriting_speedtest.html

References

Berninger, V. & Amtmann, D. (2003).

Preventing written expression disabilities through early and continuing assessment and intervention for handwriting and/or spelling problems: Research into practice. In H. Swanson, K. Harris, and S. Graham (Eds.), *Handbook of learning disabilities* (pp. 323- 344). New York: The Guilford Press

Berninger, V. & Fuller, F. Gender differences in orthographic, verbal, and compositional fluency: Implications for diagnosis of writing disabilities in primary grade children. *Journal of School Psychology*. 1992; 30: 363–382

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Howell, K.W., Fox, S. L., & Morehead. K. W. (1993). *Curriculum-Based Evaluation: Teaching And Decision Making*. (2nd Ed). Pacific Grove, California: Brooks/Cole Publishing Company

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