

Audience Impact on Standard Spelling: Second Graders' Daily Journal Entries vs. Authentic Books for Kindergarteners

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Keywords

Audience, authentic writing, context, journals, spelling, student choice, topic

Abstract

The purpose of this action research project was to examine the difference in student standard spelling between two types of authentic writing assignments in a second grade classroom. Students wrote for a narrow audience (daily journals) and a broad audience (books for kindergarteners) over the course of 2 months. Students explored writing context, topics, and the idea of audience as they brainstormed, drafted, and published books for kindergarten students. I used daily journal entries, weekly spelling tests, all pre-writing and drafts of their books, and a research diary to collect data. I compared student use of standard spelling in authentic writing activities to examine if audience size does impact standard spelling. Findings revealed that my students were proficient spellers overall. I found that while audience size had a small impact on student standard spelling, there were additional non-spelling benefits to writing for a broad audience. Students improved the quality of their writing (mechanics and creativity) and increased the quantity of their writing, they used more technical vocabulary, they were enthusiastic, and they became critical readers of their own writing.



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Introduction

I currently teach in a second grade classroom of thirty-five students in a suburban, parochial school in southern Ohio. I give weekly spelling tests, just like most other primary teachers. Students' scores are typically either 92% or 100%, with students usually missing just one word, or spelling all words correctly.

“This is amazing! My kids are fantastic spellers! Oh, wait; look at the spelling in these writing samples...”

I consistently observe spelling words previously studied misspelled in students' daily writing samples. A sense of frustration rises inside me as I wonder if I am wasting my time with formal spelling instruction. How can I get students to realize there is a link between standard spelling and writing?

It is common for teachers to observe great weekly spelling test scores, and then find those same words misspelled in students' daily writing (Beckham-Hungler & Williams, 2003). In their one-year study of first-grade rural students, Rymer and Williams (2000) compared students' weekly spelling test scores to the number of spelling words used correctly in students' daily journal entries. They found their formal spelling program had little impact on their students' self-selected journal writing. Students transferred relatively few spelling words to their daily journals (on average less than 28%); and the spelling words they did use in their journals were often misspelled, even after students spelled these words correctly on their weekly tests (Rymer & Williams, 2000). How can teachers increase student standard spelling in writing activities?

Literature Review

Spelling and Writing Link

Although many students are able to memorize spelling list words for their weekly tests, memorization of those spelling words often does not transfer to student writing. This is commonly due to the fact that numerous students do not clearly realize the link between standard spelling and writing. When teachers are able make their students aware of their writing context, topic, and audience and give students appropriate, meaningful tasks, they can begin the writing process (Buchanan, 1989). Although the main focus of writing is still content, when students acknowledge and respect their audience, they will improve standard spelling in their writing to increase their ability to communicate by making their meaning understood (Buchanan, 1989; Henderson, 1985; Marten, 2003).

Spelling Lesson Background

I currently teach spelling in the familiar routine pre-test Monday, activities and workbook Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, and post-test on Friday. Yet, as I began to research current best practices in spelling, I learned through many sources that students retain spelling words best when practiced in daily, meaningful, authentic contexts. Educators know that learning to spell takes place most effectively within daily meaningful reading and writing situations, for example, a letter to an author, a recipe for a classroom snack, or instructions on how to care for the classroom pet (Cramer, 1998; Graham, Harris, & Chorzempa, 2002; Simon, 2004; Tompkins, 1997). This is what my current spelling program was lacking; an authentic, meaningful context for students.

Context in Writing

Students must realize the link between standard spelling and writing in order to efficiently communicate with others. According to Tompkins, “Students need to learn to spell words conventionally so that they can communicate effectively through writing” (p. 110). Context includes purpose, topic, and audience. It gives students writing direction and meaning by helping them decide if and what to write. Many beginning writers are eager to create written messages and share them with their peers; however, if students are to develop their writing skills, they must be given a specific direction and purpose for their writing (Buchanan, 1989, Plucker & Omdal, 1997). “There is a great deal of evidence to suggest that where learners perceive the context to be relevant and one that demands standard spelling, they are likely to show a greater concern for standard spelling” (Bean & Bouffler, 1991, p. 19).

One relevant context is book making. Few studies on book making are found in educational research. Constable (1997) examined the joint construction of book making between tutors and first graders. This study found that the meaningful interaction surrounding the book making event yielded contextually-supported concept development in young writers. My study looks at improving student standard spelling through book writing.

Audience

As I delved into the idea of authentic, meaningful spelling experiences for my students, I found audience impact greatly promotes conventional spelling in student writing. Audience is a strong motivational tool for students. When children value their audience and realize it demands correct, standard spelling, they begin to focus on spelling as an important aspect of the writing process (Buchanan, 1989). Proponents of the

“Of all aspects of context audience appears to exert the greatest effect on children” (Bean & Bouffler, 1991, p. 21).

social learning perspective believe that learning is social and students benefit from being involved in reading and writing activities with others (Tracey & Morrow, 2006). Reading and writing are social processes that society uses to establish, structure, and maintain social relationships.

Yet, many students typically write for a narrow audience (their teacher, parents, and classmates). By encouraging a broader audience – one that has more authentic and varied meaning to the students – quality of writing improves and students produce compositions that have substance (Cramer, 1998; Henderson, 1985). Students who write for compelling audiences realize the importance of making their meaning clear and of using standard grammar and spelling.

The Project

In order to create an authentic, meaningful project for my students, I decided to have them create books on self-selected topics for one kindergarten class in our school. This project would enable me to compare their use of words spelled correctly in their daily journals (narrow audience) and their books for the kindergarteners (broad audience) to examine if audience does impact student standard spelling.

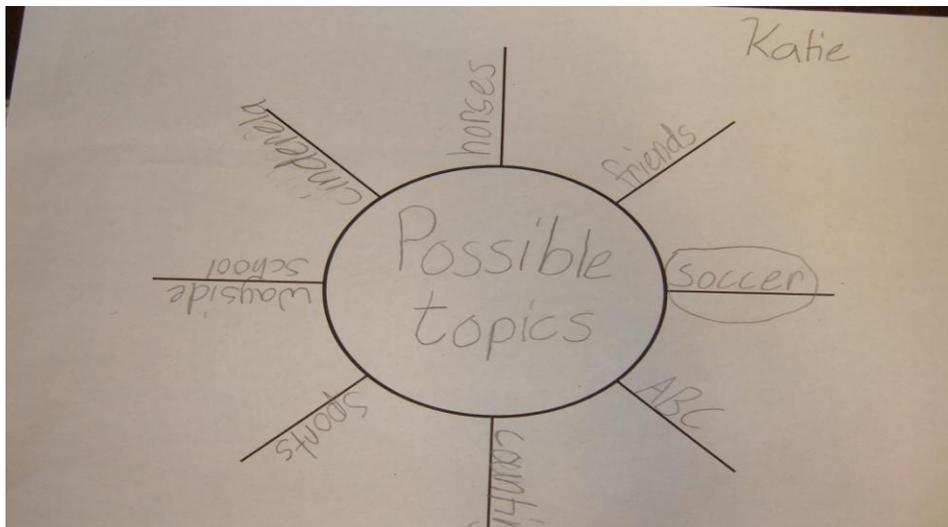
To have a measure of comparison, I allowed students to “Free Write” daily in their morning journal. This aligns with Donald Graves suggestion that 80% of a student’s yearly writing topics should be self-selected (Graves, 1994). Morning journal time was approximately 30 minutes daily after students were unpacked and settled in at their desks. Students were not required to use spelling list words in their daily journals. Journals were collected and evaluated using a rubric on a weekly basis.



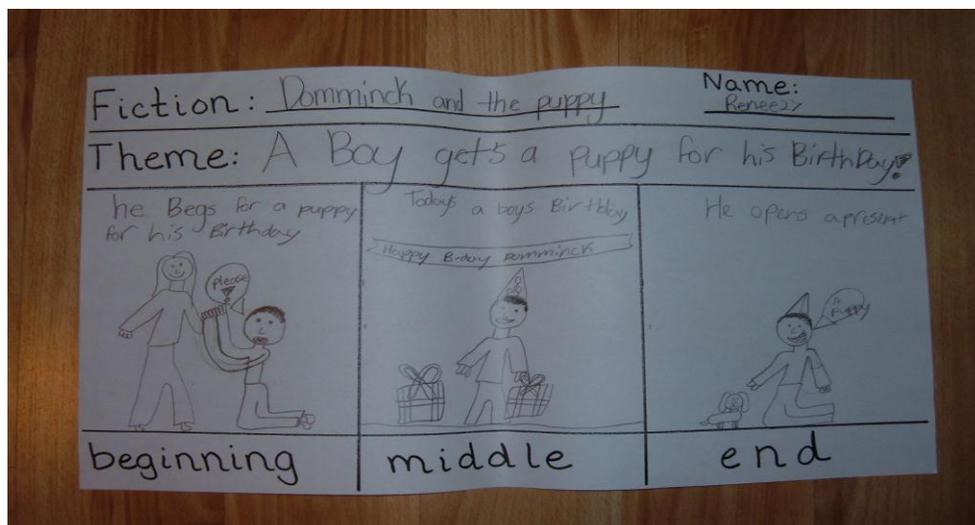
I introduced the idea of writing and publishing a book for young children ages 3-6. We brainstormed and discussed why people choose books from the library. We then discussed different genres of books they could possibly write. I showed them various library books ranging from nonfiction to fiction and displaying multiple text structures, including poetry, counting, and ABC.

We then brainstormed on the board various topics, under genres, that they might write about. I emphasized that students choose topics they know about since research (Bean & Bouffler, 1991; Harvey, 1998; Tompkins, 1997) indicates that authors write more effectively about familiar topics than unfamiliar topics.

With the creative juices flowing, our next step was to create possible topic webs with 8 choices. Students circled their number one choice- that they thought would make the best book. They were reminded to consider their audience (young children) and to choose a topic they are knowledgeable about, since students produce higher quality writing when they are knowledgeable about their topic (Henderson, 1985). “When students choose their topic and projects, engagement soars” (Harvey, 1998, p. 6). Students shared their topic choice by table and then as a whole class.



Next, we discussed the characteristics and layout of nonfiction and fiction picture books. Students read examples of their genre in small groups. They then completed brief story maps of their story by genre (nonfiction, fiction, and counting).



Students were then ready to begin their rough drafts. I reminded them once again that their audience was young children ages 3-6. We discussed the importance of trying to spell as best we can because these children are just learning how to read and it will be easier for them to read and enjoy the books if words are spelled correctly. Students worked quietly and used their story maps to help them write. Students completed their rough drafts over a four day period. We spent approximately 45-60 minutes daily working on rough drafts.

The next step for students was to circle any words they saw in their rough draft that they were not sure they spelled correctly. This got students to look critically at the spelling used in their writing. I photocopied each student's rough draft, to use for spelling analysis. Students were then placed in groups of four, with each group consisting of one higher ability writer, two average ability writers, and one lower ability writer to begin the editing process. After students made their revisions in groups, students re-wrote their stories to make a second draft correcting any mistakes they found with their group members. I then collected all the second drafts and revised any additional errors to prepare for final publishing.

Publishing



Students wrote their final drafts of their stories over a five-day period. We worked approximately 30-45 minutes a day. During this publishing period, students also created front covers, and about the author pages. Once students were finished, I compiled each student's story and photocopied them for future reference. They were then bound into books.

Distribution and Sharing our Books with Kindergarteners

I met with the kindergarten teacher to discuss a date and time for distributing and sharing our books with the kindergarteners. Since there were only 19 kindergarten students, we decided that the second graders would pair up, and most kindergarteners would receive 2 books.

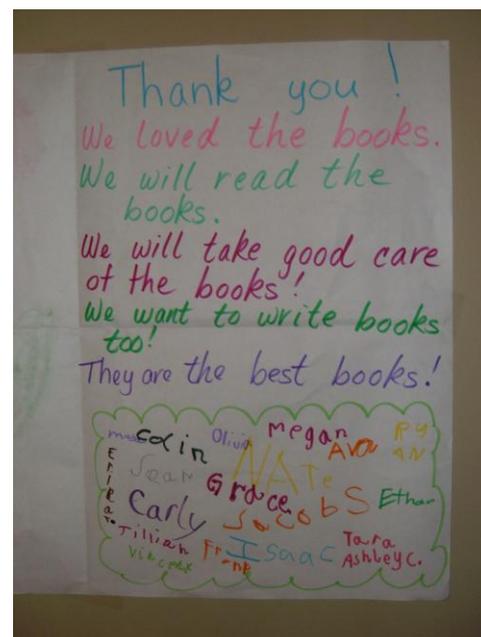


On the specified day, we went to the kindergarten classroom to distribute our books. Students were so excited! “I can’t wait to read mine!” and “I hope my friend picks my book!” were among the joyful conversations as we filed into the room. I explained the project simply to the kindergarteners. I told them the second graders worked very hard practicing their spelling and writing skills to make them special books. Each second grader then read aloud the title of their book. The kindergarteners selected a second grader whose

book they wanted to read. Since there were 16 more second graders, I then had the extra second graders find a kindergartner they thought would like their book. Students were then in groups of three (2 second graders and 1 kindergartner). Second graders spent about 15 minutes reading aloud their stories to the kindergarten student in their group. At the end of the read-aloud session, the kindergarteners held up their books and thanked us. The second graders were so proud of their books and the kindergarteners loved the surprise!

Audience Response

After students perform or read their writing in front of an audience, it is beneficial for the audience respond to the student writers with positive feedback. Audience response may include: notes, letters, or sharing thoughts orally (Bean & Bouffler, 1991; Cramer, 1998). The kindergarten class responded to our project by creating a large whole class thank you card. Since the second graders valued their audience, this response filled them with a sense of pride and accomplishment.



Data Collection

To analyze audience impact of the book project on student standard spelling, I collected students' weekly journal entries, weekly spelling tests, and all pre-writing and drafts of their books. I kept a research diary of activities and daily progress along with some anecdotal comments from the students. Since I have 35 students in my classroom and I collected an abundance of data per student, I wanted to narrow my data for analysis. I decided to randomly select 10 students for in-depth data analysis. I used a class list in alphabetical order by last name and chose every 5th student. I used this information to compare both student use of spelling list words used in writing activities and standard spelling of all words used in writing activities to examine if audience did impact student standard spelling.

Findings

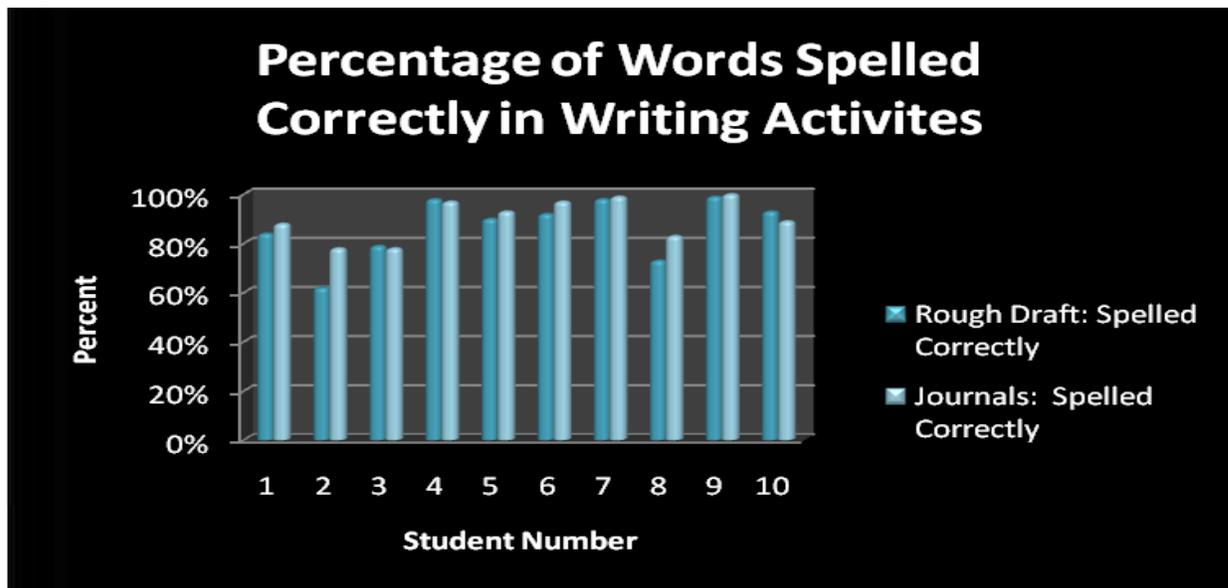
Information on Student Spelling in Writing Activities

After data collection I specifically analyzed students' book rough drafts for the percentage of words spelled correctly and incorrectly. I chose to only analyze rough drafts because they gave an honest look into student spelling before any individual, group, or teacher revisions were made. I learned that students' standard spelling scores on their rough drafts was above 75% for all students but two (one of whom was identified as learning disabled in language arts). All ten students' average standard spelling on their journals was above 77%. This finding was surprising, given my belief before starting this project that students transferred very little spelling knowledge into their writing activities!

“My students are not as poor spellers as I initially thought they were!”

Audience seemed to have little impact on whether students used standard spelling in their rough draft because the percentage of words spelled correctly in their rough draft (broad audience) and their journals (narrow audience) was so close for each student (see [figure 1](#)). However, I was very pleased with the high percentage of standard spelling in all students' writing activities! One reason for this may be because many students tend to use words that they are familiar with and know how to spell. Students with this low-risk attitude may spell with great accuracy, but limit their overall meaning and creativity while writing (Simon, 2004). I am hoping that the supportive classroom environment and the extensive modeling, sharing, and collaboration with peers led students to take greater chances and spell words outside their comfort zone.

Figure 1



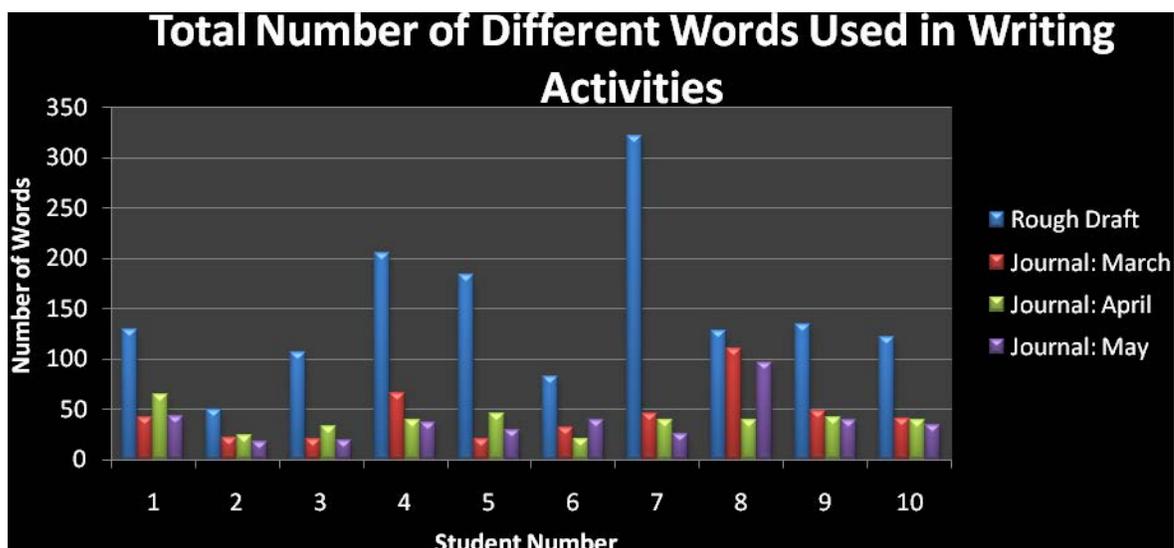
Additional Non-spelling Benefits

While I was ecstatic to learn my students had a high percentage of standard spelling in all their writing activities, as I continued to analyze my data, I found there were many additional non-spelling benefits of creating authentic books for kindergarten students and broadening student audience. Students wrote creatively, utilized more technical vocabulary, used neater handwriting, and focused on mechanics. I was also pleased to see their passion come alive while writing about topics they truly cared about.

Better Quality and Increased Quantity

Students' writing was of much better quality in their rough drafts versus their daily journal entries. All students also wrote more in their rough drafts than their daily journal entries (see [figure 2](#)). This may be due to the increased time allotted to compose their drafts. Students completed their daily journals in approximately 30 minutes each day; while we spent approximately 4 hours on our rough drafts over 4 days and 20+ hours on our book writing project overall. This increased quality and quantity may also be attributed to their comfort level with their book topic and/or their enthusiasm to present their book to a broad audience. Increased quality and quantity was not evident in their daily journals, where most students wrote the minimum (5 sentences). These vast improvements in student writing during the authentic book project suggest that writing to a broad audience (book writing) increased writing quality and quantity.

Figure 2



Usage of More Technical Vocabulary

Many students used technical vocabulary (words exceeding second grade level spelling ability that we do not currently have on our weekly spelling lists; see [table 1](#)) in their book writing projects. Many of these words coincided with their topics. This may be attributed to students' self-selection of topic and therefore their higher level of comfort with the topic. When students are comfortable with their topic, writing comes more easily (Bean & Bouffler, 1991; Harvey, 1998). According to Harvey (1998, p. 6), "Writers write best about things they know about, care about, and wonder about."

Table 1

<i>Topic</i>	<i>Technical Vocabulary</i>
Mystery	Kate, Elie and Lilly <i>investigated</i> . One day Ms. Mullins class was having <i>attendance</i> she said, "Kate, here!"
Soccer	Sometimes <i>deffenece</i> (defense) can be boring. When you're on <i>Offence</i> (offense) don't block the goal run after the ball.
Gymnastics	She loved <i>jimnatics</i> (gymnastics)! Something that she likes is the <i>volteing</i> (vaulting).
Princess University	They woke up in princesses <i>Univerceity</i> (University).

Creativity and Enthusiasm

Students were so excited to work on their books daily! A common question by many students as they were welcomed into the classroom each morning throughout the writing process was, “Are we working on our books today?” There was no complaining from students during the writing process. When I announced we needed to stop working on our projects for the day, students were disappointed as was evidenced through their chorus of “Awww!” groans and, “Can I just finish this page? Please!” There was a broad range of creativity in topic choice (ranging from gymnastics to mysteries to monsters) and students chose various genres based on their interests and comfort levels with topics. This may be accredited to the broad audience. The opposite seemed to be true in students’ daily journal entries. There was still much complaining about having to compose a journal entry daily, and students tended to pick very similar topics.

Critical Reading Skills

Students became more critical of their reading, writing, and spelling during the book writing process. They were concerned with how the kindergarten students would react and I believe this led to students being critical of their own work, as well as the work of other students in their editing groups. Again, this was not entirely evident in their daily journals. Many students still seemed to hurry through this task without rereading their work to have free time before the day began.

Reflections

Students welcomed the chance to break free from the formal spelling program while creating authentic, meaningful books for their audience. I was pleasantly surprised with my findings that most students used standard spelling in over 73% of the words they used in their rough drafts and all students used standard spelling in over 77% of the words used in their journals. Spelling aside, the enthusiasm and pride they exhibited before, during, and after the project made it a worthwhile experience for not just them, but me too. I will continue to have my students create books for a broad audience as an authentic, meaningful writing experience.

While this project studied the effects of a broad versus a narrow audience on student standard spelling in authentic writing activities, further research is needed to examine the impact of writing for a broad audience (books) versus an audience of one (i.e. the grader of the weekly spelling test). I look forward to continuing my exploration of audience impact on standard spelling.

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