

## Global Community – A Plain Language Summary by Ryan Tannenbaum

### **Spelling brings it all together – how spelling can act as a bridge to many English skills**

A plain language study of *The pathway to English word reading in Chinese ESL children: the role of spelling*

#### ***Effective ways to build a variety of lower-level processing skills in Chinese language learners***

##### **What you need to know:**

Working on spelling with young learners can help them to build basic English skills, like letter knowledge, vocabulary knowledge, and phonemic awareness. In fact, spelling is great for this, because to spell correctly, students need to focus carefully on what the word sounds like, what sound different letters make, and what letters they should use.

##### **What is the research about?**

One of the best signs that students will be successful at English are their understanding of letters, vocabulary, and phonological awareness. Phonemes are the smallest parts of English words that make sounds, for example letters like “r”, “s”, “e”. Phonemes can also be groups of letters that, together, make one sound, like “th”, “sh”, “wh”.

Because these three skills are so valuable, researchers wanted to know if there was a way to help students build all three at the same time. They conducted research, and found that teaching spelling can help to improve students’ abilities in all three skills. This is because when students think how to spell a word, they need to concentrate on what the word sounds like, what letters it is made of, and, what the word means.

##### **What did the researchers do?**

The researchers tested 141 5-year-old Hong Kong kindergarteners, from six different kindergartens across Hong Kong. All of them spoke Cantonese as their first language, and English as their second. Students were from low to middle-class background.

The researchers met the students three times. The first time they met the children, they checked students’ phonological awareness, letter knowledge, and vocabulary knowledge.

The second time they met the students, they checked the students’ spelling ability.

Finally, the last time they met the students, they checked how well students could recognize different English words. These words were chosen from material that students were learning in school.

##### **What did the researchers find?**

The researchers found that spelling had a big effect on all the other skills that they tested – vocabulary knowledge, letter knowledge, phonemic awareness, and word recognition. In fact, while phonemic awareness and vocabulary knowledge helped students recognize English words, the students who were successful, had also mastered spelling.

The researchers advise that Chinese students spend a lot of time copying English and Chinese words in school, and so, because they focus so much on writing, spelling might play a bigger role for Chinese students than for students of other cultures.

As well, the group studied were Cantonese kindergarten students from Hong Kong. We should be careful before applying this to older Mandarin students from mainland China.

### **How can you use this research?**

When students practice spelling, they need to focus on English words in detail. By getting young learners to practice spelling words, and playing with invented spellings, it can help them develop their understanding of letters, vocabulary, and phonemes.

If we remember that many Chinese learners come from educational backgrounds that emphasize writing, and that their spoken English vocabulary is quite low, we can see that teaching spelling helps to build a lot of basic skills in young learners.

### **About the researchers:**

Dan Lin, Yingyi Liu, Huilin Sun, Richard Kwok Shing Wong, and Susanna Siu-sze Yeung ([siusze@eduhk.hk](mailto:siusze@eduhk.hk)) attend *The Education University of Hong Kong*, and are affiliated with the Department of Psychological studies, the Department of Early Childhood Education, and the Centre for Brain and Education.

### **Keywords:**

Bilingualism, Cantonese Hong Kong Learners, letter knowledge, vocabulary knowledge, phonemic awareness, word recognition, spelling

### **References:**

Lin, D., Liu, Y., Sun, H., Wong, R. K. S., & Yeung, S. S. S. (2017). The pathway to English word reading in Chinese ESL children: the role of spelling. *Reading and Writing, 30*(1), 87-103.