Surviving Spelling Tests

Most state curriculums probably have a standard in their K-8 Language Arts program worded something like this: Demonstrate knowledge of standard English spelling. Many teachers administer spelling tests on a weekly basis to teach and assess this standard. Spelling tests can be a true challenge to any educational interpreter. At the elementary level, many of the words will have a sign and you will be able to use that sign. Even with this "easy out," you will run into multi-meaning words and multi-word signs. Just how many ways are there to sign "run," depending on the individual meaning and sentence the teacher uses? And when baggage, suitcase, and luggage are all in the same spelling unit, how do you differentiate them in sign? There are several strategies that can be used singularly or together to survive the spelling tests.

As with most educationally related interpreting decisions, one of the first things to consider is the goal for the student. This could be simply identifying the misspelled or correctly spelled word or it could be for the student to be able to spell the word independently. If recognizing the word is the key, a multiple choice test with three incorrect spellings and one correct spelling could be used. Another option would be for a student to pick out the misspelled words from a text (sentence, paragraph, or story.) If the student needs to spell the word him/herself, the question becomes, "How do I express the word, particularly for words that have no exact sign equivalent, so that the student can write it?" There are a variety of visual based systems that can be used to interpret the spelling test, each with its own pros and cons.

One strategy for interpreting the words on a spelling test is to agree on a conceptual sign or conceptual sign string to express the word. For example, "vertigo" might be signed "DIZZY" or "soot" might be "CHIMNEY, BLACK touch-inside rub-fingers." While this might seem ideal and even can assist to expand a student's vocabulary and word choice, does it test the spelling of the word or knowledge of the word's definition? First a deaf student must identify the concept being signed, then find the right English word for that concept for the test, and then spell it. A hearing student only needs to identify the letters that make the sounds in that word. It also makes endings difficult to represent without switching to a SEE type of sign system.

A second strategy would be to fingerspell[1] the word. WHAT!?! Yes, I said finger*spell* the word, fluently, as it might be seen in a conversation among deaf individuals. When we read fingerspelling, we don't see each letter individually, we see the whole word as a unit, just as when you read a book, you don't read each letter of a word, you read the whole word as a unit. Also, when we fingerspell, we often drop letters, especially central vowels (at least I do!) The point being, if the student knows how to spell the word, he/she will recognize it and write it without a multitude of repetitions. The question then becomes, how many is too many repetitions? If the student is asking the teacher to repeat the word (like he/she should,) the teacher can make that determination. This is an ideal system for open spelling lists such as are found in spelling bees.

A third strategy could be to mouth the words, allowing the student to speechread the word from your lips instead of or in addition to the teacher's. This, particularly used with other manual methods, helps the student to identify and spell the correct word ("vertigo" not "dizzy.") Problems with this method can include prefixes and suffixes that look similar on the lips, such as "unexplainable" and

"inexplicable" or "liking" and "likely" as well as words that look similar if not used with a manual method ("fifty" and "fifteen.")

Cued Speech or Visual Phonics can also help to bridge the gap during spelling tests. Both of these systems provide visual access to the phonics of speech, but in different ways. Once learned, any word can be represented visually using specific handshapes and movements to represent the phonemes of a word. This system works well for open lists of words, such as spelling bees, where signs can't be decided ahead of time. One negative for both methods is the need to learn a new system, usually by bringing in trainers and spending a lot of time practicing before and while using it with students.

A final method that could be used is to give the definition and the student must determine what word to spell. While this is similar to the first strategy, I see this one as different in that we are purposefully using the meaning of the word instead of a conceptual synonym. For example, instead of "vertigo" being signed "DIZZY," you might use "PERSON FEEL DIZZY O-R PERSON SEE SEEM ROOM room-spins." Again, this is testing the student's knowledge of the definition which is not usually being tested in the hearing student. On the other hand, it could expand the student's word choice when writing to have seen both the word and its definition.

As mentioned before, several of these methods could be combined to communicate the desired word. In the end, the student needs to know the words on a closed list well enough to be able to identify the spelling word, no matter what method is used. For an open list, fingerspelling, Cued Speech, and Visual Phonics would be the best methods, with the use of mouthing the word to support speechreading.

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[1] Some professionals and research are suggesting fingerspelling be used for all spelling tests. See *A Case for Fingerspelling Spelling Tests* (http://www.natureofascension.org/TerpTap/edterp/2articles.html) for more information about the appropriateness of fingerspelling for tests.