

**The Benefits of
Multisensory
Spelling
Instruction**

By Beverly L. Adams-Gordon

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Castlemoyle Books

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The Benefits of Multisensory Spelling Instruction

As home educators we spend a great deal of our time thinking, talking, and learning about how to best teach our children essential spelling skills. You can be sure the conversation between two home educators will eventually include the topics of learning styles, multi-sensory teaching, and hands-on activities. Unfortunately, confusion (and sometimes conflict) can occur when these terms are used because they have multiple and overlapping definitions.

The main problem you may encounter is that there are two meanings in common use for the term “learning style”. The original use of this term refers to the sensory pathway or modality through which your student finds it easiest to learn. There are four generally recognized sensory modalities: visual (sight); auditory (hearing); tactile (touch); and kinesthetic (movement). The modern definition of “learning style” encompasses a much broader look at how your student approaches learning situations and tasks. It often includes a complete profile of how a student functions as a learner. In addition to preferred modality, some of the areas profiled are optimal learning environment (such as best time of day, lighting, temperature and noise level), how his personality effects his motivation (such as the need for or avoidance of competition), his natural areas of competencies or intelligence and so on.

Research conducted by Gertrude Hildreth in the first half of the twentieth century found a direct correlation between a student’s favored learning modality and his spelling ability. Students whose favored modality is primarily visual find learning to spell almost effortless and are often referred to as “natural spellers.” They can tell whether a word “looks” right or wrong at a glance and often excel at spelling even when not taught spelling as a separate, formal subject. These are the lucky learners for whom the advice “teach them phonics and give them lots of good reading materials and they’ll learn to spell” actually works.

Unfortunately, not all learners are visual learners. Poor spellers, more often than not, learn best through a modality other than visual recall. Kinesthetic learners need movement that involves the large body muscles to learn efficiently. They find writing a word several times using whole arm

movements to be the most helpful way to master spelling words. When asked how to spell a word, it is not uncommon to hear the kinesthetic learner say, “just a second, let me write it down.” Their dependence on their motor-memory of a word’s spelling requires them to “feel” whether a word is correctly spelled.

Quick, expeditious spelling sessions are most effective for kinesthetic learners because they tend to find it hard to sit still and focus for long periods. Because of the focus on movement and exploration of concepts, kinesthetic learners often benefit from “hands-on” curriculum approaches when learning spelling skills and rules. While hands-on learning includes kinesthetic elements, they are not one and the same approaches. The concept of a hands-on curriculum goes beyond mere use of movement in learning. In addition to physical activity, hands-on learning also involves completing projects, researching information, investigating concepts and experiencing phenomena. Good hands-on learning is not accidental, it is the result of careful planning by the teacher (or program planner) so that the student “discovers” concepts.

To learn the spelling of words, an auditory learner depends on remembering the sounds of the letters being recited in order. For the auditory learner it doesn’t matter who is doing the reciting, it could a recording, his teacher, or even himself. Chanting the spelling of a word in a rhythmic or singsong way is even more likely to help the auditory student recall the correct spelling of a word and motivate him to complete the necessary repetition required to learn the material. Spelling riddles, silly songs about the spelling rules and exceptions, and other activities that “play with sound” greatly appeal to and aid recall for these students. Because auditory learners naturally focus on sound patterns, they benefit more when spelling words are grouped by sound patterns rather than the grapheme (written) patterns that are typically used in “phonics for reading” programs. Because they depend so heavily on their auditory memory and the related phonetic cues, it is crucial that the teacher check that the student can properly pronounce his spelling words.

The tactile learner absorbs information best through the act of physically touching that requires small motor movements and activities that emphasize “feeling” an item with the tips of his fingers. He may initially appear to be an auditory or kinesthetic learner, but he is actually learning through the tactile impressions made as he writes or recites the spelling of a word. Individuals in this last group recall the spelling in terms of the lip and throat movements made when spelling the word aloud for himself.

Tracing the word with the tips of his fingers or feeling the shape of the word also helps the tactile learner master his spelling words. In this regard, adding pleasant textures or sensations creates a stronger neural impression of the words. In the past, tactile and kinesthetic learners were often lumped together. However, some of the most current research on how the brain functions shows that two distinct and separate areas of the brain are responsible for storing these two types of sensory input.

Armed with the information above, it may be tempting to assume you should determine the student's favored learning mode and then teach him accordingly. This would be a mistake. Teaching using only one learning modality could result in the neglect of important spelling skills. Proofreading is an example of an essential spelling and writing skill that is primarily visual. It is a skill that does not come naturally to a non-visual learner. To become a competent proofreader, your student must be helped to develop visual discrimination skills. He should be taught to look at the whole word in isolation, with special attention to the shape or outline of the word. He should also look carefully at the word syllable by syllable to see if there are any peculiar combinations of letters, unexpected spellings or any "silent" letters used to spell the word. Finally, he must be given a systematic approach to proofreading his own and others' writing.

Your student's dominant learning modality may also have developmental implications. For example, very young children are known to learn mainly through auditory modalities; early school-aged students tend to use more kinesthetic and concrete avenues; and as a student nears adolescence, he tends to rely more and more on his abstract and analytical reasoning along with his visual recall. Skills taught using only one learning modality may need to be retaught using another modality as he enters each new developmental level and begins to depend more on another learning modality to store and retrieve information. Teaching using multiple learning modalities eliminates this inefficiency.

Research has consistently shown that use of simultaneous multi-sensory teaching and learning approaches are critical for students who have moderate to severe learning disabilities. In the mid-1920's, Dr. Samuel T. Orton and his colleagues Anna Gillingham and Bessie Stillman, first began using multi-sensory techniques with his dyslexic students. Orton was influenced by Grace Fernald and Helen Keller's descriptions of the kinesthetic methods used by Dr. Maria Montessori at the 1915 Panama-Pacific Exposition at San Francisco. Orton correctly theorized that Montessori's use of kinesthetic reinforcement of visual and auditory associations would correct the tendency to reverse letters and transpose

the sequence of letters his dyslexic students made while reading and writing. Their program, which includes multi-sensory learning as well as other important concepts is commonly called the Orton-Gillingham approach.

More recent research shows that the more senses we incorporate into the learning process the more efficient learning becomes for all types of learners. Rhonda Farkus (2003, *The Journal of Educational Research*, Vol 97, No. 1) states, "The power of evidence supporting the benefits of learning-style methodology is compelling. Achievement test scores of students taught using their preferred modalities were statistically higher than of students who were not taught using their favored learning modalities. Moreover, when students were taught with multi-sensory instructional resources, (although initially through their most preferred modality), scores further increased."

Multi-sensory instruction is a powerful tool for reinforcing our language teaching in three important ways. First, it helps get the information across. Second, it helps the students process the information. And, third, it helps students more easily retrieve information already learned. Using a variety of senses simply opens up more doorways into the brain.

What is the Orton-Gillingham Approach?

Many programs today claim to be based on the “Orton-Gillingham approach.” Some do incorporate methods and principles first described in this foundational work, as well as other practices supported by more recent research. Others’ only connection to the “Orton-Gillingham approach” is their claim to be based on it used in their advertising. Unfortunately, because like Maria Montessori’s name, the name “Orton-Gillingham Approach” was not specifically trademarked anyone can use it without violating the law. So what should a parent look for when selecting language arts approaches according to this method? Below (in the side box?) you will find some of the key principles that should be included in an effective language arts program claiming to be an “Orton-Gillingham Approach.”

Key principles of multi-sensory language approaches include:

- ***Simultaneous, Multi-sensory (VAKT):*** Teaching using all learning pathways (i.e., visual, auditory, kinesthetic and tactile) simultaneously and sequentially to enhance learning and memory is essential to the multi-sensory approach.
- **Systematic and Cumulative Approach:** Multi-sensory language instruction requires that the organization of material follow a logical order. The sequence must begin with the easiest and most basic concepts and progress methodically to more difficult material (i.e. in the case of spelling words from the easiest, most-frequently-used words to the harder, less-frequently-used words.) Each concept must also be based on those already learned. Concepts taught must be systematically reviewed to strengthen memory.
- **Direct Instruction:** The inferential learning of any concept cannot be taken for granted. Multi-sensory language instruction requires direct teaching of all concepts through direct and continuous student-teacher interaction and observation
- **Diagnostic Teaching:** The teaching plan is based on careful and continuous assessment of the individual student’s needs. The content presented must be mastered step-by-step for the student to progress to the next skill, group of words, or level.

- **Synthetic and Analytic Instruction:** Multi-sensory, structured language programs include both synthetic and analytic instruction. Synthetic instruction presents the parts of the language and then teaches how the parts work together to form a whole. Analytic instruction presents the whole and teaches how this can be broken down into its component parts.

- **Comprehensive and Inclusive:** All aspect of the language skill or skill subset are addressed, often in parallel, including sounds (phonemes), symbols (graphemes), meaningful word parts (morphemes), word and phrase meanings (semantics), sentences (syntax), longer passages (discourse), and the social uses of language (pragmatics).

Meet Beverly L. Adams-Gordon

Beverly L. Adams-Gordon is an internationally known speaker and author. Honored in 1996 as Writer of the Year by the American Christian Writers Association, she has written over 500 magazine and newspaper articles and seven educational books. Mrs. Adams-Gordon conducts teacher in-service programs and workshops on a variety of educational topics. She is a popular speaker at home education conferences throughout the United States and Canada.



Beverly's background in engineering, classroom teaching, and home schooling make her a uniquely qualified educational writer and speaker. She has taught preschool, kindergarten, first grade, multi-age third through sixth grade, as well as high school level science classes.

During the 1987-88 school year, Beverly and her husband John began home schooling their two oldest daughters, Amelia and Angelia. After being home educated through their Senior High School years, both girls have gone on to higher education and vocations. The Gordons' youngest daughter, Merina Ann began Kindergarten at home in September, 1999. Merina is now 16 years old and doing (mostly) 10th grade work at home. She has grown up an active participant in our business.

When Beverly isn't teaching, writing or speaking, you'll usually find her at home enjoying her last few years of the home school adventure with Merina, serving tea in the bookstore or spoiling her five beautiful grandchildren.

You may view a list and description of some of Beverly's and her husband's workshops and seminars. For more information or a speaker's kit, which includes a sample tape of Beverly speaking, have your seminar coordinator call Castlemoyle Books (toll free) at 1-888-773-5586 or email her at beverly@castlemoyle.com.

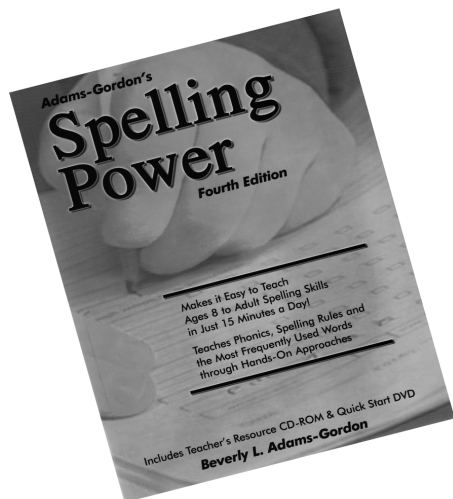
Books by Beverly L. Adams-Gordon

Spelling Power
Spelling Power Activity Task Cards
Spelling Power Skill Builder CD-ROM
Home School, High School and Beyond
Spelling Power Teacher Training DVD
Writing power (Out of Print)
God's Living Creation (out of print)
Functional Grammar & Sentence Building (In production phase)
Tools for Teaching Discovery Science (in research phase)
Project Discovery: The Plant Kingdom (in research phase)

Spelling

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Note: Canadian/British alternate spellings appear in brackets behind the American spellings on the word lists (for example: color [colour], making it possible for non-American spellers to use Adams-Gordon's Spelling Power.



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Spelling



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Update your Spelling Power 3rd & 10th Anniversary Eds. with these Resources:

(Note: These resources are included with 4th ed. Spelling Power manuals.)

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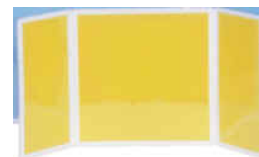
Use these kits to add to your spelling kit. The kits work together and are great for more advanced spellers!

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