
Escriure en català. Un estudi del coneixement ortogràfic a tercer de primària

Joaquim Arnau i Querol

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Spelling has been one of the most problematic aspects of language learning for years. As Joaquim Arnau notes, orthography is a complex instrument created to represent speech, and students have to be guided in order to progress in their mastery of spelling conventions and also need to be helped so that they can understand the nature of this instrument.

On the one hand, spelling is an important part of the standard rules that any language needs to ensure its purpose as a tool of communication and culture. On the other, the current forms of exchange and information via mobile phones and computers have ousted the letter as a traditional form of communication. Yet they have not diminished written communication; to the contrary, it has become even more prevalent in everyday life and the professional world. Given this, it is important to bear in mind that spelling is not only about writing a word correctly but also includes the rules and customs for transcribing the words of a spoken language.

In any case, mastery of spelling still has as much value as a social marker as Alexandre Galí noted almost one century ago. But despite that the acquisition of spelling has declined in society in a worrisome way. Proof of this is the disturbing fact that Spain's Ministry of the Interior removed the spelling test from the selection of candidates to join the police force in 2022, given that 75% of them failed it.

In view of facts like this, we can deduce that the candidates, and much of the rest of the population, were not properly and efficiently taught how to write. Nor we cannot ignore the fact that in the majority of our primary and secondary schools, practice shows that the traditional approaches of penalising spelling mistakes and memorising spelling rules still survive, perhaps with the addition of phono-technical exercises.

In academia, too, some people are advocating measures to simplify spelling, which is not free of social and media controversy, like the one that emerged around the Catalan spelling reforms approved by the Institut d'Estudis Catalans in 2017. Yet at the same time, this controversy shows society's interest in the language and its spelling.

Given this backdrop, *Escriure en català. Un estudi del coneixement ortogràfic a tercer de primària* (Writing in Catalan: A Study of Orthographic Knowledge in Third Grade) proposes an in-depth reconsideration of how to teach spelling. This research is of keen interest, since there are so few studies on how spelling is learned, and most of those that exist have questionable theoretical and methodological foundations. In this work, Joaquim Arnau studies the orthographic knowledge of Catalan of 60 Catalan-speaking and Spanish-speaking students in three third-grade classrooms based on the analysis of six texts that each student wrote.

Thus, for the first time in Catalonia, he has performed an assessment by analysing these texts phoneme-by-phoneme and coming up with categories of mistakes. This approach affords a unique new perspective that shows the factors explaining the knowledge of spelling: learning processes, exposure to written texts and phonological and morphological factors, as well as the nature of the mistakes, which is extremely important in order for teachers to provide the necessary feedback.

Joaquim Arnau shows how conventional mistakes, both phonological and purely orthographic, comprise a little over 80% of total mistakes. The remainder reflect three types of processes: phonic discrimination, and sublexical and lexical processes.

The author also notes that the way learners store words' orthographic structures is neither rote memory nor purely associative. Likewise, he outlines the most prominent factors that explain students' right and wrong spellings and spotlights the areas where they have the most difficulties.

Just as Alexandre Galí had done, the research highlights the fact that the number of mistakes drops if the learners have constant, sustained contact with reading and writing activities, a factor that is as important as knowledge of the rules and school learning.

Professor Arnau Querol clarifies the fact that learning spelling is not a visual process. It is not about memorising the sequence of letters in a word, as we would do when memorising an arbitrary list. What learners do is establish increasingly precise relationships between phonemes and graphemes. This is joined by the fact that from a developmental perspective, the learning process involves turning weak connections between phonemes and graphemes into ever stronger ones.

Likewise, the work also assesses the place of spelling in the teaching of the curricular contents, as well as when students should begin to learn spelling. It outlines mistaken conceptions about learning spelling, in which the learning process, the nature of learners' mistakes and the factors explaining how spelling is learned are seldom taken into account. The author notes the

difficulties of training teachers in this field and avoiding passive, boring situations for both students and teachers. And conversely, he encourages training to be provided in the diagnosis of spelling competence and lists general principles which could form the foundation of teaching strategies for the meaningful learning of spelling.

A second way that this study is quite useful is that it helps readers to view the issue of spelling from the standpoint of children, so that teachers can perceive the explanations behind their right or wrong spelling based on each student's logic. This helps us to reflect on orthography's conventional nature and the reasons justifying the rules, while also taking a comparative look at spelling systems and solutions adopted by the other languages that the children are studying at school.

Therefore, Joaquim Arnau's research encourages teachers to break with the old approaches and prejudices about how we learn spelling. It is an invitation to do away with the customary punishment for spelling mistakes and instead build teaching strategies that are more efficient in practice, based on an understanding of the basis of each student's right and wrong spelling. Thus, students are given clues to improve their own learning in a more individual or group way, working from Rosa Sensat i Vilà's premise that, in education, sometimes you need to learn how to apparently waste time in order to ultimately gain it.

References

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