

ACCURACY IN SPELLING

Q: For students who have a diagnosed learning disability which impacts their ability to spell, how should I handle this on a test or a quiz? There are times when the spelling doesn't even remotely give a hint as to what the actual word is. But, when I ask the student what he or she was striving to communicate, they usually can tell me.

A: if the student can tell you the answer, then your assessment (whether test or quiz) should allow for 'multi-modal' answers: written, spoken, signed...

I think you need to be clear, at each stage, exactly what it is you are trying to test for, and to allow the student to use any means that will demonstrate that.

For example: if you want to know if a student has understood a foreign word or phrase, he/she might write down the English, tell you (or speak into a recording device you can mark later), point to a picture or a written word, carry out a mime or other action that demonstrates understanding.

If the student is given the English item and needs to demonstrate knowledge of the foreign word or phrase, then what exactly is it you want to know? How it sounds? How it looks when written down? Whether the student can find the word in a body of text or recognise it in a list of options.

If you really need to know if the student can spell the word correctly, then you might have to admit they can't. But perhaps, having admitted that, you might want to know if the student has acquired the skills to **discover** the right spelling, either by using a foreign spell checker or otherwise selecting the correct spelling from a list of options. This is valid, I think, because we can't cure the dyslexia, or whatever, but we can (and should) be able to show the student techniques for mitigating the ill effects of the disability in real life. By simply asking for the correct spelling we can destroy hope. By showing how the correct spelling might be found we give the student the means to succeed where otherwise he/she would have failed. And yes, I'm sure they should be given credit for that.

Incidentally, I have heard that some dyslexic students can spell more correctly when using a keyboard than when using a pen or pencil? This seems to be because it uses parts of the body that have a memory of their own (well, can you put your car into reverse gear with the wrong hand?) and draws upon spatial awareness and kinetic patterns of movement that may (in time and with practice) become automatic. It might be worth conducting an experiment with interested pupils to see if this does help, e.g. practice typing the word while learning it, as well as trying to commit it to memory.

In a school where we taught below average students touch typing (we called it 'keyboard skills'), the results were astounding across all subject areas. Whereas they had always been reluctant to engage in any tasks that involved handwriting, they began to produce longer and more accurate pieces of work that they could be proud of, they did it more willingly and they completed it more quickly. Might be worth involving your Learning Skills colleagues in some study like that?

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(with thanks to Marcy Webb of Watkinson School, Hartford, Connecticut for the original question)