Second Edition

Teaching ESL/EFL Reading and Writing

I.S.P. Nation and John Macalister

ESL & APPLIED LINGUISTICS PROFESSIONAL SERIES

Teaching ESL/EFL Reading and Writing

The second edition of this bestselling text, *Teaching ESL/EFL Reading and Writing*, is a fully updated and expanded guide for teaching learners at all levels of proficiency how to develop their reading and writing skills and fluency. Practical and accessible, this book covers a diverse array of language teaching techniques suitable for all contexts.

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Teaching ESL/EFL Reading and Writing is designed for practising and pre-service teachers of all levels, and is ideal for certificate, diploma, masters, and doctoral courses in English as a second or foreign language.

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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
NEW YORK AND LONDON

Second edition published 2021
by Routledge
52 Vanderbilt Avenue, New York, NY 10017

and by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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First edition published by Routledge 2008

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Nation, I. S. P., author. | Macalister, John, 1956- author.
Title: Teaching ESL/EFL reading and writing / I. S. P. Nation and John Macalister.
Identifiers: LCCN 2020013375 | ISBN 9780367433772 (hardback) | ISBN 9780367433765 (paperback) | ISBN 9781003002765 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: English language—Study and teaching—Foreign speakers. | English language—Rhetoric—Study and teaching. | English teachers—Training of.
Classification: LCC PE1128.A2 N345 2021 | DDC 428.0071—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2020013375

ISBN: 978-0-367-43377-2 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-0-367-43376-5 (pbk)
ISBN: 978-1-003-00276-5 (ebk)

Typeset in Sabon
by MPS Limited, Dehradun

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Preface

This book (and its companion book *Teaching ESL/EFL Listening and Speaking* which is also available in a second edition) is intended for teachers of English as a second or foreign language. It can be used both by experienced teachers and for teachers in training. In its earlier forms this book has been used on graduate diploma and masters level courses, and with teachers in training.

The second edition of this book contains numerous changes and updatings, and contains three new chapters: Chapter 2 "Using the Four Strands to Plan a Reading or Writing Course", Chapter 9 "Writing and Digital Technology", and Chapter 12 "Applying Principles to Reading and Writing Courses", making a total of 12 chapters. Chapter 4 has a lot of changes largely as a result of a recent book, *Teaching Extensive Reading in Another Language* (Nation & Waring, 2020).

In this second edition, each chapter is now followed by three tasks and suggestions for further reading that could be used with teachers in training. The tasks focus on understanding and applying some of the ideas covered in the chapter.

Several of the techniques described in this book can be found at https://tinyurl.com/Language-Teaching-Techniques. The videos are short and very practical and are a useful supplement to the descriptions in this book.

The book has three major features. First, it has a strong practical emphasis - around a hundred teaching techniques are described in the book. Second, it tries to provide a balanced programme for developing the skills of reading and writing. It does this by using a framework called the four strands. These are called strands because they run through the whole course. They are the strands of meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning, and fluency development. In a well-balanced language program covering the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, each of the four strands should have roughly equal amounts of time. The organisation of the book largely reflects these four strands. Third, wherever possible, the ideas in this book are research based. This is reflected in the principles which are

described at the end of Chapter 1 and in Chapter 12, and which are referred to throughout the book. The idea which lies behind these principles is that it is not a wise idea to closely follow a particular method of language teaching, such as communicative language teaching or the direct method. It is much more sensible to draw where possible on research-based principles which can be adapted or discarded as new research evidence becomes available.

The book is written using clear and simple language. Wherever possible, technical terms have been avoided. However in a few cases, with terms such as *phonics*, *topic type*, and *extensive reading*, technical terms have been used and explained in the text. This book thus does not require any previous knowledge of second-language acquisition theory or language teaching methodology. The book takes account of the effects of digital technology on the nature of reading and writing and the teaching and learning of reading and writing.

The first six chapters look at reading, and the next five at writing. Chapter 1 compares first and second-language reading. Chapter 2 looks at planning a well-balanced language course. Chapter 3 focuses on intensive reading. Chapters 4 and 5 look at extensive reading and fluency. Chapter 6 looks at assessing reading, giving particular attention to the reasons for testing. Chapter 7 presents a range of ways for supporting writing. Chapter 8 examines the writing process and Chapter 9 looks at how digital technology can affect the writing process. Chapter 10 has relevance for both reading and writing, looking at topic types which describe the kinds of information contained in different kinds of texts. Chapter 11 examines a range of ways that can be used to respond to written work. Finally, Chapter 12 looks at some important principles of language learning and how they apply to reading and writing.

As a result of working through this book, teachers should be able to design a well-balanced reading and writing course which provides a good range of opportunities for learning. The teacher's most important job is to plan so that the learners are learning useful things, so that the best conditions for learning occur, and so that the learners are getting a balance of learning opportunities. This book should help teachers do this.

The reviewers of the book before it was published provided many helpful and frank comments which helped us to see the book through others' eyes. We are very grateful for this. Both this book and its companion volume, *Teaching ESL/EFL Listening and Speaking*, were largely written and used in teacher training courses before they were offered for publication. There was thus lot of input from the teachers who were studying on these courses.

We would feel that the book's purpose has been achieved if, as a result of reading it, teachers learn some new techniques and activities,

understand why these activities are used and how they relate to principles of learning, and see how they fit into the larger well-balanced program.

Teaching English and training teachers of English are challenging but very rewarding professions. We have been involved in them for a very long time and they have given us a great deal of enjoyment. We hope that this enjoyment is apparent in the book and that the book will help readers gain similar enjoyment.

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1 Learning to Read in Another Language

Learning to Read in the First Language

People learn to read their first language in a wide variety of circumstances. The following description is of a fortunate child in a fortunate country where reading is well prepared for and well taught. An excellent account of the teaching of reading to native speakers in New Zealand can be found in Smith and Elley (1997).

Children are prepared for reading at an early age by listening to stories, being read to, and interacting with adults and others about the stories they hear. This is done not with the main purpose of preparing a child for reading but as a way that parents and others interact with and entertain and educate children. The interaction involves asking questions about what is going to happen in the story, getting the child to complete sentences in a known story, talking about the interesting and scary parts of the story, and generally having fun.

When children start to learn to read, they already have a large vocabulary of several thousand words which includes most of the words they will meet in early reading. They also have good control of the grammar of the language, have a lot of knowledge about books and reading conventions, and have had many, many stories read to them. They are very keen to learn how to read.

They begin formal schooling at the age of about five. The teacher and learners work with books that are interesting, well illustrated, use language that is close to spoken language, and not too long. The texts contain a lot of repetition and are often very predictable but in an interesting way.

The techniques used to teach reading are largely meaning-focused; that is, they give primary attention to understanding and enjoying the story. They include shared reading, guided reading, and independent reading. A small amount of attention may be given to phonological awareness, phonics, and spelling, but this is in the context of enjoying the story and only takes a very small amount of time. Let us now look at the typical techniques used to teach reading to young native speakers.

Shared Reading

The learners gather round the teacher and the teacher reads a story to the learners from a very large "blown-up" book while showing them the pictures and the written words. The teacher involves the learners in the reading by asking them what they think will happen next and getting them to comment on the story. Where they can, the learners read the words aloud together. The procedure is an attempt to make the shared-book activity like a parent reading a child a bedtime story.

The learners are asked to choose what blown-up book they want read to them and the same book may be used in the shared-book activity on several occasions. In the later readings, the learners are expected to join in the reading much more. At other times, learners can get the small version of the blown-up book and read it individually or in pairs. After a reading, the learners draw, write, act out the story, or study some of the language in the story.

The shared-book activity is a very popular reading activity in New Zealand pre-schools and primary schools. It was developed by a New Zealander, Don Holdaway, and is such a normal part of a primary teacher's repertoire that publishers now print blown-up book versions of popular children's books.

The purpose of the shared-book activity is to get the learners to see the fun element in reading. In the activity, this fun comes from the interesting story, the interaction between the teacher and the learners in predicting and commenting on the story, and the rereading of favourite stories.

Teachers can make blown-up books (Ministry of Education, 1993). Although a blown-up book takes some time to make, it will be used and re-used and well repays the effort of making it or the cost of buying it. The books also make attractive displays in the classroom. There are also commercially produced blown-up books. You can search for them on the internet (search for "Big books for children"). Titles include *Where Do Monsters Live?*, *Bears, Bears Everywhere*, *Mr Noisy*, and *What Do You See?* The shared-book activity was used in one of the experimental groups in the Elley and Mangubhai (1981) Book Flood experiment.

Guided Reading

Guided reading can be done silently or with a child reading aloud to a friend, parent or teacher. Before the reading the learner and teacher talk about the book. Research by Wong and McNaughton (1980) showed that for the learner they studied, pre-reading discussion resulted in a greater percentage of words initially correct, and a greater percentage of errors self-corrected. The teacher and the learner look at the title of the book and make sure that all the words in the title are known. Then they talk about the pictures in the story and make predictions about what

might happen in the story. They also talk about any knowledge the learner already has about the topic. Important words in the story are talked about but need not be pointed to in their written form. So, before the learner actually starts to read the story, the ideas and important words in the story are talked about and clarified. Then the learner begins to read.

If the learner is reading aloud to the teacher, then it is good to use the pause, prompt, praise procedure (Glynn et al., 1989; Smith & Elley, 1997: 134–136). This means that when the learner starts to struggle over a word the teacher does not rush in with the answer but pauses for the learner to have time to make a good attempt at it. If the learner continues to struggle the teacher gives a helpful prompt, either from the meaning of the story or sentence or from the form of the word. When the learner finally reads the word correctly the teacher then praises the attempt.

If the learner is reading silently, then a part of the text is read and there is a discussion of what has just been read and the next part of the text.

Independent Reading

In independent reading the learner chooses a book to read and quietly gets on with reading it. During this quiet period of class time, the teacher may also read or may use the time as an opportunity for individual learners to come up to read to the teacher. In beginners' classes there is a set time each day for independent reading and learners are expected to read out of class as well, often taking books home from school.

Learning to read is also helped by learning to write and learning through listening. In writing as in reading, first-language teachers emphasise the communication of messages and expect the learners to gradually approximate normal writing over a period of time.

Research indicates that the best age to learn to read is about six to seven years old. Starting early at five has no long-term advantages and may make it more difficult for some learners to experience success in reading. At the age of about six or seven children are intellectually ready to begin reading.

It should be clear from this description that native speakers learning to read have the advantage of bringing a lot of language knowledge and a lot of experience to learning to read. They might have the disadvantage of beginning to learn a complex skill when they may not be quite ready for it.

Learning to Read in Another Language

There are numerous factors that affect the difficulty of learning to read in another language. Table 1.1 focuses on three factors but as the footnote to the table suggests there are other factors that are important particularly when working with a group of learners. Let us look at the factors in

Table 1.1 L1\L2 differences for an individual beginning to read

Constraints	*General effects*	*Particular effects*
L1 beginning readers already know a lot of the language they are beginning to read (sounds, vocabulary, grammar, discourse). L2 learners do not.	Learning to read an L2 involves a great deal of language learning.	L2 learners need very controlled texts. L2 learners need a greater amount of pre-reading activities.
L2 beginners can already read in their L1.	They have general cognitive skills. They have preconceptions and attitudes to reading. They have language specific skills. There will be interference and facilitation effects.	They do not need to learn what they can transfer from the L1. They may need to change attitudes to reading. Learners may have to learn a different writing system.
L2 beginners are usually older than L1 beginners.	L2 learners have greater metalinguistic and metacognitive awareness.	It is easy to transfer L1 skills. L2 learners can use more explicit approaches and tools like dictionaries.

Note: This table has been kept simple by focusing on only one learner who is just beginning to read. It is more complicated if you have several learners with different L1s, different L2 proficiencies, different L1 reading proficiencies, and different motivations for reading.

Table 1.1 by focusing on a learner from a particular language background, Thai, who is in the very early stages of learning English. The learner is 12 years old and can already read fluently in Thai.

A Thai learner beginning to read English will know very little English vocabulary. There are English loan words in Thai like *free*, but a Thai learner might not realise that they have an English origin. This means that the initial reading material will need to be much more controlled than the material aimed at young native speakers of English who already know close to three thousand words. Thai learners may also need much more preparation or pre-teaching before they start on their reading. These are all disadvantages. There are, however, numerous advantages that the Thai learner has. First, the Thai learner can already read Thai and so knows a lot about reading. Thai is an alphabetic language so the Thai learner is already very familiar with the alphabetic principle; that is, that letters can represent sounds and these letters can go together to make up words. Thai script is not related to English script so the Thai learner will have to spend time learning letter shapes. An Italian learner of English does not have this problem because Italian uses substantially the same script as English.

Second, if the Thai learner is good at reading Thai, the learner will have many reading strategies like guessing from context, scanning, skimming, and careful decoding which could be carried over to the reading of English if the conditions for reading were suitable. There is evidence, for example, that training in increasing reading speed in the first language can transfer to another language if the materials in the other language are at a suitable level (Bismoko & Nation, 1974; Cramer, 1975). Third, reading is largely a valued and enjoyed activity in Thai society so there may also be positive attitudes to reading carried over to English. Fourthly, a 12-year-old is much more able to learn to read than a five-year-old. A 12-year-old has much more developed cognitive skills and is much more able to learn from direct instruction.

Learning to Recognise and Spell Words

An essential part of the reading skill is the skill of being able to recognise written forms and to connect them with their spoken forms and their meanings. This involves recognising known words and also deciphering unfamiliar words.

There has been considerable debate in first-language reading over the role and nature of direct systematic teaching of word-recognition skills. (See Moorman, Blanton, and McLaughlin, 1994 for an example of this.) There is also debate over the role of form-focused activities like reading aloud (see Griffin, 1992; Rounds, 1992; Mullock, 2008). The position taken in this book (see Chapter 2) is that there needs to be a balance of the four strands of meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning and fluency development, and there is thus a role for appropriate amounts of formal word-recognition instruction in the language-focused learning strand. The principles that should guide this formal teaching are that most attention should be given to rules and items that occur frequently, that are simple, and that are regular.

Prerequisites for Formal Reading Instruction

To be able to benefit from instruction on spelling rules, learners need to (1) know at least some of the letter shapes, (2) be aware that words are made up of separable sounds (phonemic awareness), (3) know basic English writing conventions (we read from left to right, beginning at the top and moving down the page), and (4) know the spoken forms of most of the words that will be met in the initial stages of reading.

Learning Letter Shapes

If a second-language learner is already able to read in their first language, and their first language uses the same alphabet as English, then little if any letter-shape learning will be needed.

Phonemic Awareness

Phonemic awareness is the knowledge that spoken words are made up of sounds that can be separated; that is, that /kæt/ (cat) is made up of the sounds /k æ t/. If the learner can already read in their first language and the writing system of the first language is alphabetic, the learner will already have phonemic awareness. Here is a classic test of phonemic awareness (Yopp, 1988).

> Today we're going to play a different word game. I'm going to say a word, and I want you to break the word apart. You are going to tell me each sound in the word in order. For example, if I say *old*, you will say *o-l-d*. Let's try a few words together.
> (Three more examples are given: *ride*, *go*, *man*) Total score = 22. Takes about 5–10 minutes.

dog	lay	keep	race
fine	zoo	no	three
she	job	wave	in
grew	ice	that	at
red	top	me	by
sat	do		

In essence, phonemic awareness is not awareness of particular sounds. It is awareness of the general principle that words are made up of separable sounds. It is likely that learners who are not literate in their L1 but who are above the age of seven or eight will already have phonemic awareness in their L1 but this should be checked.

Learners who are between four and six years old could be tested for phonemic awareness and, if necessary, could be given phonemic awareness practice which is just like the test above. Phonemic awareness activities should be done with known words and should be fun.

Phonemic awareness and letter knowledge are the two best predictors of how well first-language children just entering school will do at learning to read during the first two years of school. Phonemic awareness training can have positive long-term effects on spelling.

In the vast majority of cases, learners of English as a second language will not need phonemic awareness activities because they will already have this knowledge.

Writing Conventions

English has the following writing conventions. Not all languages follow the same conventions.

1 Writing goes from left to right (cf. Arabic – right to left, Japanese – top to bottom).
2 The lines of writing go down the page (cf. Japanese).
3 The pages go from front to back (cf. Japanese – back to front).
4 Words are separated by spaces (cf. Thai – no spaces between words).
5 Sentences begin with a capital letter and end with a full stop, question mark, or exclamation mark.
6 Quotation marks are used to signal speech or citation.
7 English has upper-case (capital) letters and lower-case (small) letters. The use of capital letters may carry an extra meaning.
8 Sentences are organised into paragraphs.
9 In formal and academic writing there are conventions that need to be learned, such as the use of bold and italics, the use of headings and subheadings, the use of indentation, the use of footnotes, the use of references, and page numbering.

In early reading, learners may need to be checked for knowledge of these conventions, and some may need to be pointed out and explained.

Spoken Language and Reading

The experience approach to reading is based on the idea that, when learning to read, learners should bring a lot of experience and knowledge to their reading so that they only have to focus on small amounts of new information. Sylvia Ashton-Warner's (1963) approach to teaching young native speakers to read is an excellent example of this. Here are the steps in her approach.

1 Each learner draws a picture illustrating something that recently happened to them or something that they are very interested in.
2 One by one the learners take their picture to the teacher who asks them what it is about.
3 The teacher then writes the learner's description exactly as the learner said it, using the same words the learner said, even if it is non-standard English.
4 This then becomes the learner's reading text for that day. The learner reads it back to the teacher and then takes it away to practise reading it, and to read it to classmates, friends, and family.
5 These pictures and texts all written by the same learner are gathered together to be a personal reading book for that learner.

Note that most of the knowledge needed to read and comprehend the text is directly within the experience of the learner. The ideas come from the learner, the words and sentences come from the learner, and the organisation of the text comes from the learner. The only learning

needed is to match the new written forms provided by the teacher with this knowledge.

It is possible to learn to read a foreign language without being able to speak it, but learning to read is much easier if the learner already has spoken control of the language features that are being met in the reading. Reading texts used with young native speakers of English use language that is already known to them and that are on topics that interest them. However, young native speakers learning to read have an oral vocabulary size of around 3,000 words. Non-native speakers will have a very much smaller English vocabulary and so if native-speaker texts are used to teach second-language reading, they need to be checked to make sure that they contain known and useful vocabulary.

Phonics and the Alphabetic Principle

Learning phonics is learning the systematic relationships between written letters and sounds; for example, learning that the written form p is usually pronounced /p/. At a very general level, learning phonics means learning the alphabetic principle; that is, that letters and groups of letters represent sounds in a largely systematic way. At a detailed level, learning phonics involves learning the range of spelling–sound correspondences that exist in a particular language (see Appendix 1).

Some languages like Chinese do not follow the alphabetic principle. They do not have separate letters that represent the individual sounds that go together to make a spoken word. Other languages follow the alphabetic principle in a very regular way. The Māori language for example has 12 consonant sounds and five vowel sounds (ten if long and short versions of vowels are not counted as the same sound). These are represented by 11 consonant letters and five vowel letters. The only exceptions to a one letter–one sound (not necessarily one phoneme) rule are that the letters wh represent a sound which is not /w/ plus /h/, and the letters ng represent a sound /ŋ/ which is not /n/ plus /g/. After a few lessons in Māori pronunciation, it is possible for anyone familiar with the English alphabet to learn all the Māori spelling–sound correspondences in a few minutes.

This is an over-simplification because there are different dialects of Māori. However, there are frequent, systematic relationships in English that can provide a good basis for effective phonics instruction (see Appendix 1). Here are some English spelling–sound rules that are regular and very frequent. The letter b is pronounced /b/, f - /f/, k - /k/, m - /m/, v - /v/. There are exceptions to these rules, but most of the exceptions are rule-based (bb - /b/, mm - /m/) or do not occur in many words.

As a fluent reader of English, you already know the regular rules and can thus make a reasonable pronunciation of written words that you have probably never seen before – *lyncean*, *glogg*, *cordwain*, *sclerotium*, *tussah*.

Because phonics involves spelling–sound relationships, it is significant both for learning to read and for learning to spell.

Spelling: Productive Phonics

Being familiar with spelling–sound correspondences can be seen as a receptive skill in that it relates to the receptive skill of reading. The productive equivalent of this part of the reading skill is spelling which is part of the skill of writing.

There has been considerable research with native speakers on the learning of spelling and the definitive collection of research reviews is Brown and Ellis's (1994) *Handbook of Spelling*. From an applied linguistics perspective, the study of research on spelling is rewarding not only for the information it provides on the teaching and learning of spelling, but also because it provides valuable insights into many of the central issues involved in second-language learning. English spelling is a very limited and clearly defined area, involving only 26 letters and a definable set of combinations of letters. Working within this limited area makes the issues clearer and easier to deal with in a comprehensive way. It is worth thinking about how the same issues apply to the learning of word parts, vocabulary, collocations, and grammar. Table 1.2 lists the most important of these issues with a brief summary of findings from L1 research. Let us look briefly at some of these.

There is evidence of positive and negative effects of the first language on the second at the levels of pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and discourse. Spelling is no exception, and there is plenty of evidence of first-language spellings having both positive and negative effects according to the degrees of similarity and difference between the language items and rules.

Designing a Focused Spelling Programme

If spelling is a significant problem for learners, it may be worthwhile giving it some focused, planned special attention. Numerous studies focusing on spelling and on other learning issues have shown the positive effects of a balanced, focused programme. Table 1.3 lists general principles that can be applied to any focused programme. These are organised under the headings *affective*, *cognitive*, and *social* to make them easier to remember and to put into practice the idea that an effective programme will approach a problem from several perspectives; in this case, the attitudes and feelings of the learners (affective), the knowledge involved (cognitive), and the support that others can give (social). Table 1.3 also gives examples of application of the principles. There could be a third column in Table 1.3 and that would show the particular applications to a spelling programme. Let us take an example. Under the applications of the affective principle *Keep learners*

Table 1.2 Issues in spelling that apply to other language levels

Issues	*Findings*
Deliberate and incidental learning	Deliberate analytic learning can speed up learning and can help with learning problems. Regular tests help. Most learning of spelling is incidental. Substantial reading improves spelling.
System learning and item learning	Some words can be dealt with by rules, others have to be learned as unique items. The unpredictability of the English spelling system is a major obstacle to learning to spell.
A single kind of learning and interactive systems	Alphabetic learning interacts with lexical learning.
The effect of other levels of language on this level and this level on others	Phonological awareness affects spelling and has long-term effects on spelling. Spelling affects word recognition. Poor spellers have problems in writing – they use avoidance strategies. Phonological awareness affects reading and reading can affect phonological awareness. Writing the letter shapes helps learning.
The direction of the effect	Spelling affects use, use affects spelling.
The effect of the origin of the feature	Etymology affects spelling.
The treatment of irregularity	Some high-frequency items are irregular. Irregular items are learned as lexical units.
The effect of frequency on the type of storage	Highly frequent items, even regular ones, are stored as lexical items. Regular low-frequency items are dealt with by rules.
The effect of age on learning	Older learners are better at deliberate learning.
The role of developmental sequences	Complex items need to be learned through a series of stages.
The treatment of error	Letting students invent spellings can have positive effects.
The effect of the first language	The writing system of the first language can have positive and negative effects on the second language.

motivated there is the application *Do mastery testing*. Mastery testing involves repeated learning and testing until learners gain near perfect scores in what they have to learn. For mastery testing to work, there needs to be a clearly defined set of things to learn and there needs to be repeated and varied opportunities to do this learning. Mastery testing could be applied to a spelling programme in the following way. For a particular

Table 1.3 Features of a good intensive learning programme

Principles	*Applications*
Affective	
Keep learners motivated	Praise success Give quick feedback Do mastery testing Measure progress Record success on graphs or tables
Make learning fun	Use attractive aids Have amusing competitions
Cognitive	
Encourage thoughtful processing	Use rich associations, mnemonics, rules, retrieval, visualisation, deliberate learning, movement Use both analytic and holistic techniques Isolate and focus on problems
Plan for repetition and revision	Give regular practice Plan increasingly spaced revision
Provide training	Combine activities into strategies Train learners in strategy use Get learners to reflect on learning
Organise the items to learn in helpful ways	Group the items to learn into manageable blocks Avoid interference Group helpfully related items together
Plan for transfer of training	Provide fluency training
Social	
Provide peer support	Do peer tutoring Get learners to report progress to others Organise support groups
Aim for individual responsibility	Let learners choose what and how to learn Encourage autonomy

course, the focus may be the regularly spelled words in the first one thousand words of English. Those words would be ones that could be completely described by sections A and B of Appendix 1. Each week a few correspondences would be focused on and these would be tested by word dictation tests to see if learners had mastered the rules. If they did not score 18 or more on a 20-item test, they could sit another test focusing on the same correspondences. Before sitting another test, the teacher or learners could analyse the errors in the previous test and the learners could work on some practice items.

Table 1.3 can also be used as a basis for evaluating a focused programme. Not all of the applications need be used but there should be variety and balance.

Spelling is only a small part of learning a language and for some learners it may not be an important focus, either because they have no problem