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Spotlight on Spelling: Realising Speech and Language Therapists' Interpretive Potential in Interprofessional Practice with Teachers

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Abstract

Despite the close and interdependent links between language and literacy and well-documented associations between difficulties in both areas, literacy remains surprisingly underexplored in Irish research on interprofessional collaboration between teachers and Speech and Language Therapists (SLTs). Emerging evidence from practice suggests that Irish SLTs are often uncertain about their role in this area. Yet, internationally, literacy is explicitly recognised as part of SLTs' scope of practice. Drawing on these global experiences, Irish SLTs have clear potential to collaborate with teachers across multiple literacy domains. This tutorial spotlights spelling as an area deserving greater attention from SLTs and as a productive focus for teacher-SLT collaboration. It outlines the linguistic underpinnings of spelling, including phonological, orthographic, and morphological knowledge, and illustrates how SLTs' expertise can be leveraged to interpret spelling errors, guide intervention planning, and support children's literacy development. While spelling is rarely prioritised within SLT practice, it offers a clinically meaningful context to apply linguistic knowledge, complement oral language interventions, and facilitate collaboration with educators. By adopting a linguistically informed approach to spelling assessment, SLTs can enhance intervention and improve outcomes for children with co-occurring speech, language, and literacy difficulties. This tutorial positions spelling as a timely and underutilised domain through which Irish SLTs can strengthen clinical and collaborative practice and align their work with international standards and evolving policy priorities in education.

Key Words: Spelling, Speech and Language Therapist's Scope of Practice, Interprofessional Collaboration, Structured Literacy, Literacy Intervention, Education

Introduction

Structured literacy (SL) is an umbrella term encompassing evidence-based instructional approaches that integrate all components of spoken language into the teaching of reading, spelling, and writing (International Dyslexia Association [IDA], 2023). Grounded in decades of interdisciplinary research collectively known as the *Science of Reading*, SL is widely recognised as the most effective instructional framework for supporting students with reading disabilities, including dyslexia (IDA, 2023). Emerging evidence suggests that Irish teachers are increasingly adopting SL approaches in response to a growing awareness of the *Science of Reading* (Horgan, 2022). However, longstanding evidence indicates that many teachers lack the linguistic knowledge required to implement SL effectively (Moats, 2014) and often report feeling underprepared to teach spelling specifically (Joshi et al., 2008).

Our recent research (Kazmierczak-Murray et al., 2025a) highlighted Irish SLTs' interest in engaging with literacy instruction, suggesting both a willingness and potential to contribute meaningfully. We propose that SLTs, who receive specialised training in linguistics, are particularly well positioned to support the implementation of SL in schools. Specifically, their interpretive capacity to analyse and elucidate underlying linguistic patterns enables them to enhance teachers' practices in spelling assessment and intervention. Within the expanding remit of school based therapists in Ireland, this will enable SLTs to provide targeted recommendations to support special education teaching. The embedding of SLTs more formally within the education system will mean that Irish schools will become sites for interprofessional collaboration. While this term may have previously only been related to what occurs between professionals within single disciplines (e.g. health), within the Irish

context there is a growing acknowledgement that this term now should reflect any collaborative practice when those from different professional backgrounds (e.g. health, education) work together to support high quality outcomes (Kazmierczak-Murray et al., 2025b). However, our findings revealed that Irish SLTs report limited confidence and knowledge gaps when supporting spelling, a pattern echoed in international literature (e.g., Serry & Levicky, 2020). This apparent paradox, between SLTs' linguistic knowledge and their reported uncertainty around spelling, warrants closer attention and may partly reflect gaps in preservice preparation for school-age literacy practice (Stephenson et al., 2025), inconsistent training in written language (Summy & Farquharson, 2024) and insufficient attention to interprofessional collaboration beyond the health sector. In this article, we argue that spelling represents a domain in which SLTs can, and should, play a more active and collaborative role with teachers.

This article takes the form of a tutorial review, focusing on the potential role of SLTs in the assessment and intervention of spelling difficulties in primary school-age children (i.e., aged 4 to 12 years in Ireland). We begin by establishing the importance of spelling for literacy development and academic achievement, before outlining the linguistic underpinnings of spelling development, with particular attention to phonological, orthographic, and morphological knowledge. Building on this foundation, we consider how the expertise of SLTs may be leveraged in literacy assessment and the planning of literacy intervention in schools,offering a guide for interprofessional practice in educational settings. Literacy offers a uniquely equitable domain for collaboration between clinicians and teachers (Kazmierczak-Murray et al., 2025b), and spelling assessment provides a focused, practical entry point for such work. Within this collaborative work, SLTs can contribute targeted linguistic insights through the interpretation of spelling errors to inform classroom instruction, supporting shared decision-making around literacy intervention.

The tutorial responds to growing interest and evolving expectations around the SLT's role in literacy. We believe it is particularly timely for Irish SLTs to engage in this work, given the evolving scope of SLT practice both nationally and internationally, the growing involvement of SLTs in literacy instruction in countries with comparable education systems (e.g., New Zealand, Australia, the UK), and recent policy developments promoting greater integration of SLTs within Irish schools (National Council for Special Education [NCSE], 2024). Internationally, the role of SLTs in literacy has long been recognised, with professional bodies in some jurisdictions providing formal guidance on their involvement in written language (e.g., American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, 2016; Speech-Language and Audiology Canada, 2016), in contrast to less clearly defined roles within Irish and UK contexts. However, translating clinical knowledge into literacy practice remains challenging, particularly in the context of service pressures, heavy workloads, and the ongoing impact of COVID-related waiting lists. While the content of this tutorial is designed to support SLTs in understanding spelling as a valuable and informative component of their clinical assessment work with *individual* clients, we strongly believe this knowledge has broader relevance for strengthening future interprofessional teacher-SLT practice in Ireland and SLTs' work in school settings more generally.

The Importance of Spelling: Implications for At-Risk Populations

Spelling plays a critical role in effective communication and enabling full participation in literate societies (Daffern & Fleet, 2021). The process of spelling, translating spoken language into written form, requires the integration of multiple linguistic domains and their representations within English orthography (Moats, 2016). As such, children with difficulties in oral language, particularly in phonology or morphology, are at increased risk of

spelling difficulties (Broc et al., 2021), as these underlying oral language weaknesses are likely to be reflected in their written output. A substantial body of research identifies spelling ability as a strong predictor of success in reading and writing acquisition (e.g., Treiman, 2017). When spelling is effortful, children must allocate considerable cognitive resources to word-level encoding, which impedes writing fluency and diminishes the overall quality of their written work (de Bree et al., 2025). For instance, children who lack confidence in their spelling may avoid using complex vocabulary, instead favoring simpler or more familiar words (Kohnen et al., 2009). Importantly, spelling ability correlates with reading fluency and comprehension, highlighting its broader implications for literacy development (Bowers & Bowers, 2018).

Children with underlying speech and/or language impairments, including those diagnosed with Developmental Language Disorder (DLD), are particularly vulnerable to spelling challenges (de Bree et al., 2025; Broc et al., 2021; McCarthy et al., 2012). Meta-analytic findings indicate that children with DLD consistently perform below their typically developing peers on spelling tasks (Graham et al., 2020), which is unsurprising given the linguistic demands of spelling and the high prevalence of comorbid reading difficulties in this population (McCarthy et al, 2012; Snowling et al., 2019). Similarly, children with persistent speech sound disorders are also at increased risk for spelling and word reading difficulties, particularly when co-occurring with broader language impairments or a familial history of literacy difficulties (Hayiou-Thomas et al., 2017). Consequently, children with spelling difficulties are likely to comprise a substantial proportion of SLTs' clinical caseloads, underscoring the importance of SLTs understanding how oral language abilities influence broader literacy outcomes, including spelling. In this context, incorporating spelling into SLT assessment is justified by the close relationship between oral language, speech development, and written language outcomes, rather than representing an expansion of professional scope.

Linguistic Contributions to Spelling

Effective spelling relies on the integration of multiple linguistic domains: phonology, morphology, orthography and semantics, alongside the ability to consciously reflect on and manipulate these structures (Bahr et al., 2012; Moxam, 2020). Difficulties in any one of these domains can disrupt accurate spelling (Broc et al., 2021). In English, spelling development is particularly demanding due to the language's deep orthography. The writing system is morphophonemic; spellings represent both sound (phonemes) and meaning (morphemes) while also preserving etymological information that reflects historical word origins (Murphy & Diehm, 2020). According to Triple Word Form Theory, a contemporary model of spelling development, children must attend to and integrate phonological, orthographic and morphological information at all stages of spelling development, reflecting the interdependent nature of these linguistic domains (Richards et al., 2009). This integrated view is consistent with evidence highlighting the inextricable links between language, speech, and spelling, and the importance of making these connections explicit to support both instruction and intervention (Moxam, 2020). Consequently, successful spelling acquisition requires learners to coordinate multiple linguistic systems and understand how language is represented in written form. Instruction that explicitly targets and connects these word forms has been shown to strengthen spelling acquisition and foster broader linguistic awareness (Daffern, 2017). The sections that follow explore each domain in detail, highlighting their contributions to spelling development and the implications for assessment and intervention, including how SLTs could collaborate with teachers to inform targeted spelling intervention.

Phonological Processing

Learning to spell in English requires the ability to map phonemes (the smallest units of sound) to graphemes (the letters or letter combinations representing those sounds in

written language). Phonological awareness, the conscious awareness of the sound structure of spoken language, therefore plays a foundational role in spelling development (Kilpatrick, 2020). The ability to segment and manipulate phonemes (phonemic awareness), is thought to distinguish proficient spellers from those with persistent spelling difficulties across age groups (Kilpatrick, 2020). Phonemic awareness not only encompasses the ability to segment or manipulate individual phonemes within words but also the capacity to differentiate between phonemes that are perceptually similar, particularly those that share articulatory features such as place or manner of articulation (Moats, 2016).

Early spellers often produce phonetically plausible spellings, attempting to represent the sounds they hear, even if their responses do not yet conform to conventional spelling rules. For example, a child may spell *dry* as *jry*, *hand* as *had*, or apply regular inflections based solely on their phonological properties (e.g., *walkt* for *walked*), reflecting their developing awareness of the sound structure of words. While such errors may appear obscure or incorrect in the conventional sense, SLTs are equipped to recognise these as meaningful indicators of a child's phonological processing skills.

By contrast, dysphonetic spellings are characterised by attempts that do not plausibly represent the phonemes of the target word, such as vowel omissions, incorrect sequencing of sounds, or substitutions involving phonemes that are articulatorily similar (Moats, 2016). For example, contrasts such as /b/ and /p/ in *big* and *pig*, or /d/ and /t/ in *den* and *ten*, can pose challenges for some learners. Such errors typically indicate that the child has not yet developed sufficient awareness of individual consonant and vowel phonemes and/or is experiencing difficulty segmenting and extracting these sounds from the speech stream. SLTs, through detailed error analysis, are uniquely positioned to identify phonological processing difficulties (Quick & Erickson, 2018), whereas many teachers may lack the

linguistic knowledge required to interpret spelling errors diagnostically. By contributing their expertise through interprofessional collaboration, SLTs can support teachers in using these analyses to develop targeted, linguistically informed spelling intervention.

Orthographic Knowledge

Orthographic knowledge refers to how spoken language is represented in written form, encompassing both mental representations of grapheme sequences (grounded in the alphabetic principle) and broader rule-based patterns (also called orthotactics; Apel, 2011: Galuschka et al., 2020). The alphabetic principle involves recognising that phonemes correspond to letters or groups of letters (graphemes). Importantly, orthographic knowledge also encompasses awareness of alternative spellings for the same sound. For example, the phoneme /j/ can be represented by the graphemes *j, g, -ge* or *-dge* depending on its linguistic context. Orthotactics relates to positional constraints of graphemes within words, reflecting knowledge of acceptable and unacceptable letter sequences. This aspect of orthographic knowledge plays a critical role in spelling accuracy, guiding the correct placement of graphemes within words. For example, at the end of one-syllable words, the phoneme /j/ is spelled *-dge* when it follows a short vowel, as in *bridge* and *judge.* In contrast, the grapheme g (or soft g) typically represents the phoneme /j/ when it appears before the front vowels i, e, or y, as in *giant*, *giraffe*, and *gym*.

Orthographic knowledge enables spellers to apply learned patterns and conventions to generate plausible spellings for unfamiliar words by applying learned patterns and conventions (Apel, 2011). Nevertheless, orthographic errors remain common in the writing of students with literacy difficulties (Moats, 2016). Although these errors are phonetically plausible, reflecting the child's effort to represent spoken sounds in writing, they contravene English orthographic conventions. For example, *cklos* for *clothes* misapplies *ck* in a word-

initial position, where it is never permitted. In collaboration with teachers, SLTs can play a critical role in analysing students' spelling errors to determine whether they stem from phonological processing difficulties, limited orthographic knowledge, or a combination of both.

Morphological knowledge

Morphological awareness, the ability to recognise, reflect on, and manipulate the morphemic structure of words, also plays a critical role in spelling development. English spelling, unlike languages with more transparent spelling systems (e.g. Spanish, Italian, Finnish), prioritises consistency in the representation of meaning units (morphemes) over the consistent representation of sounds (phonemes). Consequently, words that share a common morphological 'root' often retain consistent spelling despite changes in pronunciation (e.g. *heal*, *health*), making morphological knowledge a key contributor to accurate spelling (Daffern & Fleet, 2021). This includes understanding of how morphemes are represented in writing and the rules that govern how affixes are attached to base words or roots (Apel, 2011). While base words are often standalone words that can take prefixes or suffixes (e.g. *help, helpful*), roots are core meaning-bearing morphemes that typically do not function independently in English (e.g. *rupt* in *eruption*). Morphological knowledge also involves understanding how the addition of affixes may alter a base's spelling (e.g. *happy* → *happiness*) and applying the conventions associated with inflectional (e.g. *-ed*, *-s*, *-ing*) and derivational morphemes (e.g. *-ly*, *-tion*).

Morphological knowledge provides predictable spelling patterns that help learners spell complex words accurately (Colenbrander et al. 2024). For instance, explicit knowledge that *sign* and *signature* share a common morphological root can help children maintain accurate spelling despite changes in pronunciation. With their expertise in morphology, SLTs

are well-placed to make these links to support intervention in partnership with teachers, extending beyond consultative models of collaboration to more equitable, collaborative practice with a shared focus on spelling as a common intervention target. Morphological awareness constrains possible spellings by offering meaning-based cues, thereby enhancing accuracy. A recent scoping review of spelling errors produced by children with DLD highlighted that phonologically unacceptable spellings are a core feature of their written language difficulties, alongside persistent morphological errors (Broc et al., 2021). These findings underscore the importance of assessing children's morphological awareness and analysing spelling errors for evidence of morphological breakdown. Such analysis can inform targeted recommendations for educators, including explicit instruction in relevant inflectional and derivational morphemes to support spelling development. In classroom contexts, SLTs' recommendations could guide literacy intervention by informing how teachers embed focused morphological instruction within literacy lessons.

Spelling Assessment to Inform Intervention: The Interpretive Role of the SLT

SL approaches emphasise explicit, systematic instruction, guided by diagnostic assessment that captures a learner's specific linguistic strengths and weaknesses (IDA, 2023). For SLTs working with individual clients, this emphasis aligns closely with clinical practices that rely on language-based assessment to tailor intervention to the specific profile of the child. Traditional spelling assessments, which often rely on binary scoring, categorising responses as simply correct or incorrect, lack the sensitivity to detect partial knowledge or reveal the underlying linguistic processes involved in spelling development. In contrast, diagnostic approaches enable a more nuanced analysis, where understanding the *why* behind spelling errors informs goal setting and intervention planning.

Several frameworks have been developed to support such analysis. Notable among these are the Spelling Sensitivity Score (Masterson & Apel, 2010) and the Multilingual Coding System (Bowers et al., 2014). For practical guidance, SLTs can refer to Brimo's (2013) *Guide to Linguistic Analysis of Spelling* and Quick and Erickson's (2018) *POMplexity for Roots and Affixes*. These tools offer structured methodologies for identifying whether phonological, orthographic, or morphological elements are emerging, developing, or underutilised in a child's spelling repertoire. Crucially, this kind of linguistic error analysis offers a powerful lens for understanding where and why the spelling process is breaking down. For example, two students may produce a similar number of spelling errors, yet linguistic analysis could uncover distinct underlying difficulties, such as phonological processing deficits in one case and morphological weaknesses in the other (Quick & Erickson, 2018). Table 1 presents spelling errors collated from a child's writing sample and illustrates how SLTs' interpretive capacity can be used to analyse these errors and guide instructional focus across both clinical and educational contexts.

Table 1. Examples of Spelling Errors by Linguistic Domain and Clinical Interpretation

Target Word	**Child's Spelling**	**Linguistic Domain(s)**	**Interpretation**
kicked	kickt	Morphological	Omission of past tense -ed; reinforce morphological rule for regular past tense
splitting	spiting	Phonological / Orthographic	Deletion of consonant on the inside of consonant blend; failure to apply orthographic change rules for suffix addition (consonant doubling rule)
dreams	dreamz	Morphological / Orthographic	Plural -s represented phonetically; reinforces orthographic representation of the suffix -s

joked	joket	Morphological	Past tense -ed represented phonetically; reinforce morphological rule for regular past tense
magician	magition	Morphological / Derived Word	Derived word error; highlight morpheme patterns and derivational suffixes
scramble	scamble	Phonological	Omission of /r/
smile	smil	Orthographic	Missing final letter; address silent e patterns
bowl	bole	Orthographic	Orthographic; acceptable phonological spelling, but orthographically incorrect

Table 1 illustrates the potential value of SLTs' interpretive expertise in analysing spelling errors. When incorporated into routine language assessments (e.g. through authentic writing samples from school) analysis of spelling can provide insight into a child's underlying linguistic knowledge (Moxam, 2020). For example, phonological spelling errors that correspond with speech sound difficulties may confirm patterns observed in speech and inform what recommendations SLTs will prioritise. Similarly, morphological spelling errors may signal broader language-based difficulties and help guide targeted instructional support in clinical or educational contexts. In most cases, formal spelling assessment would remain the responsibility of educational professionals, with SLTs contributing to the linguistic interpretation of errors and their implications for learning.

Conclusion

While the role of SLTs in supporting written language development is increasingly recognised, many clinicians report limited confidence and insufficient knowledge in the areas of spelling and writing (Serry & Levicky, 2020). This challenge has been observed both internationally and within the Irish context (Kazmierczak-Murray et al., 2025a), highlighting

a clear need for more targeted professional learning in this area. Yet, spelling presents a valuable and often underutilised opportunity for SLTs to extend their existing expertise in oral language to the domain of literacy. Because spelling is rooted in the structure of language, including phonology, morphology, and orthography, it serves as a rich context for reinforcing and applying linguistic knowledge in clinically meaningful ways, while also offering a powerful window into a child's underlying linguistic functioning (Moats, 2016).

This tutorial has outlined the importance of spelling within broader literacy development, reviewed its key linguistic foundations, and demonstrated how SLTs can apply their expertise to the assessment and intervention of spelling difficulties in primary school-age children. While we recognise that having theoretical knowledge does not automatically translate to its application in practice, we believe that this tutorial represents one support towards advancing this translation. It positions spelling as a clinically relevant focus that aligns with the SLT's core competencies in language and offers meaningful opportunities for focused interprofessional collaborative practice. By adopting a linguistically informed approach, SLTs can support both academic progress and functional communication. Moreover, spelling assessment provides a valuable platform for partnership with educators, enabling the diagnostic interpretation of errors, the co-construction of targeted interventions, and the alignment of goals across clinical and educational contexts. Strengthening this interprofessional collaboration has the potential to enhance service delivery and improve long-term outcomes for children with co-occurring language and literacy needs. In the longer term, greater attention to interprofessional learning (IPL) across practicing SLTs and teachers, alongside interprofessional education (IPE) at the pre-service level in Ireland may further strengthen collaborative literacy practices, with spelling assessment providing one practical avenue through which such learning could be enacted.

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