Case Study: Mill Field Primary School, Leeds

Using Spellodrome to plug the gaps for GPS tests

About the School

Mill Field is a large primary school in a deprived area of Leeds, rated as ‘good’ by Ofsted. Of its c400 pupils, high proportions are classified as ‘disadvantaged’ and supported by the Pupil Premium and/or have English as an Additional Language (EAL) - over 30 different languages are spoken in school. Many pupils speak little or no English when they join Mill Field, which is situated in an area of high mobility, with many pupils joining or leaving the school partway through their education.

The number of pupils on roll has increased significantly since 2010 and the school has expanded rapidly as a consequence, moving from one- to two-form entry.

_The school prides itself on giving its pupils opportunities and experiences which enable them to enjoy learning, in addition to making good progress._
The Challenge

Given the school’s intake, writing and spelling can frequently be challenging for pupils. But following the introduction of the new curriculum, the school realised there was additional pressure on its pupils and a need to develop its teaching of technical English.

Julie Gill-Hall is currently a Year 5 teacher, with a lot of Yr 6 experience, and responsible for running the school’s new spelling project across KS2. “Grammar, Punctuation and Spelling has an elevated status in our school now and is a key area for development,” she said. “We found that the new tests meant that the children’s true abilities were not reflected in their results. For example, we found that significant numbers of pupils achieved a very reasonable score in the Grammar and Punctuation sections of the test, but were unable to reach ‘Level 4’ because they had specific issues with spelling and were therefore at a disadvantage.

“As a result, we have had to really take stock of how we teach spelling and use resources such as Spellodrome to help us.

Following the introduction of the new curriculum, the school realised there was additional pressure on its pupils and a need to develop its teaching of technical English.

“The challenges of the new curriculum are particularly stark for our children who frequently struggle to understand the spelling rules. We also recognise that to help their command of English, we need to teach some things which are not in the curriculum, such as double consonants, silent letters and irregular plurals.

“We don’t just want to teach to the test, we want them to be confident with all aspects of their English. We also like to invest in resources which pupils can access at home.”
The Solution
The school uses Spellodrome - an award-winning, curriculum mapped, digital resource, designed to develop spelling, grammar, writing and communication skills in pupils aged 7-14 (KS2-3) using a fun ‘gaming-style’ challenge and reward system to increase confidence and motivation. Comprising an engaging array of activities, games and challenges, everything is designed to encourage independent learning and the development of critical spelling awareness.

It includes pre-populated 2014 curriculum-aligned word lists for KS1 and KS2 and these word lists can be customised (from more than 10,000 words) to the specific needs of each teacher.

“Spellodrome is used extensively during lessons,” said Julie. “I personally find the word lists useful as it is possible to set up ‘groups’ at different year groups, meaning that I can instantly access word lists from anywhere in the curriculum. In addition to this, if there is a specific rule that children are finding difficult, I am quickly able to find a bank of words that will meet the rule and which children can return to in their own time.

“It’s also good that the words are shown in context – EAL pupils have a lot of trouble understanding the meanings of words so this is particularly helpful for extending their vocabulary, especially during independent study.”

As well as using the resource in teaching time, the school runs an after-school spelling club and an in-school booster spelling club particularly targeted at Years 5 and 6, using a mix of resources and challenges, heavily featuring Spellodrome.

Popular features include the live gaming feature (similar to that already employed in the company’s popular Mathletics resource) where pupils play games live with other pupils around the world, word searches, Word Detective and Words in Pieces games. “Allowing pupils to find parts of a word by matching up puzzle pieces to form a word, as in Words in Pieces, is brilliant for EAL pupils who can find it almost impossible to begin with a word otherwise,” said Julie.
The Results

The children are making rapid progress with their spelling across KS2 this year.

“As part of our concerted effort around spelling this year, we know that Spellodrome is having a positive impact on learning and is in effect extending the school day because pupils love it enough to use it before and after school and at home,” said Julie. “Once the children experience Spellodrome, they are hooked. It also helps to remove some of the pressure as they see it as an interactive resource, rather than a test of their spelling knowledge.

“As part of our general spelling project, children are rechecked on an initial assessment in September that reflects the spelling rules of the new curriculum, in addition to rules that we know our children find difficult. All the children have made progress – for some of them the improvement is phenomenal.

“Day to day I am finding that the children’s general awareness of spelling rules has increased and that they are able to transfer their knowledge of the rules to include a new word, which tells me they have really understood the rule. They will often mention a spelling rule when they are supposed to be doing something else like handwriting!

“They seem genuinely motivated to improve even further – often asking to use Spellodrome and being very keen to get on to the Hall of Fame in the live games.

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“What has been really pleasing has been seeing the children use more interesting words in their writing. We want them to be creative writers and so it’s great to see that their confidence is growing and they are not afraid to try new words.

“It is possibly too early to comment on impact on GPS scores, although in 2015 improved spelling did help a number of children secure their Level 4 in this assessment. This year will be a baseline for the new curriculum, after which we expect results to improve year on year as children feel the benefits of a more structured spelling programme and more widespread and targeted use of Spellodrome.

“The children’s typing speed has also significantly improved through the use of Spellodrome, particularly as children race to enter the Hall of Fame. The fact that children can return to specific lists has undoubtedly been instrumental in this.

“For staff, it has also been useful to use the student reports to help identify words that have been misspelt by the children either in the teacher reports or on the children’s screen. I really like the way that this differentiates between words spelt incorrectly during Play Live (where they are under time pressure) and in the other activities. The children also have the chance to self-correct their spellings using this feature.”

In the future the school plans to run a ‘Summer Challenge’ to make sure the children keep up the good work during the long holidays. Having them hooked on Spellodrome makes this easier and could go some way towards minimising the summer learning loss.

“Our celebration assemblies where we give out individual and class certificates for good work on Spellodrome are very popular so I’m sure the children will be just as keen to win points during the summer,” said Julie.