

# Can a focus on rhythmic disyllables improve spelling in German and English?

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# **SYSPELL: Systematic and Computer Assisted Written Language Acquisition**

Funded by: Erasmus+

Run by: IDEUM Education, Vienna

Partners in: England, Germany, Hungary

# Some phonetics: doubled consonants

- Many languages have doubled consonant phonemes (inc. Finnish, Estonian, Hungarian, Maltese, Italian, Latin, classical Greek, ...) and write them with doubled consonant letters
- Often, pronouncing/writing a single consonant changes meaning
- Finnish examples: kuri ('discipline')/kurri ('skimmed milk')  
laki ('law')/lakki ('cap')
- Latin example: sumus ('we are')/summus ('top, summit')
- English: VERY RARE – hol(e)y /'həʊliː/ vs wholly /'həʊlliː/
- But many German & English words have doubled consonant LETTERS – why?

# ‘Marker’ graphemes

- In fully consistent orthographies, all graphemes are independent, & text can be read aloud fairly accurately without knowing meaning
- But in less consistent orthographies, some graphemes indicate/‘mark’ pronunciation of adjacent/nearby graphemes
- ‘Magic <e>’/split digraphs in English
- When to write consonant letters single/double source of confusion & errors in both German & English

# SYSPELL

In German:

- Devised by Dr Margit ERGERT in Austria
- Trialled with 300+ primary children in Pustertal in Südtirol/Alto Adige, Italy
- Piloted in one primary school in Germany in 2022

Adapted into English & further piloted in one primary school in England in 2022

# Trochaic disyllables

- ‘TUM-ti’ = first syllable stressed (‘accented’), second syllable not
- Vowel in 2<sup>nd</sup> syllable almost always ‘reduced’, = schwa /ə/
- 1000s in German & English
- Almost all German disyllables are trochaic
- In English, 85% are trochaic, 15% iambic (‘ti-TUM’)  
& there are many identically-spelt pairs where noun/adjective is trochaic, verb is iambic, e.g. EXport / exPORT

# Ambisilbische Konsonanten/ Ambisyllabic consonants

## Deutsch

Liebe

Lister

Lippe

## English

gable

gamble

gab**b**le

Mark preceding vowel letter as pronounced short

Helpful for pronouncing – much less so for spelling – complex rule

And rule is much less consistent in English than in German

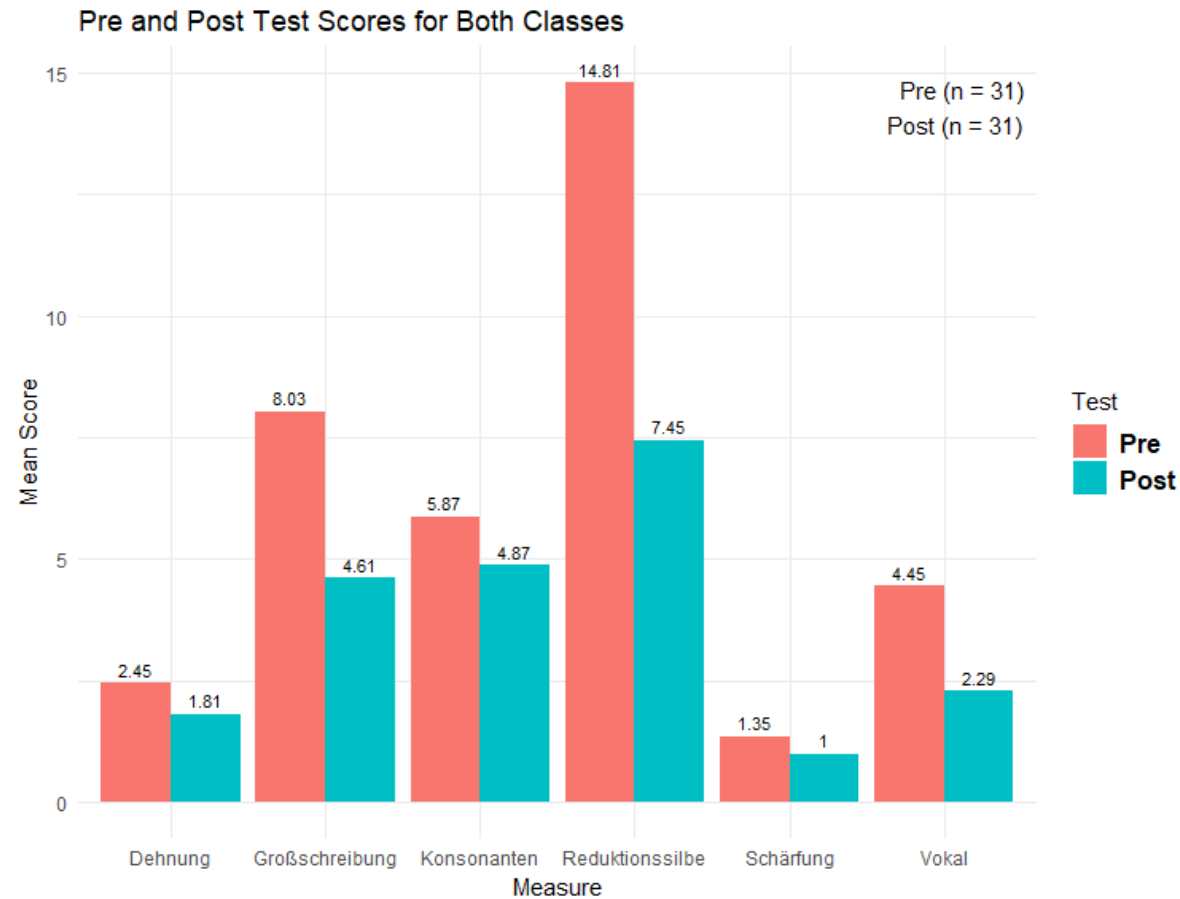
# Margit Ergert's hypothesis

Building on the prosodic and rhythmic aspect of most trochaic words in German and English would:

- encourage children to pay attention to the quality of the first-syllable vowel phonemes, and therefore
- help them to spell the intersyllabic consonants more accurately, and
- improve their spelling more generally



# Results In German school, 2022



# Provisional findings

- German: both in Pustertal & in the school in Germany, significant reduction in errors
- English: Very little difference in outcomes between 56 children aged 7-11 years in 4 classes receiving SYSPELL & 56 children in 4 parallel classes not receiving it
- Less suited to English? Or strengthen & try again?

# Thank you!

Questions/comments

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