Previous studies have indicated that phonological ability is an important predictor of early spelling performance. In addition, research indicates that rapid automatized naming ability only affects spelling performance in older more experienced spellers. This study aims to explore predictors of spelling in children using a new interpretive spelling tool consisting of exception words, regular words and non-words. An existing standardized spelling assessment of single words was also employed to explore the validity of the new spelling assessment. The project is a cross-sectional one using a correlational design to evaluate the association between phonological ability, phonological memory, and rapid automatized naming and single word spelling in a large representative sample of primary age children (Yr1-yr6, N=479) from different schools in the UK.

The results indicated a significant improvement in spelling performance across the year groups, as expected. Regression analysis conducted with all the items in the new spelling assessment (N=106) indicated that phonological ability and rapid naming were significant predictors across the year groups, but phonological memory was not a significant predictor. Similar results were found for exception word spelling (N=36). However, for non-word spelling (N=34) phonological ability and rapid naming were significant predictors for the younger children (Yr1-Yr3), but not for the older children (Yr4-Yr6). For the older children only phonological ability was significant.

Results indicate that in order to have a better understanding of the development of spelling ability we need to use reliable spelling tools which assess the different components of spelling, as different processes seem to be associated with the different types of letter string across different levels of spelling experience. We suggest that the new spelling assessment provides a reliable means for identifying specific spelling difficulties experienced by individuals and also to help researchers in their studies.