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Spelling Instruction in the Classroom

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Abstract
The purpose of this paper is to identify research-based, effective spelling strategies that will improve students' abilities in a classroom. There has been a great debate about the effectiveness of spelling instruction in the classroom. Many studies have been conducted on spelling instruction using a word sort technique. By looking at past and present studies of spelling instruction, educators will be able to see how well these strategies for spelling instruction have worked. This knowledge can help educators design a spelling instruction program that will enhance their students' scores in many curriculum areas. An effective, research-based, contemporary model for teachers to utilize during spelling instruction is called word sorts. This is a method that engages students and allows them to manipulate words as they are learning them. Word sorts can be used in a classroom model an example is provided in this paper, to help improve students' spelling abilities. Implementing effective strategies, such as word sorts that have been researched and proven to work will allow educators to see the growth their students can make. The growth students make will I be shown in the area of spelling but it will also show how that growth in turn affects other academic areas, such as reading and writing.
Spelling Instruction in the Classroom

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Spelling correctly is one of the most valued yet difficult skills in written communication. Spelling requires matching the sounds of language with the appropriate letter(s) in order to accurately and reliably convey messages to those we meet and interact with in our society. Learning to spell correctly is a key component of a student’s academic program. A formal spelling instruction plan can have a positive impact on word attack skills and written compositions (Wanzek, 2006). In past years, however, spelling instruction has been seen as a form of memorization or as a way to keep students busy by writing words multiple times. Seldom did instruction focus on orthography or word study to help students learn to spell words. Recently, the shift of spelling instruction has gone into the area of word study. In word study, words are examined and sorted to help students see specific patterns of words when they read and write them, such as in spelling instruction.

Recently word sorts have been found to be more effective than traditional spelling methods for improving spelling performance on spelling tests (Joseph, 2005). With newer research focused on the importance of spelling in the classrooms, teachers need to change how they are teaching spelling in their classrooms; if they are teaching spelling at all.

With the increased use of technology reaching the classroom setting, teachers and students rely more on spell check applications to correct spelling of words. Many educators no longer provide spelling instruction to students in the classroom. When spelling instruction is used; however, it is often spelling instruction methods of the past that are not effective according to research. At times, educators have been told that spelling instruction does nothing for students and is a waste of time. Students who are in the lower elementary levels are learning to read but not learning how to spell the words they are reading. Districts still mandate spelling tests at the
end of each week for the students, but teachers are not given time to teach the words to the students or teach how those words relate to reading or writing in a formal large group setting. Scores for students at these levels on the spelling tests have dropped substantially compared to previous years when spelling instruction was provided in the school setting.

Students also seldom receive spelling help at home due to many factors. Parents of the students are feeling frustrated and overwhelmed because they do not know specific strategies in which they can help their child. Other factors also hinder parents who are trying to help their child at home, such as working two jobs or working odd hours of the day. All of the above mentioned reasons have assisted in failing the students from an education in spelling instruction that they should be receiving, both at home and at school. These students are teaching themselves, and many of them are doing it wrong!

When school districts lack consensus on spelling instruction, educators are left teaching spelling in ways with which they are familiar, often the way they were taught how to spell years earlier. Some educators believe they should teach spelling indirectly as part of an integrated curriculum through other content areas, with limited direct instruction- only as the need arises. Others preach that spelling should be taught through “word study” sequences created to fit the varied developmental levels of students. Still others believe that using a conventional spelling book is still a useful tool when used appropriately (Templeton, 1991).

Schools and educators realize that writing correctly, using proper grammar, and correct spelling in writing is important. Schools need to figure out the ways in which teachers should instruct their students in the areas of spelling that would provide consistent and constant practice that enables students to experience achievement in this area. The purpose of this paper is to investigate how spelling instruction is provided in classrooms, to examine research that is
currently being done in the field of spelling, and to create a plan to improve spelling instruction in the classroom. This paper defines spelling as being a unique part of the curriculum that benefits students even after their years of school. Research on spelling instruction also applies to curriculum being taught in the district. The results of this research will help educators improve their current practices in the classroom in relation to spelling. The researcher also hopes students will have higher spelling abilities when taught researched techniques that have been found to be effective.

Statement of the Problem

This researcher is in an elementary building where teachers are instructed to no longer teach spelling in the classroom. Hearing the mounting frustration, anger and hopelessness around the building, the researcher has decided to look into ways teachers can effectively instruct spelling to help these students and to show other educators in the building that spelling should have strategies implemented based on research. Not only are teachers getting frustrated, but parents of the students are also feeling the pressure at home, too. By writing this paper, the researcher hopes to use the strategies found in her own classroom to improve academic success in this field of study. The researcher’s question is: What are the effective strategies teachers can use when teaching spelling to their students?

This paper will identify strategies that teachers are using to improve spelling in their classrooms as well as strengthen other areas of the curriculum. Many educators have not changed their ways of teaching spelling and thus have left others to criticize the concept of teaching spelling in the classroom. What this researcher needed was to find ways that spelling could be introduced into classrooms and homes that were effective and would still aid in the writing and reading processes students were learning.
Significance of the Problem

Spelling instruction should be important in school districts and classrooms everywhere for many reasons. As stated earlier, spelling skills in reading and writing will affect students beyond just elementary and high school. Students who want to move on to college and apply for jobs need to know about spelling, the words in our society, and how to use them. Mastering spelling is important to both the writing and reading curriculum areas. When students have spelling errors it makes text more difficult to read. This can cause the reader to devalue the quality of the writer’s message.

Spelling difficulties can also interfere with the execution of other composing processes. These composing processes would cause the student to continuously think about how to spell a word, which then in turn interferes with the writer’s processing memory. If students are having difficulty with their processing memory it will lead them to forget ideas or plans they had to retain in their working memory. When students do not know the spelling of multiple words it will influence the words they will use when they write, making them less likely to write and choose words they cannot spell (Graham, 2008).

Students who are not showing knowledge of morphemes will misspell words because the vowels are not predictable from a given pronunciation (Rosa, 2008). This makes instruction on morphemes, graphemes, and other orthographic information vital in children’s writing and spelling of words. It is also important to note that children’s awareness of morphology, as assessed by off-line tasks (thinking about speaking, reading and writing) develops with age and as instruction is provided (Rosa, 2008).

Students and adults who are poor spellers will learn avoidance techniques that will steer them clear of spelling throughout their life. One way for students to avoid learning how to spell
is through using spell-check. This is not a fool-proof plan as computers do not always catch our grammar and spelling mistakes. It is amazing how many students rely on this method alone. Students also adopt illegible handwriting so that they can hide their spelling abilities to those around them. Some students rely on carrying dictionaries everywhere they go in case they are expected to write. Others can ask someone how to spell a word, or find someone who will do the writing for them. Still, a number of people will change their original message of what they intended to say so that their message can contain words they know how to spell, even if the final message was not what they intended to say!

Definitions of Spelling Instruction

**Contextualized Spelling:** Spelling activities given within the context of reading instruction (Cooke, 2008).

**Orthography:** A method of representing a language or the sounds of language by written symbols; spelling. It is the aspect of language study concerned with the letters and their sequence in words according to established usage.

**Spelling:** The forming of words with letters in an accepted order.

**Word Study:** The study of words. It is based on learning word patterns rather than memorizing words that do not connect to each other in a list format. Word study is a cohesive approach that addresses word recognition, vocabulary, and phonics as well as spelling.

Organization of the Paper

This paper is organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the issue of spelling, states the problem and its significance for educators. The reader will learn definitions to spelling terms that will be discussed throughout this paper. Chapter 2 will provide a rationale for providing spelling instruction to students and ways to do so effectively. Next, it will examine the
history of spelling instruction and how it was taught years ago. As instruction has changed so has the mindset educators have when talking about spelling instruction, methods and ideologies have evolved since the beginning of formal spelling instruction. These evolving methods will be examined to show the reader how spelling instruction has progressed from years past. The reader will learn about different ways to provide instructional delivery of spelling to students. Some of these ways are: computer-assisted instruction, spelling instruction using multisensory training and word study practice procedures to enhance spelling capabilities for students.

Chapter 3 will identify solutions or strategies that teachers can use in their classrooms related to spelling instruction. A strategy discussed in length will be that of word sorts and the types of word sorts teachers can use to improve spelling abilities. Current spelling research on word sorts can create a change in the way teachers use and instruct spelling in their classroom. This will lead to higher academic achievement and better spellers in the classroom. Chapter 4 will look at five developmental levels that students go through as they learn to read and write. Students do not pass through these levels all at one time so it is important for teachers to know where each of their students are in their development. Knowing where students are in the developmental levels can assist educators in providing instruction that meets the students’ individual needs. Readers will learn about some informal and formal assessments that can be utilized when figuring out developmental levels of students.

Chapter 5 will utilize information the reader has gained about word sorts and developmental levels from the previous chapters to show a plan of instruction that teachers can use in their classroom. This plan will incorporate word study strategies using a five day plan for an average school week. The classroom plan is just an example of how teachers could use the word sort method to meet the varying developmental needs of the classroom. The word sort
method will also provide a way to teach the individual rather than the whole group. As a final point, this section will offer the researcher’s concluding thoughts on using a structured spelling model when implementing spelling strategies in the classroom.
Chapter 2: History of Spelling Instruction

Introduction

The idea for providing focused spelling instruction for students has been around for many years. As the years have passed, formal spelling instruction methods have changed. The chapter will show how the history of spelling instruction has influenced contemporary approaches in four sections. The chapter will begin by introducing a rationale to teaching spelling followed by an overview of the history of spelling instruction, methods instructors used for spelling instruction in the past, and a description of how the focus for spelling has changed as the methods have changed. The first section will discuss why spelling is so important for young children's literacy development. For this reason spelling needs to be taught effectively to enable improved abilities in spelling, reading, and writing.

After a rationale has been given, the next step will be looking at the history of spelling instruction. This part of the chapter will show the changes and movements that have occurred for spelling instruction as time has passed. Important researchers will be identified who helped create the movement shifts in spelling instruction. It is important to know how the foundation of spelling instruction was created, who was involved, and how spelling has evolved throughout the years.

Then the chapter will look at the variety of methods associated with the historical development of spelling. It is important to see what ideas were commonplace years ago and how those ideas have developed since the 1930's. This section will also include pros and cons for using these traditional strategies in the classroom. There is a systematic approach on how to instruct spelling in the classroom. Educators have been using this systematic approach to study the effects of spelling instruction since the 1930's.
As spelling instruction has evolved throughout the years, so has the focus on individual students. In the past, teachers instructed to the whole class, moving from content to content without much thought about the progress of individual students. In classrooms today there is a drive to reach all learners in the classroom, no matter how diverse their needs. Teachers need to be aware and sensitive to the variety of needs that exist among their students. Being aware will help teachers to focus on needs of the individual instead of teaching to the needs of the whole. This will provide instruction that is differentiated and appropriate for all students.

Rationale for Spelling Instruction

Spelling is so important to young children’s literacy development. For this reason, it’s critical that spelling is taught effectively during the primary grades. It is important because spelling helps to minimize the spelling constraints on writing as well as facilitate understanding of reading skills (Graham, 2008). Educators also need to be mindful that spelling instruction is responsive to children’s individual needs and not limited to whole class instruction. When spelling instruction is meeting students’ needs, it can shape their approach to writing tasks. Berninger found that primary-grade children who have difficulty with spelling avoid writing and they hold the belief that they cannot write throughout their school years (Graham, 2008).

The most current results for spelling instruction provide strong support for transfer between reading and spelling. This suggests spelling practice may be particularly valuable in setting up orthographic representations that also can be used for reading (Conrad, 2008). Spelling instruction should provide practice mapping phonemes onto graphemes and require production of words rather than recognition of letter patterns. This practice makes giving full attention to all letters in a word necessary (Conrad, 2008). In other words, spelling requires the retrieval rather than the recognition of the graphemes in words studied (Cooke, 2008).
Learning about spelling can enhance children’s early reading development by shaping their knowledge of phonemic awareness, strengthening their grasp of alphabetic principles, and will make sight words easier to remember (Graham, 2008). The orthographic knowledge underlies the students’ learning to read and spell. The synchrony of reading and spelling is the relationship of reading and spelling. It is interesting to note that a students’ reading achievement slightly advances their spelling where their spelling achievement greatly increases their reading (Gehsmann, 2008). An essential part of spelling is the ability for students to be able to evaluate and revise their produced text. Specifically, in order to revise, students must be able to detect and correct their spelling errors. If spelling is not an automatic process, the writer has to consciously monitor their ongoing spelling process. This in turn can take working memory capacity away from the other writing processes the student needs in order to write and create sentences around a thought process (Maki, 2002). It is also important to remember that students should be active in the examination of words that have been selected by the teacher for their instruction (Bloodgood; Templeton and Morris, 1999).

History of Spelling in the Classroom

The earliest method of spelling instruction required students to memorize numerous words in list formats. New memorization strategies were introduced from 1930-1940’s in order to assist learners in mastering words for weekly spelling tests (Massengill, 2006). Educators called these mnemonics, which provided students with a saying or a specific way to remember how to spell given words. During the 1960’s the first analysis of spelling generalizations discovered a surprising amount of consistency in the English orthographical system. This influenced researchers and educators to make changes in the lists of words. Educators began
making selections for words based on the words spelling patterns instead of using random words that had no connection or correlation to each other.

In the 1970's Chomsky and Read began to investigate young children's invented spelling. Their investigations of what children could do became the foundation of the developmental stage theory. In their research they found that children have the innate ability to learn language, and they could construct and use knowledge about letter-sound relationships related to words. Thus, this created the conceptual framework of the Word Study approach. In the Word Study approach, it is believed that learners progress through stages of development that are based on three tiers of English orthography: alphabet (sound-letter correspondence), pattern (complex grouping of letters), and meaning (derivations of words) (Massengill, 2006). Within each tier of orthography there are five stages of spelling development that learners progress through before going to the next tier. The five stages are called: emergent, letter name, within word, syllables and affixes, and derivational relations (Massengill, 2006). Within each of the five stages there is a progression of knowledge about word features that can be identified as early, middle or late.

The first stage of the developmental levels is the emergent stage where students scribble and pretend to write. Emergent spellers learn that some letter-sound matches and develop their understanding of directionality. The second stage is the letter-name stage where the child can spell words phonetically. Letter name spellers solidify their letter-sound knowledge, including consonants, short vowels and most consonant blends and digraphs. The third stage is the within word stage where students experiment with vowel patterns within words. Within-word spellers learn long-vowel markers, ambiguous vowels and complex consonant clusters in one-syllable
words. The focus of instruction is the multiple vowel patterns in single-syllable words such as long vowels, ambiguous vowels and r-controlled vowels (Massengill, 2006).

The fourth stage is the syllables and affixes. Syllables and affixes learners begin to experiment with consonant doubling, suffixes and prefixes, and vowel and consonant alternations in multi-syllable words. The fifth stage is working with derivational relations. Derivational relations instruct learners to spell most words correctly and to expand their vocabulary by mastering derived Greek and Latin roots. All students go through these stages, but most importantly, they do not go through the orthographic development stages at the same time or at any given age (Gehsmann, 2008). Information in depth on these five developmental stages will be discussed in chapter four of this paper.

There are two main approaches for teaching spelling. The first approach is known as the “spelling is caught” approach. In this approach it is assumed that spelling for students can be acquired as naturally and as easily as if they were speaking. This approach immersed children in literacy-rich environments where they had plenty of opportunities to read and write for real purposes within the classroom setting (Graham, 2008). Graham concluded that relying on incidental learning approaches (immersing students in literacy rich environments and hope that they will acquire spelling) is not enough for students with severe spelling difficulties. Instead, spelling skills must be taught explicitly while considering technical aspects of handwriting and letter formation, spelling processes, as well as spelling (Maki, 2002).

The second approach is known as the “spelling is taught” approach. In this approach it is assumed that it is necessary to directly and systematically teach children how to spell. There are three ways educators instruct spelling in this approach. One way to instruct spelling was through memorization. Students would memorize specific spelling words from lists. Another way
teachers taught spelling was through generalization. In generalization, teachers directly taught the rules and skills for spelling words that were unknown to students. The third approach was developmental. Through the developmental approach students would connect and extend their grasp of the spelling system through use of word study activities, such as word sorting (Graham, 2008).

Traditional Methods

Regardless of the approach teachers chose to use in their classroom, there were always spelling techniques or methods teachers used to support the learning of the students. The purpose of this section is to discuss the earlier methods of spelling instruction that were used in classrooms. Early spelling techniques that were provided and utilized were taught to teach memorization of words and to write words from specific lists over and over. Many adults can remember the traditional methods of spelling instruction that emphasized memorization through spelling bees, mnemonics, and the writing of words multiple times. However, this traditional method of instruction was not meeting the needs of all students. However, research did support these methods: students who were weak in spelling at the beginning of the year were still weak at the end of the year (Manning, 2004).

The traditional basal speller approach had a set structure, too. Students had weekly word lists and daily activities that varied but were predetermined by the teacher. The words studied each week changed, depending on the basal spelling program. Some programs chose words that students would read in the basal. Other programs selected high-frequency words that students encountered in variety of text and still other programs chose words that combined one of aforementioned approaches with words having similar phonetic features (Massengill, 2006). The lists, though, continued to stay the same for all students in the class.
Most activities did not engage students in manipulating and categorizing words. Activities that students did in the traditional basal speller approach were often related to vague language arts goals. Goals that tied in with language arts included: unscrambling words, alphabetizing words, writing words three times, finding words in the dictionary or using words in a sentence (Massengill, 2006). While these requirements may have assisted students in learning related skills, none of these activities have been shown to support spelling achievement (Schlagal, 2002). Yet, many educators continue to use these approaches for spelling in their classrooms!

Basal problems have a lack of consistency when choosing words for students between basal programs. Research on basal spellers suggests the traditional basal speller approach that requires rote memorization may no longer be the best technique for instructing spelling. The transfer of knowledge and carry-over of knowledge into other academic areas is lacking in this approach. Memorization alone does not seem to be an effective enough method for learning words, with is the true goal of spelling.

Children are also often asked to practice spelling through lists. These students then are asked to copy words and are tested through single-word dictation. When teachers dictate words, they often do not use the colloquial pattern of the language. Instead, teachers over correct pronunciation of words to provide phonological information required for students to correct their spelling. This approach does not encourage identification of morphological representations in writing (Rosa, 2008). Teachers should think about understanding teaching methods for spelling that draw on the children’s ability and place less emphasis on the acquisition of word-specific knowledge (basis of current approach) (Rosa, 2008). It has been demonstrated that spelling learners advance through sequential processes of knowledge about word features, and students
should be receiving spelling instruction according to their developmental level (Bear et al., 2004).

In order for students to use spelling strategies, the teacher needs to give students some background knowledge for the strategy. Discussing the strategy and modeling and remodeling the strategy needs to happen next. After modeling the strategy many times, the teacher can support memorization of the strategy through having students practice and by showing how to use the strategy correctly. Students can practice the strategies through many means, such as paper-pencil tasks or word sorts (Maki, 2002). Through modeling, the instructor guides the student through the process by saying what to think and do as they are using the strategy. The instructor also scaffolds the process (gradual model of release) so that eventually the student is able to perform the task individually and able to explain the advice learned from the instructor on their own. Eventually, students can use the strategy when they come upon a problem all by themselves automatically (Maki, 2002).

The word study approach teaches phonics, vocabulary and spelling simultaneously. Word study originated with the work of Charles Read and Edmund Henderson in the 1970's. These researchers believed that word study is a vital part of a balanced literacy program. English orthography, or spelling, has three layers: alphabet in relation to sounds, pattern and meaning (Gehsmann, 2008). An example of the alphabet layer would be having students sound out each part of the word cat, or c/a/t. For patterns, students would be looking at words that are similar such as cape or cap, thus putting them into word families. Meaning would have the students looking at the prefixes, suffixes, roots and bases of words they are studying.

Another strategy educators can use is called the Listen-Segment-Code Strategy. The students are asked to pronounce the word to be spelled vocally or sub vocally. Then they will
segment the phonemes and mark each phoneme with the corresponding letter. From there the students learn about the code for words similar to the word they are spelling and apply the code to other words (Maki, 2002).

Educators also have a strategy to teach the n-phoneme to students when it appears in words. Students will always write an n with a k or a g, depending on where they feel the phoneme in their throat or in the mouth when they say the word (Maki, 2002). When teaching double consonants to students, teachers can have students pronounce the word with one consonant and then with two consonants. Students then need to decide which sounds right and looks right on their paper (Maki, 2002).

Another method teachers have used is a computer-assisted instruction program. This is a feasible option for teachers to use due to the computer’s capability of offering direct, personalized instruction for students. The computer-assisted instruction has been associated with increased student motivation to learn based on current research (Wanzek, 2006).

The error correction procedure is when the teacher reproduces a student’s error before presenting the correct response. This allows students to view and see if they can figure out the mistake made in the sentence. This error imitation model shows a common mistake that students are making in the classroom without pointing out anyone in particular. When this strategy is utilized in the classroom, the students’ performance was enhanced due to their actively looking for how to correct the errors (Wanzek, 2006).

Teacher Awareness

Spelling educators also need to be aware and sensitive to the diverse needs of their students. This is especially the case for those students who are weak spellers. It has been recommended that teachers spend 60 to 75 minutes per week on spelling. This averages out to 10
to 15 minutes a day on spelling instruction (Graham, 2008). A low percentage of time spent on activities in which spelling was integrated into context of teaching reading skills can be spent (about 4 percent) and still show improvements (Cooke, 2008). Students should be assisted with one on one time with an adult or tutor to support them in the spelling areas if they are very weak spellers (Graham, 2008). Strategies that teachers can use for struggling spellers should include: phonological awareness, phonics skills, and strategies for detaining the spelling of unknown words and basic spelling rules (Graham, 2008). If teachers are given examples of what they can do in their classrooms to modify instruction to include spelling activities, they can facilitate an increase in knowledge of spelling instruction for all of their students (Cooke, 2008).

Spelling requires that students can name letters, connect phonemes with corresponding letters and produce letters with a pencil or word processor without much fine motor difficulty. Beginning spellers should be able to segment spoken words into syllables and phonemes in order to decide which letters are needed and in which order. Spelling requires students to have knowledge of spelling rules, such as capitalization, punctuation and specific irregular phoneme-grapheme correspondences (Maki, 2002). This will not happen automatically for the students if they are not taught spelling.

Educators who provide instruction in spelling for up to fifteen minutes a day may also increase their students' abilities to read given words in and out of context (Cooke, 2008). Treiman also noted that including spelling in literacy instruction has cognitive benefits of spelling on reading achievement. The act of spelling words encourages children to practice phonemic segmentation skills, which makes more obvious the relationship of graphemes to phonemes when reading words (Cooke, 2008).
Summary

For years spelling has been considered a rote memorization process (Schlagal, 2002). Yet research has shown that memorization is not sufficient for learning to spell, and that individual’s orthography can be strengthened as they increase their knowledge about the structure of the words (Massengill, 2006). This chapter discussed the importance of using spelling in classrooms. It also provided an overview of the history of spelling and the traditional methods used in the past. Research has now shown traditional methods of the past, before the word study initiative, held no effects on students for improved spelling abilities or an increase in understanding words.

A newer contemporary strategy, called word sorts, will be discussed in the next chapter. Word sorts are a technique based from the word study philosophy that spelling is developmental and should be taught at the specific needs of the students. Students using word sorts will be extending their learning by becoming engaged with words and stretching their knowledge about words in word sorting activities.

In this strategy students learn about the meaning of words they are using with a focus on prefixes, suffixes, word patterns, and structures to identify and spell new words. Not only do students learn about words, but they are doing it at their developmental level. Word study is based on teaching students on their needs and the word sort technique allows students to be engaged and manipulate words that are at their level of confusion. This word sort strategy allows teachers and students to focus spelling instruction on diverse needs of the individual and not as the whole group. Word sorting is an important strategy because it makes learning engaging and interactive for students as they manipulate words. Continuing research has shown this is a strategy that will help improve word understanding for students.
Chapter 3: Solution Strategies

Introduction

As discussed in chapter two, the research on traditional methods of spelling instruction, those occurring before word study, have been unable to show students’ abilities in spelling over time. This information is disheartening but also allowed researchers to continue to look for ways that would impact students’ spelling scores. This is why it is important to examine more recent methods that will improve students spelling abilities. This need can be met through the strategy called word sorts.

Word sorts are a contemporary strategy that follows the developmental stages of learning to spell. These developmental stages allow teachers to instruct students at their level using word sort activities that engage students. This chapter will be broken into four sections: word sorting, techniques that facilitate word sorting, how word sorts can be effectively used in the classroom and how word sorts create a change in the classroom. The first section will examine word sorting. Word sorting is an important technique that teachers are using to guide their students’ spelling instruction. It is important because it provides individualized instruction for their students in areas of spelling that challenge them. Word sorting is a technique honed by the Word Study initiative created originally from Charles Read and Edmund Henderson in the 1970’s. Based on their word work research, the word sorting method was created. Next, techniques that can facilitate word sorting will be addressed. After looking at how to facilitate word sorting, the reader will learn how word sorts can be effectively used in the classroom to teach spelling to students in the elementary grades.

Finally, this chapter will discuss how using the engaging proposed word study approach (word sorts) in the classroom creates a change in how the students respond to words in their
writing and reading. It will also show how using the word sorts will improve spelling in the
elementary grades. It is important for teachers to understand this technique, because it provides a
way for them to create improvement in spelling area. This technique provides a focused look at
the meaning of words and their patterns in a differentiated instructional approach. In this word
sort approach, teachers create lessons that allow spelling to be meaningful for each student in
their classroom and as a result will not leave any students behind.

**Word Sorts**

In the next three sections I will discuss the concept of word sorting and why it is
important for educators to use. One technique that educators have been using to help with
spelling instruction, in relation to interactive word study in the classroom, is to implement word
sorts. Word sorts serve multiple purposes as it may be implemented to teach reading as well as
specific spelling skills (Joseph, 2005). Word sorts are designed to help children examine,
discriminate, and categorize words according to their spelling and sound patterns (Joseph, 2005).
The finding in word sort research suggest that it was only when word sorts were implemented in
classrooms that spelling improved and the criterion levels were reached across all sets of words
(Joseph, 2005).

Word sorts are meeting the needs of students because they can follow along the
developmental levels of spelling. (This will be discussed in more depth in chapter four.) This is a
benefit because it allows teachers to address spelling in a differentiated, developmental way.
Teachers are able to put students into small groups or work with students individually at their
own specific level of need. Students are given the opportunity to work on skills they use but
confuse, instead of learning spelling instruction in a whole class format which may or may not
apply to their needs.
Teachers may use word sorts to serve many purposes. Some uses for word sorts are helpful for students to spell words, recognize words, make word analogies, and become more aware of phonemic structures of words. Using this technique allowed students to gain meaning of words they were studying in the word sorts (Joseph, 2005). Using words sorts in the classroom helps students make connections between reading and spelling skills with greater ease (Joseph, 2005). Word sorts can also allow students to write lots of words based on patterns such as /oo/, /ou/, /ea/, /u/, prefixes, suffixes and plural word groups (Manning, 2004).

Word sorts are an inexpensive way to teach multiple literacy skills in the classroom as well as an opportunity to teach students how to spell words. Joseph (2005) has shown that word sorts were more effective than traditional spelling instruction for improving spelling performance on spelling tests. This could be because students are engaged with the words in a variety of activities that allow them to vocalize patterns they are seeing as they manipulate words.

Word Sort Instruction

In order for teachers to use word sorts, they need to know when to use them with their students. The spelling instruction actually begins when students “use but confuse” features such as long and short vowels. The student instructional level is determined by assessing student word knowledge with developmental spelling inventories. Teachers also examine unedited writing samples and reading miscues to help provide instruction and intervention at the needed level of each student (Gehsmann, 2008). The reader will learn more about the developmental levels and how to find the students’ individual levels in depth in chapter four.

Types of Word Sorts

There are two types of word sorts: closed and open. In closed word sorts the teacher defines the process for categorizing the words given. This requires students to engage in critical
thinking as they examine sight vocabulary, corresponding concepts, or word structure. In open word sorts the students determine how to categorize the words, thereby becoming involved in an active manipulation of the words. Students can sort words into multiple ways. Some suggestions are sorting cards alphabetically, sort by prefixes, suffixes, or roots, and sorting by parts of speech. For example, if students were to sort words through a common suffix they may focus on the ending –ed and –ing. Students will be given words that consist of one or the other suffix. Students then focus their attention on what they see in the words to help create the sort.

Teachers should always ask students to think aloud when creating their sorts because it allows the students to verbally state how and why they created the sorts. This process actively engages the students in multiple ways. One way is allowing the students to manipulate the words into sorts. Having students think about their processing of the words is another way to keep them engaged with the words being studied.

When sorting words by parts of speech students are able to see the spelling-meaning links by tracking the base word or root word across the row of cards. Another type of sort would be to have students work in pairs and practice pronunciation and spelling of words by asking each other to spell the word on their card. Word sorts can also be used to have the students show their understanding of word formation and word families to build new spelling words with the cards provided for suffixes, prefixes and roots or with cards they make from other familiar word parts. This expands on their knowledge as well as allowing students to practice the strategies they have learned in the classroom about words and how they are formed. The following are types of word sorts teachers can use to instruct students in areas of weakness.
Picture Sorts

In picture sorting activities, pictures are sorted by initial phoneme or sound. The focus for word sorts is to introduce the concept of attending to the initial phoneme in words. Then teachers can help develop automaticity in separating words by phonemes. The picture sort also helps establish the foundational knowledge to begin learning simple (c-v-c) vowel patterns.

Rhyming Short Vowel Word Family Sorts

In word family sorting activities, the vowel and ending consonant remain constant. Words are sorted into families or patterns. The focus for rhyming short vowel word families is to introduce the concept of categorizing words by pattern. Simple words are used (c-v-c) to demonstrate the alphabetic nature of the spelling system. This helps to establish foundational knowledge against which other vowel patterns can be compared and established. It also helps to develop the ability to quickly change initial consonants when the rime unit is held constant. Students will also learn to develop automaticity in (c-v-c) word recognition.

Word Sort Uses

Educators can also use the word sorts throughout different content. For example, if students are learning about habitats the teacher could create word sorts with animals and habitat names. Students would then have to use their knowledge about habitats to create word sorts.

Another way word sorts could be implemented in the classroom could be through the area of math. Teachers may find it important for students to know about spelling of geometric shapes. Teachers could create a word sort using names of shapes and properties of shapes as their words. Students then focus on attributes to shapes and place them into sorts. As students are sorting the cards, they are also looking at words, manipulating words, and writing words as they create their word sorts. The more the student works with the words, the easier the transfer of the words will
be when they are assessed what they have learned. The ideas are endless when it comes to implementing words throughout the content areas!

The purpose of word sorts can become multi-dimensional, with spelling always in the mix. Students can learn words, how to spell them and how to correlate them within other areas of instruction. The more students have the opportunity to manipulate words and put them into context, the higher their abilities will become in spelling the words.

Facilitating Word Sorts

Here are some ways to implement word sorts that will enhance performance of weaker spellers in the classroom setting. One suggested way is to limit the number of words that the students are to learn consecutively. Research states that students should learn only between three to five new words at a time. This focus helps students to truly learn the words without having to remember too many rules for the new words at one time. This also allows the word sorts and other strategies to stay focused on a few (Wanzek, 2006).

Another suggested strategy for teachers to use when they are instructing spelling in their classrooms is to use a constant time delay technique. This constant delay technique asks teachers to gradually increase the delay time they give to students before the presentation of a correct answer to the students. This approach is to scaffold the learning of the students so that they are thinking the answer in their head and being involved before the answer is given away. This approach has shown improved spelling outcomes in recent research (Wanzek, 2006).

Teachers can also use multiple strategies as introduced by Graham: Reducing number of words studied each week, re-teach spelling skills and strategies, use games to learn spelling skills, use word sorting activities to teach knowledge about spelling, have students work together to learn spelling skills, apply computer programs to teach spelling, praise student’s correct
spelling, apply reinforcement and other motivational strategies to foster spelling performance and conference with the parents about their child’s spelling performances (Graham, 2008). If teachers avoid using these strategies, they will set their students up for failure when writing words that should be automatic to them.

Research and teaching experience demonstrate that spelling provides information about words that facilitates reading, and that lessons in which take advantage of this reciprocity build strength in literacy acquisition skills (Cooke, 2008). Ehri (cited in Cooke, 2008) examined the effects of spelling instruction on first grade readers’ reading skills. Students who received spelling instruction outperformed control students on measures of nonsense word reading, timed reading and timed oral passage reading, as well as making significant gains in segmenting and spelling.

An intervention to promote spelling skills of elementary students with difficulties in producing even short words could use the cognitive strategy instruction. This would be important because it is a prerequisite for skilled academic performance. It is the ability to use strategies and to regulate one’s own strategy use (Maki, 2002). In a study conducted by Maki, interventions and strategies taught to students seemed to improve the students’ spelling revision skills. Students were more able to correct errors when they found them in their writing and were also apt to not make as many spelling mistakes as they wrote or took spelling tests (Maki, 2002).

How Word Study Creates Change

Word sorts are based upon the contemporary method called word study. Interactive word study is founded on the orthographic research that has been done in the past decade or so. Interactive word study is a method for teaching literacy skills by requiring learners “to examine, discriminate, and make critical judgments about speech sounds, word structures, spelling
patterns, and meaning” (Massengill, 2006). Word study provides students with opportunities to investigate and understand the patterns in words. Knowledge of these patterns means that students do not need to learn how to spell one word at a time, because they are learning a group of words that relate to a specific pattern. Word study has been widely used in teaching children for more than a decade and it’s based on a developmental philosophy that learners’ spelling progresses through predictable stages over time (Massengill, 2006).

The word study approach includes active manipulation of words—example: sorting words to compare and contrast features, which then in turn allows students to internalize and generalize word features. Bear et. al. deemed this word analysis to be superior to any act of memorization because spelling is an active process, not a passive one (Massengill, 2006). When teachers are familiar with theories associated to word study they can learn how to assess students’ spelling using spelling inventories. When teachers realize the wide range of spellers that are within their classroom, they are better positioned to consider planning differentiated instruction and reconsider the “one size fits all” instructional methods. Using words sorts also aid educators in clustering students into more defined distinct groups for instruction with specialized lists meeting their needs (Gehsmann, 2008). The complex English language may become orderly to learners who cognitively map new levels of words based on words they know, and examine. In this manner, spelling is a concrete process, not an abstract one (Henderson and Templeton, 1986).

Rationale for Word Study

In contrast to the traditional way of spelling described earlier (giving words off lists that are provided to the entire class without a focus of instruction), the word study strategy provides teachers a way to differentiate their instruction to provide more focused lessons to small groups or individual students. This focused instruction approach provides students a chance to learn the
rules that they are confusing through interactive manipulation of the words and are given time to apply those rules throughout a week’s worth of activities. Students are not given tasks that are beyond their developmental needs.

Using word study sorts for teaching students about words will help teachers prepare developmentally appropriate lists of words. By creating these developmentally appropriate lists, teachers are giving students time to read and sort them into specific or unspecific groups (open or closed sorts). These sorts can highlight contrasts of sound, pattern and/or meaning and are based on orthographic features emphasized in a given stage of development. After sorting, students discuss their categories; comparing and contrasting them and developing theories about the patterns they are discovering. Teachers who use word study and word practice procedures see positive outcomes when the teacher is directing as well as when students are taught to use the practices for independent study. Another way teachers can see improved outcomes is teaching students in a structured setting to do word sorts with a peer tutor (Wanzek, 2006).

In word study, students learn that spelling patterns exist and these patterns help to explain how to spell, read and write words. Word study builds knowledge that can be applied to both reading and spelling. It also develops students’ abilities in phonics, word recognition and vocabulary. Students are also able to vocalize and identify generalizations they see in the words they are sorting (Gehsmann, 2008). When students are allowed to vocalize how they know why a word is spelled a certain way, they are also allowing those patterns and rules to apply to other words they come across in their writing or reading. These connections help students in their spelling.

As noted in the research of Massengill, the participants at the end of the word study research felt their knowledge of word features increased as did their confidence and self-esteem.
When choosing a spelling intervention to use in the classroom, educators must have a choice concerning content of spelling intervention, application of specific instructional methods, and the learning environment must be interrelated (Maki, 2002). Why wouldn’t instructors want to use a program that does all of that for their students? Word study is a method that makes learners more conscious of word features, patterns and generalizations and gives them a tool to better determine the spelling of words.

Word study encompasses a number of instructional strategies designed to help students develop automatic word recognition and decoding skills. Readers use multiple strategies to figure out words. The goal of word study instruction is to help students develop flexible strategies for decoding unknown words and recognizing familiar words quickly so that they become automatic (Clymer, 1996).

Summary

As described previously, there are many methods that can facilitate word sorts in a classroom. This section presented word sorting and the effective strategies that are research based that will improve knowledge and understanding of words. These effective strategies, when implemented in a classroom, provide a change in how students interact, manipulate, and study words. Through word sorts, students become involved with interactive activities that engage them and allow them to manipulate words. Knowing that word sorts are interactive and can enrich a students’ knowledge about words is just the first step. The next step is to look at the different developmental levels of students in regards to spelling. These developmental levels are important because knowing the levels students are in will lead to a further focus on lesson plans that will meet individual students’ needs in the classroom.
In the next chapter, the five stages of learning to spell will be introduced. Once the stages are defined, the reader will learn about how to determine which level the students are in using a spelling inventory and informal observations. This is important because it will drive the teacher’s instruction for spelling with each individual student as they create word sorts for their students.
Chapter 4: Developmental Awareness

Introduction

Word sorts and other methods are useless unless the teachers understand where to begin instruction to better enable students to improve their understanding of word patterns and spelling rules. The purpose of this chapter is for the reader to link what students do in daily work to their developmental level. In order to do this, teachers must know about the levels of development. Within each developmental level I have included examples of what students may be doing in their writing and spelling in their daily work. This will aid the teacher when deciding on the next instructional steps that are needed to assist their students and to match what their students are using when they spell and write.

The first step is learning and understanding the five developmental levels of learning to spell. These strategies will help teachers to guide their instruction in an individualized way for their students. Knowing the developmental level is important because in order to make lessons differentiated for students, a teacher needs to instruct spelling strategies and patterns at their level.

Once developmental levels are known, the teacher will need to determine where their students are in relation to those levels. This step uses informal assessments such as observing student's writing and observing students as they read aloud. Doing observations informally is important because the teacher will be able to see how students read and write on a daily basis. Doing these daily observations will also allow a teacher to understand what their students are able to do and how the strategies they are learning are transferring to their daily work. These informal observations will also show areas the students are still struggling with, even though they may be already learning the strategies in class.
The next step after looking at students’ daily reading and writing, would be to perform a formal assessment called a spelling inventory. A spelling inventory is a test of words that progress from easy to complex in a range of areas. After analyzing the spelling inventory, a teacher will have a new awareness of where the students are at and will be able to make appropriate instruction decisions based on the results of the spelling inventory. The spelling inventory can be administered throughout the year, but it has been suggested to do at least three different times (beginning of year, middle of year, and end of year). Administering the spelling inventory multiple times will provide more information for teachers on how students are progressing from the beginning of the year throughout the year as well as looking at transfer of knowledge gained from word sorts.

Each of these levels and steps are defined in this chapter so that teachers are better able to instruct their students at their own level. When teachers can differentiate their teaching and instruction, the students’ progress in spelling will improve.

The Developmental Levels

As stated in earlier chapters, the work of Henderson and his students found that students’ spelling errors are not just random mistakes. Building on this discovery Henderson found an underlying logic to the students’ errors, which changed over time, moving from using but confusing elements of sound to using but confusing elements of pattern and meaning (Bear, 2004). This led to the creation of the five developmental levels. The study of word features must match the level of word knowledge of the learner. Without matching the needs of each child to their needed instruction will result in frustration, boredom, and little learning. This is a gradual and cumulative process. By knowing their developmental level, the teacher will be able to see
what each child already knows and then start their instruction from that point, versus starting everyone at the same place and not meeting the needs of the classroom.

When students are instructed at their own zone of proximal development, studying “words their way,” they are able to build on what they already know, to learn what they need to know next, and to move forward in that learning. With direct instruction and ongoing support, word features that were previously omitted or confused become amalgamated into an ever-increasing reading and writing vocabulary (Bear, 2004).

Developmental spelling research describes students’ growing knowledge of words as a continuum or series of chronologically ordered stages or phases of word knowledge. In reality, students grow in conceptual knowledge of the three general layers of information along a continuum. There is often an overlap in the layers and features students use to understand meaning. Students could understand something easier at a more advanced level, but not understand something more complex at the level prior. Students move hierarchically from easier, one-to-one correspondences between letters and sounds, to more difficult, abstract relationships between letter patterns and sounds, to more sophisticated relationships between meaning units (morphology) as they relate to sound and pattern (Bear, 2004).

The five developmental levels are: emergent, letter name, within word, syllables and affix spelling and derivational spelling. Within each level there are three functional levels that are useful guides for knowing when to teach what to the students. Teachers need to think about what students do correctly (an independent or easy level), what students use but confuse (a student’s level where guided instruction is most helpful), and what is absent in students’ spelling (a frustration level where spelling concepts are too difficult) (Bear, 2004). Teachers should focus their zone of proximal development by determining what the student uses but confuses. This
approach will identify the orthographic features and patterns for teachers that will provide the most beneficial instruction for the students.

For each of the following stages, I have provided examples to help teachers determine what stage their students appear to fall into. This is important because it will help teachers to focus their instruction where the students need the most support.

Stage One: Emergent

In this stage, students are emergent readers who are not yet reading conventionally. Students at this level scribble letters and numbers on the paper. At this level students earnestly look as if they are reading and writing even though they are actually pretending to read and write. This happens because students do not yet have the knowledge of words to actually read or write them. Students at this level also lack letter-sound correspondence or represent most salient sounds with single letters because they have not been exposed to formal reading instruction. This stage occurs from 0 to 5 years of age, although anyone who is not yet reading conventionally would be placed at this level.

As students practice their writing they often use random marks or scribble and can show legitimate letters in their writing. This is the pre-phonetic stage in their knowledge of letters and words. In the early emergent stage students produce large scribbles and drawings. They will have no letter designs in their work and their writing is undecipherable. Gradually students will begin to show some script to go with their pictures.

At the middle of the emergent stage, students are trying to model writing but keeping it separated from the picture they create. This is showing that they understand the words should tell something about the picture they have made. There still is no relationship between letters and
sounds for students at this level. Throughout the emergent stage, children begin to learn letters in their own names and they start to pay more attention to sounds in the words.

At the end of the emergent stage, writing begins to show most prominent and salient sounds in a word. Students are beginning to make some letter-sound matches in their writing (Jasmine would say JMOE). Students will also show that they remember some words and these words will begin to be seen in their writing over and over repeatedly (cat, Mom, Dad, and like).

The Word Study focus would be on developing oral language with concept sorts. Teachers will want to provide students with opportunities to play with speech sounds to develop phonological awareness and plan activities to learn the alphabet. Through the word sort, students could begin sorting pictures by their beginning sounds. Students should also be encouraged to write with inventive spelling at this stage.

Stage Two: Letter Name-Alphabetic

In order for students to move from the emergent stage to letter name stage, students need to know that letters represent sounds in a systematic way. Students also need to know that words can be segmented into sequences of sounds read from left to right.

In this stage, students are beginning readers. This is the stage when students are formally taught how to read, typically ranging from Kindergarten through 1st grade and extending into the middle of 2nd grade (5-8 years old). This stage reflects students dominant approach to spelling (names of letters as cues to sound they want to represent). An example would be writing a y for the /w/ sound or r for the word are or u for the word you. We call this alphabetic spelling.

As previously stated in Chapter 3, students use multiple strategies to define and identify words. Ehri found that beginning readers identify words in four ways: sight, decoding, analogizing, and contextual guessing. When students read by sight they are retrieving
information from memory based on prior experiences with that word. When decoding, students
are sounding out letters and blending the sounds together to pronounce a word. In analogizing,
students are using knowledge of a similar familiar word to identify an unknown word. For
example, to read the unfamiliar word mellow, you think about how similar it is to the word
yellow. When students are contextual guessing, they are using meaning-based cues in the text
(such as words in the sentence, syntax, and pictures) (Clymer, 1996). Different readers may use
these strategies in different ways and in different times. Effective instruction in word recognition
and word study will help students develop flexible strategies using each of these approaches.

The three periods of letter name-alphabetic spelling (early, middle, late) because of rapid
growth gained during this developmental timeframe. Students learn to segment the sounds
(phonemes) within words and to match appropriate letters or letter pairs to those sequences. In
the early letter name-alphabetic spelling students are applying alphabetic principle mostly to
consonants spell first sound and then last sound of single-syllable words (when as YN). The
middle elements of syllables, vowels, are omitted. The first sound of two-letter consonant blend
represented (float as FT). Students often do not provide spacing in words (semi phonetic because
only some phonemes represented). When students use the alphabetic principle, they find matches
between letters and spoken word by how sound is made or articulated. The students may still
confuse the b and the p sounds.

In middle to late letter-name alphabetic spelling the students are showing mastery of
beginning and ending consonants. Students also show knowledge of high-frequency words and
that they consistently use vowels. In student work, the teacher may see long vowel sounds
represented this way in words: TIM for TIME, or HOP for HOPE. The students show ne
representation, or knowledge, for the silent letters in words. The short vowels are also used by
confused. An example of this would be MES for MISS and MIC'HI for MUCH. Students at this stage are learning to segment both sounds in a consonant blend and begin to represent blends correctly. Teachers may see GRAT for GREAT. The middle letter name-alphabetic spellers can segment and represent most of sound sequences heard within single-syllable words, their spelling is now described as phonetic.

Late letter name-alphabetic spellers are able to consistently represent most regular short-vowel sounds, digraphs and consonant blends because they have full phonemic segmentation. Teachers may see BUK for BUNK, LUP for LUMP, or DOT for DON’T. By the end of this stage, students have mastered and shown they have mastered the alphabetic layer of English orthography and will now begin to use but confuse silent long-vowel markers such as the silent e in the spelling of RAIN as RANE.

For the Word Study instruction teachers could have students collect known words from word banks and sort pictures of the words by their beginning sounds. Students should also look at word families that share a common vowel or study beginning consonant blends and digraphs. Again, teachers should encourage invented spelling so that teachers can see how the student see words they want to write. In middle-to-late letter name stage, students can be sorting words and pictures by different short vowel word families. They could also sort them by the sounds and CVC patterns. Students can even begin doing sorts comparing short and long vowel sounds.

Stage Three: Within-Word Pattern

In this stage, students are transitional readers. They are able to read and spell many words correctly on their own. They can do so because they have gained automatic knowledge of letter sounds and short-vowel patterns. This stage begins as students are transitioning from unable to read to independent reading. This typically begins at the end of first grade and can expand
through second, third and even fourth grades. The students at this level are typically between the ages of 7-10 years old but adults who are low skilled readers may also be at this stage.

Within word pattern spelling begins when students correctly spell most single-syllable, short-vowel words correct as well as consonant blends, digraphs. The students are now able to work at a more abstract level beginning to include patterns and chunks of letter sequences and will then move away from sound-by-sound approaches. Students can study words now by sound and the pattern simultaneously and have the ability to now look closer at vowel patterns within single-syllable words. Students would now write TEME for TEAM, GOWL for GOAL and THROWE for THROW. Students are using but confusing long vowel patterns. In this stage, students would first begin to study common long-vowel patterns such as joke, goal, and throw and then would study the less common patterns such as the VCC pattern of cold and most. The last item students would study at this level would be ambiguous vowels. These are the most difficult for students to learn because their sound is neither long nor short and the same pattern present in the words may represent different sounds. An example of an ambiguous vowel would be the /ou/. The /ou/ could sound different in the following words: mouth, cough, through and tough.

When teaching at this stage, the focus would be on the pattern layer of English orthography. Students also need to consider the meaning layer to spell and use homophones. This is where students would begin learning and understanding the spelling-meaning connection. This spelling-meaning connection will be seen more in the next two developmental stages.

The focus for the within word pattern stage of word study should include daily activities in a word study notebook. In the notebooks, students can sort words by long and short vowel sounds and by common long-vowel patterns. Students can also look at r controlled vowels and
looking at less common vowels, diphthongs, and other ambiguous vowels. At the most advanced part of this level, students could begin to explore homophones and homographs.

Stage Four: Syllables and Affixes Spelling

In this stage, students are intermediate readers. Students are expected to spell many words of more than one syllable to be at this stage. Students in the upper elementary and middle school grades normally fall into this category (between the ages of 9-14 and adults who have poor literacy skills could also fall in this stage). In this stage, students consider spelling patterns where syllables meet along with meaning units such as affixes (prefixes and suffixes). The errors that students show in their writing are with mostly two-syllable words and appear most common where syllables and affixes meet in the given word. Students will show that they can use but confuse conventions for preserving vowel sounds when adding inflected endings. Some examples of this could be: LITTEL for LITTLE, SUMER for SUMMER, and MOUNTIN for MOUNTAIN (Bear, 2004). At the end of this stage, students are struggling with affixes that change the meaning of the word. They may begin to misspell affixes for example, DESLOYAL for DISLOYAL, and CAREFULL for CAREFUL.

Students who are beginning to study base words and affixes as meaning units at the end of this stage are getting themselves prepared for the next stage. At the next stage, derivational relations, the students will study the words and their derivational affixes that students will learn about English spelling at same time they are enriching their vocabularies.

At this stage, students are examining plural endings, compound words, consonant doubling and inflected endings of the focus of word study. Students should also be exploring grammar through word study and sort and study common affixes (prefixes and suffixes). Students in this stage will also be able to join spelling and vocabulary studies so that they link
meaning and spelling with grammar and meaning as they do their word sorts. Students will also
be looking at unusual consonant blends and digraphs, such as qu, ph, gh, and gu.

Stage Five: Derivational Relations

In this stage, students are advanced readers. Some students can start this stage in grades
four and five, but most derivational spellers are found in the middle school, high school, or
college levels. This stage continues throughout adulthood as people are able to choose topics of
interest to read and write about on their own.

This stage is known as the derivational stage because students examine how words share
common derivations, related base words, and word roots. Students begin to discover the meaning
and spelling of parts that remain constant across different but derivationally related words. The
word study in this stage builds on and expands knowledge of a wide vocabulary throughout its
activities. Students are able to spell most words correctly, but their errors show a lack of
knowledge about derivations.

Some mistakes that students could make at this level may be: FAVORITE for
FAVORITE where the student is not showing the relation to favor. For the word DIFFERENT
students could write DIFFRENT which shows that the student was not seeing the relation and
lacks connection to the word differ. Other examples of endings that students often misspell or
confuse in this stage would be the –sion and –ent endings. Students typically write –sun for –sion
and typically write –ence for –ent in their writing and spelling of words in this format at this
level. These frequent errors have to do with the reduced vowel in derivational related pairs.

Students do not always pay attention to base words and at this stage, instruction should be
directed toward the base or root words within words. If students know that COMPETE is
derivationally related to COMPETITION it will help them to spell the derived word correctly.
Another reason students have spelling errors in this stage is because they often have to do with using but confusing issues of consonant doubling in absorbed prefixes. Absorbed prefixes are the convention of changing the last consonant of a prefix to the first consonant of the root word. An example of an absorbed prefix would be IMOBILE for IMMObILE or CORESPOND for CORRESPOND.

At the end of stage five, students begin to change adjectives to nouns (such as brilliant to brilliance, adolescent to adolescence). It is not uncommon to find students using but confusing these derivational endings. Another example would be writing ADOLESCANCE for ADOLESCENCE or BRILLENCE for BRILLIANCE.

The focus for word study at this stage will be on words that students bring to word study from their reading and writing. This is a stage where their curiosity about words they are reading will help guide them. They will examine common and then less common roots, prefixes, and suffixes (ion) and examine vowel and consonant alternations in derivationally related pairs. Teachers can help the students join spelling and vocabulary studies through linking meaning and spelling with grammar and meaning. A focus also will be given to students on studying Greek and Latin word roots, stems and suffixes and how they relate to the words. Students are focusing on analysis of words that are content-related and apply in other academic areas other than spelling alone.

Determining Developmental Levels

After learning about on each specific developmental level, the teacher will need to know where their students are in their respective classrooms. This is important because research has shown a need to teach spelling to students at their developmental level and provide opportunities for them to learn words through active, exploratory approaches (Massengill, 2006). In the
beginning of the Word Study program, teachers use a spelling inventory to determine which stage of spelling development each student is at and then the teacher will group students for instruction based on their individual assessments. Once groups are created, teachers develop “differentiated instruction” based on the stage of development each group of students has achieved.

Observation of Student Writing

The first step teachers take when figuring out where students are at developmentally should be done through informal observations. These observations can tell teachers what students understand about words and how they apply rules they have been taught or already know. One informal observation should be done by looking at what the students are writing. For example, rough drafts will have a lot of information about a student’s orthographic knowledge. These informal writing assessments can be done daily or weekly to monitor the progress students are making or to use initially to determine developmental level.

Teachers should not rely completely on work samples, however, because sometimes students are overly anxious about their accuracy of spelling and will only use words they know how to spell. Students also may be using environmental print that they see or words a nearby classmate is writing. Thus, their work sample will not reflect their true ability. Other students may just try to get ideas down on paper without paying attention to spelling. This may result in excessive errors, errors that they would normally not make. Teachers need to know their students in order to hold student writing accountable.

Observation of Student Reading

Another informal assessment teachers can do on a daily or weekly basis would be observing the students’ reading abilities. This assessment will help because orthographic
knowledge can be obtained when teachers listen for the types of errors students make consistently. As stated earlier, close relationships between reading and spelling exist. Reading errors show us what students are using but confusing when they read, much like spelling. Teachers who understand students’ developmental word knowledge will be in good position to interpret students’ reading errors and make decisions about the appropriate prompt to use.

Both of these informal assessments on reading and writing will show teachers the link between the two. If students are having problems with endings of words, this will show as they write words and as they read words. This would be a good place for teachers to provide word sorts on word endings so that students are focusing on that part of words.

Although observations made during writing and reading provides some insight into students’ development, assessments should also include an informal qualitative spelling inventory. This will provide a rich collection of information to understand a student’s knowledge of orthography. This leads to the next step a teacher would do to continue to look for developmental levels of students.

Spelling Inventory Overview

A spelling inventory can also provide information, much like the reading and writing observations, except that this would be a formal assessment. Spelling inventories consist of lists of words that are specifically chosen to represent a variety of spelling features or patterns at increasing levels of difficulty (Bear, 2004). The words in a spelling inventory are designed to show students’ knowledge of key spelling features that relate to the different spelling stages. The tests do not include all spelling features, but instead only include orthographic features that are most helpful in identifying a stage and for planning instruction. After taking an inventory, the
teacher analyzes the results to see a broad picture of the students’ development and where they would be placed on the developmental stages.

Teachers will want to use spelling inventories because they are quick and easy to give to students and quick to score. Spelling inventories are also reliable and are valid measures of what students know about words. In order to use spelling inventories teachers need to follow four basic steps. Teachers need to first select a spelling inventory based on the grade level of the students and their achievement levels. Students should not study any of the words in advance and teachers should administer the test the same as they would a regular routine spelling test. Next, the teacher would analyze the students’ spelling using a feature guides (such as in the Words Their Way book by Bear et. al.). This analysis will help you identify what orthographic features students know and what they are ready to study.

After the feature guide, teachers will organize groups using a classroom composite form and the spelling by stage form. These will help the teacher to plan instruction for developmental groups. Finally the teacher will monitor overall progress by using the same inventory several times a year. Weekly spelling tests will also help assess students’ mastery of the orthographic features they are studying at the time (Bear, 2004).

When teachers select a spelling inventory, it is best if they choose the inventory that corresponds with the grade the student is in. It is also important to note that students may need an easier or harder assessment, depending on the range of the students’ knowledge. There are three main spelling inventories and they are: Primary Spelling Inventory, Elementary Spelling Inventory and Upper Level Spelling Inventory. The Primary Spelling Inventory has a list of 26 words that have simple CVC words and ends with inflected endings. The Elementary Spelling Inventory is a list of 25 increasingly difficult words that begin with bed and ends with
opposition. This inventory has a range of features throughout elementary grades and can identify students up to the derivational stage. This is a good inventory if a school wants to administer the *test to the entire elementary building to track growth and progress over time.* Teachers will want to discontinue the test if students have missed more than five in a row or who show signs of frustrations.

The Upper Level Spelling Inventory can be used in upper elementary, middle and high school. This is a list of 31 words that will show the orthographic knowledge of older students. The words chosen will help to more efficiently identify what students in the derivational stage are doing. Administration of all the spelling inventories is the same, regardless of which inventory is chosen.

**Administering the Spelling Inventory**

Once an inventory is chosen, the administration is similar in all of them. These inventories are not to be graded so students should not study the words before or after the inventory is given. Teachers will need to have 20 to 30 minutes set aside to give the test to students. Students will need to number their paper (or if in the younger grades, it may be easier for teacher to number paper) and provide a reason for doing the inventory to the students. Let them know that you will ask them to spell some words that they have not studied or looked at before. It is important to let students know that they will not be graded on their answers and that you would want them to do the best that they can because some will be easy and others may be difficult for them to write. It is also important to relate to students the real purpose behind the inventory. Letting students realize that they are showing their abilities in reading and writing to enable teachers to instruct them at their level may motivate some students to do their absolute best. Teachers may want to provide the inventory in small group settings to avoid copying. Try
to create a relaxed environment where students don’t feel pressured to cheat or look at others papers around them and so that they will try their absolute best.

Call Words Aloud

After students appear to be ready to start the assessment, pronounce each word without drawing out sounds or breaking the word into syllables. Say it as naturally as possible. Say each word twice and use it in a sentence if the context will be helpful for the students to know what word is being called (homophones). This strategy may be very time consuming and cause distractions if teachers do it for every single word, teachers should use their own judgment when implementing the strategy.

To monitor how students are doing, teachers should move around the room so that they can see the behaviors of students and how they are actually doing on the assessment. Teachers could be watching for words they do not understand due to poor handwriting and ask students to rewrite the words when needed so the instructor can make a note of what the student had written or said. For the spelling inventories, it is best if students print so that writing is legible.

If time allows, teachers can ask students to try and respell a word that was harder for them next to their first attempt. This will give students another chance at the word, but enables teachers to see the thinking processes and to be an indicator of the depth of their orthographic knowledge.

Stopping Point

As the instructor walks around the room, he or she should be scanning the papers looking for misspelling and frustrations in students. For younger students, teachers can stop after the first five words if they couldn’t spell any correctly. Older students should be able to do the entire inventory in around twenty minutes. It is important to remember that it is better to have too many
words than not enough words to determine the level of the students. It may also be an idea to test the entire list to students regardless of their age so that there is a complete set of data on the student. This will provide information at the end of the year to show the amount of growth students had made. If teachers want to provide the whole assessment they should remind students that they will be giving the assessment. It is also important to let students know that the words given will get harder at the end and they should try their best, even though the words may be too hard for them to spell correctly.

Scoring Inventories

After the inventory, collect papers and set aside time to analyze them. When looking at the inventories, teachers do not just mark them right or wrong, rather they are looking at orthographic features. These “features” are scored separately and students get points for knowing certain items. For example, a student spells the word WHEN as WEN. This student knows the correct short vowel and ending consonant and therefore will get points for knowing those features in the word even though the spelling is not correct. The rubric, or feature guide, helps the instructor to see the parts of a word. The rubric also provides the points students can get for each word, because it is all formatted for the teachers on the sheet. This provides information in a qualitative way that shows specific skills students know and do not know and what they will need to study next to progress along the stages.

When beginning, the teacher can mark the words right or wrong, remembering to write the correction next to the wrong answer provided by the students. This will help focus the teacher’s attention on what the student was using and what they were confusing. It also helps parents and other teachers to understand the papers. The teacher then calculates a raw score,
which is called the power score. This score will give the instructor an estimate of the students’ spelling stage.

Feature Guides Scoring

The feature guide helps instructors analyze student errors and confirms the designations of the stage suggested by the power score. These feature guides come along with the inventory. Teachers will want to make a copy of the appropriate feature guide for each student and record date of testing. There is spelling features listed in the second row of feature guide. Teachers will look to right of each word and check off each feature of the word that was shown written correctly on the students’ inventory. For example, if I spelled red correctly there would be a check in the beginning consonant box, middle consonant box, final consonant box and the short vowel for a total of three feature points. Students also get a point for spelling the word correctly which is scored in far right column.

If students are correctly getting some parts but not spelling entire word correct, they can still earn points. For example, the word bright, if a student spelled the word as BRITE, we notice that they were able to write the blend sound but not the spelling pattern of –igh. Teachers want to write on the inventory feature guide what students actually wrote instead so that they are able to see how students are using but confusing rules. Not every feature in a word is scored but the features sampled are the key for identifying certain stages of spelling.

After scoring each word, add the checks in the column and record the total score for that column at the bottom of the guide as a ratio of correct features to total possible features. The teacher will need to adjust this ratio if they call fewer than the total. The teacher should also add the total feature scores across the bottom and the total words spelled correctly. This will give teacher an overall total score that can be used to rank order students and to compare individual
growth over time. Looking at the feature columns from left to right, instruction should begin at
the point where a student first makes two or more errors on a feature. Look for what they know,
and what they are confusing. This will set the tone and pace for the next step in their instruction
and will also provide awareness for what the instructor will need to provide in their instruction
next.

Once the spelling inventory is completed and scored, a teacher’s next step will be to
group their students according to their abilities. This is important because teachers will then be
able to provide planning for their students using word sorts that will impact learning at their
level.

Summary

In this chapter, three steps for providing spelling instruction were discussed. Teachers
need to understand developmental levels before placement of students into groups can occur.
Examples of what students could be doing in their reading and writing were also provided to aid
the reader when working with students. Teachers can use informal and formal assessments to
find these levels using students’ reading and writing examples from their daily work. Students
are also given a spelling inventory to see what type of errors they make when spelling words.
This inventory shows areas students use and confuse, which is a great starting place for teachers
to focus their instruction. The use of the informal writing and reading observations along with
the formal spelling inventory will provide the teacher enough information to place the students in
their correct developmental level. Without using all three, information may be distorted or not
truly defined as to the correct developmental levels the students are learning in. This would also
throw off the instruction provided to help remedy the problems.
In the next chapter, teachers will be able to take the developmental levels found for students from the informal and formal assessments and learn how to apply them to a curriculum or model for using word sorts at their levels correctly and efficiently. The Word Study instruction has to be deliberately sequenced by the teacher so that students will get instruction that will propel their development.

To help students explore and learn about words, instruction must be sensitive to two fundamental areas. These areas are: students’ learning of phonics, spelling, and vocabulary is based on their developmental level and students’ learning is based on the way they are naturally inclined to learn: through comparing and contrasting word features and discovering consistencies. The next chapter will introduce and show the application of the Word Sort method in a possible classroom setting so that students are actively engaged with comparing and contrasting words and learning how to vocalize the consistencies of the words they are working with in their focused instruction.
Chapter 5: Word Sorts in Classrooms

Introduction

In chapter four the developmental levels of learning to spell were discussed. An understanding of the developmental level enables teachers to look through informal and formal assessments to identify the level of each of their students were in the developmental levels. After teachers have examined their students’ developmental information, they can apply that information to chapter three’s spelling strategy, word sorts. Through using the word sort strategy in chapter three and applying information learned on developmental levels in chapter four, teachers can begin to make spelling instruction practical for students. In this chapter, I will show one way to make these strategies practical in a school week’s schedule. By focusing on using word sorts, teachers will have a better understanding what it could look like if they implemented all areas discussed in this paper to their spelling instruction.

I have divided the sections into five days (a school week) to show what typical lessons would look like. For each day, students will progress through different interactive activities that engage them as they learn about words. When teachers are helping their students learn about words they should remember to adjust their instruction to each student’s developmental level. This will aid students on comparing and contrasting word features to assist in the discovery of consistencies. Word study is then active for the students and allows them to make their own meaning for how words they are studying work.

There are also strategies that teachers can use effectively in their classrooms to provide spelling instruction. Once the reader has seen the classroom model of word sorts divided into five days, strategies and activities that can be used to adapt the lessons each day to keep the students engaged and motivated to continue to look at words will be shown. By the end of the
week’s lessons. Students should be able to verbalize what they have learned about the selected words and their patterns. Teachers can encourage students to compare and contrast features in words. Students can begin sorting words and use their word knowledge to separate examples that go together and those examples that do not go together. From there, additional strategies can be used to link together what the student is learning about a set of words. Lastly, the researcher will have some final thoughts about spelling instruction in the classroom using a model such as the one developed below and implementing a word study program in classrooms to improve spelling.

Classroom Model

As stated in chapter four, teachers will have already assessed their students using a spelling inventory to determine their developmental levels. Teachers will next select a group of words that demonstrate a particular spelling pattern that the students are using and confusing because this would be their instructional level. After choosing a word pattern that students confuse and use (such as the /ou/ pattern), students can begin to sort words that fit the pattern at their developmental level. The developmental level teachers would want to focus on is the level the students assessed at on the spelling inventory previously given. The pace of the children’s progress will vary through each stage; rarely would all students in the class be studying the same list of words. If students already have a predetermined list of words that the instructor needs to follow, then I would use different strategies to effectively teach the words.

The field of “word study” provides opportunities for students to manipulate words and parts of words in meaningful and enjoyable activities and games. The next part of this chapter will demonstrate some of the meaningful activities that teachers can do with their students to work with letters and their corresponding sounds, components of words, such as roots, prefixes
and suffixes at their own levels. Students will also be able to notice patterns of how words are spelled, such as word families, and students will be able to see parts of words and how often it gives hints to meanings of words as well as its spelling and pronunciation. These activities will call for students to have active participation and active problem solving skills. Students will be encouraged to look for spelling patterns, form hypotheses, predict outcomes, and then test them. Students will need to internally think about what they see and what they know about the words they are working with.

The ultimate goal for doing word sort activities is for students to take control of the knowledge and automaticity gained while doing these word sorting activities. They should be able to transfer this knowledge to reading unfamiliar words they come in contact with, whether they are in isolation or in context.

Day One:

As previously stated in Chapter four, I would first check the writing and reading capabilities of my students through their daily work. Then I would test my students using the Words their Way Assessment from Bear et. Al (2004). Once students have been assessed, I would begin to look for words that matched their need of instruction at their individual developmental levels. Steps in instruction that could be beneficial for teaching students about words would be to introduce a new word sort. Instruction should be provided on what the patterns look like, what those patterns mean, what we say when we see the specific pattern, and any other relevant information about the word pattern.

The students would then perform the steps of a word sort so that they are able to state the generalization of the pattern. I would make sure to model the word sorting of the pattern with the students together so that they are seeing the same things I am seeing, and they can state what
they see to me as I observe what they are doing with the words. The students should read each word aloud during the word sort activity. Teachers should ask the student why the words are sorted in a particular way. Then have students scramble the cards up again and sort the cards as fast as possible into the sort previously made.

Teachers will want to introduce the spelling pattern students will be working with first through choosing words for the students to sort. Teachers should have students look for any words that have patterns to another word. This would be a great place to have students notice that words can follow similar patterns. It may be nice to alphabetize the words or tell the definition of the words to students so that they know what their meanings are. Often times, teachers forget to let their students know what words mean assuming they know the meaning already of the given word.

Day Two:

The following day I would assess the students on their previous lesson’s words and expand on what was taught so that students are able to recognize pattern in new ways. It is important to note that word study lessons should be similar for at least the first two sessions. Instructors should also build in a lot of repetition and opportunities for students to look over past words and word sorts as a reminder or as an assessment to see what has been retained over time. I would encourage students to discover the pattern in their daily reading and writing activities to help create a learning connection to what they are doing during Word Study time and what they are seeing in their other curriculum areas or their leisure time. I would do a speed sort in which students quickly put words into categories. Students would then discuss why they put their words in the formats that they did. I would also have students write their word sorts into a word sort journal so that they have it to refer to for the rest of the week.
Day Three:

Next, I would continue to provide activities that reinforce the pattern to help students relate the pattern to previously acquired word knowledge. For instance, students could put words together by long vowel sounds, short vowel sounds, alphabetizing, and focusing on prefixes, suffixes, roots or base words. Students could also put words by their part of speech or create a major concept sort. Students could also create new words that would correspond to the sorts they have already created on the word patterns they are focusing on for the week. Students could also check for word families that they already know and whether or not they apply to what they are learning about.

Students could then put the word in a sentence they created used in the correct manner. Students could look up words in dictionary to see parts of speech they are before sorting. Students could practice making the words with letters, then writing the words after they have formed them with alphabet letters. Students could look at blends and digraphs that words have to help sort them. Students could draw picture to go with the word to help create a connection to the word and picture model of the word.

The main activity would be to have the students sort the words in a no peeking sort. Students would lay down a word from each category as a header and then read the rest of the words would be read aloud by the teacher. Students need to indicate where the word would go, without seeing the word in written format. The teacher would then lay the card down where the student had suggested and let the student move the card in the correct place if he or she is wrong. This activity should be repeated again if the student makes more than one error. If students are able to do this correctly the first time, then I would have them do a blind writing sort. In a blind writing sort I would call the words in random order and the student should write the words into
the sorting categories. If students misspell a word, call out the word again a second or even a
third time. This helps students to show what they know about the given words.

Day Four:

To start of the day’s lessons I would review with students what patterns they have been
working on. We would take out their word cards and have them create their word sorts again.
This time, after doing their word sort, I would have them glue their word sorts into a notebook.
This notebook will provide the students a strategy when they come across a word they could add
to the notebook or when they are writing and they need to look up a pattern they would have this
notebook at their disposal!

I would also instruct students using word hunts. In word hunts, students search for words
with similar patterns in their reading or writing which may aid in transferring knowledge, seeing
generalizations in multiple words, and making the connection between their learning and their
daily literacy tasks. Students could use a familiar book they have been reading (such as in small
group guided reading) that have the same sound, pattern or both. Have students look for two or
three new words for each category with which they are working. I would have students create a
word study notebook (as discussed previously) in which they could label their lists they had
created each week. This would also be a great way to keep their learning of skills and strategies
close at hand in case they would need it as a reference or guide in their spelling.

Day Five:

Teachers then could test the students’ pattern knowledge rather than their ability to
memorize single words. The teacher may have had the students working with twenty words
during the word study cycle, but then randomly test students on only five words to see if they
understand the patterns. For testing the teacher can check to see if they have the ability to
transfer their knowledge of the word pattern that they learned. For example: for students studying the -at family, a teacher might include the word “vat” on a spelling list even if the students have not seen the word before. This allows the teacher to see if students are able to transfer their word knowledge of the -at chunk to new words they haven’t seen before, or to words that were not previously on their word lists. This again is going to show whether the students truly understood the patterns and generalizations of these types of words and not just memorizing words from a word list. The test will be on the word patterns they are studying, not necessarily on a certain set of words.

Additional Word Study Strategies

When working with word sorts, the above mentioned plan does not have to be the only way. It is just a representation that follows a structured gradual release model of learning. This means that students watch as it is modeled, practice with the teacher, practice as teacher observes and then implement the strategies unaided. These additional strategies could be used within the five day plan or as activities on their own.

Teachers could have students hunt for words in their reading and writing that fit the pattern they are studying for the week. This idea could be used in day three. Students could construct a word wall that illustrates examples of the different patterns that are being studied that week. This idea could be used within the first two days of teaching the sort. Each student could have a part in creating the word wall with their own word pattern. This could be a culminating activity on day five to show what students have learned before taking a test.

Students could find pictures that match the word as a visual also to the word wall. Students could also keep a journal, or a word study notebook, to record the known patterns of words they are studying. This could be a journal that they could write their new understandings
about words in along with words they find in reading and writing outside the working with word sort time. The journal could be used throughout the week to support words students are finding outside of the spelling instruction time.

Students could also play games and activities that apply to their word knowledge. Providing games, such as, Boggle Junior or Scrabble could be a starting place or teachers could create their own games to support what their students are learning about words and word patterns. There are many different games and activities that teachers could create and use from the *Words Their Way* book by Donald R. Bear et. Al (2004). This resource would be very helpful for educators to extend on activities that are being done in the classroom.

**Final Thoughts**

By following the steps of looking at reading and writing on a daily basis and then testing students on a spelling inventory the reader will see where to “classify” their students for grouping. After the students have been grouped, the focus can be on what the students need in order to improve their spelling capabilities at their level. This word sorting method is student driven and will help teachers provide a more focused and clear plan on how they will meet the students’ needs.

The model talked about previously is not the only way to teach spelling. As the researcher found out, there are many ways to teach spelling to students. It is, however, imperative that the teacher remembers the skills the students possess and where they are at orthographically in order to provide strategies that will benefit the child the most. These strategies will help support the learning of words for the students as well as provide strategies and connections to words that the students may never have received without modeling and practice of the words and strategies in their classrooms.
Through the students’ practice of word sorting activities, they become more automatic in looking for words in their reading that contain generalizations or patterns they have studied. Students become active learners who are engaged in their own learning. Spelling rules aren’t dictated by the teacher for the students to memorize. Instead, spelling patterns and generalizations are discovered by the students. Students can apply the rules and understandings of words they have learned in their own spelling and writing. This method provides a way for students to learn words and not memorize them for a test. Students will begin to show the transfer of their knowledge to other curriculum areas. Not only will student’s knowledge of words increase but so will their confidence and self-esteem!
References


