

Traditional Spelling Lists: Old Habits are Hard to Break

by Katherine Hilden and Jennifer Jones

It occurs in classrooms every Monday morning. Students enter, settle in for the day, and receive their weekly spelling lists. Every student gets the same list, which is typically organized by a featured spelling pattern of the week, with key vocabulary words from content studies often thrown in as “bonus” words. The weekly list may be teacher-generated, provided from the core reading program, driven by the district pacing guide, or a hybrid of each.

Students are typically expected to study and learn how to spell the words outside of the classroom, often via nightly homework assignments. Homework assignments are rather predictable, too, involving students in practice with the targeted words, such as, “Write each word three times,” or “Use each word in a sentence,” or “Write the words in alphabetical order.”

On Friday, the spelling test is given, students receive their scores to take home, and the class moves on to a new set of words the following Monday. The same weekly routine is repeated throughout the school year.



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The problem with the traditional spelling list concept is that it does not use research-based data to inform the instructional process. It assumes that every student in the class should be on the same list of words at any given point in the school year. Likewise, it assumes that one week of practice on a given feature or set of words is enough for anybody, so new words must be studied and learned each week.

What Does the Research Say?

Research shows us that students move through a continuum of spelling

development, progressing through five stages (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, and Johnston, 2008). Stages are not grade specific. It is useful for teachers to draw upon the research and classroom-friendly approach of spelling experts such as Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, and Johnston (2008), as well as Ganske (2008). The stages move from a *sound* to *pattern* to *meaning* focus. Teachers can recognize students’ stages by closely examining their spelling in regard to word features spelled correctly, features that are “used but confused” and features absent in students’ spelling (Bear et al, 2008). Features “used but confused” or applied inconsistently by students inform the teacher where to target instruction. The accompanying chart highlights some of the main features “used but confused” in each stage of spelling development (Bear et al, 2008).

In any given classroom, three to four stages may reside. With everyone using the same spelling list, students in stages outside of the traditional list miss out on instruction that will propel them

Summary of Spelling Stages and Features “Used but Confused” Adapted with permission from *Words Their Way* (Bear et al, 2008)

Sound	Pattern	Pattern & Meaning	Meaning
Emergent	Within Word Pattern Stage	Syllables & Affixes Stage	Derivational Relations Stage
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Write in letter-like forms • Learning to recognize letters • Begin to make representations of sounds in words 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Short vowels • Consonant blends • Consonant digraphs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • R-Controlled vowels • Long vowel patterns • Diphthongs (“ambiguous vowels”) • Complex consonants • Homophones 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inflectional endings • Syllabication • Common prefixes and suffixes
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assimilated and absorbed prefixes • Suffixes and parts of speech

forward through the stages. Research shows that effective teachers teach “up” in proximity to where students’ needs reside (Tomlinson, 2009).

Pacing guides for phonics and spelling instruction often perpetuate problem of spelling lists where “one list fits all.” Pacing guides are used with the well-intentioned goal of assuring that students are “paced” through the curriculum, covering all of the phonics and spelling elements needed to do well on an end-of-the-year high stakes assessment. Regardless of the degree of prescriptiveness the guides in play may exhibit, pacing guides do not typically acknowledge or address the fact that students have individual spelling needs; hence, the implicit message is given that data-driven instruction to meet students’ individual spelling needs is not valued or necessary.

Finally, it is important to question what exactly the implementation of the traditional spelling test accomplishes. Are the kids doing well on the Friday tests *really* good spellers, or are they just the products of parents who have assisted with study and homework consistently throughout the week? With the traditional spelling list and routine, it is difficult to know if students have truly learned and mastered the words or features at hand. Further, consistent support systems may not be in place for students who do not do well on the tests, as new words are introduced weekly.

Breaking Tradition

Addressing spelling, or word study, is integral to students’ literacy development. However, alterations to the traditional spelling list/homework/test routine must be exercised in order to meet students’

individual needs through differentiated instruction. Guidelines for breaking the traditional spelling approach are provided in the accompanying sidebar (Mesmer, Jones, Catherwood-Ginn, & Lester, 2011).

Differentiation is *making a difference by making it different* (IRA, 2000), and differentiated instruction should begin with data. By breaking the tradition of the weekly spelling test in which everyone receives the same, new words each week with little in-class instruction and replacing it with word study instruction that is informed by data, teachers will indeed make a difference in the literacy development of *all* students!

References

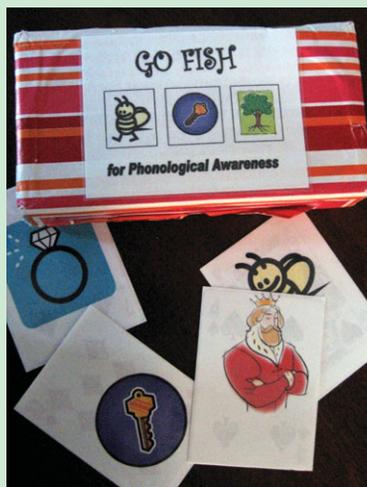
1. *Bear, D., Invernizzi, M., Templeton, S., & Johnston, F. (2008). *Words their way: Word study*

A Best Practice Action Plan for Effective Spelling Instruction

1. Assess first. Begin by administering a spelling inventory. Spelling inventories typically involve giving students what looks like a traditional spelling list. Rather than simply looking for “right or wrong” words, spellings are analyzed to determine what word features students *know*, which features they are *using but confusing* and which features are *absent* (Bear et al, 2008, Ganske, 2000). Students’ writing serves as an excellent secondary source.

2. Use the data. Data is only valuable if it is used. The authors of *Words Their Way* (Bear et al, 2008) and *Word Journeys* (Ganske, 2008) suggest that teachers form groups for spelling instruction. After groups have been determined, each group of students should receive a spelling list tailored to its needs.

3. Develop a Model of Management. A plan must be put into place that provides the teacher with time to work small groups according to spelling stage needs, time for students to practice with one another and/or



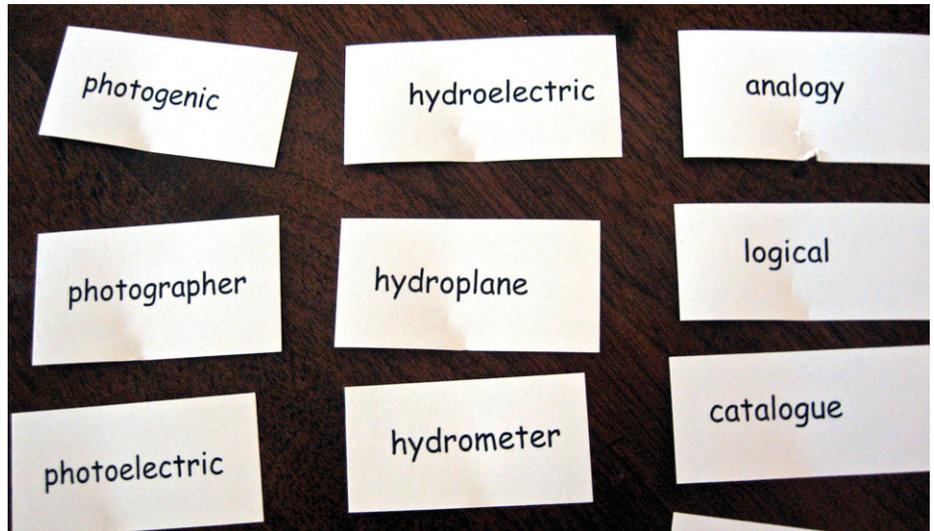
Emergent spelling game

time for students to independently work with words.

4. Teach. In small groups, teachers should engage students in the study of words by sound, pattern and/or meaning. With teacher explanation and demonstration guiding the way, students should examine words through analyzing sound and spelling features, categorizing words and applying knowledge through both reading and writing activities.

5. Monitor Progress. Weekly spelling tests may be given, even with in this non-traditional approach. It is crucial that spelling groups will be tested on their word lists. Unlike the traditional spelling approach, new features should not be routinely introduced each week if student groups do not exhibit overall mastery of a targeted feature (80% or better). Likewise, if students master a feature in less than a week, there is no reason to wait until the following week to move on. Groups should remain fluid and flexible, with weekly data and students’ writing samples serving as guiding factors in students’ placements within groups.

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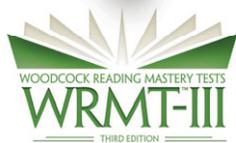
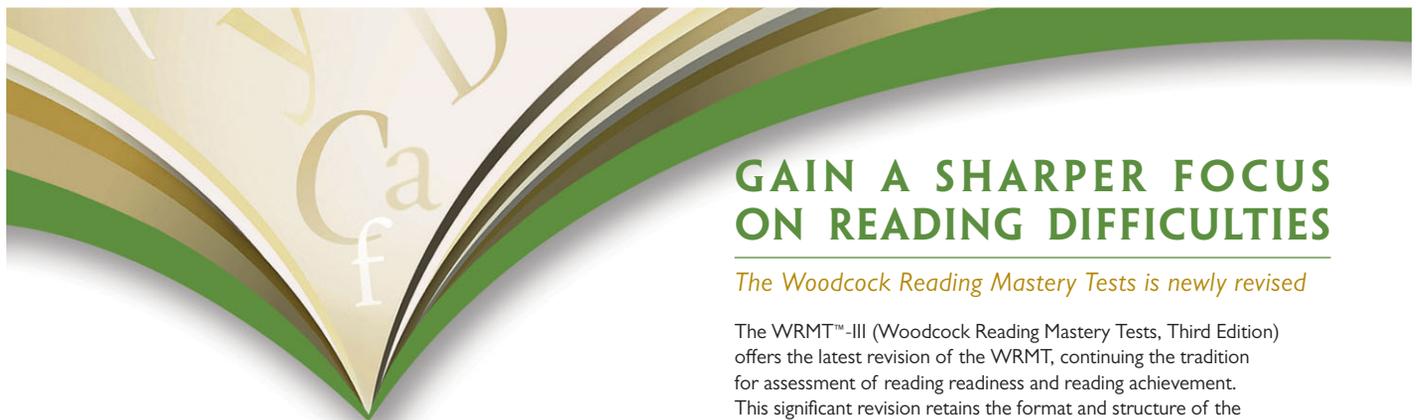
Derivational Relations stage sort using word roots PHOTO, HYDRO, and LOG

Shared principles worth sharing. *New England Reading Association Journal*, 45 (1), 26-31. (* indicates teacher-friendly recommendations for beginning differentiated spelling instruction)

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