



FOCUS ON WORDS

It is essential that all students become competent readers and writers. For this to occur, teachers understand that their students must gain mastery over certain specific skills such as phonics and spelling rules. They also know that their students must become fluent readers able to gain meaning and understanding as well as become competent writers who can communicate.

FINDING THE BALANCE

Many have written about the key ingredients of a balanced literacy instruction, (NICHD) yet finding the balance between different instructional approaches, such as direct instruction, guided reading or word study, is sometimes problematic. However, we **do** know that students' literacy development is greatly enhanced by the amount of time they spend actively engaged in code-based literacy activities. (National Early Literacy Panel 2009 page 17) We believe therefore that there is a need to create a coherent curriculum in which word study and meaningful reading and writing activities are all connected. We must make sure that students develop an understanding of how written language works. (Pinnell & Fountas 1998) (NICHD 2000).

This article is about **word solving**— an important part, but indeed only a part, of overall literacy instruction. Word study or word solving is a means to an end —“It is obvious that word solving serves communication in written language; it is not an activity unto itself. It is meaningful because of the way it serves the reader or the writer”. (Pinnell & Fountas 1998)

WHY A 'WORD FOCUS' IS IMPORTANT

English is an alphabetic language – that is, its written system is based on the principle of matching spoken sounds to written symbols or letters. Having only 26 letters in our alphabet and more than 40 sounds, there is a lot of “doubling up” of letter use. (For example the long vowel sound “ay” can be written as *ay, ai, a-e, ei, etc.*) English has also borrowed many words from other languages such as Latin, Greek and French, which add to its complexity. Yet English remains in many ways both a regular and predictable language. Our task is to demonstrate this to our students and to teach them strategies so they can observe and discover ‘within word’ patterns themselves. See newsletter number 27 *Linking Sounds and Letters* (November 2007) to read about the three areas of regularity in English.

- Word solving is an important part of the **meaning-making process**. It enables the decoding of unfamiliar words, and facilitates understanding of the reading passage and reading fluency.
- It is also relevant to the task of **spelling** - particularly of words that are unfamiliar and those that are not automatically known. Spelling ability is sometimes considered to act as a ‘gate keeper’. Poor spelling often places a constraint on the writer’s output. It is also unfortunate that teachers and peers may sometimes evaluate both the poor speller’s work and their overall ability less favorably than that of more able students.
- Word solving activities help students understand the **regularities, patterns and conventions** of the English language –essential components of written language.

- Word solving activities, when accompanied by opportunities for discussion of both the process and the results, leads to the development of important metacognitive /**meta - linguistic knowledge** about how the English language “works”.
- Word study builds **vocabulary** knowledge. Students develop greater understanding of words through the integration of saying, writing, spelling, analyzing and using the words in meaningful situations.
- Teaching word solving strategies encourages students to become **self-learners**. It allows them to generalize beyond isolated examples to entire groups of words.

WORD STUDY – AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH

A word study program is a cohesive approach that takes place on a daily basis in the context of meaningful reading and writing experiences. We believe that this approach is more effective than thematic words or spelling lists based on ambiguous vowel spellings e.g. such as **ea** in read, bread, create.

- students are empowered to discover patterns and think critically about the words they read and spell.
- teachers are mindful of individual differences in their group of students, noting their performance on reading and writing tasks and making adjustments to the kinds of word solving activities they suggest. Some students will be able to make generalizations from their self-discovery literacy activities almost on their own. Others will be able to retain their knowledge from a brief encounter or a specific teacher mini-lesson. And a smaller but significant group of students will require repeated exposure and systematic explicit teaching, and repeated practice. In the words of Donald Bear, one of the authors of *Words their Way* (2007), words chosen for word study "need to be words that children can look in to, play with, think about, attack, study deeply and make generalizations about. You can't teach all the words that kids need to know. You're teaching them how to look at words." To implement word study effectively, teachers and students alike must become **word detectives**, engaged in an ongoing attempt to make sense of word patterns and understand their relationships to one another. Spelling "rules" are not dictated by the teacher for students to memorize. Rather, spelling patterns and generalizations are discovered by students." Diane Henry Leipzig (2000).

THE TEACHER'S ROLE

As fellow “word detectives”, teachers can:

- set a time and a place for word study activities.
- model their own approach and verbalize their thinking. For example, they may quote a difficult word they encountered in a novel and how they worked it out, or how they recall the correct spelling of a complex place name.
- emphasize how a word is pronounced and differentiated from similar sounding words. For example, *comb/cone; conservation/conversation*.
- discuss what a word means and model how it is used in a sentence.
- provide a regular systematic word study program based on developmental sequence but also respond to observation of children's spontaneous writing.
- engage students in interesting ‘hands on’ word activities so they become more motivated about their own learning.

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- encourage students to be verbalize their awareness of what they can do well and what they need to spend time on improving.

- praise students for independently applying their knowledge.
- prompt the use of strategies during both reading and spelling, for example by saying “look in the middle”, or “its end is like in the word *jumping*”.

WHERE TO START?

Word study involves an important blend of explicit teacher instruction, self-discovery literacy activities and the development of meta-cognition and meta-linguistics (the abilities to think and talk about the processes of learning and about the structure of the language system). It is based on the teacher’s developmental assessment of where students are functioning.

Word solving strategies are particularly important in the early stages of learning to read and spell. However competent readers and writers also have them on ‘standby’ in case they encounter an unfamiliar word. At any point as they are reading, they might have to apply strategies of examining words – breaking them up, observing parts etc – “on the run”(Pinnell and Fountas 1998 page 26). Writing tasks offer fewer additional cues than reading and even the mature writer and speller will often have to call upon their word knowledge to construct an unfamiliar word.

EARLY WORD SOLVING

Once students have a basic appreciation of sound letter links they are ready to apply this knowledge to phonically regular words. Combining a consonant (C) and a short vowel (V) in regular 2 sounded words such as *at, it, on*, is often an empowering starting point. This can then be extended to 3 sounded words CVC (e.g. *rat, sip, fun*) and even those that incorporate 4 letters to make up the 3 sounds (e.g. *sick, hill, shop*).

- The teacher will need to show how words are formed with letters and at the same time verbalize their thinking processes. “ I can spell bat, b-a-t. (Point to the letters as you sound out the word /b/ /a/ /t/.) The word bag sounds almost the same - /b/ /a/ /g/. The last sound is different. I can hear /g/. I know that I use the letter g for the /g/ sound. So I will spell bag, b-a-g.”
- Many children find the transition from 3 to 4 sounded words difficult. Phonically regular 4 sounded words use a consonant blend either at the start or end of word. For example: *spot, flip, lamp, rust*. The consonants in a blend are very closely articulated and many students need specific training to both hear and feel the sounds. Using tokens or buttons to represent the 4 sounds will support students to “find the sounds” in the word and then translate this into written or chosen letters.
- Younger children will need many opportunities to physically manipulate letter tiles, or magnetic letters, create real words from letter blocks or flip books and talk about their decisions and actions. See newsletter number 33 *The Reading Journey* (September 2010) for further ideas about sound analysis and blending.
- Parents can also help the children at home, by showing interest in word solving activities, noticing the ‘tricky’ parts of words, interacting with writing activities as well as reading and sharing books that focus on aspects of language such as rhyme, syllables or alliteration. It is important for teachers to provide information to parents about the ‘why’ and ‘what’ of the word study program.

LATER WORD SOLVING

Teachers using a word solving approach will aim to teach strategies that can be used again and again. The strategies will need to be adapted for the age group. It is when we move beyond regular words containing a short vowel that many of the so-called irregularities of English are revealed. For example the long /A/ sound can be represented in many different ways, such as *ay* (day), *ai* (rain), *a-e* (cake), *ei* (rein).

Many commercial programs provide charts itemizing possible spellings for consonants and vowels (for example THRASS, The Speech Sound Set and Vowel Set from Pelican Talk). Whilst a valuable reference point for older students, young learners may be overwhelmed by the possibilities if they are not yet grounded in the regular and more frequent patterns that occur in written language. There is considerable regularity if we look at long vowel words in which the sound pattern and the spelling pattern are consistent. These are called **rime patterns**. Fry (1998) has researched the common rimes such as *ack, ing, ight, ash*. Fry found that just 38 common rime patterns can be used by readers to decode 654 one-syllable words. “Moreover, these same rimes can also be helpful for partial decoding of a much larger number of longer, more difficult, multisyllabic words.” (Rasinski, 1999.) For example: inventing, lightening, fashionable.

Many traditional reading and spelling instruction methods focus on **spelling rules** or popular generalizations to teach spelling. Unfortunately many of these, such as “*When two vowels go walking, the first one does the talking.*” can be less than 50% reliable (Clymer 1963/1996). It is important then to concentrate on the generalizations that are the most consistent. For example – doubling of final consonant when adding an ending to a word with a short vowel, as in run/running. See Abbott (2000) There are many traps for students who try to adhere rigidly to a set of rules. Even when students appear to “know” a certain rule in a spelling test, generalizing what they know to less structured reading and writing tasks may not occur without teacher support and guidance. Whilst children can be trained to expect and tolerate exceptions and given opportunities to practise applying their knowledge, discovering the rules for themselves, through organized word solving activities is immensely powerful. In this way they will be more likely to make strategic use of their understanding, developing predictive skills and strategically applying possibilities rather than relying on memorizing a rule they have been “taught”.

Teachers should model flexibility in using key words to pronounce harder words. For example when decoding the word *conductor*, children are coached to modify the pronunciation of the first and last syllables to sound more like a word they know. (Pinnell and Fountas 1998 page 25)

Word solving for older students can be extended to multi-syllabled words that contain common prefixes and suffixes, for example *pre, im, -able, -ture*. It is important to explicitly teach children about these so that they can recognize them in reading and use them in spelling.

SOME STRATEGIES/ACTIVITIES FOR WORD STUDY

- **Letter, picture and word sorts** - focusing on any aspect of written or spoken language e.g. consonant blends, first sounds, rime families, the most frequent ways of spelling the /A/ sound, doubling of consonants before adding endings. Students are shown examples of this sorting by a competent language user. They then engage with others in word sorting activities, talking about the process as they go along. Eventually individual students may be able to sort using more than one correct criteria, e.g. same first sound as well as same last sound.
- **Mini lessons** – demonstrating a problem solving approach to a specific language feature for example, contractions, capitals, first sound, suffixes.
- **Brainstorming** words with a rhyme pattern. Students say the words (for example, *pain, lane, stain, rain, reign, crane*) and the teacher writes these in groups on the board to emphasize the alternative spellings. With encouragement and verbalizations students “discover” the most frequent spellings and the rules of application.
- **Analogy** – students are given a word to read or spell and encouraged to recall a word that looks or sounds similar to assist. Nonsense words can be used to encourage this. For example; “Read this made

up word – *creetling*.” Encourage students to talk about their thinking – for example, “I saw the ‘ee’ and thought of the word ‘see’ and then the end says ‘ing’ like in sing.”

- Using “**Word Wall**” charts. Students look at a word, identify the spelling pattern, think of a known word with that pattern or look at the “word wall” for a word with that pattern. The word wall is assisting the use of analogy.
- **Letter cubes** – three cubes with letters printed on each surface are provided and students see how many words can they create. Children will learn which letters go together frequently, which cannot go together and which can go together but only in a particular word position.
- **Interactive whiteboard or computer activities**. Our book *A Sound Way* and the accompanying interactive whiteboard CD have numerous activities where students have to think and problem solve about words – in particular the manipulation activity CHANGE in the ‘Bringing it together’ section.
- **Games** will encourage confidence with word building. Some focus on regular 3 sounded and 4 sounded words (Wizard, Love and Reilly). Others feature rime families or move into more complex words providing base words and adding prefixes and suffixes. Smart Kids products are also useful for this.

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