

## SPECIAL INTEREST ARTICLE

### An Instructional Approach to Teaching Spelling: Word Study

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#### Abstract

*Spelling programs in elementary school grades are a controversial topic among teachers, parents, and researchers in the field of best practices. Because spelling is a foundational skill of literacy, recent education publications continue to stir contention among teachers to resolve what is the best approaches to spelling instruction. Proficient spelling enhances the quality of writing and proficient reading, so a developmental word study approach is essential. In this article, the author presents a research-based case demonstrating how the instructional program Words Their Way is an effective method to assess and instruct spelling, which may be integrated in balanced literacy programs in preschool to secondary grades.*

Teaching spelling has been a controversial topic for years (Graham & Santangelo, 2014; Pan et al., 2021). Spelling is a foundational skill of literacy (Alves et al., 2019) that empowers people to function in day-to-day activities (Alves et al., 2019; Nahari & Alfadda, 2016; Pan et al., 2021). It is also a skill that is judged by others; spelling errors can be perceived as lack of skill or education, and can negatively impact a person's confidence (Alves et al., 2019; International Literacy Association (ILA), 2019c; Nahari & Alfadda, 2016). Headlines such as "Does Spelling Still Matter – And If So, How Should It Be Taught?" (Pan et al., 2021), "Rethinking Assessment in Word Study" (Koutrakos, 2019), and "Does Spelling Instruction Make Students Better Spellers?" (Graham & Santangelo, 2014) in recent educational publications continue to stir contention among teachers to resolve what are the best approaches to spelling instruction.

#### What Research Says About Spelling

Researchers have explored how children learn to spell and the instructional approaches that are needed to support their learning. As new ideas developed around more effective approaches, the idea of word study was crafted (Bear et al., 2016), more recently with an emphasis on differentiating instruction (Mihalik, 2017).

According to Ehri (1987), a literate person must be able to read and spell words, which proficient readers do with ease. Research studies have explored how readers refine literacy skills as they develop mastery of letter knowledge, transfer, and letter-sound cues, and later become skilled at decoding and spelling (Ehri, 1987). Ample research findings have attested to the significance of spelling instruction as an important literacy skill (Alves et al., 2019; McNeill & Kirk, 2013; Mihalik, 2017).

Proficient spelling leads to quality writing and proficient reading and is a skill that demands attention (ILA, 2019c). It also enables a student to write clear messages, build writing stamina and fluency, and results in descriptive and an expansive word choice, adding voice to the writing (ILA, 2020). Students who lack spelling fluency often are often poor readers and writers (Robinson-Kooi & Hammond, 2020). Thus, the teaching of spelling skills should be considered an essential part of a balanced literacy program, including opportunities and quality instruction for students to read, write, and speak (Mihalik, 2017), signaling teachers to implement a spelling program that is developmental, explicit, and differentiated.

## **Spelling Is Developmental**

In the 1970s, researchers began to examine how young students approached spelling, soon realizing there may be a developmental approach to how young children represented speech with print (Bear et al., 2016). Fifty years of research in literacy development has led us to an understanding of how learners develop writing and spelling skills; learners move along the same continuum at varied rates (Bear et al., 2016; Masterson & Apel, 2010; Mihalik, 2017), and growth through these literacy stages is individual (Ehri, 1987; Mihalik, 2017; Pan et al., 2021). These stages enable teachers to develop a better understanding of student errors and guide them in a plan of instruction to best support individual students when they make spelling errors (Reed, 2012). Thus, students must be met with literacy instruction at their level to reach their optimal learning growth potential (Mihalik, 2017).

Developmental research encourages spelling instruction to follow a learner's natural detection of patterns, including phonology, morphology, and orthography (Alves et al, 2019; ILA, 2018). Proficient spelling is more than memorizing. Spelling instruction should be based on a developmental approach (Robinson-Kooi & Hammond, 2020) and examined carefully by teachers to gain intuitiveness into their errors and developmental level (ILA, 2019c). Despite the research that has been done in literacy instruction, child development, and student learning, teachers remain hesitant to replace spelling programs that memorize weekly spelling lists with research-supported word study approaches (Mihalik, 2017).

### ***Phonology***

Phonological awareness usually develops after the age of four and is a demanding task for some learners because they often attend to word meaning instead of the sounds (ILA, 2019b). Described as “a multilevel, oral language skill typically defined as the sensitivity to the sound (or phonological) structure of spoken words apart from their meanings” (ILA, 2019b, p. 2), phonological awareness is crucial as students learn to manipulate, segment, build, read, write, and spell words (Reed, 2012). Most spelling approaches rely on phonology, but this sole approach is not sufficient to develop vital skills in young students learning how to spell (ILA, 2019c).

Initially, teachers start with teaching students alphabetic letters and corresponding sounds. In other words, phonology is the starting point of spelling instruction. Students learn how the alphabet works and its connection to writing, building the foundation for further development in spelling and reading (ILA, 2018). Learners must understand that writing involves representing the phoneme with the correct letter(s) (Alves et al., 2019).

### ***Morphology***

The second stage in the development of writing is the learner's understanding of morphemes, “the smallest linguistic units that carry meaning” (Alves et al., 2019, p. 225). Research stresses the importance of teaching students how to spell, using a morphemic approach instead of a phonemic approach (Devonshire & Fluck, 2010). Attending to a morphemic instructional approach is advantageous when teaching students to spell, and it also improves reading and writing skills, especially among students in grades two to four, during the time they receive a lot of literacy instruction (Devonshire & Fluck, 2010). Students learn how to spell through instruction about prefixes, suffixes, and root words, and at the same time they learn rules for applying suffixes and making plural words. Explicit teaching of spelling has been successful in improving the spelling skills with students with dyslexia (Reed, 2012), helping students develop an awareness of word structure, which is pivotal in becoming a skilled and accurate speller (Alves et al., 2019), and aiding in vocabulary development (ILA, 2019c).

## **Orthography**

Mihalik (2017) defined orthographic knowledge as “information stored in a student’s memory that helps represent spoken language in writing. In spelling, orthographic knowledge includes hearing words orally and transferring to writing, such as a spelling test” (p. 32). In the mid-1900s, an orthographic method was introduced, encouraging instruction to focus on a developmental approach, with the understanding that learners progress through these levels in a similar order but at a different rate (Mihalik, 2017). Learners develop an awareness of spelling predictability when they are immersed in literacy from an early age. They try to “make sense of words and how they are spelled” (Alves et al., 2019, p. 226). Orthography is important because it teaches students word patterns and rules (Alves et al., 2019), and helps reduce spelling errors (ILA, 2019c).

## **Explicit Instruction**

In the context of a classroom, this instruction involves the teacher using scheduled time to explicitly teach spelling (Pan et al., 2021). Explicit instruction helps students strengthen spelling skills, because it uses the gradual release of responsibility model (Robinson-Kooi & Hammond, 2020). Explicit teaching of writing skills improves reading skills because both skills are the cornerstone of word study. This empowers a reader/writer to decode words while reading and apply this skill to build words when writing (ILA, 2020). In other words, it is a reciprocal relationship.

Graham and Santangelo (2014) published the results of a meta-analysis of 53 studies, concluding that spelling, reading, and writing skills are expanded with direct teacher instruction. In addition, Graham and Santangelo examined an additional 23 studies that explored the effect of teaching spelling and found that formal instruction was more effective than a natural spelling approach. They concluded that explicit teaching was exceptional and had a positive effect in almost 90% of the studies examined. Six additional studies concluded that explicit instruction of spelling produced academic gain in spelling accuracy when writing, and formal spelling instruction resulted in increased success that were sustained over time.

Mihalik (2017) provided evidence of growth when using explicit instruction to teach spelling, because it involves teacher modelling, guided practice, and timely feedback on practice work. The International Literacy Association (2019a, 2019b) concluded that active engagement in an appropriate word study, supplemented with explicit teaching, fosters success and skill.

Smith (2017) made three recommendations for spelling programs targeting students who struggle in literacy. First, explicit instruction is notably paramount for students who have a spelling disorder because effective interventions are pivotal to supporting their language development. Next, students who struggle need consistency in programming, word study practice, and an explicit approach to spelling, for the simple reason that they need these foundational skills to be successful writers. Finally, teachers must be reminded that when struggling students are learning to read, decode, and spell, the students must receive direct instruction practice in word blends and syllables, and sound segmenting. All three of these approaches should be a part of a solid intervention.

## **Approaches to Teaching Spelling**

### **Memorization Approach**

The memorization approach stresses the importance of developing spelling proficiency by using memorizing, drilling, and testing of routine words lists. As early as 1920, professors developed spelling textbooks for grades one to eight, to implement daily drill and practice in word work (Mihalik, 2017; Pan et al., 2021; Reed, 2012). Students learn to spell high frequency

words, to help enhance reading and writing skills. This practice focuses on levels to be implemented across various grade levels (Mihalik, 2017).

### **Visualization Approach**

The visualization approach teaches students to use their cognitive skills to link the memory of what they see (e.g., to picture the word) to spelling. This helps learners realize when a particular word *looks* right (Alves et al., 2019; Nahari & Alfadda, 2016). According to the International Literacy Association (2019c), visual understanding enables students to store word knowledge when students are actively engaged and exposed to lots of words. Research has shown (Nahari & Alfadda, 2016) that the use of multiple senses while playing games builds success, confidence, and engagement while learning. Nahari and Alfadda (2016) concluded that the visualization approach yields higher results, and that visualization may be the answer for spelling success because students who use this approach scored higher on their post-test, than students who were taught spelling using a traditional approach. They also found that students who were taught visual approaches had a more positive attitude toward spelling.

### **Word Study Approach**

A recent study by the International Literacy Association (2020) suggests that methods to teach spelling should include teaching high frequency words and patterns while using word study approaches to sort and build words based on spelling patterns. This research-based approach considers student literacy development and best practices for literacy instruction, and focuses on “phonics, spelling patterns, and vocabulary through a differentiated and developmental approach that seeks to meet students at their instructional spelling levels and monitor progress through a range of assessments” (Mihalik, 2017, p. 46). That is, teachers instruct at the same level as the child, while maintaining student engagement and reducing frustration in student learning. This support enables the learner to make the greatest achievement gains (Bear et al., 2016).

The main goal of daily word study is to encourage learners to put into use their knowledge and understanding of spelling, while also reading as a support of fluent decoding and comprehension (Koutrakos, 2019). Word study improves awareness and understanding of how words can be broken down into smaller chunks of meaning (i.e., morphological awareness), and empowers the teacher to address the stages of spelling as students develop, ultimately improving academic success for all learners (Mihalik, 2017).

### **What Do I Recommend?**

Published in 2000, *Words Their Way* (Bear et al.) is supported in research as an effective method to assess and instruct spelling and can be integrated in a balanced literacy program from preschool to secondary grades (Mihalik, 2017). This program follows a developmental approach (Bear et al., 2016; Mihalik, 2017; Zugel, 2005), enabling students to move through five levels from letters and sounds to more complex words (Bear et al., 2016; Mihalik, 2017). For example, early years students in grades K-1, would “benefit from sorting pictures associated with sounds as they first build automaticity with consonants, scaffolding their initial attempts to read and write” (Mihalik, 2017, p. 16). In the Within Word stages, usually around grades 1-3, students compare words, to help develop their vocabulary. In future stages, students develop knowledge and understanding of more complex words, more specifically, “prefixes, suffixes, and base words” (Mihalik, 2017, p. 16).

*Words Their Way* addresses a learner’s developmental level and differentiates the instruction. According to the International Literacy Association (2018), word study approaches use explicit instruction and differentiation, which enables students to build their spelling skills for

accurate spelling while building confidence and writing fluency.

### **How Do You Apply Words Their Way in the Classroom?**

In the context of the classroom, teachers begin this program by assessing the student's spelling level by administering a diagnostic spelling assessment. This diagnostic tool scores the students' ability to recognize initial and final consonants, vowels, digraphs, and their understanding of complex spelling patterns, permitting the teacher to determine the students' instructional level for differentiated instruction (Mihalik, 2017). In a typical grade 2 classroom, one teacher could have four or five groups of spelling levels to instruct.

In my classroom, I meet with each group on the first day of a new word sort for explicit instruction of new words. We read the words, discuss their meanings, and sort them. To begin, students actively sort the words into groups using personal rules, share their reasons for sorting, and then engage in a focused lesson (e.g., the sorting rule this week is doubling the consonant before adding *-ing* to a word). After the lesson, students return to their seats to engage in assigned word work. Teachers have autonomy in assigning word work activities, which may include daily quick sorting of the words by rule or pattern, using the words in context (writing a sentence, paragraph, or story), searching for similar words in the classroom that have the same sorting rule, completing the supplementary workbook page, and, if a teacher chooses, completing a word test at the end of the week.

While I facilitate a small group, the remaining students rotate through literacy centers: silent reading, writing, working on an integrated science or social studies lesson, buddy reading, or independent word work. I schedule my word work block at a time when I have a support teacher in the classroom to help work with the remaining groups. Once a routine is established, I meet with the word groups only on the first day of the new sort because guided reading/ writing groups are my focus on the remaining days.

I was first introduced to this program five years ago, when I moved to a new early years school. At that time, there was school-wide implementation of this program. I was given a copy of the program manual *Words Their Way: Word Study for Phonic, Vocabulary, and Spelling Instruction*, 6th ed. (Bear et al., 2016). After reading the book, I collaborated with colleagues to obtain strategy ideas for effective ways to implement this program in my grade 3 classroom. I did not receive any further training, which at the time led to my finding the program overwhelming. However, once I learned how to establish routines, sustaining the program was effortless. It takes time and patience at the beginning of each year to frontload students with expectations. For me, the payoff of this approach is that everyone settles into a routine, and the students become quite independent in their weekly word work activities.

This speaks to the effectiveness of the program: students are hands-on, engaged, and completing their assigned word work. Students are assessed three times a year (beginning, middle, and end) and I witness growth in all students, with some students climbing two to three levels over the year. Surprisingly, I noticed that my guided reading and word work groups do not automatically match. I sometimes have struggling readers in my average word work group or have a strong reader in my average group, which results in a struggle for center rotation, because my guided reading and spelling groups are not identical.

### **Linking Spelling Instruction to Word Study: Words Their Way**

When taking a comprehensive look into these three approaches, a word approach such as *Words Their Way* (Bear et al., 2016) can be viewed as an effective spelling program. Research has shown that *Words Their Way* helps learners “to accurately spell words, decode words when reading, and expand the breadth and depth of their vocabulary” (Mihalik, 2017, p. 16). When students are involved in word study, they actively sort and classify words while applying thinking skills (Koutrakus, 2019). Likewise, when teachers model skills about word sounds, patterns, and

meanings, students can make meaning as they read a variety of text. This explicit teaching in word study empowers students to build an understanding of the English language, knowledge of word meanings, and how to spell them (Bear et al., 2016).

According to the International Literacy Association (2019c), diagnostic spelling tests give insight into students' spelling errors, and a class profile can be reviewed to determine common errors across numerous students. *Words Their Way* includes a diagnostic test that provides the teacher with the necessary information to determine a student's developmental level and spelling needs (Mihalik, 2017), giving this program an advantage over spelling approaches that do not address the challenge of students who are not at grade level and offers an entry point for all students in the classroom (Mihalik, 2017). Using *Words Their Way*, teachers can scaffold their literacy instruction to meet the literacy needs of their learners, which will result in a higher rate of spelling growth and student confidence (Dew, 2012). In addition, Zigel (2005) found this program to be effective in vocabulary development and comprehension, which in turn increased reading comprehension.

Bear et al. (2016) concluded that a word study program parallels reading behaviours and is the "synchrony of reading, writing, and spelling development" (p. 15). He further stated that students develop understanding of words while actively engaging in reading and writing, and through explicit teacher instruction. *Words Their Way* uses these two foundational beliefs to instruct students, so that they build deeper word knowledge. Students' acquisition of skills in word knowledge is based on their stages of development and students naturally learn by actively exploring words.

Mihalik (2017) conducted an 18-week transcendental phenomenological study on the "phenomenon of teacher implementation of word study spelling programs across elementary classrooms" (p. 27) to analyze prevailing themes in the spelling practices of six grade 2 classrooms. Mihalik explored the factors that influenced teachers: challenges in instructional methods, how those challenges are addressed, program feedback, and influences of professional development. Data collection consisted of a variety of formats, including interviews (administrators and teachers), classroom observations, teacher journals, and collections of student work. He chose a grade 2 classroom, because classrooms at this grade often include a wide range of spelling abilities and would cover the most levels in the *Words Their Way* program. Teachers in the study reflected on the efficacy of the program, stating that they "felt confident that word study provided valuable levels of differentiation ... and was a worthwhile approach to spelling" (Mihalik, 2017, p. 203), and "it is notable that a combined 95% of teachers [reportedly] had some level of success" (p. 119).

When looking at the overall effectiveness of this program, one may also consider Fisher et al.'s (2016) effect size, and how a word study program influences student academic success. This work considers influences that are 0.4 and above as having a significant positive effect on student success. Fisher's group concluded that the following influences have a positive influence on student learning: responses to intervention (1.07), vocabulary programs (0.67), direct instruction (0.59), phonics instruction (0.54), and small group learning (0.49). The word study program *Words Their Way* includes all of these components, which is evidence of its effectiveness as a spelling program.

In comparison, memorization and visualization approaches are less effective. The memorization approach, for example, which stresses the importance of developing spelling proficiency using memorizing, drilling, and testing of routine words lists, does so without any specific focus on word patterns or sounds (Mihalik, 2017, p. 38). Students learn to spell high frequency words to help enhance reading and writing skills (Mihalik, 2017), but this method does not account for any additional knowledge students need to understand about language and to become proficient spellers (Masterson & Apel, 2010).

The visualization approach serves students who are actively engaged and exposed to lots of words while playing games, leading to success, confidence, and engagement. However, this approach does not consider a developmental strategy, nor does the teacher explicitly teach

them. According to Graham and Santangelo (2014), formal instruction in spelling improves performance and achievement in spelling, writing, phonological awareness, and reading skills. Furthermore, Devonshire and Fluck (2010) concluded that explicit instruction in morphology yields positive results in spelling skills. They also concluded that the gains in these areas were maintained over long periods of time. Finally, Robinson-Kooi and Hammond performed a quantitative study in 2020, concluding that explicit teaching rules and formation patterns, inflection, derivation, and composition of word structure yield positive results. The visualization approach does not include explicit instruction when teaching spelling. Therefore, the visualization approach is not a singularly effective approach to spelling instruction.

### **Limitations of a Word Study Approach**

When determining the effectiveness of the Words Their Way program, one should consider research evidence that identifies its limitations. In Mihalik's study (2017), an absence of guided writing instruction across the sample group was noted, which is a lost opportunity for teachers to facilitate a homogenous group of writers with a focus on guiding students who are at the same developmental writing stage. Mihalik provides evidence that parallels what current literature states, that students often do not transfer spelling and word study skills. There is a need to supplement or expand the word study instruction, to include meaningful literacy activities, such as integration into daily "reading, writing, and content area ... [activities, for] ... meaningful application of skills" (p. 204), because this will result in higher levels of retention and word transfer.

Zugel (2005) suggested taking the words from each sort, and using them in meaningful writing activities so that students focus on literacy skills in context. When Zugel (2005) used this program to supplement writing activities, he found it to be highly effective with low leveled students and it helped to increase their reading fluency. Adding to this evidence, Bear et al. (2016) concluded that some word approaches included explicit modelling of skills, but in isolation. In other words, students needed opportunities for engaging and purposeful literacy activities, to facilitate reading and writing these practice words in context.

Mihalik (2017) also observed scheduling conflicts that resulted in lower level readers receiving their scheduled reading intervention block at the same time their classmates had word study. This meant the lowest level students missed their word study, requiring effective scheduling. Some of the teachers in Mihalik's study found value in the program, although they found multiple groups challenging to manage. Learner support was most effective in organized schools, where school teams had students attend classroom instruction at their level, providing individual differentiation for students and fewer groups within the classroom.

A final limitation is a lack of professional development, which may cause some teachers to become hesitant to implement new programs due to a lack of understanding (ILA, 2019a; Mihalik, 2017). Likewise, McNeill and Kirk (2013) concluded that teachers found this developmental instructional method to be successful, but called for further professional development. These viewpoints were acknowledged by Smith (2017), who stated that students will reach their highest potential in reading and writing if there is a team approach to support student learning.

### **Conclusion**

Classroom instruction must include spelling as an essential component to the successful development of literacy in young learners (Graham & Santangelo, 2014). Using a word study approach to teach spelling as a component of a balanced literacy program, teachers can assess, differentiate, and explicitly teach word sounds, patterns, and meanings. I recommend implementing Words Their Way with supportive professional learning as an effective word study approach, because this program incorporates best practices and research-based evidence to

fully support all students' development of spelling, and ultimately leads to proficient readers and writers.

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