

Word Study to Teach Phonics, Vocabulary, and Spelling: The Why, What, and How

BY DONALD R. BEAR, PH.D.

Introduction

Word study is a process of discovery and is an integrated approach to teach *word knowledge* in phonics, vocabulary, and spelling. Four principles of word study and the essential elements of instruction and specific routines to examine focused contrasts of words by sound, pattern and meaning are presented. This paper shows what word study looks like, and what it takes to provide explicit and differentiated word study instruction. The essential elements of word study in the *Words Their Way Observation Tool* are presented to think about deep professional development.

In the first section of this paper, word study is shown to be explicit and experientially based with activities for practice that lead students to understand the generalizations that underlie how to read and spell words. To illustrate how a teacher guides this discovery process, consider the way Ms. Kiernan interacts with students. Building on this example, in the second section, we examine the key elements of word study instruction and organization, the *how* of word study.



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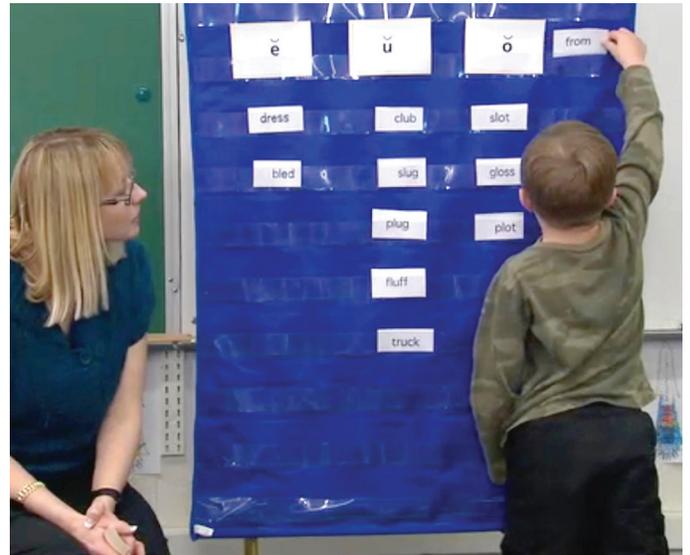
Ms. Kiernan's Small Group Word Study

At a pocket chart in a first-grade classroom, Ms. Kiernan begins with a short vowel sort. As suggested by his furrowed brow and in the dialogue that follows, Sebastian is momentarily confounded by the word *from* and decides to place *from* in the Oddball category.

Ms. Kiernan and Sebastian discuss where to sort the word from.



“...word study is explicit, thought provoking, and student oriented.”



Ms. Kiernan: Sebastian, tell us what word you have.

Sebastian: *From*

Ms. Kiernan: *From*. Can you come up and put *from* up?

[Walks to the pocket chart but does not put his card anywhere.]

Ms. Kiernan: I see you stopping. What are you thinking?

Sebastian: Um, it has the *o*.

Ms. Kiernan: Ah-ha, it sure does, doesn't it? So, what do you think we should do with it?

Sebastian: [Puts *from* in the oddball column.]

Ms. Kiernan: Oddball, I think that's a good decision. I think that's quite a nice decision that you noticed, that you really thought about that word, Sebastian. It doesn't sound like *slot*, *gloss*, or *plot*. And good for you for noticing that.

Sebastian: And it sounds like a *u*.

Ms. Kiernan: It does, doesn't it?

Sebastian: But it doesn't have a *u*.

Ms. Kiernan: But it doesn't have a *u*.

In this dialogue, you can see that word study is explicit, thought provoking, and student oriented. Ms. Kiernan guides this process when she asks, “*What are you thinking? So, what do you think we should do with it?*” Over several days, to forge their understandings of short vowels, students study the patterns independently and with partners in small group with Ms. Kiernan, at their seats and centers, and at home. (This lesson can be viewed in the *eText for Words Their Way, 7th edition, 2020.*)

Why Teach Word Study?

This question can be answered succinctly. We teach word study to teach students to read and write. Word study assists students in the fast, accurate recognition of words in texts, and fast accurate production of words in writing so that readers can focus their attention on making meaning (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton & Johnson, 2020). The word study programs based on this integrated and development approach are effective across tiers including literacy interventions (Eddy, Ruitman, Hankel, Matelski, & Schmalstig, 2011).

What is Word Study?

Our approach to word study instruction is structured around 4 Principles. We discuss these principles and research that underlie word study.

Word study instruction is:

Integrated. *Word study instruction is integrated.* **Word study = phonics + spelling + vocabulary instruction** illustrates the integrated approach to instruction. There is a reciprocal relationship between reading and writing development and instruction (Perfetti, & Verhoeven, 2017; Templeton & Bear, 2018). In word study, when you teach spelling, you are also teaching phonics and vocabulary. A meta-analysis of spelling research indicates that spelling instruction impacts reading achievement (Graham & Santangelo, 2014), and that students may learn more about reading from spelling than they do about spelling from reading. Pedagogically, the implication is that spelling, phonics and vocabulary are taught together, and not as separate subjects. For many teachers, students and families, this way of thinking about word study reflects a change in why and how we teach spelling.

Developmental. *Word study is developmental.* Five stages of spelling have been described as they fall in line with the three layers of English writing: the sound, pattern, and meaning layers that you see at the top of Figure 1. Word study lessons focus on particular layers depending on students' development according to what stages students are in (Henderson, 1981). During the first two stages of spelling development, students begin with phonological awareness, the alphabetic principle and the spelling of beginning consonants, and in the upper two stages, students learn about English morphology, the study of affixes and word derivations (Templeton, Bear, Invernizzi, Johnston, Flanigan, Townsend, & Hayes, 2015).

“There is a reciprocal relationship between reading and writing development and instruction.”

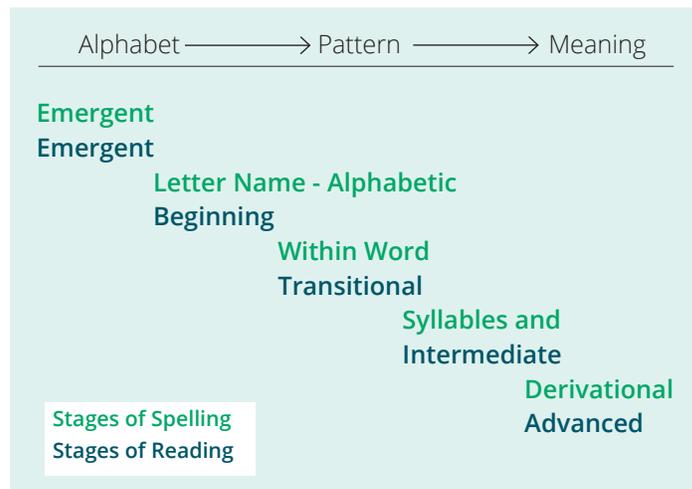


Figure 1. Developmental Stages of Spelling and Reading Layers of English orthography:

As seen in Figure 1, spelling stages can be related to reading stages. There is a synchrony among reading, writing and spelling development. Specific reading behaviors including word recognition, reading fluency, accuracy, and at the upper levels, comprehension can be viewed developmentally. For example, beginning readers who read between 40 and 80 words per minute (wpm) with good accuracy are likely in the second stage of spelling, the letter name – alphabetic stage when they examine short vowels. Transitional readers are in the next stage of reading and are within word pattern spellers. Their reading is more fluent, above 100 wpm with some phrasing, and in word study they focus on the patterns for long and complex vowels like vowel diphthongs such as the CVCe, CVVC and CVV patterns in *line*, *team* and *pie*, respectively).

Explicit. *Word study instruction is explicit.* Specific *focused contrasts* are chosen to teach students explicitly about the features that match their development. Explicit instruction occurs when the teacher demonstrates how to examine these contrasts. The scope and sequence of the features students contrast is based on research of students' development (Ehri, 1997; Ehri, 2014; Invernizzi, & Hayes, 2004). For example, students in the letter name – alphabetic stage contrast a variety of sounds and features within a range of categories: beginning consonants, then digraphs and blends, short vowel families, the CVC pattern for short vowels, and final consonant digraphs (Bear, et al., 2020). Explicit instruction is observed later in Ms. Kiernan's lesson

“Spelling, phonics and vocabulary are taught together, and not as separate subjects.”

when she shows students that words with beginning consonant blends (*dress*) follow a CVC pattern with the blend (*dr*) as one unit.

Interestingly, as we see in Sebastian’s reflection and quizzical expression, part of explicit instruction is to ask open-ended questions that are designed to teach students how to talk to each other about what they observe and learn. Ms. Kiernan asks: “*What are you thinking? So, what do you think we should do with it?*” This ability to reflect is an essential part of word study instruction and assessment discussed below.

Experiential. *Word study instruction is experiential.* The most important way for students to grow their word knowledge is to do a ton of reading and writing. Without this time, reading and writing explicit word study instruction will not stick. After the explicit instruction in the demonstration, students spend most of their word study time, approximately 20 minutes each day with partners and independently playing word study games, sorting, and writing sorts into their word study notebooks, all along, making decisions about the contrasts they are studying. Over several days, teachers continue to provide explicit instruction, but these sessions are four- or five-minute check-ins, which may be a part of guided reading time; students may quickly sort in front of the teacher or the teacher may clarify confusions after the initial demonstration.

Word study is an active way for emergent bilinguals to learn another language. In English, we have examined how students who speak other languages compare and contrast English with their first languages (Helman, Bear, Templeton, Invernizzi, & Johnston, 2012). Instructionally, teachers spend a bit more time on contrasts that

may confuse learners whether it is the *ch/sh* contrast or teaching s-blends in English for Spanish speakers (Helman, Bear, Invernizzi, Johnston, & Templeton, 2009), or looking at final nasal sounds among students who speak Chinese or Korean (Bear, et al., 2020).

Observation and Assessment of Student Understanding in Daily Word Study

How do we know what students are learning from these focused contrasts? How are formative assessments made of students’ learning? At a macro level we look for growth from one stage to another. To assess student knowledge of contrasts at a feature level in daily activities, look for a progression in their proficiency level in the word study activities: 1) *Accuracy* in their ability to read and contrast words that fit the patterns; 2) *Fluency* is the ability to make the comparisons quickly and generate their own examples. 3) *Reflection* is the third proficiency we look for: Can the students reflect on the categories of words and features being contrasted? 4) The fourth level of proficiency and understanding has to do with students’ ability to *generalize and apply* these contrasts to similar words and word patterns. For example, when students learn about long *e* they are also learning about patterns that generalize to spelling other long vowels using their knowledge of the CVCe, CVVC, and CVV patterns.

4 Levels of Proficiency in Contrasting Features: How you know a student is ready to go on to the next lesson.

- **Accuracy.** Can students sort accurately?
- **Fluency.** Can students sort fluently?
- **Reflection.** Can students talk about the categories and why they sorted the way they did?
- **Generalization and Application.** Can students generalize to similar patterns and apply this knowledge *e* in their reading and spelling?

As part of the assessment process, we also monitor progress with goal setting and spelling checklists students and teachers use to assess proficiency spelling particular features. And periodically, three or four times a year a spelling inventory is administered as summative assessments to examine developmental stages and word study groups.

Elements of Effective Word Study Instruction

And now we come to the *how* of word study. What makes for a successful word study program? Ten essential elements are identified in the *Words Their Way Observation Tool* (Gehsmann, & Bear, 2014) that comes with this program online. These 10 elements are divided into two categories: *organizing instruction* and *student reflection and interaction* as presented in Table 1. We discuss how we use this tool in professional development with hopes that your teams will use this tool to think about and advance their word study instruction.

Organizing Instruction	Student Reflection and Interaction
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Differentiated word study grouping • Preparation and organization of materials • Extension and transfer to reading and writing • Instructional routines for daily and weekly activities • Notebook use • Teacher knowledge and classroom management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher talk facilitates student reflection and clarifies concepts • Student-to-student talk is substantial • Student reflection • Engagement

Table 1. Components and 10 Essential Elements of Word Study Instruction*

*From the *Words Their Way Observation Tool* (Gehsmann, & Bear, 2014) available in *Words Their Way Classroom* (Bear, et al., 2019).

Organizing instruction. In small groups, focused contrasts are introduced to teach the principles and generalizations students need to know at particular stages in their development. A spelling inventory is a good way to know where students are developmentally, what groups there may be, and what materials are needed. Most teachers manage three word study

groups; some teachers develop an additional one or two groups if there are teachers who push-in to teach one or two groups. For many teachers, their small group reading groups are also their word study groups. Word sorts, games and other activities engage students in their practice and reflection (Bear, et al, 2020). Each student has some form of word study notebook. For developmental word study, the notebooks are a place for students to write the words that show the contrasts, record their word sorts and hunts, and formulate their reflections about the contrasts.

Word study in whole class is usually linked to vocabulary activities and disciplinary studies, like ELA, science, and social studies, where vocabulary instruction is linked more to content and less to development. Students develop separate sections in their word study notebooks for these content areas to collect words connected conceptually for academic vocabulary (see Templeton, Bear, Invernizzi, Johnston, Flanigan, Townsend, & Hayes, 2015). Upper level vocabulary programs can be both developmental and incorporate academic vocabulary. In one program we combined these areas of vocabulary study by incorporating five general academic, five domain-specific, and five generative word families for the exponential learning that comes with studying affixes and derivations (Bear, Flanigan, Hayes, Helman, Invernizzi, Johnston, & Templeton, 2014). Small group, developmental word study is a time to address standards that are foundational to literacy development, while heterogeneous and whole class word study instruction evolves around content, vocabulary, word meaning, and interests.

Student reflection and interaction. To explore words and their patterns deeply, we encourage thinking and reflection, the elements in the second column in Table 1. In a validation study of how teachers can use the word study observation tool, student reflection was a key component of word study success (Gehsmann, Millwood, & Bear, 2012). Through her open-ended questions, Ms. Kiernan had students help her introduce the word study lesson. Recall how Ms. Kiernan asked Sebastian to reflect on what he noticed to have him help her introduce the “oddball” word *from*.

How do we teach students to reflect and discuss their word study? The *Words Their Way Observation Tool* presents many examples of teacher talk and open-ended questions that encourage student talk and reflection. A great guideline that makes it easy

to practice asking open-ended questions is to ask no questions that can be answered with one word, like *Yes/No-questions*.

We want the interaction to be among students, and not just between teacher and individual students, so we show students how to talk to each other, and we create schedules and contracts for them to take responsibility for choosing and completing the deeper word study activities with partners, in small groups and independently.

Professional Development

To implement word study, teachers consider their own starting points with each of the elements in the observation tool. Some elements, like *preparation and*

organization of materials, are straightforward: How can we teach without the materials to show students the contrasts? The lessons, sorts, games, and reading selections all contribute to a coherent, developmental program.

Sustained professional development in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) and the like in school or district initiatives with teachers and administrators studying and collaborating over time is critical. In checking through the essential elements of the observation tool, teachers see what they have already accomplished and focus on developing one or two elements at a time. We are dedicated to students and teachers having powerful word study experiences over many years and we welcome learning of your experiences and questions. We wish you happy sorting and word study with your students!

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