Research

Developmental word study is built on the understanding that the English language is predictable and logical. In 1975 Charles Read, a Harvard linguist, discovered that preschool children’s invented spellings revealed a consistent pre-existing system of development (Read, 1971, 1975). This watershed discovery led Edmund Hunderson and his colleagues at the University of Virginia to explore student’s spelling over time, which resulted in a comprehensive model of developmental word knowledge that progresses across five stages: emergent, letter name, within word pattern, syllables and affixes, and derivational relations.

Within these five stages, *Words Their Way* builds students’ word knowledge, including the development of phonics, spelling, word recognition, and vocabulary. This is done through a variety of research-based practices. In *Words Their Way: Word Study In Action*, students will:

• Sort pictures and words, discovering similarities and differences and eventually learning to recognize, decode, and write spelling patterns. The sorts are based on a structural approach to word study.
  - Students’ spellings reveal systematic, phonetic logic underlying preschoolers’ categorization of English speech sounds (Read, 1971, 1977).
  - Fourth-grade students assigned to a word-sort group significantly outperform a control group on standardized measures of reading and spelling (Weber & Henderson, 1989; Hayes, 2004).
  - Compare-and-contrast approaches within a historical-structural curriculum are effective with intermediate students (Henry, 1989; Templeton, 2003).
  - Word sorting is an effective approach to phonics and spelling instruction across the elementary school grades (Hall, Cunningham & Cunningham, 1995; Zutell, 1998).
  - Word sorting is more effective than traditional spelling approaches (Joseph, 2000; Abbot, 2004).

• Learn by building on what they know and are trying to negotiate. The word study sorts, and lessons in *Words Their Way* provide students with systematic instruction in alphabet, pattern, and meaning.
  - Developmental study of spelling in grades one through six reveals three discernable phases of orthographic understandings: alphabet, pattern, and meaning (Schlagal, 1992; Henderson & Templeton, 1986; Henderson, 1990; Invernizzi, Abouzeid, & Gill, 1994).
  - Effective word-study instruction reveals the historical structures inherent in English orthography (Templeton & Morris, 2001; Invernizzi & Hayes, 2004).
• Engage with words in a wide variety of activities. Students categorize words by sound, pattern, and meaning. Word recognition is enhanced when words are studied in isolation.

  • Orthographic knowledge significantly predicts sight word acquisition, word recognition, and oral reading fluency. Relationships among spelling, reading, and writing are reciprocal and symbiotic. (Zutell & Rasinski, 1989; Johnston, 1998; Bear, 1992; Invernizzi, 1992; Templeton & Bear, 1992)

  • Combined approaches outperform single approaches to improving spelling and word recognition (Berninger; Vaughn, Abbott, Brooks, Abbott, & Rogan, 1998; Lovett, Lacerenza, Borden, Frijters, Steinbach, & De Palma, 2000).

• Search for words as they read, which deepens their understanding of word meanings. Words at each level were selected based on spelling patterns, relevance to the curriculum, and grade-level appropriate vocabulary.

  • There is an interaction and integration of reading and spelling development. Students’ orthographic knowledge develops in predictable phases (Ehri, 1997; Ellis, 1997; Perfetti, 1997, 2003).

  • Spelling predicts overall reading achievement and is significantly correlated with word identification, decoding, and oral reading fluency (Cataldo & Ellis, 1988; Ehri & Wilce, 1987; Ellis & Cataldo, 1992; Zutell, 1992).

• Take assessments at the beginning of the year for appropriate placement within the Words Their Way scope and sequence. Ongoing spell checks continue through the year to ensure the right instruction for each student’s development.

  • Developmental spelling analyses in the fall of the school year are reliable and valid predictors of literacy proficiency at the end of the school year (Morris & Perney, 1984; Bear & Barone, 1989; Ganske, 1999).

  • Teaching low-achieving spellers at their instructional levels yields greater gains than control group students who received grade-level instruction regardless of their instructional level (Morris, Blanton, Nowacek, & Perney, 1995; Hayes, 2004).

• Get support wherever they are in their literacy development through alternate sorting and vocabulary activities, alerts and instruction for English language learners, and teacher tips.

  • Students’ first oral and written languages influence the way they learn to read and spell in English. Spelling errors among English-language learners are predictable (August & Hakuta, 1997; Bear & Helman, 2004; Bear; Templeton, Helman, & Baren, 2003; Fashola, Drum, Mayer, & Kang, 1996; Helman & Baren, 2003; Helman, 2004; Weber & Longhi-Chirlin, 2001; Zutell & Allen, 1988; Shen & Bear, 2000).

  • Students who have learning disabilities, speak nonstandard dialects, or experience language delays demonstrate the same types of spelling confusions, and they benefit from word study at their instructional levels (Worthy & Invernizzi, 1989; Sawyer; Lipa-Wade, Kim, Ritenour, & Knight, 1997; Cantrell, 1990, 1999; Bear; Templeton, Helman, & Baren, 2003).

Third-party research on the reliability and validity of Words Their Way was conducted by the Center for Research in Educational Policy at the University of Memphis and forms the foundation for the spelling inventories in the program.