

WORD CLASS - A MORE EFFECTIVE APPROACH TO SPELLING INSTRUCTION

[Andrew P. Johnson, Ph.D.](#)

Minnesota State University, Mankato

Weekly spelling tests have been the staple of elementary education for the last 100 years. Here students memorize a list of words each week and then take a test on Friday. Tests are corrected, scores are taken, and one is deemed either a good spelling or not good speller. This is would be a great way to teach spelling except for one thing: it's not very effective. Studying a list of words out of any meaningful context has minimal effect in helping to develop students' spelling proficiency; and worse, they keep students away from real writing experiences (Gentry & Gilbert, 1993; Graves, 1983). This chapter describes a better way to help students learn how to spell correctly in authentic writing conditions (Johnson, 1998).

SPELLING PROFICIENCY AND VISUAL MEMORY

What is the difference between a good speller and a poor speller? According to Gentry (2006), spelling proficiency might be attributed to one's visual memory capacity. That is, good spellers are better able to store and retrieve necessary letter patterns from their long- term memory than less able spellers. Effective spelling instruction then should focus on improving the efficiency of this storage and retrieval. This can be done by using activities and assignments that help students become more aware of letter patterns and word parts.

WORD CLASS APPROACH

Word Class (1998) is an approach to spelling instruction that meets the special needs of both ability and low ability spellers. Here students select the words they wish to study each week. Sounds crazy I know, but read on.

Choice

Allowing students to choose the books they want to read and their writing topics is a powerful motivator in reading and writing. (Imagine if, in your adult life, somebody else always chose the books that you would read for pleasure.) Choice of spelling words is equally motivating. Word Class teaches students how to generate and choose the words they will study each week. Choice here doesn't mean total choice all the time however. This choice might happen in one of three forms:

1. Choice within a topic or category. Given a topic, students create their own spelling lists. For example, if you were studying the rainforest in a science or social studies class, students would be able to generate and choose a list of related words. Words could also be taken from a book students are reading or from current events. Spelling can then be used to reinforce concepts taught in other subject areas. Students are also able to see their spelling words in places other than the list in their spelling books.

2. Choice within their lives or experience. This is sometimes call total choice. Here students use their lives and experience to create their own spelling lists. This approach is usually the most interesting, as children search their lives for interesting and meaningful words.

3. Choice with a spelling pattern. While this is the least desirable of the three choice options, there are times when it is appropriate to generate a list of words around a spelling

pattern. Here, the teacher begins with a short mini-lesson covering a particular spelling pattern or skill.

Generating Spelling Lists

In word class, each student studies a personalized list of words each week. This list can be generated in large group or small group.

Large group. Initially, words for spelling lists should be generated in large group. This enables students to see many words and choose the ones that are of interest or importance to them. Given a topic or category, start by providing a couple of examples of words within that category to prime the pump. Then ask students to think of other words to be included. These words are written on the board. (Seeing words gives students ideas for other words.) After a large number of words have been generated, students would choose eight to ten words to study during the week (given them a specific number). Advise them to check the spelling of the words, as you may not have gotten them correct.

Pairs or small group. You can make this a cooperative learning activity by defining a specific task and then creating roles. The group's task is to generate 30 words for spelling lists (more or less depending on age and ability). Each student within the group then chooses 10 words from the group's list to study that week. With primary students use groups three or four. With intermediate and middle school students, use groups of four to six. Some or all of the following roles can be used:

- *President* - makes final decisions, assigns roles.
- *Scribe* - records words.
- *Spell checkers* - uses a dictionary, word processor, or electronic spell checker to insure the correct spelling.
- *Brain* - thinks up words. (You may want to have more than one person here)
- *Sociologist* - makes sure everyone contributes an idea.
- *Investigator* - looks in books, magazines, or the Internet for words related to the topic. (You may want to have more than one person here).

Spelling word sign-up. Put a large poster made of butcher paper on a bulletin board or taped to the wall with the next week's spelling topic. Figure 1 shows spelling word sign-up posters related to the three types of choice. Put a pencil or marker on a string next to the poster. Encourage students to think of and write interesting or important words.

Figure 1. Three examples of spelling word sign-up posters.

Next week's Spelling Words water resources	Next week's Spelling Words your life	Next week's Spelling Words words with ea
<i>Please add interesting or important words.</i>	<i>Please add interesting or important words.</i>	<i>Please add interesting or important words.</i>

Selecting Words -- Multilevel

But what if students just pick easy words? Well, then they would be able to experience much needed success. This is a good thing. However, Topping (1995) found that the words students choose are usually longer and more complex than those chosen by teachers. This is because they choose words of interest to them regardless of the complexity or length.

To ensure that students are exposed to words of varying difficulty levels, you can choose to include two to five mandatory words for all students to study each week. To make this multilevel, assign different mandatory words for specific students. In doing this, don't make the mistake of giving high ability spellers more words to study. Instead, assign more complex words for higher level spellers, less complex words for struggling spellers. These would be written out on a 3x5 inch card and given to students after they have identified the words for their individual word lists.

Word Book

Students' individual word lists should be recorded in their personal word book. The word book is like a journal or learning log. It should be kept on a shelf or some other special place other than students' desk. This will insure that it doesn't get lost or become something to tear paper out of for use on other assignments. Keeping the word books on a shelf also enables you to quickly go through them as a form of formative assessment, and to make comments and respond to them, creating a dialogue journal.

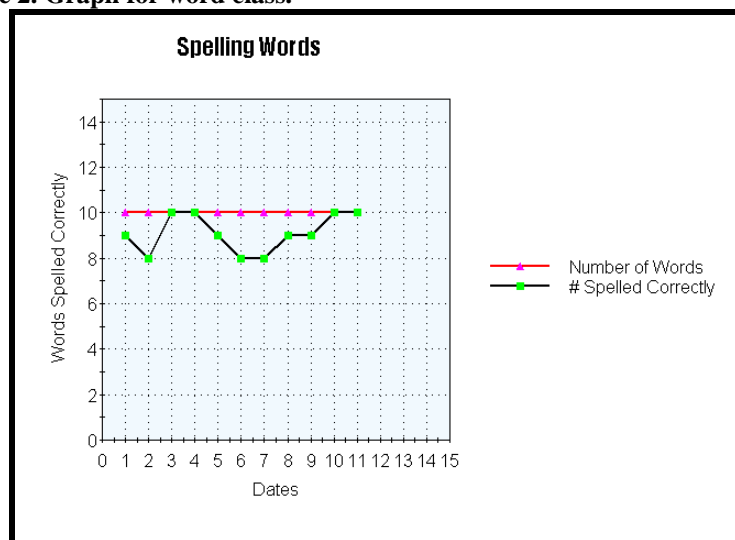
The word book will be used throughout the week for various writing activities using the list words (see below). You are limited only by your imagination here in the types of activities and writing experiences you design. The goal however is to get students to use their list words and to recognize or manipulate letter patterns. The word book is to be used in place of the expensive consumable spelling books which are of little use to teaching students how to spell.

Documenting Growth - Celebrating Learning

On Fridays you will still give a spelling test (we call them celebrations of learning); however, instead of giving the same test to all your students, each will be taking his or her own individualized test. To do this, students pair up with a buddy. The first student hands the second student his or her lists of spelling words. The second student then reads the words (administers the test) while the first takes the test. After the first test has been taken and corrected, students change roles.

After both tests students record their results in their word book or in a portfolio. A line graph or bar graph can be used to provide a visual reference (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Graph for word class.



Direct Assessment of Spelling

In your real life how is your spelling assessed? That is, how do people know if you're a good or a poor speller? Answer: They look at your writing. An authentic form of spelling assessment would be WPH (words-per-hundred) scores. Here, the teacher examines a student's final edited draft, designates a 100-word segment, and then counts the number of words spelled correctly in that 100-word segment to arrive at a WPH score. This evaluates students' ability to spell (and edit) under authentic writing conditions. Also, this is how real writers' spelling ability is evaluated in the real world. With younger students, a WPF score (words-per-fifty) or even a WPTF score (words-per-twenty-five) can be used.

Advantages of Word Class

There are four advantages of using the self-selected approach:

- **Students' ideas and experiences are valued.** By their choice, students are invited to bring their world and experiences into their literacy class. They select words that they are interested in. This creates a strong connection between school life and real life and provides greater motivation to read and write.

- **More time can be spent doing real writing.** The goal of language arts instruction is not to fill out spelling books or to pass grammar tests (although spelling and grammar are both important). The goal of language arts class is to enable students to *USE THE LANGUAGE*. We want our students to be able to write effectively. Too much time spent drilling spelling, grammar, and punctuation sub-skills can get in the way of authentic writing experiences. Instruction in these areas is very important, but it should be kept short and quickly paced so that students can get to the business of writing. Also, students' own writing provides the best context for learning these skills.

- **Money spent on consumable spelling books can be used to buy real books, or paper and pencils.** Consumable spelling books cost anywhere from \$14 to \$25. Imagine how many good books you could buy for that price. In a classroom, this money could provide the basis of a nice classroom library. (It is important to have exciting, interesting, new books for children to read - both at home and at school. How do we expect children to read if we provide nothing of interest for them to do so?)

- **Students develop depth and dimension to their word knowledge.** As you'll see below, the activities used in word class will expand students' knowledge of particular words. Since students select words that interest them, the activities are more likely to move these words into their productive vocabulary (they use them in their own speaking and writing).

WORD CLASS ACTIVITIES

Spelling instruction should be limited to about 20 minutes a day (Gentry & Gilbert, 1993). This section describes a variety of activities that can be used during this time. These activities add depth and dimension to word knowledge, highlight letter patterns, enhance writing skills, and value students' ideas and experiences.

- **Word walls.** A word wall (Cunningham & Allington, 1994), can be used to call attention to interesting or important words within the given topic or spelling pattern. This was a strategy described in an earlier chapter.

- **Word sorts** (letter groups and idea groups). Students sort their words or create groups. A group is one or more things that are the same. These groups could be related to spelling patterns (Figure 3) or ideas (Figure 4). Word sorts can be recorded in students' word books. With a little imagination, they can also be incorporated into art projects.

Figure 3. Spelling pattern groups

List: dock, fish, swim, boat, water ski, jump, life jacket, soggy, cold, dip, diving board.
1. Short 'i' group: swim, fish, dip
2. 'CK' group: dock, life jacket
3. Consonant blend group: fish, swim, water ski, diving board, jump
4. Two word group: water ski, life jacket, diving board.
5. One-syllable group: dock, fish, swim, boat, cold, dip

Figure 4. Idea groups

List: dock, fish, swim, boat, water ski, jump, life jacket, soggy, cold, dip, diving board.
1. Water ski group: boat, water ski, life jacket, soggy
2. Swimming group: swim, jump, cold, diving board, dip
3. Fishing group: dock, fish, boat
4. Doing group: fish, swim, water ski, jump, dip.

• **Crossword puzzles.** Do an Internet search using the words: *create-crossword-puzzle*. There are many free programs that enable students to create their own crossword puzzles. (www.crosswordpuzzlegames.com/create.html) These puzzles invite students to focus on letter patterns, as each letter must correspond to a box, as well as word meaning. Also, plain old graph paper with 1-inch or ½-inch boxes works just as well. Students should create these puzzles for other students to do. For struggling students, a word box with the answers can be included with the crossword puzzle.

• **Word box riddles.** Word box riddles invite students to focus on meaning and letter patterns of words. Here a line is used to hold each letter of the riddle answer. Some riddles may include one or more letter clues. Just like crossword puzzles above, students should create these puzzles for other students to do. Again, word box containing the answers can be included for those who may have difficulty.

Figure 5. Word box riddles

Word box: dock, fish, swim, boat, water ski, jump, life jacket, soggy, cold, dip, diving board.
1. I hate when my corn flakes are this: _ _ _ _ _
2. I row, row, row this: _ _ _ _ _
3. I very quick swim: _ _ p.
4. Dolphins can do this very well: S _ _ _

• **Super Word Web.** Here students see a word in the context of a sentence. They're then asked to generate synonyms and associations. This activity should be done in small groups or pairs. You may have students work with a partner during one day's spelling activities. Here they would each create two SWW's based on their spelling words. These could be written in their word books or they could create posters to hang up on the walls.

• **Write a sentence.** Using words from their personalized lists, students can experiment with words and ideas by writing different kinds of sentences in their word books. Some ideas for sentences are in Figure 6.

Figure 6. Write a sentence.

Write ...	
<i>a spooky sentence.</i>	<i>a sentence using exactly 7 words.</i>
<i>a silly sentence.</i>	<i>a sentence using exactly 3 words.</i>
<i>a big sentence.</i>	<i>a very long sentence.</i>
<i>a sentence using 2 of your words.</i>	<i>a sentence about you.</i>
<i>a tiny sentence.</i>	<i>a sentence using 3 of your words.</i>
<i>a blue sentence.</i>	<i>a sentence using none of your words.</i>
<i>a wild sentence.</i>	<i>a nonsense sentence.</i>
<i>a boring sentence.</i>	<i>a sentence about something important.</i>
<i>a sentence about your day.</i>	<i>a sentence about your week.</i>

• **Word association paragraphs (WAP).** Students pick one of the words from their personalized list then think of three to six things related to or associated with their list word (you may need to model this). Students then use the word and associations to create sentences or paragraphs to create a WAP box (see Figure 7.). They do not have to use all their words in the sentences or paragraph they create.

Figure 7. WAP boxes.

WAP Box
<p>Word: soggy</p> <p>Associations: cornflakes, crisp, milk, morning, Frosted flakes, crunchy,</p> <p>Paragraph: I love to eat my cornflakes when they're crunchy like fall leaves. I hate when people call me on the phone in the middle of eating. I'm worried that my cornflakes will get soggy. It's funny because they still taste the same. It's just that it feels differently.</p>

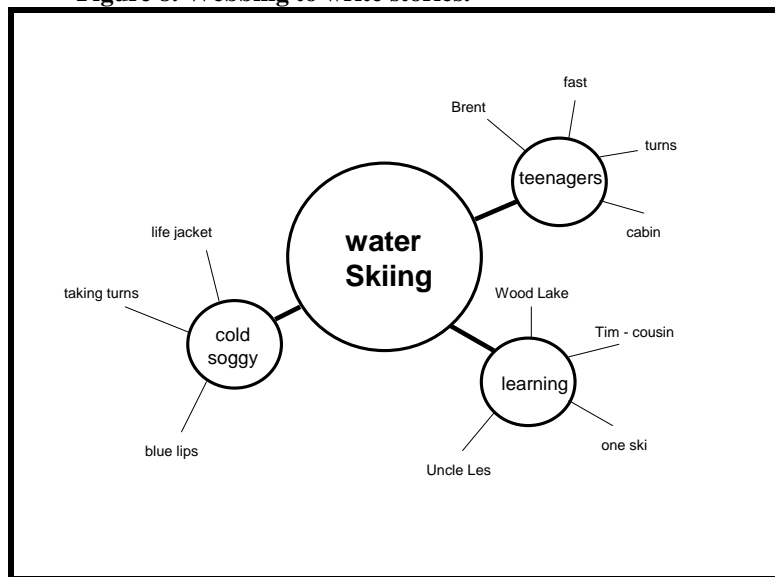
WAP Box
<p>Word: soggy</p> <p>Associations: rain, raining, mud, boots, wet clothes, school, yellow rain coat, hate, school, soak.</p> <p>Paragraph: I remember going to school when I was in 1st grade when it was raining. It was soaking wet. I work a yellow rain coat with a hat. The rain coats back then were pretty stiff and heavy. I love the smell of them. I'd wear it with my heavy, black buckle boots. Kept my feet from getting soggy.</p>

• **Life connection.** Students select a list word then use it to describe something happening in their life or something that has happened. For example, if they included the word “swim”, they might describe a particular swimming episode or what they do when they go swimming.

• **Treasure hunt.** Students look in their textbooks, reading books, or other written material for. There are four kinds of treasure hunts: (a) look for words from their lists words, (b) pick a word and look for synonyms or similar phrases, (c) pick a word and look for associations or related words [students must explain the connection], or (d) pick a word and look for similar spelling patterns [*spelling patterns, word families, endings, beginnings, middles*].

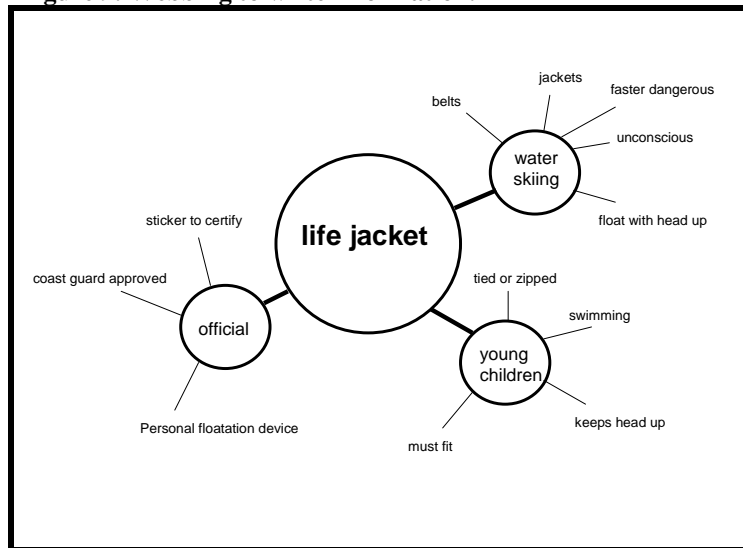
• **Webbing to write stories paragraphs.** Students use webbing as a pre-writing strategy (see Figure 8) to create a story paragraph based on one or more spelling words. The web provides structure to a piece of writing. Ideally these story paragraphs are related to some part of their personal life or experience. At the end of the lesson, students record their best or most interesting piece of writing in their word journal.

Figure 8. Webbing to write stories.



• **Webbing to write information.** Webbing to write information (expository text) is a bit different from webbing to write stories (Figure 9). Here the student is telling something or explaining. Webs are effective in teaching the concept of a paragraph. Each node (a group of ideas) becomes a paragraph.

Figure 9. Webbing to write information.

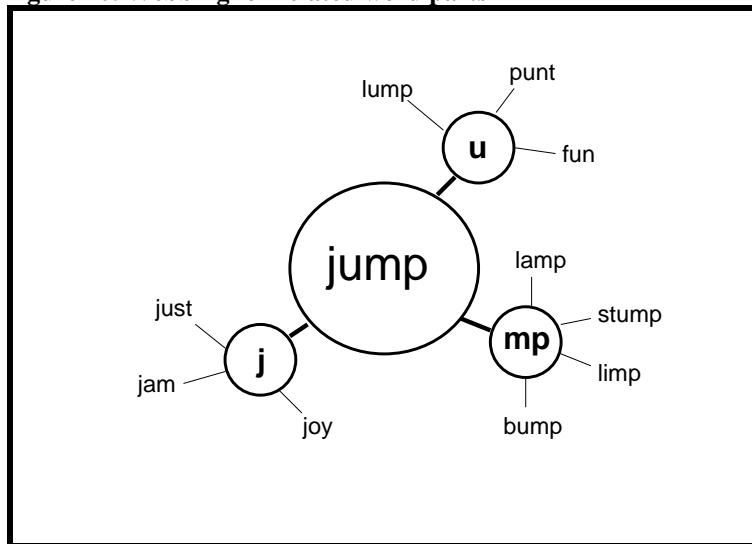


• **Webbing to speak.** Students pick a word from their spelling list to use in creating a short one-minute oral presentation in small group. Here students identify a topic (the topic could be a spelling list word or a related topic. Just like the web in Figure 22.9, the topic name is put in the center of the web. Students are asked to think of two or three things about their topic they think is important. These become the title for the nodes. Students then brainstorm ideas for each node.

Instead of the large group speeches which can be frightening (and a little boring), students are put into small groups of three to six students. One student stands and delivers the speech using the web as a guide to their speech. One person in the group should be the timer. With younger students, these speeches should be about 30 seconds. With older students, speeches should be one to two minutes. For more information on using oral communication across the curriculum see *Making Connections in Elementary and Middle School Social Studies* (Johnson, 2006). The small group format enables students to practice oral communication in smaller, more comfortable settings. It also enables the teacher to watch several speeches simultaneously as students in several groups will be speaking at the same time (this will be described in greater depth in Chapter 19).

Webbing to find related word parts. Here, students web to find related parts of a word. Students choose a word from their spelling list and break it into beginning, middle, and ending parts. For example, the word, 'jump' can be broken into three parts: "j" beginning, short "u" middle, and "mp" blend for the ending (Figure 10). The word, "jump" is the central idea. "j", "u", and "mp" are the three nodes. With a partner, students brainstorm on each node to find words with similar parts. The web is recorded in students' word journal.

Figure 10. Webbing for related word parts



RELATED VIDEOS

[Self-Selected Approach](#)

[Temporary Spelling](#)

References

- Bartch, J. (1992). An alternative to spelling: An integrated approach. *Language Arts*, 69, 404-408.
- Cunningham, P.M. & Allington, R.L. (1994). *Classrooms that work: They can all read and write*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.
- Gentry, R.L. & Gilbert, J.W. (2006). *Breaking the code: The new science of beginning reading and writing*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Gentry, R.L. & Gilbert, J.W. (1993). *Teaching kids to spell*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Graves, D. (1983). *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Johnson, A. (1998). Word class: A way to modify spelling instruction for gifted learners, *The Roeper Review*, 20, 128-131.
- Johnson, A. (2006). *Making connections in elementary and middle school social studies*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Johnson, A. (1996). Inference: A thinking skill to enhance learning and literacy. *Wisconsin State Reading Association Journal*, 40, 9-13.