WORD SORTING

What is it?

In this practice, students sort words according to specific features. These features may be provided for them, or they may discover them while they are sorting. The focus on word sorting can be on the look and sound of the words (phonics) or on units of meaning in words (morphemic). Teachers can select the focus for word sorting that best suits the developmental phase of the students in each group. Word sorting relies on a reader/speller's visual attending to letters, letter combinations and word parts. The power is in linking the visual features of words to the spelling pattern. Word sorting provides an enjoyable way to incorporate active engagement in repeated practice for word-learning. Revisiting words is essential to making the patterns stick. Word sorting is a great way to engage reluctant readers in exploring their own understandings of words and how they work while providing opportunities for them to take risks in a supportive setting.

Why is it important?

Research has shown that understanding how words work; particularly segmenting words is the one of the best predictors of future success in reading (ref). While this skill does not guarantee reading success, what we know is that most good readers display competence in this skill. Because of this, it seems reasonable that we consider an important area for instruction. Paying attention to the look and sound of words is an important skill that developing readers need to work on because it helps students to become more successful word solvers in reading, writing and spelling.

Things to consider before starting

Before beginning carefully select the words for study based on the students current levels of understanding and what they need to learn next. Explicit study of words should focus on either one or more of the following aspects, of word features

Syllables (phonological awareness)

Sounds (phonics)

Visual appearance (structural awareness)

Units of meaning: Utilising the information about the units of meaning i.e. word derivatives (morphemic awareness)

Comparing the new word with one already known (analogy or word association awareness)

Steps in an Word Sorting Session

1. Decide which strategy will help the children read and spell the word
2. Locate word lists that illustrate either same concept i.e. "double ff words" or words that begin with "tele" etc.
3. Either study the words as a whole class or in groups that have similar needs and spelling development. Focus on how the word is constructed, and which strategy helps the children to learn how to spell the word and remember it.
4. Make word lists that illustrate the strategy that has been studied.
5. Do this each week.
6. Children need opportunities to practice the new concept they have learnt. Provide follow-up activities that allow this.
7. Remind students daily about the new concept in spelling they have learnt.

Making Word Sorting Work

There are many different ways you can use sorting to vary the interactions that students have with the words and with each other. Each one has its own challenges and can be used flexibly no matter what kinds of words are being studied. The sorts below include a focus on both reading and writing words. Research suggests that working with words in ways that incorporate both reading and writing is beneficial to learning their orthographic patterns. Working encoding and decoding together as complimentary processes enhances the learning significantly. Focusing on the features of words "hard-wires" the patterns into long-term memory (Ehri, 2005). You can help your students by playing to the brain's strengths in your teaching. If the students read the words, also have them write them. If they write the words, also have them read them back.

Types of Sorts

Closed Sorts

Closed Sorts introduce students to word sort tasks that are teacher-directed (the patterns are highlighted and outlined). When working with closed sorts, model the thinking process of problem-solving a few times (think aloud) before allowing students to complete the task independently. Follow this up with lots of discussion. Students must articulate decision-making for words placed in categories.

Open Sorts

This is an inquiry/problem solving based activity that relies upon the discerning of patterns rather than applying them. An Open Sort is student-centered, and is for those already familiar with looking and thinking about word attributes. Open Sorts reveal diagnostic information about what students know and understand, or misunderstand about how certain word patterns work. The activity should lead to productive discussion around justifying why they sorted the way they did.

Word Hunts

Round the room word hunts are great for turning students into word detectives.
In this kind of hunt, students search for words patterns they are working on. They can search around the room, or in texts at their own reading levels e.g. reading books, magazines.   Word Hunts help students make the connection between spelling words and reading words. Use a **Gradual Release of Responsibility** approach. If they use post-it notes to record identified words in text they can be used later for class discussion (stick on large category charts). Model the activity first, working line by line. This is not reading for meaning – select familiar texts with an accessible level of word features. You are connecting Word Study to other literary contexts, and extending to more difficult vocabulary. You are demonstrating how the word-solving skills are useful in reading EVERY day.

Memory word hunts are great for having students use their long-term recall of words and their spelling strategies in combination. In memory word hunts, students work alone or in groups to recall words from memory in patterns they are working on. Even if they do not recall them perfectly, they use their knowledge of the pattern to make close approximations of words and engage in checking word features. Their words are recorded for later discussion and grouped into categories.

Collaborative or Group Sorts

Students will work in groups to sort large word tiles in either Closed or Open Sorts, developing and recording a hypothesis about the pattern they see or discover. At the end of the session, in community share time, students demonstrate to others what they have learned. To finish, the sort is copied into a spelling notebook, where students record and comment on their discoveries about word patterns.

Writing Sorts

In writing sorts you can read words from two different word pattern families aloud and have students write them down in columns to sort the different spelling patterns. This can be done with a small group or the whole class. This is not a spelling test. It is an exploration of spelling patterns. You can encourage multiple attempts and corrections. This type of sort is like a think aloud with regular checking. Students could use notepaper or whiteboards to record their words as you read them out.

Word Collectors is a variation on the idea of a writing sort. Instead of you reading the words aloud, the students could go on an oral scavenger hunt, asking other students for words with certain patterns. They then have to collaboratively spell those words and categorise them. Each student has his or her own board and an explicit collecting focus e.g. collect ten words with the long o pattern or the suffix "pre").   Students swap words (orally) and write them on their own boards. To follow up as a class, all words written must be studied, explained in terms of the pattern they exhibit and re-read as a list.

Example: Collaborative Writing Sort/Word Hunt:

Collect TEN Compound Words

Move round the room "collecting" compound words as you go.

When you find ones you like write them 1-10 on your whiteboard.

When you have TEN words- check with 2 buddies that your spelling attempts are good ones.

Split the words into the two word parts with a dividing line

Practice reading your words to a buddy quickly. Pay attention to the word parts as you say the words.

Get ready to share your words at sharing time.

Speed Sorts

Add a stopwatch to an open, closed or writing sort to build fluency in word analysis and recognition. Sorting to a time limit can help students become more efficient as word solvers in reading and writing.

References

Ehri, L. (2005). Learning to read words: Theory, findings, and issues. Scientific Studies of Reading, 9, 167-188.