Word Boxes: Helping Students Spell

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Keywords
collaboration, spelling, individualized instruction

Abstract
The purpose of this project was to find a way to help students learn and retain spelling words to use in their every day writing. I created word boxes as a way to individualize spelling words to match each one of my students needs. I then had the students work with a partner to use the words in meaningful activities. I assessed students on how many words they could correctly spell at the end of the project and then again three weeks later. All of the students showed growth in spelling; while some of this growth is due to factors outside this intervention, I believe the word boxes project did make a positive contribution towards their spelling growth and is an activity I will continue to use in my classroom.

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Introduction

As I sit and grade my students’ spelling tests, I am very pleased with their ability to correctly spell the words on their weekly assessment. I notice that most of them have very high spelling grades without much direct instruction on the words. Next, I start reading student journals and notice many errors in their spelling; I am concerned, but also attribute this to not having the students edit their selections. I pick up math homework and notice that many of the students’ mathematical explanations also have words that are misspelled. I next look at the Social Studies test and see that students are misspelling very common words, some that even appeared on their spelling tests, in their short answer responses. What is happening? How are my students excelling at the spelling program, but not managing to transfer or use similar spelling strategies in their everyday writing?

I started looking at my spelling program in an attempt to focus on individualizing student spelling goals, meeting the needs of all learners, and allowing the students to work together. I knew I wanted to have individual words for each one of my students so I decided to start giving each child an index card box in which to keep their own personal spelling words. I then came up with different activities that the students could do each day with a partner to help them see, spell, and use the words from their boxes. I thought that if I allowed students to use their individualized list of words during the activities, they would only be focusing on the words they were having trouble spelling and they would be engaging in hands-on activities where they could apply their spelling words. By using word boxes in the classroom, I hoped that spelling in my classroom would shift from a contrived, memorized list to words that could (and would) be used everyday in writing.

Research

There is no research to suggest that students apply words from weekly spelling tests to their writing; in fact, the evidence suggests otherwise (Gill & Scharer, 1996 & Laminack & Wood, 1996). Beckham-Hungler & Williams (2003) also expressed concern about the ubiquitous spelling list and the widely held assumption that children learn to spell through its weekly use.

Elementary students within a single grade level exhibit diverse spelling problems (Graham & Miller, 1979). Graham (1983) states that individual children do not encounter the same difficulties in learning to spell, nor do they learn at the same rate. Simon (2004) also agrees stating, “Children will learn [these] words at varying speeds, and an individual spelling program allows children to learn at their own pace” (p. 11). Teachers who fail to account for individual differences between students rely on a
jumbled mixture of procedures that produce disparate results (Schell, 1975). Teachers therefore need to have a spelling program whose central focus is on the specific spelling needs of their students.

Learners are commonly classified into three primary learning styles: visual, auditory, and kinesthetic (Warda, 2005). Most students learn best through a combination of these styles. Simon (2004) agrees, stating that another truth about spelling is that a child needs to develop more than one system – a multisensory approach – for identifying and distinguishing letters and sounds.

Another research-based strategy to enhance student learning during spelling is collaboration (Oudenhoven, Berkum, Swen-Koopmans, 1987). A common explanation for why students work better in pairs is that the achievement improvement is due to better processing. If students cooperate, they will exchange information; and by doing so, they will develop their reasoning skills (Harris & Sherman, 1973; Lomov, 1978; Skon, Johnson, & Johnson, 1981 as cited in Oudenhoven, Berkum, & Swen-Koopmans, 1987). Also, it may be that cooperation increases students’ motivation, which in turn leads to achievement improvement (Oudenhoven, Berkum, & Swen-Koopmans, 1987). In their study of third graders, Oudenhoven et al. showed that working in pairs produced better spelling results than did working individually. Students can find many opportunities to work together during spelling instruction to aide each other on how to spell words and share strategies that they have found to work. Vygotsky (Tracy & Morrow, 2006) was one of the first to suggest that cognitive development depends much more on interactions with the people in the children’s world and the tools the culture provides to support thinking. He also expresses that children’s knowledge, ideas, attitudes, and values develop through interaction with others.

My idea for word boxes stemmed from these research-based understandings about individualizing lists to meet student needs, the power of collaboration, and the effectiveness of multisensory instruction. I decided to conduct this study using word boxes to see what effect these research-based principles had on my students’ spelling abilities.

**Context**

This study included 13 third grade students who attended an elementary Christian school in Westerville, Ohio. There are no children who receive free or reduced lunches. This school largely consists of children from college-educated, middle to upper class families who stay very active in their child’s education.

My 2007–2008 third grade spelling group that I used for this study consisted of 13 students. My school currently uses the Sitton Spelling program to guide children in their spelling instruction. This program is designed to focus on learning how to spell words for life and not just for the weekly test. The children do not have a list of words ahead of time, but are tested over words from a master list of third grade words. The students are assessed through a cloze passage to address words that each child should know by the
end of the third grade. The program also addresses different areas of spelling and grammar in a daily mini-lesson. The Sitton program is a good start for spelling, but wasn’t enough for the group of kids I was working with. A problem of the program is that too many of the students already know the majority of the words on the weekly list, and others have no time to practice the words they are continually misspelling. I needed a program that was sufficiently challenging, engaging, and would provide students with structures for retaining and applying their knowledge, rather than just memorizing it for a week.

The Project

Word boxes allowed each student to focus on his or her own individualized words as he or she engaged in different spelling activities with a partner to enhance spelling potential. I developed these different activities to meet the various learning style needs in my classroom. Some of my activities were visual where students were able to find and use words in their writing. Other activities involved listening as students asked each other spelling words. Many of the activities were also hands-on as the students could use letters to make words. The five different activities were finding words, making words, using words, spelling fun, and spelling quiz (See table1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Learning Style</th>
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<tr>
<td>Finding Words</td>
<td>Students find misspelled words throughout their writing</td>
<td>Visual</td>
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<tr>
<td>Making Words</td>
<td>Students use letters to make their spelling words</td>
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<td>Using Words</td>
<td>Students find the definition, part of speech, and use their word in a sentence</td>
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<td>Students spell out their words using shaving cream or clothespin letters</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spelling Quiz</td>
<td>Students quiz each other on their spelling words</td>
<td>Visual, Auditory</td>
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Table 1. Word box activities

Finding Words

Finding words was an activity where children would literally find words that they had misspelled in their writing. The most common item students would use was their writer’s notebook which contained all their writing that was done during writer’s workshop
throughout the year. They were also using returned homework, worksheets, and notes they had written to find incorrectly spelled words. After the weeks went on, many children even started keeping a list at their desk of words they wanted to add to their box during spelling time. When children found a word that they had misspelled or thought they had misspelled, they would look up the word in the dictionary or ask their partner or me for help. They would then write the correctly spelled word on an index card and put it in the front of their box (before the number one tab). These words would then become the words that the students used in their other spelling activities.

**Making Words**

Making words was an activity where the students used magnetic letters to make the words from their boxes. A student would work with their assigned spelling partners and they would take turns asking and spelling words. If the student correctly spelled the word using the magnetic letters, their partner would place a star on the card. After the activity, the students would file their word cards into their boxes behind the number of stars it had on it. For example, if the card had one star on it, it would go behind the one tab.

**Using Words**

Using words was an activity where the children had a chance to actually use the words from their box. They would pull out a card from anywhere in their box (except from behind the ‘five’ tab) and look up the word in a dictionary. They would write the definition, part of speech, and use the word in a sentence on the back of the card. They then would let their partner check and if their partner felt they used the word correctly, their partner would place a star on the card. After the activity, the students would put their word cards back into their boxes behind the tab of the number of stars it had on it.

**Spelling Fun**

Spelling fun was a hands-on activity that allowed children to spell out the words from their box. During the spelling fun activity, children could either use shaving cream or clothespins with letters on them, to spell their words. Their partner would ask them a word and then they would spell it out using the given materials. If they were able to correctly spell the word, their partner would give the card a star. At the end of the activities, all the words would go back into the box behind the tab of the number of stars it had on it.

**Spelling Quiz**

The spelling quiz was an activity where a child would take out an index card and his or her partner would read out all the words that the child had in his or her spelling box. If any of the words were written incorrectly, the child would then take the time to practice the words he or she needed to work on. They could practice them by writing them or having
their partner ask them the word again. Any words that were spelled correctly were given a star and again at the end of the center time, the words would go behind the tab that showed the number of stars on the card.

Knowing the research on the importance of individualizing spelling to fit the need of each child, I gave my children only words that were challenging and meaningful in their everyday writing. Each child had an index card box with five tabbed dividers, labeled one through five in which students would file the cards when they had correctly used or practiced each word. I put a schedule for each child on the top of their box so they knew which center (e.g. spelling activity) to go to on each day. For example, A Day might be making words and B Day using words. The children had a convenient reference tool to help them keep track of their schedule.

Each student would work on these activities with an assigned partner. There was one group of three because of the odd number of students, so these three students got into the habit of rotating to practice words instead of just asking back and forth. I tried to pair a strong speller with a weaker speller so the partners could work together to get the most out of their spelling activities. Most of the pairs also consisted of one boy and one girl which I had found serves to minimize the amount of socializing taking place in this class.

At the beginning of the spelling instructional time, students had 15 minutes to gather their word boxes and begin the spelling activities. I would circulate around the room to make sure each student was on task and cooperating with their partner. I would give the students a warning when there were five minutes remaining and then when there were only two minutes left, I would have them finish up on the word they were on and start putting their words back into their boxes.

**Data Collection**

In order to find out if students were gaining and applying spelling strategies, I gave all the students a quiz on all of the words in their word boxes immediately after we finished the project. I then waited another three weeks and gave them another quiz to see if they were retaining the spelling words. I collected information about my students through observation before, during, and after the word box project. I also took notes on comments that my students had made during this project.

**Findings**

The first thing I looked at was how well my students spelled the words that they had practiced. Immediately after we ended the word box project, I assessed each student on every word in their spelling box. I then waited three weeks after the project and assessed each student again. I wanted to compare how well they spelled words they had only
practiced using one of the spelling box activities to words they had correctly used five times.

My findings show that there are benefits to my spelling word box program. After practicing a word once using a spelling box activity, students were already starting to put that word into their long-term memory. The biggest benefit to students was when they practiced a word five times when using the multiple sensory activities. Ninety-eight percent of my students correctly spelled the word they had practiced immediately after we finished the word boxes project and 94% of the students retained that information after three weeks (See Figure 1). This is a very high percentage for the total percentage of words spelled correctly.

The power of collaboration and the effectiveness of multisensory instruction help account for the high percentages on this graph. By letting students work together and addressing all learning styles, children were able to learn and retain new spelling words. It’s also refreshing to know that these percentages aren’t on words that children might have previously known, but on words they were misspelling in their every day writing.

**Figure 1**

![Bar chart showing the total percentage of words spelled correctly over different numbers of times practiced.](attachment:chart.png)

- **Immediate:**
  - 1: 80%
  - 2: 77%
  - 3: 89%
  - 4: 86%
  - 5: 98%

- **3 Weeks Later:**
  - 1: 88%
  - 2: 85%
  - 3: 95%
  - 4: 86%
  - 5: 94%

By letting the students work together and meeting all learning styles, children were able to learn and retain new spelling words.
Implications

One implication of my findings was that many of the children already had a high percentage of correct spellings after they had only seen and used a word once during our word box activities. Immediately following the activities, my students had an 80% average after only practicing their words once (See Figure 1). This might be due to the fact that they were picking words from their everyday writing and some of the writing might not have been edited. After looking at and thinking about the words, some of the students probably realized their mistake and took the time to process and think about each word carefully.

Another implication from my research was the fact that after one, two, and three times practicing a word, the students averaged a better percentage retaining the spelling words versus the immediate assessment (See Figure 1). This was surprising when the norm during studies is that kids start to lose information over time and instead they were continuing to gain spelling awareness. I think this might have to do in part with the fact that I was spending more time on spelling instruction and the students saw the enthusiasm I was now demonstrating towards spelling. I also recognize that students were continuing to make educational gains throughout the school year. The spelling results could also show that the students are continually gaining more knowledge as they mature and age.

Reflection

As I plan for next year, I know I want to include word boxes into my curriculum after witnessing a successful trial with the project. There are some things I need to start taking into consideration for next year to make the project even more beneficial for my students.

One area I need to change is the evaluation of the success of the spelling word boxes. Students were misspelling words in their everyday writing and my goal was for students to start realizing their mistakes and start correctly spelling more words. Even though I was able to evaluate the words they had used in their word boxes, it wasn’t in an authentic writing context. I was still accessing students by asking them to spell out individual words instead of looking for the spelling of words in their writing.

My plan for next year is to try giving the students time to evaluate the work of their partner to find words that were in their word box. I want to have a system where they can check for words that they have used in their box and tally the amount of times the words were used. Also, they would check how many times the word was spelled correctly or incorrectly. If the word was found in their writing correctly spelled, there may be some incentive, such as another star or a sticker. This way the students can see the difference they are making in their work and I also can see if students are making adequate progress in their everyday writing by using the word boxes.
Although it’s impossible to say that word boxes were the factor that improved spelling abilities, it is reasonable to say that word boxes can only help enhance learning. We know children gain information from continued repetition and word boxes allowed children to use the same words over many times. We also know how important it is to both individualize and meet the learning styles of each child. Word boxes allow each student to have their own unique collection of words and use those words in a variety of activities. Overall, word boxes were a positive undertaking in my classroom and an idea I’ll continue to use.

References


