I imagine the following words on index cards: bear, horse, calf, goose, gorilla, bull, lion, camel, lamb, hippo. Imagine asking your students to “sort” them. What would they do? Where would they begin?

Some might categorize—zoo animals and farm animals. Some might identify initial consonants—b, c, g, h, and l. Some might use word length—four, five, and six letters. Some might use syllables—one, two, and three. All will try to arrange the words into groups, find similarities and differences, identify patterns of meaning, sounds, or spellings. Essentially, they will perform the various investigative tasks of word study, a proven method for recognizing and understanding the elements of words (Bear, Templeton, Invernizzi, & Johnston, 1999).

The scope and sequence of word study skills are based on research in developmental spelling (Henderson, 1990; Templeton & Bear, 1992), which shows that children acquire word knowledge in a hierarchical order. Students first learn basic letter/sound correspondences and then the patterns associated with long and short vowels; third, they learn structures of syllables and affixes; and finally, classical roots and stems in derivational families.

Word study targets the particular stages of the child’s development. For example, you would not give students still mastering letter formations the type of sort in the first paragraph. They would find a more appropriate challenge in matching lowercase letters to their capital formations. Through the developmentally appropriate and investigative nature of word study, children begin to understand how words truly “work”—from phonology and orthography to semantics and pragmatics.

As a method of word study, word sorting addresses a wide developmental range and a variety of needs. Picture sorts are helpful tools for developing phonological awareness in children who are just learning or have not yet learned to read. They often ask students to perform tasks that build awareness of phonemes, the very smallest part of oral language, by categorizing or matching initial, middle, or final sounds. Sorts can help build understanding of graphemes as well, the smallest part of written language, by asking students to match particular sounds to their written representations. Research continues to show that this ability to recognize that written words are made up of letters that represent sounds—the alphabetic principle—is one of the strongest predictors of successful reading (Stanovich, Cunningham, & Cramer, 1984; Bradley & Bryant, 1985; Chall, 1996; Langenberg, 2000). Research also suggests that word study and word sorting are effective ways of teaching these essential elements (Joseph, 2000; Cunningham, 1997; Fountas, Pinnell, & Giacobbe, 1998; Bear et al. 1999).

Word study and word sorting are not only for emergent readers. Once students have mastered the basic sound-symbol correspondences and patterns, they may experience difficulty with morphemes, or units of meaning, such as affixes and base words (Henderson, 1990). Word sorting activities that ask students to compare words by their roots or base words or manipulate words with prefixes and affixes teach these complex elements in meaningful ways. Research suggests that word sorting for older students is an excellent way to increase vocabulary and reading comprehension skills (Hennings, 2000; Invernizzi, 1997). Word sorting works particularly well for students with special needs. Studies show that word sorting improves word knowledge, reading, and comprehension of children with learning differences and disabilities (Zutell, 1998; McCormick & Becker, 1996). Students learning English as a second language can also make great gains in reading and word knowledge with word sorting exercises (Strickland, Ganske, & Monroe, 2002).

Because the activities are relatively short and the methods based on the student’s level of development in the classroom, word sorting can be integrated into any curriculum. Researchers such as Anderson (1996) and Invernizzi (1997) show that word study is an effective component of integrated reading and language arts programs. Word sorting can be used for whole-class instruction, individual work, cooperative groups, learning centers, and parent involvement.
Perhaps what makes word sorting such an effective practice is its hands-on, developmental nature. The teacher may prepare a “closed” sort in order to teach and/or assess a particular concept. A teacher may also call for an “open” sort, such as the one described in the first paragraph. This allows the students to determine for themselves the ways in which certain words go together.

Studies support the importance of motivation in the acquisition of reading and language skills (Gambrell, 1996; Anderson, Wilson, & Fielding, 1988). As teachers, we appreciate the appeal of engaging, unique, and exciting methods. I suggest that nothing is quite as exciting as seeing a children study a collection of words, generalize and make meanings, evaluate their decisions, and come to discover that they understand the way words work and enjoy the language they are learning.

References


