

2.1. Word Sorts

Introduction

“For a beginning reader, every word is a unique pattern. Major statistical patterns emerge as the child encounters a larger sample of words, and later, finer-grained dependencies.” (Seidenberg, 2017, 92)

The *Word Sorts* activity reflects the above observation. That is, children should have regular opportunities to explore how words work. In other words, learners need to appreciate that there is a logic to English phonology and orthography, even if they are a bit more complex in English than in some other languages (like Spanish). By examining simple to more complex word patterns, learners are able to develop their decoding and encoding skills with greater confidence and understanding.

Equipment

1. Elkonin boxes & picture sorts (for PA activities)
2. Word lists
3. Word cards
4. Pattern categories
5. Blank cards (for added words)
6. Pictures (optional - to match to words)
7. Coloured tokens
8. Space to write words, sentences and more
9. Texts (optional - for pattern hunt)
10. Record keeping templates

Key Skills

Core skills: phonemic awareness, understanding of sound-letter correspondences, developing pattern recognition, decoding ability and rule learning;

Further skills: (print) word recognition, developing and applying rules, extending patterns, considering exceptions, and using words in context; and

Extended skills: semantic analysis, expressive language, grammatical competence, conventional spelling, and applying decoding skills within context.

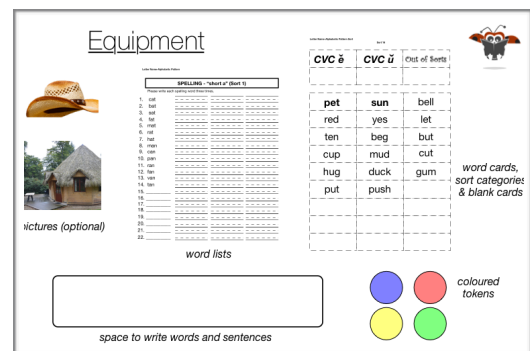


Figure 1: Illustration of the required equipment.

Preparation Notes - Closed, Open and Conceptual Sorts

There are a few ways to go about sorting the words. For the present purpose, we will refer to **closed** and **open sorts**. In a **closed sort**, the teacher provides the categories under which the words or pictures are to be sorted. For instance, the teacher provides the letters “s” and “t” or the rime patterns “-og” and “-ot” or the various ways to spell the “long a”, and the learner must categorise the words or pictures accordingly. However, in an **open sort**, the learners must derive the categories after first reviewing the words or pictures. Then, they proceed to sort.

Even though, we are mainly focused on sorting words by sound/spelling pattern, we encourage teachers to also organise **concept sorts**. In a **concept sort**, learners must sort words or pictures into meaning-based categorises, such as “fruit/vegetable” or “animate/inanimate”.

Steps

1. Cut out either the word or picture cards for the sort activity.
2. Organise the category headings for the sort.
 - If performing a **closed sort**, provide learners with category headings under which the learner will categorise the words or pictures;
 - If performing an **open sort**, provide the learners with at least two blank cards so they can write the category headings once they have organised the words or pictures.
3. Help the learners categorise the words or pictures according to the provided headings or the headings that the learners begin to identify. Discuss the patterns that have been observed.
 - Consider words that do not fit the patterns. We call these *out of sorts* words. For instance, the words “was” and “said” would be considered *out of sorts* because they do not fit either the usual CVC or “ai” pronunciation patterns, respectively.
 - **Also**, write words on blank word cards that fit the patterns.
4. Once the words are sorted, review them by saying them out loud.
5. Shift attention and focus on the meanings of the words.
 - Choose a few words and perform semantic maps.
6. Use these and other related words in rich, juicy sentences.
7. Reflect on the patterns and rules that have been covered.
8. Record the learners’ progress.

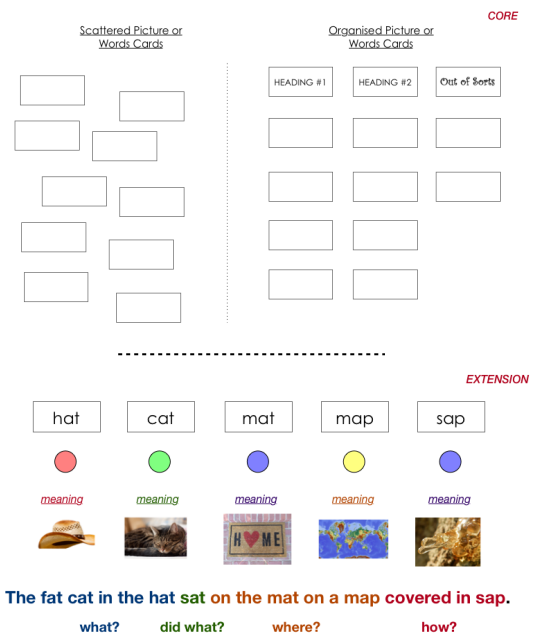


Figure 2: Workflow for the activity



2.1. Word Sorts (cont.)

What to look for ...

We want learners to begin noticing the patterns within words, and the rules that accompany these patterns. This begins with stable patterns, such as the CVC or consonant-vowel-consonant patterns, and progresses to more complex vowel patterns - such as CVCe and CVVC patterns - which require learners to develop additional word knowledge.

To help support teaching and learning, *The Literacy Bug* distributes additional resources, such as a Pattern Checklists (see Figure 3), that can be used by teachers and others to better understand English phonology and orthography.

Ultimately, we want learners to read and write progressively more complex texts. In the context of actual reading, learners are able to apply their emerging knowledge to problem solve words. When encountering new vocabulary, children will have the *word attack* skills to reading a widening corpus of words.

b	c	d	f	-ack	-ake	-an	-ane	-ain	-ale	-ail	-at
g	h	j	k	-ate	-ame	-ap	-ape	-ash	-ank	-ag	-aw
l	m	n	p	-ay	-eat	-est	-ell	-ed	-en	-ill	-ick
qu-	r	s	t	-ice	-it	-ight	-ite	-ip	-ig	-in	-ine
v	w	x	y	-ink	-ide	-ock	-oke	-ot	-oat	-oom	-ook
z	ch	sh	th	-ore	-og	-op	-unk	-ump	-ut	-ug	-un

Figure 3: A checklist of the most common single-syllable word patterns, including consonant onsets and common (rime) endings.

Assumptions

1. It is assumed that the learners have acquired a strong level of phonemic awareness (or the detection of individual sounds within words);
2. With a strong/emerging level of phonemic awareness, learners are able to conceptualise how the sounds they hear are associated with letters (and letter combinations) they are learning.
3. Similarly, learners can grasp why a change in a single letter results in similar words being pronounced differently (e.g. hat → ham).
4. Therefore, learners are able to notice differences (i.e. visually discriminate) in similar words (e.g. hat → ham)
5. Learners are able to sort words by noticing salient patterns. Therefore, learners are able to learn patterns.
6. Learners are able to use this strategy to “study” words, and extract logical conclusions about the pronunciation and spelling of a growing corpus of words.
7. Learners can use this growing knowledge to read and write with increasing confidence.
8. It is also assumed that learners are concurrently learning to read and write both common vocabulary and high frequency words.
9. With this experience, we feel comfortable that learners are in a position to learn. That is, they have the skills to extract rules and develop a knowledge of words through the progressive study of words. This includes the developing ability to handle exceptions to rules. Consequently, learners are developing the ability to quickly and accurately decode a wide range of vocabulary.

Additional Notes

Note #1: This IS a DECODING and ENCODING activity. By progressively exploring predictable patterns, learners are able to apply logical criteria as they decode words. They are also able to detect patterns and apply rules to better understand spelling and pronunciation conventions within the context of word reading.

Note #2: This IS a systematic approach to learning. Teachers can sequence the sorting activities in such a manner that students progressively learn to decode predictable words as well as contend with exceptions. *Word Sorts* can be arranged in a manner that is highly consistent with research-based phonics sequences. In other words, teachers can select words that feature the consonant and vowel sounds that children are mastering across time.

Note #3: Learners should also learn to quickly recognise high frequency words (HFWs) as well as analyse known - but more orthographically complex - words in their oral vocabulary. They will need to read and writing a combination of decodable words, HFWs and content words even in simple texts.

“Readers become orthographic experts by absorbing lots of data, which is one reason why the sheer amount and variety of texts that children read is important. ... The path to orthographic expertise begins with practice practice practice but leads to more more more.” (Seidenberg, 2017, 108)

Where to from here ...

Word Sorts help learners become aware of the spelling patterns within words of increasing complexity, which is a significant step in being able to read and write with accuracy and expressiveness. This (and other like-minded activities) will help learners gain a grasp of patterns within the written word in a deliberate and staged manner.

One similar activity which will be explored in the future will be the *Word Ladder* strategy. In the *Word Ladder* strategy, learners are assisted to form new words - one after another - by changing one letter at a time. For instance, the word “me” becomes “men” becomes “mean” becomes “lean” becomes “learn” and so on. Each transformation is prompted by a clue which helps guide the learner to write the appropriate word.

Actual reading is the true springboard for discovering other intricacies found in English orthography. As Mark Seidenberg also notes, “only a limited amount of spelling can be taught ... Orthographic expertise is not acquired [simply] through ... study ... We gain expertise by [problem solving words whilst] reading.” (Seidenberg, 2017, 94).

