

A COMPARISON OF TWO STRATEGIES
TO TEACH SPELLING
TO STUDENTS WHO ARE LEARNING DISABLED

THESIS

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Abstract

Spelling is often frustrating for students with learning disabilities. They may seem to 'learn' the words because the words are spelled correctly on a weekly spelling list. However, the spellings may be forgotten the minute the test is over. The purpose of this study was to compare two spelling strategies to teach spelling to students with learning disabilities to determine if one helped them to retain the words better.

The first strategy involved traditional activities, such as putting the words in alphabetical order. A weekly spelling test was administered. The second strategy was student-monitored. The students started with a bank of 'known' and 'unknown' words. They were taught a repetitive, multi-sensory strategy for learning the words. This included daily practice tests. They were responsible for keeping track of their progress and moving on to new words.

After six weeks, posttest was administered. The results showed that the student-monitored group spelled 29% more words correctly than the group taught through traditional methods. The results could interest teachers who may want to learn more about spelling strategies that ensure the words are retained over time.

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Chapter I

Statement of the Problem

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to determine if a traditional strategy of teaching spelling or a student monitored strategy of teaching spelling was more effective in helping learning disabled students retain the words over time.

Question to be Answered

Does a traditional spelling strategy or a student monitored spelling strategy help the students to retain the words more effectively?

Need for the Study

Spelling is a difficult task for students, especially those that have learning disabilities. As Henderson (1990) points out, the inconsistencies of the English language are demonstrated by the phrase 'please break bread.' The three words have three different vowel sounds for the pattern 'ea'. Due to quirks such as these, spelling is a tremendously frustrating and complex process.

Researchers report that children use the same one

thousand words in their writing ninety percent of the time (Graham & Voth, 1990). It might appear easy to teach this group of words to students. However, mastering a process, even for a thousand words, that involves keeping a word in short-term memory while retrieving and applying information from long-term memory to spell the word is difficult (Farnham-Diggory & Simon, 1975).

Henderson (1990) describes other reasons why spelling is so difficult to learn:

Not only do our 26 alphabet letters not represent sounds consistently, but some sounds have no letter to represent them, some letters have no sound of their own and some letters may represent different sounds (p.9).

Students struggle with learning to spell and instructors may not be using the correct methods to help them. Teachers have been found to be using spelling strategies with students who are learning disabled that are not empirically supported (Vallecorsa, Zigmond & Henderson, 1985). A reason for this may be a lack of training or reliance on traditional 'textbook' activities.

There is a growing amount of research on strategies to effectively teach spelling, but teachers still face a huge task when trying to find ways to improve their

students' spelling achievement and ensure that the words are retained over time. Although many methods have been tried, studied and supported, most involve similar ideas and techniques. Few researchers have looked at the retention of words over time. Traditional methods may help students to get 100% on weekly spelling tests, but the same words often are not spelled correctly the next week. More research on ways to improve spelling achievement is needed.

DEFINITIONS

Spelling: In this study, spelling is defined as "Producing a string of letters that corresponds in the written language to the spoken word (Farnham-Diggory & Simon, 1975, p.599).

Learning disabled: "students whose learning problems result from a difficulty in one or more of the modalities of learning and are not problems caused by other conditions" (Suran & Rizzo, 1983, p.583). In this study, the subjects have been identified as being learning disabled by the district's Committee on Special Education.

Pull-out program: students are based in a regular classroom but receive language arts and/or math instruction in a separate special education class. Only

fifteen students can be in the special class.

Strategy: a procedure that is used to teach a skill (in this case, spelling.)

Student-monitored spelling strategy: students practice their words daily and give one another practice tests daily. They are also responsible for recording progress and moving on to new words.

Teacher-directed: teacher chooses words to be studied and activities to be used.

Traditional spelling strategy (spelling list-test method): instruction involves distribution of a list, activities with the words throughout the week and a test on Friday.

Limitations of the Study

The subjects involved in this study had a wide range of ability and achievement. Some still used random letters when spelling words. Others spell almost perfectly. There was also significant variation in the amount of motivation within the group. Some students seemed to have little desire to learn to spell and put a minimal amount of effort into trying to write correct sounds. Others tried their very best. They sounded out carefully when spelling an unfamiliar word or used available resources to make sure their words are spelled

correctly. Another limitation was that some students studied and learned their words at home. Others never took their lists home. There were also differences in the amount of parent support. Some parents made their child study the words each night. Others did not monitor their child's studying.

Another limitation was that there was a two week Christmas break near the end of the study. This may have affected the posttest results. Finally, the students were not tested on their ability to read their words prior to having to learn how to spell them. Dangel (1987) believes that the ability to read a word is a prerequisite step to spelling it.

Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the need to find a strategy of spelling instruction that will help the students to retain the words. Research indicates that many of the strategies presently used with learning disabled students are ineffective.

Chapter II

Review of the Literature

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to determine if a traditional strategy to teach spelling or a student-monitored strategy to teach spelling was more effective in helping learning disabled students retain the words over time.

Spelling Ability of Learning Disabled Children

Researchers agree that spelling is often a difficult subject for students with learning disabilities. These students often have poor spelling achievement, which is a factor that interferes with school achievement in general (Dangel, 1987; Dangel, 1989; Vallecorsa, Zigmond & Henderson, 1985). They tend to misspell words two to four times more frequently than their 'normal' peers (Graham & Voth, 1990). Because spelling affects a range of subject areas, poor spelling can interfere with school achievement in general (Dangel, 1989).

The teachers of these students also have a difficult task, because these students may not benefit most from traditional spelling methods. Unfortunately,

the teachers and students may be involved in activities that have little impact on student achievement (Seda, 1989; Vallecorsa, Zigmond & Henderson, 1985). In a study of the strategies that teachers use to teach spelling, Stetson found that a large percentage of them believed in traditional, textbook driven procedures, strategies that are in direct opposition to research findings (Seda, 1989; Stowitschek & Jobes, 1977). However, the memorization and drill rationale has historically dominated the teaching of spelling (Hodges, 1982).

Traditional Spelling Strategies

Traditional spelling strategies involve distributing a list of words on Monday and giving a test on Friday. The words often come from a spelling workbook. Activities throughout the week might include putting the words in alphabetical order, counting the syllables in the words or looking up the definitions of the words.

Henderson (1990) believes that "properly derived spelling lists today are not at all artificial but a true sample of natural language " (p.90). Johnson, Langford & Quorn (1981) also maintain that children can learn from spelling lists if the words are those the

children currently use. But as Fehring (1986) found, word lists don't always contain words the children want to use again in their writing. Many traditional spelling texts develop lists based on grade level, age or phonic generalizations.

A concern about traditional spelling strategies is that they may not have a positive influence on writing. Zutell (1978) states that traditional programs promote rote memorization, boredom, frustration and a dislike for writing. Henderson (1990) also commented that "repetitions do not reinforce recall. They fatigue the hand, numb attention and promote error" (p. 199). Smith also concluded that traditional spelling methods can be the greatest obstacle to fluent writing.

Graves' (1977) research has determined that students usually achieve about 85% on weekly spelling tests but this knowledge isn't seen in their writing. Beers & Beers (1981) agree that learning to spell is not just a memorization process but can only develop naturally as a child learns to write.

Another difficulty with the traditional spelling list-test method is that learning to spell lists of words and learning to spell may be two different processes (Rule, 1982). This may account for the reason

why students may get 100% on their spelling tests but do not use the words when writing.

Some researchers are strongly opposed to traditional spelling strategies. Graves (1977) states that:

Spelling is for writing. It is not to develop skills in alphabetizing or identifying affixes and inflectional endings. These activities may contribute to a greater word sense or a wider vocabulary, but the odds are they do not contribute to greater power in spelling (p. 12).

Graves (1977) also believes that commercial texts, which are the foundation of many spelling lists, have not been reviewed for content, approach or effectiveness.

Other Spelling Strategies

Some researchers have worked to determine which teaching strategies are truly effective with learning disabled students. Dangel (1987) developed a student-directed strategy that involved sorting. Spelling words were written on cards. Based on the results of a pre-test, the students sorted the cards into 'easy' and 'hard' piles. This helped them to focus on the words they needed to study the most. Dangel also felt that the physical act of sorting the cards provided a more active and direct way of examining words than just

looking at a list of words. The students were also taught a 'trace, cover and write' strategy to help them study these words. The students trace the word on the card while saying the letters. Then, they cover the word and try to spell the word out loud. Finally, they try and write the word without looking.

Dangel (1989) conducted a study using these strategies with learning disabled students. The same students were involved in each of the three two week phases. Phase I consisted of traditional procedures and activities to study spelling words, such as writing the words, defining them, putting them in alphabetical order and activities from spelling books. The sorting technique was used in Phase II. The third phase involved the use of the 'trace, copy, cover' technique. The students also kept track daily of words spelled correctly. The results indicated that the students' performance increased with each phase. Sorting and self-recording strategies proved to be efficient and effective.

In similar studies, researchers have agreed that self-directed strategies such as having the student keep track of their own progress can be motivating and increase the number of words spelled correctly (Graham &

Voth, 1990).

Another strategy to teach spelling that has been researched is the use of computers. Hall, McLaughlin & Bialozor (1989) found that the students involved in spelling activities on the computer had higher spelling test scores than the control group who practiced from textbooks. Those students who were poor at keeping on-task improved this behavior while working on the computer.

A spelling strategy involving imitation training has also been used in a study (Stowitschek & Jobes, 1977). This 1:1 approach was teacher-directed. The teacher modelled spelling words, orally and in writing, for students to imitate. For example, the teacher said the word and the child repeated the word. She then showed a flashcard of the word and said the word again, and the child repeated the word. The final step involved the child trying to spell the word on the chalkboard. Posttests were given at the end of each session. Words that were spelled correctly on three tests were removed from the list. Immediate feedback was provided during this instruction. This strategy was found to be effective in teaching children to spell.

Another teacher-directed study was conducted by

Neef, Iwata & Page (1980). The subjects were students who were mentally retarded. They found that when new words were interspersed in a list of old words, the acquisition rate and retention was superior. When given the choice, the students chose a list with old words interspersed over a list of all new words.

Other strategies found to be effective include daily spelling tests, having students correct their own errors on tests with teacher supervision and presenting a few words daily instead of a whole list at one time (Frank, 1987; Graham & Voth, 1990). Also, several researchers believe that decreasing the number of spelling words assigned each week can also enhance mastery (Dangel, 1989; Graham & Voth, 1990). According to Graham & Voth (1990) choosing between six and twelve words that are encountered frequently in reading and writing and/or encountered in the content area seems most appropriate. Finally, Farnham-Diggory & Simon (1975) found that presenting a word visually was more effective than just presenting it auditorily. This raises questions about the traditional dictation spelling activities.

Foster & Torgesen (1983) hypothesized in their study that children do poorly on learning and memory

tasks because they don't use efficient strategies. After being taught a technique that involved repetitive processing of material, the scores increased. This study helped the researchers to conclude that students with learning disabilities retain words better if taught study strategies and or are provided with more learning trials.

There are many methods of teaching spelling. The trick may be to match the right strategy for the individual child. The child must have adequate knowledge to take advantage of the chosen strategy (Graham & Voth, 1990).

Summary

This chapter examined the problems that children with learning disabilities face when learning to spell. It also described research involving traditional methods of spelling instruction, as well as more unique strategies.

The research causes serious concerns to be raised about the effectiveness of popular and widely used spelling strategies. Learning disabled students may need a unique, repetitive way to help them learn and retain the spellings of words.

Chapter III

Design of the Study

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to determine if a traditional strategy of teaching spelling or a student-monitored strategy of teaching spelling was more effective in helping learning disabled students retain the words over time.

Question to be Answered

Does a traditional spelling strategy or a student-monitored spelling strategy help the students to retain the words more effectively?

Methodology

Subjects

The subjects of this study were seventeen intermediate students, ages nine to eleven, who have been identified as learning disabled. They received language arts instruction in the Learning Center one and a half hours daily through a pull-out program. The students were divided into two groups: S (student-monitored group) and T (traditional group). Group S attended the Learning Center at 8:30 in the morning.

Group T attended Center at 9:30.

All of the students were from a suburban elementary school in western New York and were from eleven different classes.

Materials

- list of spelling words
- daily worksheets for traditional group
- index cards to make word cards (see Appendix B)
- daily practice sheets (see Appendix C)
- daily test sheets (see Appendix D)
- daily record sheets (see Appendix E)

Procedures

The study took place for six weeks of the school year. It was explained to the parents and the students why the current spelling program was being changed. Before the study, both groups had been taught using traditional spelling strategies.

Both groups were taught by the researcher. Instruction took place ten to fifteen minutes a day for six weeks.

A pretest was administered to all of the students on the 60 spelling words that would be introduced during the next six weeks (see Appendix A). The researcher chose the words from those the subjects commonly

misspell in their writing and from words used during social studies and science units. Holiday words and words that follow patterns (i.e. -ile or-ike) were also included on the list.

Group T practiced and studied the words through traditional methods. On Friday, they took home lists of the following week's words. On Monday, during class, the students put these words in alphabetical order. On Tuesday, they completed a cloze activity involving the words. On Wednesday the students wrote the words once in cursive. The students wrote the words in sentences on Thursdays. On Friday, they were given a dictated test on the words. In addition to the list of ten words, five review words were chose at random by five different students. At the end of six weeks, a posttest was administered.

The second group, Group S, studied their words through a student-monitored strategy. The students wrote each of the sixty words from the pretest on an index card. If the word was spelled correctly on the pretest, they wrote 'known' on the back of the card (see Appendix B). If it was missed on the pretest, they wrote unknown on the card. The words were placed in envelopes marked 'known' and 'unknown.' On the first day of instruction,

the first five known and the first five unknown words were taken from the envelopes. The students were instructed to choose a word, read it, trace the letters with their finger and finally, try to write the word from memory on the practice sheet (Appendix C). The students checked the accuracy of their own spelling on their practice sheets by comparing their spelling with the word on the card.

If the spelling was correct, the students drew an 'x' in the circle next to the word. When spelled incorrectly, the students crossed out the misspelled word and copied it correctly five times (See Appendix C).

After checking all of their words, the students worked in pairs and gave one another a test. The words were written on a daily test sheet (See Appendix D). The students again checked their spellings on the daily test against the word cards. If a word was spelled correctly, they circled the number. If incorrect, the students drew a line through the word and wrote the correct spelling next to it.

After checking their test, the students turned the cards over. If the word had been spelled correctly on the daily test, the date was written on the card (See

Appendix B). The same procedure was repeated for the remaining words.

The students removed cards from their piles that had been spelled correctly three days in a row. Cards that were marked 'unknown' were now marked 'known' and placed in the 'known' envelope. The word is considered known because it was spelled correctly three days in a row on the daily test. The students took new cards from the appropriate envelope. For example, if the student 'mastered' two 'known' words and one 'unknown' word, two new 'known' words and one new 'unknown' words were taken from the front of the envelope. The students always had five 'known' and five 'unknown' words in their envelopes.

Finally, the students counted how many words they had spelled correctly on the daily test sheet. This score was recorded on the student's progress chart (See Appendix E). This procedure was repeated daily. A posttest was given on all sixty words at the end of eight weeks.

Chapter IV

Analysis of the data

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to determine if a traditional strategy of teaching spelling or a student-monitored strategy of teaching spelling was more effective in helping learning disabled students retain the words over time.

Findings

The groups started out at equal and comparable levels. The mean pretest score of Group T was 26% (See Table I). Group S had a mean on the pretest of 27% (See Table II). An independent t-test was done comparing the two groups' mean pretest scores at $\alpha=.05$. There was not a significant difference between the scores.

Examination of the posttest results revealed that all students in both groups increased their scores. The group taught through traditional strategies, Group T, had a mean score of 26% (15 words) on the sixty word pretest. Six weeks later, the mean on the posttest was 49% (30 words), a 23% gain (See Table III). Scores ranged from a 6% gain (four words) to a 58% gain (35 words). The average increase was 19% (14 words), (See

Table V).

A correlated t-test was conducted on the pre and posttest means for Group T at $\alpha=.05$. There was a statistically significant increase in the posttest means.

The students taught by the multi-sensory, student monitored strategy, Group S, spelled more words correctly on the posttest also. Their mean pretest score was 27% (16 words). After studying these words, the mean posttest score was 75% (45 words), an increase of 48% (See Table IV). Individual scores ranged from a 36% (22 words) to a 60% (36 words) increase. The average increase was 48%, or 29 words (See Table VI).

A correlated t-test of the pre and posttest means for Group S indicated that there was a statistically significant increase in the means after the six weeks of studying.

The two groups' posttest means were analyzed using an independent t-test at $\alpha=.05$. The results indicated that Group S had a significantly higher mean posttest score than Group T.

Table I
Pretest Scores- Group T (traditional group)

<u>Subject</u>	Number of words spelled <u>correctly</u>	Percentage of words <u>spelled correctly</u>
1	13	22%
2	7	12%
3	28	47%
4	16	27%
5	21	35%
6	12	20%
7	7	12%
8	20	33%
9	13	22%
10	17	28%
		Mean=26%

Table II
Pretest Scores- Group S (student-monitored group)

<u>Subject</u>	Number of words spelled <u>correctly</u>	Percentage of words <u>spelled correctly</u>
1	12	20%
2	19	32%
3	20	33%
4	31	52%
5	12	20%
6	11	18%
7	9	15%
		Mean=27%

Table III

Posttest Scores- Group T (traditional group)

<u>Subject</u>	Number of words spelled <u>correctly</u>	Percentage of words <u>spelled correctly</u>
1	17	28%
2	11	18%
3	44	73%
4	24	40%
5	43	72%
6	24	40%
7	16	27%
8	29	48%
9	36	60%
10	52	86%
		Mean=49%

Table IV

Posttest Scores- Group S (student-monitored group)

<u>Subject</u>	Number of words spelled <u>correctly</u>	Percentage of words <u>spelled correctly</u>
1	34	56%
2	46	76%
3	47	78%
4	56	93%
5	48	80%
6	40	66%
7	44	73%
		Mean=75%

Table V
Comparison of Pre and Posttest Scores
Group T

<u>Subject</u>	Number of words <u>gained</u>	Percentage of words <u>gained</u>
1	4	6%
2	4	6%
3	16	27%
4	8	13%
5	22	37%
6	12	20%
7	9	15%
8	9	15%
9	23	38%
10	35	58%
		Mean gain=19%

Table VI
Comparison of Pre and Posttest Scores
Group S

<u>Subject</u>	Number of words <u>gained</u>	Percentage of words <u>gained</u>
1	22	36%
2	27	45%
3	27	45%
4	25	41%
5	36	60%
6	29	48%
7	35	58%
		Mean gain=48%

Researcher Observations

Several observations were made throughout the six-week study:

1. The students in Group S did not complain about having to do spelling once they started the student-monitored strategy. Several students in Group T complained ("Do we HAVE to?") each day when I mentioned that it was time for spelling.

2. Informal observations of stories that individual students had written showed that the students involved in the repetitive, student-monitored strategy were spelling a greater number of their spelling words correctly than those in Group T.

3. Group S appeared to view the daily spelling program as a challenge. They were anxious to see their pile of 'known' words increase and asked if they could add 'unknown' words to their piles. Allowing them to choose the words to include in their envelope gave them a sense of control. Spelling became more enjoyable for them.

4. Several students in Group S asked if they could keep doing the student-monitored program the rest of the year. Group T asked if we could skip some weeks of

spelling.

5. All of the students in both group were curious to know how many words they spelled correctly on the posttest compared to their scores on the pretest.

Summary

The results of this study showed that after six weeks of instruction, both groups showed an increase in the number of words spelled correctly. The students gained between four and thirty-six words on their posttest. The students taught through the student-monitored strategy showed a significantly higher increase than the students in the traditional group.

Chapter V

Conclusions and Implications

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to determine if a traditional strategy of teaching spelling or a student-monitored strategy of teaching spelling was more effective in helping learning disabled students retain the words over time.

Conclusions

Several conclusions can be drawn from analyzing the data provided by the spelling test scores:

1. The student-monitored strategy was significantly more effective than the traditional strategy. The posttest mean was significantly higher than the posttest mean of Group T.
2. All of the students in Group S improved their scores on the posttest by at least 35%. Only four students in Group T increased their scores by more than 35% on the posttest.
3. Traditional strategies may not be effective for all students.
4. The student-monitored strategy appeared to have

improved the student's attitudes toward spelling.

Implications for Education

Teachers need to evaluate their specific spelling strategies to determine if the program is effective for all of the students. What is effective for some may not be effective and beneficial for everyone. Traditional programs should be examined to see if there is improvement in spelling ability, not just progress in putting words in alphabetical order.

Not only must teachers study their spelling program, but they must become aware of effective strategies that are available, especially those that help retention of words over time. They must make choices about their spelling program. They must decide if spelling tests are necessary or if the strategy will be to work in spelling skills more naturally, as the children write.

Teachers must be aware that the content of the spelling lists are quite important. Children might be more motivated to study if the words are those that they use often or if they are involved in choosing the words that will be included on the list. Students can also benefit from correcting their own pre and posttests and keeping track of their own progress. Teachers need to

find other ways to motivate the students and to get them to invest themselves in studying their words.

It is essential to check if the children are retaining the words from week to week. When they are spelling the words correctly on the weekly test but misspelling the words in their writing, the value of the current program is questionable. Teachers must determine what their goal of spelling instruction is. Teachers may need to put aside the traditional textbooks and methods to try alternative strategies.

It is important that the parents are aware of whatever spelling strategy is being used, so that they can properly support their children at home. Some parents will have concerns if they do not see the traditional weekly spelling list coming home.

The results of this study indicate that the student-monitored spelling strategy, which involves repetition and review, may be the most effective for helping to retain words over time.

Implications for Research

This study shows that more research is needed on developing and testing the effectiveness of new and unique spelling strategies. The focus should be on

strategies that help to retain the words over time.

More research is also needed on the idea that separate spelling instruction is not necessary but that spelling development will occur naturally as a child writes.

Similar studies could be conducted that compared how scores change with different methods. A goal should be to find methods that are interesting and motivating to the students.

Further research on the student-monitored strategy could include examination of writing samples to see if the knowledge demonstrated on the daily tests is transferred to the child's writing. Another component to include would be to have the children read the words prior to trying to learn them. If they cannot read the words, it is difficult to learn how to spell them. The study could also be conducted over a greater period of time with students from different grades.

A study could be conducted on the errors that the children made on their practice sheets and daily tests to see exactly where children who are learning disabled have trouble. This would help teachers with planning instruction.

A final change that could be made if this study was to be replicated would be to include on the lists only words that the children have misspelled in their writing or are self-selected. This would make the program more individualized, as each student would have a different list. This would ensure that the words on the lists were appropriate for each student and his ability.

Summary

The use of a student-monitored strategy to teach spelling allows students to be responsible for evaluating and keeping track of their own progress. This strategy is motivating and challenging to intermediate-aged children.

Spelling development is a concern of teachers and parents. Unfortunately, the most used and familiar strategies may not be the most effective or beneficial. Educators must investigate their programs and decide if a new program needs to be incorporated.

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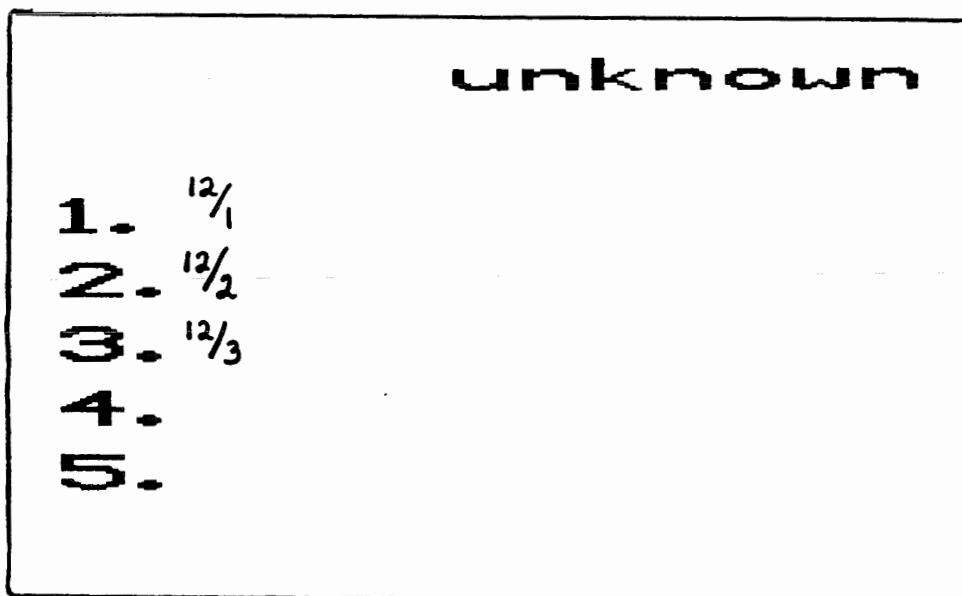
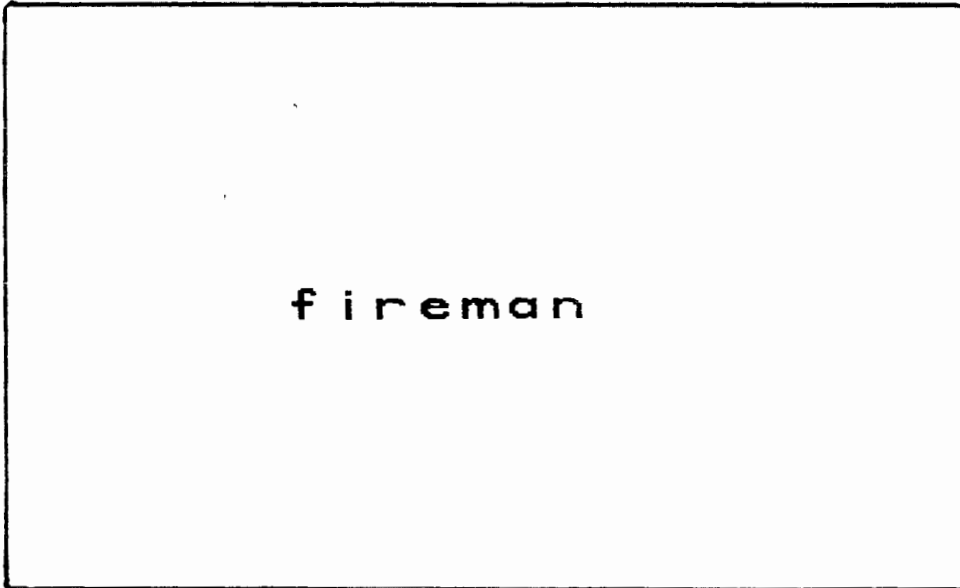
APPENDIX A

List of Words Used in Study

fireman	Jack Frost
fireplace	giving
vampire	very
retire	everywhere
admire	however
tired	eleven
wood	seven
would	never
there	east
their	west
empty	North America
remember	New York
December	table
September	ankle
lemon	turtle
them	bicycle
state	people
bones	circle
north	mistletoe
south	present
basket	Christmas
blanket	holiday
quiet	snowblower
ticket	Santa Claus
upset	ornaments
alphabet	snowman
turkey	ice skates
Thanksgiving	sled
pilgrim	angel
world	carols

Appendix B

Example of word card (front and back)



Appendix C

Example of daily practice sheet

PRACTICE SHEET

1. fireman ⊗

6. _____ ○

2. frieplas ⊖
fireplace
fireplace
fireplace
fireplace
fireplace

7. _____ ○

3. _____ ○

8. _____ ○

4. _____ ○

9. _____ ○

5. _____ ○

10. _____ ○

Appendix D

Example of daily test sheet

DAILY TEST

NAME _____

- | | |
|----------|-----------|
| 1. _____ | 6. _____ |
| 2. _____ | 7. _____ |
| 3. _____ | 8. _____ |
| 4. _____ | 9. _____ |
| 5. _____ | 10. _____ |

