

Curricular Materials — Word Learning

Words targeted for instruction and learning in *The Spell of Language* are comprised of three overlapping groupings. The words in the first group, Primer Words, are those that young students are most familiar with and are expected to learn earliest. This grouping occurs in the Essential Word Knowledge (EWK) component and again in the Spelling and Beyond (S&B) component. The second group of words is a part of the EWK component and consists of the 600 Most Commonly Used Words (MCUW 600), accounting for upwards of 90% of written English. The third grouping consists of content-area words for grades one through six in S&B; these words are expected to be learned by accomplished students at those grade levels. Phonetic analysis and the alphabetic principle are central to all EWK instruction, and phonetic analysis accompanies instruction for all word groupings.

The teaching progression at the earliest level of learning begins with Primer Words. Once the primer words can be read, it is appropriate to begin both MCUW 600 **and** spelling instruction of those primer words; teachers are strongly encouraged to teach these two concurrently as illustrated in Figure 1. In our years of teaching, it has been difficult to help students learn to apply the alphabetic principle in reading when they have already developed a basic word-reading vocabulary without recognizing that speech sounds map onto spellings. Students asked to analyze words that they already know but frequently misread find the task arduous (and in many cases, loathsome).

Along those lines, even though MCUW 600 are not presented in explicit spelling/vocabulary lessons, phonetic analysis and the alphabetic principle are fundamental parts of the instruction. This further addresses the potential arduousness as described above. In addition, as all words have a phonological structure (whether regular or irregular), the alphabetic principle allows students to learn new words by analogy, taking advantage of the structure of English rather than learning words as separate entities in their mental lexicons. Finally, phonetic analysis is also helpful when students are studying words outside of the classroom; phonetic analysis worksheets enable them to correctly read and pronounce new words.

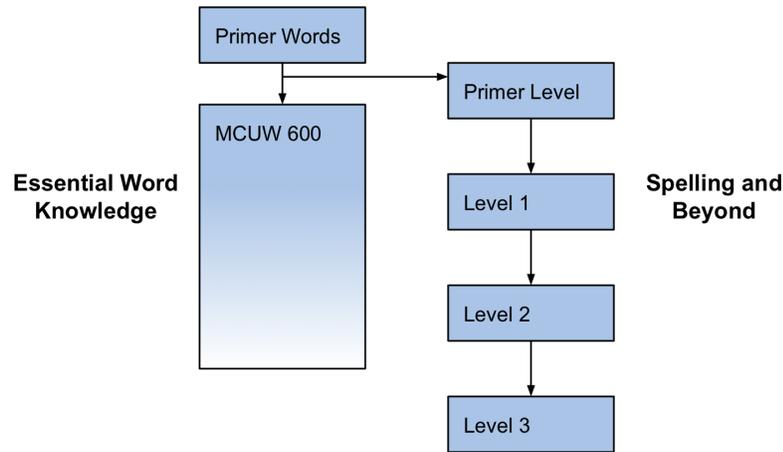


Figure 1 - The relationship between student progression in both EWK and S&B. Once students can read the Primer Words in EWK, they should revisit those words in S&B Primer Level spelling lessons. MCUW 600 instruction should be concurrent with S&B lessons, concluding as early as Level 1, but if possible, before starting Level 3.

The challenge for teachers is to target the skills, which will develop the ability to read words efficiently in the shortest time possible. The 600 Most Commonly Used Words are the “glue” that holds written language together and need to be accurately and rapidly recognized if students are to get across the line of print efficiently. As represented in Figure 1, while some students may complete the MCUW 600 while studying the spelling of the Level 1 content-area words, the goal should be for students to complete the MCUW 600 by the time they start Level 3 words. Some students will need additional instruction to reach this goal. In order to reach this goal, cognitive strategies are given in the MCUW 600 Additional Materials, Cognitive Hooks for Word-Learning Support.