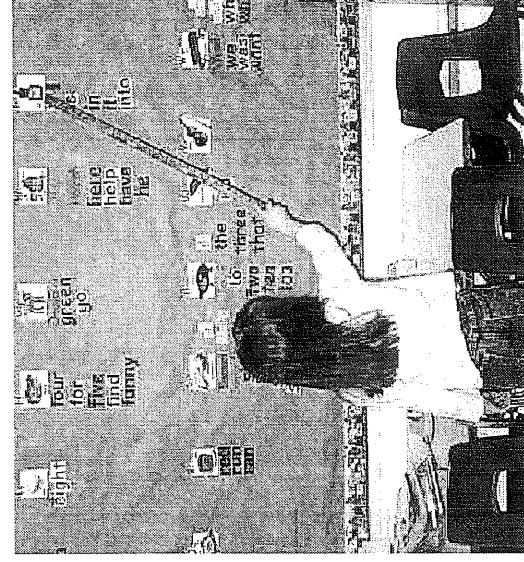
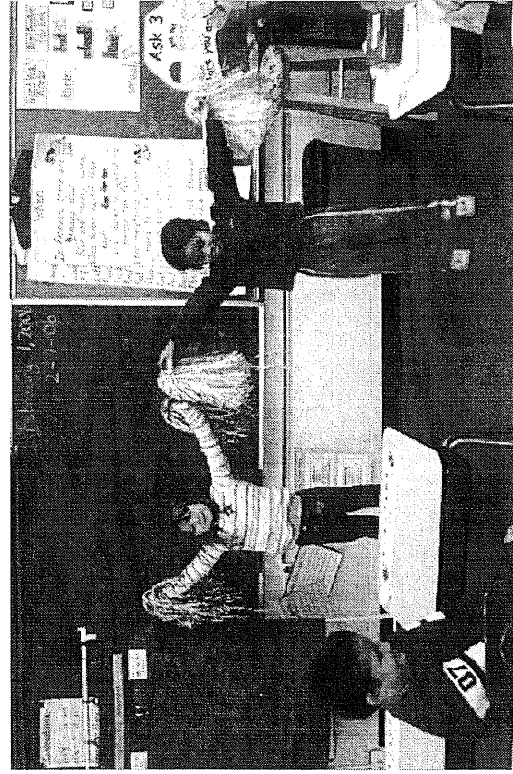


“You have to ‘do’ the word wall.”

Patricia Cunningham



Classroom Word Walls: Is Yours a Tool or a Decoration?

by Katherine Hilden and Jennifer Jones

Adorning many classrooms in American schools is the ever-present word wall. Strategically placed along the top perimeter of the classroom, or sometimes aligned to fit the space of a bulletin board, the alphabet is displayed with key words underneath each letter. For example, under **Aa** might reside important high frequency or sight words such as *and* or *are*, word families or phonograms such as *-an* or *-at*, or important content words such as *atmosphere* or *amendment*.

Word walls are designed to support the teaching of words and the teaching of how words “work.” As reference points for students, word walls promote independent reading and writing (Cunningham, 1995; Brabham & Villaume, 2001). Word walls should assist students in building at-a-glance, on sight recognition of words (Huebner & Bush, 1970). Ideally, five new words should be added to word walls on a weekly basis. This amount is not overwhelming and provides students with a manageable “load” of new information and ample time to encounter the words and patterns in meaningful ways.



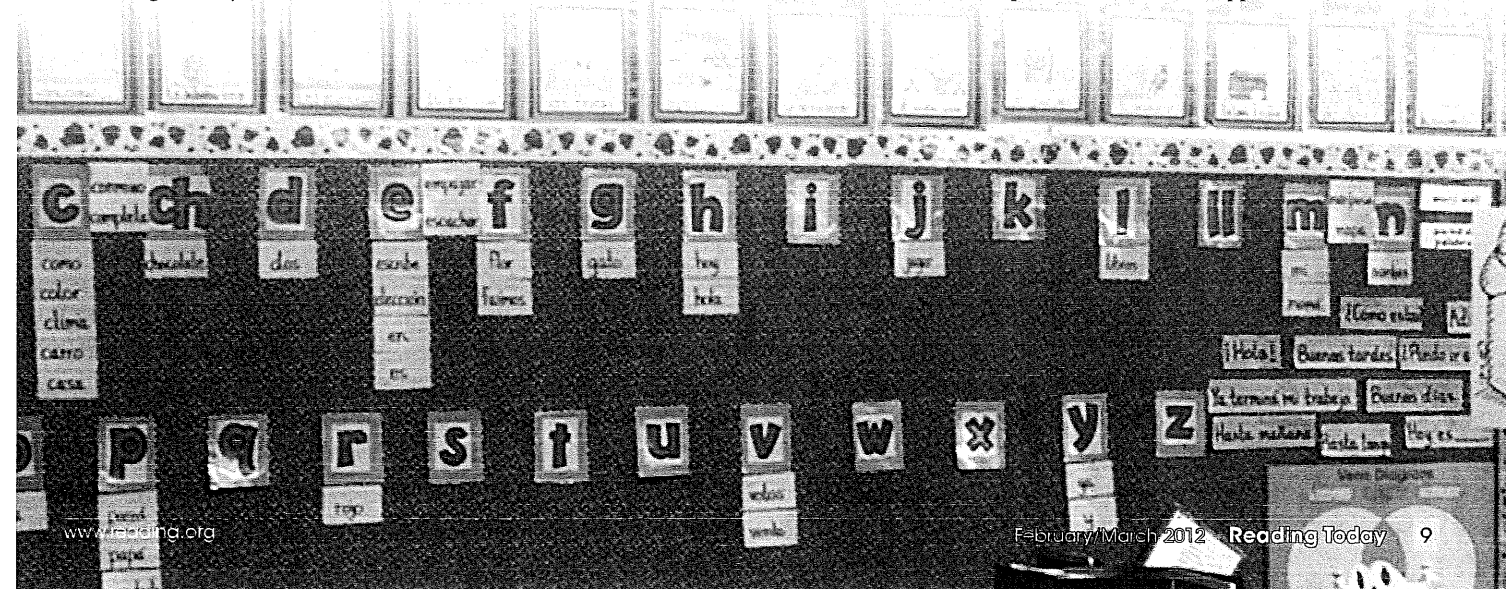
Katherine Hilden Jennifer Jones

Jasmine and Schiesl (2009) observed that although word walls are readily available to students, oftentimes children struggle to use the word wall. This problem is often observed when students ask teachers how to spell words that are actually found on the word wall, and the teacher provides the correct spelling rather than encouraging the use of the word wall as a tool or resource. Such struggles showcase the lack of follow-up activities and interaction associated with daily word wall instruction. Word walls in such cases are merely word “wallpaper.” As teachers, how can we promote *interactive* use of word walls in our classrooms (Pinnell and Fontas, 1998)?

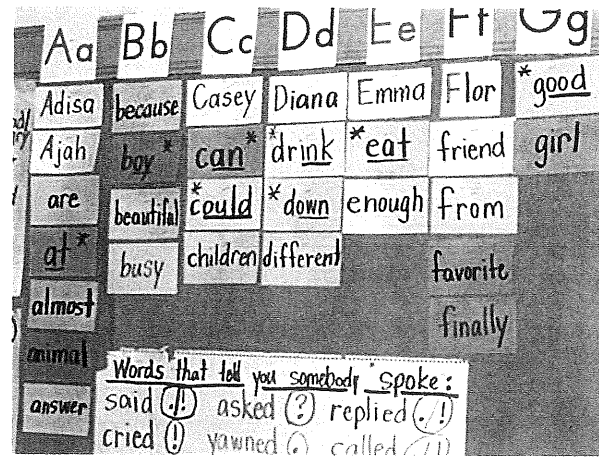
Words walls are full of possibility if they are put into play strategically and effectively. Rather than simply decorating the classroom walls with words, teachers must put word walls into action in thoughtful, purposeful ways. “Do” the word wall (Cunningham, 2000)! Aim to use the word wall to foster *independence*, rather than reliance (Brabham and Villaume, 2001).

Primary Classrooms

In primary grade classrooms, it might be most useful to organize the word wall based on sight words and high utility phonograms, commonly referred to as word families. Beside each sight word placed on the wall, place a red dot, or any other distinction of choice, indicating to students that it is an important word used in reading and writing, but it can’t be “sounded out.” For example, *have* would be found under the **Hh** on the wall, along with a red dot. There are 37 word families that are found most commonly in reading texts for primary grades (Wylie & Durrell, 1970). It is helpful to start with these high utility patterns, which will equip students with patterns that can be applied to new words.



Gaskins and colleagues (1991) have found that instruction focused around select key words containing such patterns on a weekly basis, or reading by analogy, can be quite successful. Word families such as *-ack* and *-unk* would be included within a word and underlined, such as sack or junk. The word *sack* would be placed under the Ss on the word wall, with the underlined feature would indicate the word family.



Play with the Words.

Rather than “drilling and killing” students with word lists and/or recitations of the words on the word wall, *play* with the words on the classroom word wall. Patricia Cunningham has an array of exciting activities to put into play with classroom word walls. For example, Be-A-Mind Reader provides students with five clues about one word on the word wall. Clues may be letter/sound, meaning, or even grammatically oriented. The key is providing opportunities for students to read,

write and “play” with the words on a regular basis. Consistency will provide students with meaningful practice and encourages students to look more thoroughly at words, noting letter-sound correspondences (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton & Johnston, 2011).

Upper Elementary

For upper elementary, focus might shift to content words for the composition of the classroom word wall. To help students categorize words, they might be color coded based on the content area in which they are predominantly found. For example, math words such as *circumference* might be written in blue, while science words such as *metamorphosis* might be written in green, and so on. To draw attention to words that are found across disciplines, Tier 2 words, (Beck, McKeown & Kucan, 2002) place words on white cards and put colored stickers on them. Of course, an assortment of sight words, phonograms, and content words may be utilized altogether on one word wall as well.

2000). Take five to ten minutes to call attention to the words on the wall on a daily basis. Use classroom down time while waiting for a specials teacher, right before lunch time or during bus drop-off or pick-up times, etc. to use the word wall. Whatever time you choose, stick to it. In addition, use the word wall during reading and writing instruction.

“Powerful instruction using word walls...occurs during conversations about word-solving problems that come up as students read and write” (Brabham and Villaume, 2001, p. 701). As teachers, we cannot expect our students to independently use the word wall unless we have modeled the strategic use of it during shared reading and writing times.

For example, a second grade teacher might model the use of the word wall to figure out the word *sight* by saying, “Hmmm. I see the word *s-i-g-h-t* here in our book. I do not know how to read this word, so I am going to look over our word wall. I see the word *night* on our wall. Night has the same *i-g-h-t* pattern as the word in our book. If I can read *night*, I can read *sight*.”

The same process may be used for writing, “I need to know how to spell the word *does*. I have a feeling that it is not a word that I can sound out using word families. So, I am going to look on the word wall to see if it is a red dot word. I’m looking under *d*, and I see it! What a wonderful resource our word wall is!”

Try Word Banks

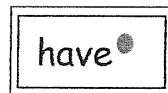
Consider utilizing personalized *word banks*, particularly with students in the Letter Name/beginning stage of reading (Bear et. al, 2011). Words for personalized word banks consist of student-chosen words harvested from meaningful texts. Ideally eight to ten words are added to the bank on a weekly basis from students’ reading texts.

Word banks differ from word walls in that they consist of words the student *knows well* and each word bank is personalized to the students’ readings and needs. Words are placed in baggies, organized in file folders or recipe boxes for each student. Students “play” with the words during allotted classroom time in order to offer repeated exposure to meaningful words, for students to gain confidence and automaticity.

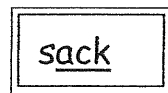
Individualized games may be used with word bank words as well, such as tic-tac-toe, or go fish. Again, repeated exposure in meaningful ways provides opportunity for students to more closely examine the spelling features of words and transfer this recognition into automatic application when reading meaningful texts.

Use and Model the Displayed Words

To avoid word wallpaper “decorating,” use the word wall regularly and make it interactive. Research indicates that for analogy instruction to be effective using word walls, teacher instruction must be direct and systematic (Walton,



The red dot indicates that *have* is an important word used in reading and writing, but it can’t be “sounded out”



Word families such as *-ack* and *-unk* can be included within a word and underlined

Suggested Readings

- Cunningham, P. M. (2000). *Phonics they use: Words for reading and writing*. Fifth edition. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Bear, D., Invernizzi, M. A., Templeton, S., Johnston, F. (2011). *Words their way: Word study for phonics, vocabulary and spelling instruction*. Fifth edition. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
 - See Letter Name Stage chapter – Word Banks
- Wylie & Durrell's List of 37 common phonograms (1970): *ack, ain, ake, ale, all, ame, an, ank, ap, ash, at, ate, aw, ay, eat, ell, est, ice, ick, ide, ight, ill, in, ine, ing, ink, ip, it, ock, oke, op, ot, ore, uck, ug, ump, unk.*

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1. Bear, D., Invernizzi, M. A., Templeton, S., Johnston, F. (2011). *Words their way: Word study*

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