

# Students' Perceptions of Two Spelling Techniques: Copy, Cover, and Compare and Flip Folder

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Received: April 22, 2020

Accepted: June 22, 2020

Online Published: June 23, 2020

doi: 10.5539/elt.v13n7p67

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v13n7p67>

## Abstract

This interpretivist research aimed at exploring students' opinions regarding two spelling instruction techniques, Copy, Cover, and Compare (CCC) and Flip Folder. Twenty high school students who previously received spelling instruction using one of these two techniques participated in semi-structured focus group interviews to give their opinions about each technique. They were divided into three groups for which three questions were asked to collect feedback about each technique. Student responses varied and included suggestions for improvements to these techniques: introducing a revision plan to memorize the learned words, creating word spelling lists, increasing the repetition of words, and taking a weekly test to assess their learning achievement.

**Keywords:** CCC, Flip Folder, multisensory, Saudi Arabia, spelling, Students' opinions

## 1. Introduction

English spelling is considered a major obstacle for both native speakers and learners of English. Several studies have confirmed that Arabs, and especially Saudi students, are generally regarded as poor spellers (Al-Busaidi & Al-Saqqaf, 2015; Albalawi, 2016; Alhaisoni, Al-Zuoud, & Gaudel, 2015; Allaith & Joshi, 2011; Althobaiti & Elyas, 2019). The majority of Saudi research on spelling has been carried out to investigate students' spelling abilities, while a few researchers have focused on applying spelling techniques (Alrwele, 2017; Althobaiti & Elyas, 2019; Nahari & Alfadda, 2016). Yet to the best of the researcher's knowledge, little data are available regarding students' beliefs and opinions about spelling techniques. This follow-up research is designed to connect to a previous quantitative study conducted by Althobaiti and Elyas (2019), which compared students' performance after receiving spelling instruction using one of the two techniques Copy, Cover, and Compare (CCC) and Flip Folder. In the current research, the researcher hoped to hear from students about their experiences with those techniques—in particular, the advantages and drawbacks of each. This research also aimed to shed light on those students' preferred methods of spelling instruction and how they can be improved. This research fills a gap in the literature by addressing the dearth of research on students' preferences when it comes to learning to spell. Therefore, the researcher adopted an interpretivist paradigm to find the truth according to the students. This paradigm draws on answers from students about the limit of learned words per day, the advantages and disadvantages of each technique, and how to improve spelling instruction techniques in general.

### 1.1 Research Questions

- a) What are students' opinions regarding the spelling instruction techniques of CCC and Flip Folder?
- b) How could these two techniques be improved?

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 The Importance of Spelling

Spelling is an important part of the language that needs to be taught as early as possible because it affects reading and writing abilities (Reed, 2012). Poor spellers are usually considered to be poor readers, and vice versa. Westwood (2005, p. 2) commented, "it is argued that an individual's literacy level is often judged by others in terms of his or her ability to spell words correctly in everyday written communications." Therefore, correct spelling displays advanced linguistic knowledge as it incorporates phonological, orthographic, and

morphological knowledge (Reed, 2012). In addition, learners with strong vocabulary are likely to use simpler words rather than the more complex ones because they are uncertain concerning how to spell them (Warda, 2005).

Graham, Harris, and Chorzempa (2002) investigated how additional spelling instruction contributes to the development of spelling, reading, and writing skills. In their study, second-grade students with difficulties in learning spelling took part in 48 sessions, each taking 20 minutes, aimed at enhancing their spelling skills. The study found that learners in the spelling-controlled group had improved spelling skills, demonstrated enhanced reading fluency and writing skills. The findings also indicated a strong impact of spelling instruction on the young learners' reading word-recognition abilities. The researchers concluded that spelling difficulties impact students' written expression, views of writing skills, early development of reading skills, writing fluency, verb morphology and writing clarity.

Similarly, Ritchey (2008) investigated the association between early spelling, writing and reading abilities. The study sample consisted of 60 children. The results demonstrated that learners' spelling skills play an important role in the development of their writing skills and reading fluency. The study concluded that spelling and reading share a role in phonological understanding and that there is a significant association between spelling ability and reading and writing fluency.

Katzir et al., (2006) likewise examined the role of spelling recognition in reading skills, with the aim of determining the relationship between spelling ability, phonological awareness and reading skills in dyslexic and non-dyslexic children. The researchers examined associations between spelling recognition and writing, reading fluency, word reading, rapid naming, phonological measures, working memory and verbal skills. The study findings demonstrated a significant correlation between learners' performances in spelling recognition and reading skills, irrespective of their reading abilities. The researchers concluded that the association between spelling skills and reading fluency becomes significantly stronger as the age of the learner increases.

Based on the findings of the cited research, it can be inferred that spelling ability enhances learners' reading proficiency. The ability of students to pronounce words correctly, as well as the development of effective spelling skills, will also contribute to students' development of reading fluency and writing skills.

## *2.2 Approaches to Teaching Spelling*

Different approaches to teaching spelling have emerged throughout the years. The most highly recognized of these are the whole-word and language-based approaches, which currently dominate English spelling instruction.

### *2.2.1 Whole-Word Approach*

The whole-word approach is the oldest method of teaching spelling. Schlagal noted that "since the 19th century, many educators have believed that learning to spell depends on rote memorization of words" (2007, as cited in Reed, 2012, p. 10). In this approach, words are usually studied from books according to students' current level; common themes; and words' difficulty, irregularity, or frequency. The most serious limitation in such an approach is that it does not provide much information about the spelling system (Schlagal, 2013). Thus, some experts have proposed that such an approach is suitable for irregular words, as the majority of English words are regular, and their spelling can be predicted in one way or another (Reed, 2012; Westwood, 2008). The best way to build word lists is to organize them to highlight spelling patterns. By doing so, students, if they learn those patterns in lists of taught words, would highly generalize and apply the patterns in similar untaught words (Schlagal, 2013). Westwood (2014) implied that word study is an important component of a spelling language program, as it aids students in understanding how words are constructed and reconstructed.

### *2.2.2 Language-Based Approaches*

Language-based approaches focus on phonemic skills and orthographic, morphophonemic, and vocabulary knowledge. These approaches shift the focus from visual memory of words to linguistic factors, such as learner awareness of language sounds and word meaning, origin, and structure (Davis, 2011). Language-based approaches include alphabetic, phonemic, syllabic, and morphemic approaches (Davis, 2011; Reed, 2012). Alphabetic spelling instruction consists of teaching students how to match individual letters to corresponding sounds, which is considered the first step in learning spelling. It has been stated that learners cannot be independent readers and spellers without mastering alphabetic matching (Westwood, 2014). Phonemic spelling instruction is based on phonemes—sound-symbols—represented by one or more letters. Syllabic spelling instruction focuses on teaching students how to segment words into syllables to write them correctly. Syllables are divided into two types: open and closed. By understanding these, students can predict, for example, when and

when not to double a vowel. Morphemic spelling instruction is based on teaching students the roots, prefixes, and suffixes of words, which leads to understanding meaning and developing spelling accuracy (Reed, 2012).

### 2.2.3 The Two Techniques

#### 2.2.3.1 CCC

CCC is considered a successful and effective technique for teaching spelling (Alrwele, 2017; Althobaiti & Elyas, 2019; McLaughlin, Skarr, Derby, Meade, & Williams, 2012; Mesmeh, 2011; Nies & Belfiore, 2006; Reed, 2012; C. Skinner, McLaughlin, & Logan, 1997; Westwood, 2014). Additionally, it has been proven to be effective with other subjects such as Math (Stocker Jr & Kubina Jr, 2017), Geography (C. H. Skinner, Belfiore, & Pierce, 1992), word recognition, and vocabulary development (Jaspers et al., 2012). CCC is a self-managed time-efficient technique by which students practice new words, receive immediate feedback, and self-correct their errors (Skinner et al., 1997). It also works best with slow learners and those who have a weak long-term memory (Heron, Okyere, & Miller, 1991).

In this technique, students are asked to look carefully at a word, cover it, and write it from memory. Students then compare their reproduction with the correct spelling; if the spelling is accurate, the student should move to the next word. But if the word is misspelled, the student should engage in positive practice before moving to the next word (Skinner et al., 1997). The repeated writing of a word possibly helps the student establish a motor pattern for that word, which would result in an automatic correct spelling (Westwood, 2005, 2014). Thus, CCC puts emphasis on the repeated writing of a word, which includes proofing and immediate error correction, in order for that word to be written automatically by the learner, especially with high-frequency words (Heron et al., 1991).

A recent case study was conducted by Brinegar, Armstrong, and McLaughlin (2015) to examine the efficacy of the CCC technique for spelling with a high school student with intellectual disabilities. The student showed frustration, and severe deficiency in spelling prior to the intervention. The results showed that the student spelling accuracy significantly improved. The researchers commented “this intervention was easy to implement, cost-effective and required little preparation necessary” (Brinegar et al., 2015, p. 238).

Althobaiti and Elyas (2019) compared students’ performance after receiving spelling instruction for nine sessions. In the study, 38 high school students were split into two groups, each one receiving spelling instruction using CCC or Flip Folder. The posttest results indicated that the CCC group significantly improved its spelling abilities and outperformed the Flip Folder group. But additional research is needed to measure students’ retention level after doing a delayed posttest, two months later for example.

#### 2.2.3.2 Flip Folder

Flip folder is a variation of Horn’s method. This “systematic technique for learning the correct spelling of words by using a combination of visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and tactile procedures was validated by research by Horn (1954)” (Gentry, 2004, p. 60). This technique falls under the multisensory approach of teaching spelling. According to Westwood (2014, p. 45), “multisensory teaching approaches that involve a combination of visual, auditory and kinaesthetic input (VAK) are often helpful, particularly with the weakest spellers.” The multisensory approach is a combination of different learning styles to maximize spelling retention, as it causes students to entirely concentrate on the learning task (Westwood, 2008). Visual learners comprehend and memorize when they look carefully at words, whereas kinesthetic learners learn best by writing a word several times; this is in contrast to auditory learners, who learn by listening to the word’s letters recited in order, whether by a recorder, the teacher, or the student (Adams-Gordon, 2010). Therefore, it has been proposed that students learn best when practicing those different modalities in one set (Warda, 2005). On the other hand, resorting to only one learning modality could negatively influence other spelling skills such as proofreading, which is primarily visual (Adams-Gordon, 2010).

In the Flip Folder technique, a multisensory approach is practiced through a folder that has been divided into three parts. Students uncover the first flap to look carefully at a word while pronouncing it. Then students say the letters in order and write the word in the air (sky writing). They then cover the word and try to visualize it, followed by uncovering the first flap to check the word. In the second flap, students write the word and check its spelling. If the spelling is correct, they move to the next word, and if not they write it one more time in the third flap (Gentry, 2004; Westwood, 2014).

Murphy (1997) conducted a study to compare the efficacy of a multisensory approach versus a test-study-test approach to teach 60 high-frequency writing words. Twenty third-grade students participated in this research, in which they were taught 60 words divided into 15 words each week. The results indicated that there was no

significant difference between the two techniques. Similarly, Schlesinger and Gray (2017) compared multisensory structured language instruction against structured language instruction to enhance better letter name and sound production, word reading, and word spelling. Students were second-grade children with typical development or dyslexia. The results indicated that multisensory instruction did not provide any improvement over the structured language instruction. This also goes in line with Althobaiti and Elyas (2019), who found that Flip Folder did not help students improve their spelling ability.

### 3. Methodology

Because the objective of this research was to collect as much data from students as possible, a qualitative approach was used. Therefore, focus group interviews were employed to check students' opinions about the two techniques of CCC and Flip Folder. A focus group interview is defined as follows (Sim & Snell, 1996, as cited in Sim, 1998) "a group interview - centred on a specific topic ('focus') and facilitated and co-ordinated by a modulator or a facilitator - which seeks to generate primarily qualitative data, by capitalizing on the interaction that occur within the group settings" (p. 346).

These interviews were semi-structured; the moderator had a set of predetermined questions, and he was free to add questions that would further develop themes both expected and unexpected (Perry, 2005).

#### 3.1 Research Site and Participants

Participants in this research were 36 male students in second year of high school from the city of Makkah in Saudi Arabia. They had been studying English for four and a half years. Their ages ranged from 16 to 18, and they had been receiving three hours of English-language instruction per week.

Due to the researcher's work as an English-language teacher, a convenience sample was adopted where participants were selected because they were conveniently available at the time of the study (Perry, 2005).

#### 3.2 The Interviews

Participants were divided into three groups of six to eight students each. Following Rabiee, group size was "large enough to gain a variety of perspectives and small enough not to become disorderly or fragmented" (2004, p. 565).

The interview was organized around three questions:

- What is your opinion about this spelling instruction technique?
- What do you think is the suitable number of words in each session?
- What do you think could be added to make it more effective?

For students' ease of communication, the interview was conducted in Arabic, and students were encouraged to express their ideas freely. Each session lasted from 8 to 12 minutes. After the interviews were completed, their recordings were translated into English by the researcher. Translations were subsequently forwarded to a freelance translator, who checked their accuracy.

#### 3.3 Data Analysis

First, the interview was piloted with two nonparticipating groups, the data were interpreted, and similar ideas were coded under a unifying theme. Thematic analysis was then established, starting with familiarization with data, creating codes, reviewing and naming themes, and finally writing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2012). NVivo 11 Starter software was used to apply thematic analysis and export graphs representing the results.

## 4. Results and Discussion

#### 4.1 What is Your Opinion about This Spelling Instruction Technique?

There was agreement among CCC group students that the technique was effective and an easy technique for teaching spelling. Members of this group responded, "it is an effective technique" and "I learned many words by practicing using this method." This view supported the results of previous research that students enjoyed the CCC technique, which made them better spellers, and that they will use it to learn other material in school (Mesmeh, 2011; Nies & Belfiore, 2006).

Members of the Flip Folder groups also commented similarly, saying "it is a great and innovative technique" and "it is a simple and effective technique." However, Flip Folder participants' answers posed a conundrum: if Flip Folder was seen to be an effective technique, why did it not create significant improvement as shown by posttest scores in previous research (Althobaiti & Elyas, 2019)?

A possible answer is that because the students in this study had little knowledge about spelling, they thought that the Flip Folder technique worked well for them. Additionally, the majority of the participants declared that this was the first time they had studied spelling at school, and this fact might have led them to think that it helped them master the practiced words.

#### 4.2 What do You Think is the Suitable Number of Words in Each Session?

In the CCC group, responses varied between two and seven words per class. One student said, “three words are enough, more than that might confuse students,” but when they were reminded of the number of words they were studying (four) per class, students unanimously agreed that four words were appropriate. Althobaiti and Elyas (2019) indicated that four words per session was adequate and effective, and this has been proven by students’ excellent results as indicated by the posttest. A possible explanation for this pattern of responses is that because students were successful in retaining learned words, they believed it would be possible to add more words to the weekly list.

Among the Flip Folder groups, six students felt that four words per class is sufficient, while four students believed that “the proper number of words depends on their difficulty level, for example, ‘vocabulary’ is more difficult than ‘what’. In other words, two to three long words would be appropriate, while in the case of short words, the number could be between six and seven. The remaining students agreed on two words, feeling that two is the appropriate number of words per class on which to receive spelling instruction. Thus, because students did not show significant improvements in spelling, they believed that reducing the number of words per class would result in better outcomes. However, 15 to 20 words has been suggested as the maximum number that students can effectively learn in a week (Gentry, 2004)

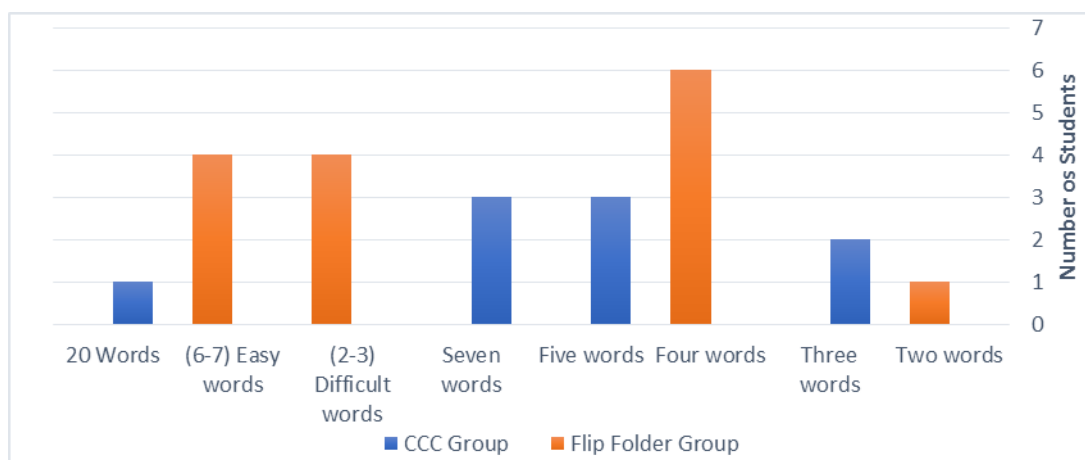


Figure 1. Suggested Number of Words per Session

#### 4.3 What do you think could be added to make it [the spelling technique] more effective?

In the CCC group, the most common answer to question three was that “students should be serious about learning”—that practicing without attending to the words will not have a positive effect on their performance. This aligns with the suggestion of Westwood (2014), which is, attending fully to the spelling task aids learning.

Other students believed that using English to communicate outside of school, and interacting with foreigners in online games or chats, would undeniably be of great help to students. Generally speaking, writing words over and over to communicate with the help of spell-checkers, as in social media apps, will increase the chances of retaining spellings. Roberts (2011, p. ix) stated that using spell-checkers “can be very beneficial for building confidence and motivation, increasing speed legibility for some students, and reducing (but not eliminating) spelling errors.” However, spell-checkers are helpful to students who are proficient readers and adequate spellers (Westwood, 2008).

Two students reported that conducting extra copying and revision at home would be useful in learning the studied words. The final suggestion, mentioned by two students, was that “listening to English-language radio” would have a positive impact on spelling. The notion of relying on pronunciation to spell words, which has been reported as one of the major causes of spelling errors for Arab learners, seems to be persistent (Al-Busaidi & Al-Saqqaf, 2015; Allaith & Joshi, 2011). Because there is a clear link in Arabic between pronunciation and spelling, some students believe that relying on phonetic spelling is the best method of spelling English words.

The literature confirms that depending on sound-to-letter representation is considered an early stage of learning spelling (Westwood, 2014).

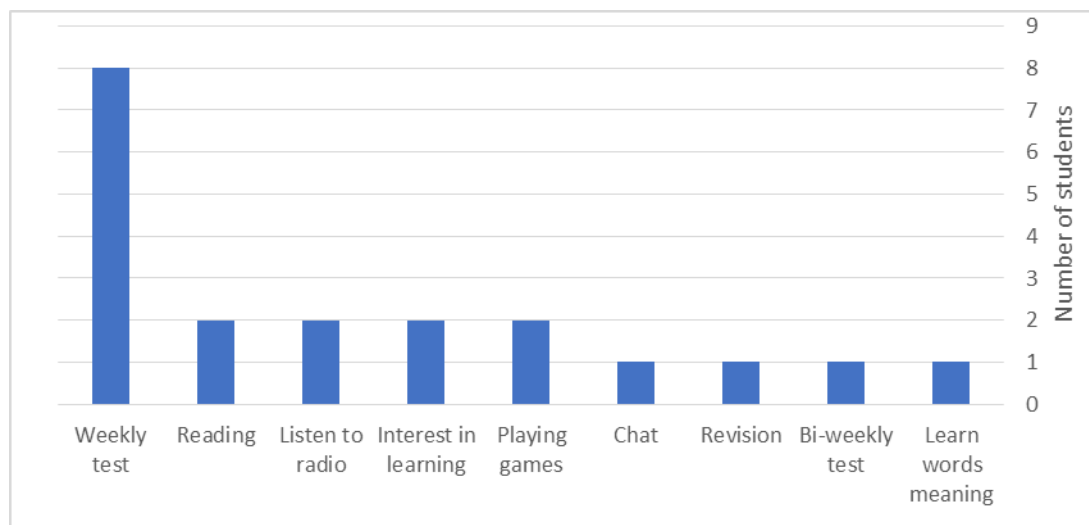


Figure 2. Increasing Effectiveness (CCC)

Students in the Flip Folder groups expressed that more repetition should be permitted when memorizing words, stating that copying new words a single time is not enough to memorize their spellings. Roberts (2011) asserted that repetition is an important element of learning spelling, adding that many students need more repetition than is usually provided. However, according to Schlagal (2002), other authors have expressed that copying words more than three times has a negative impact on spelling retention. Henderson (1991, as cited in Schlagal, 2002) commented on the perfect number of repetitions: “One helps a lot; two are almost twice as helpful, a third adds very little more, and four are bad for the stomach” (p. 47).

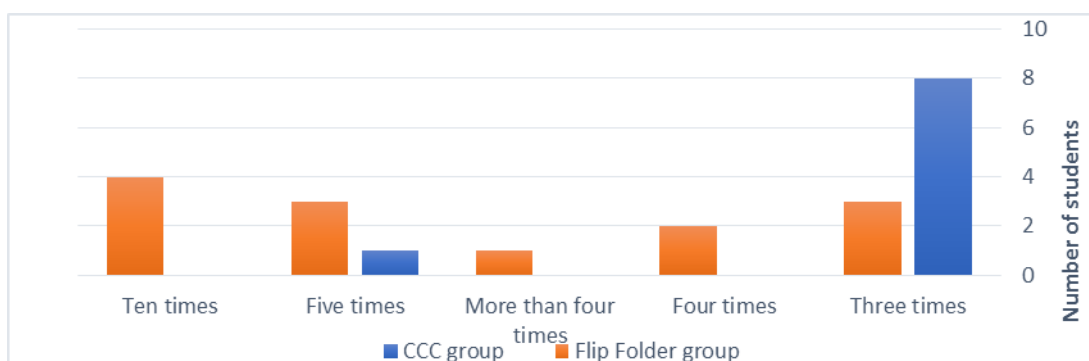


Figure 3. Words Repetition

Four students suggested that writing the spelled words in sentences devised by the students themselves would lead to better memorization. In reality, this would not help; the main goal of these techniques is to teach spelling, not sentence composition. Additionally, presenting words in sentences has been found to be ineffective in improving spelling (Wallace, 2006).

Other topics mentioned by students included “using words which are common and used in daily life.” A list of the most common words has indeed been recommended for implementation as early as possible in spelling instruction (Roberts, 2011; Westwood, 2005, 2014). Snowball (1997b) points out that “the one hundred most frequently used words make up about half the written English language. Learning to spell these words correctly and automatically is therefore a high priority for all students” (as cited in Westwood, 2005, p. 36). In addition, words derived from the 3,000 common words account for 86% of the English language (Longman Communication 3000, 2007). Therefore, learning to spell those words should be treated as a high priority. In contrast, Graham, Harris, and Loynachan (1994) recommended populating word lists with the most-used words in students’ writing. Accordingly, instead of teaching students words they might not use, it is better to focus on teaching them words that occur repeatedly in their writing.

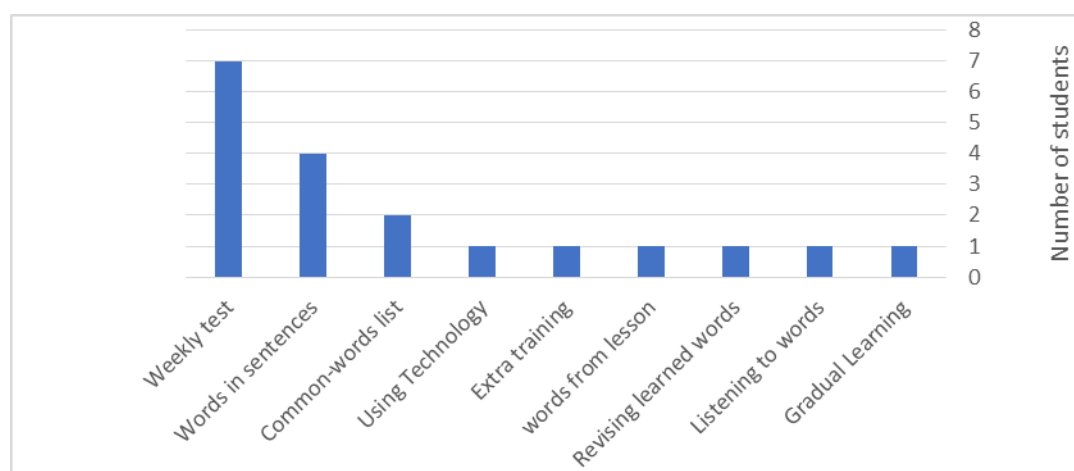


Figure 4. Increasing Effectiveness (Flip Folder)

One student suggested including a revision plan “revising last week words,” which has been reported in previous research to be of great benefit (Westwood, 2014). Therefore, teachers are advised to allocate time for reviewing previously practiced words that students might not recall or use in their writing.

Another student suggested teaching spelling gradually—from the easiest words to the most difficult. This is supported by Gentry (2014), who emphasized that learning to spell is a developmental process that should thus be taught systematically. The developmental stage theory of teaching spelling asserts that students should be introduced to, for example, short vowels, followed by long vowels and ending with vowel patterns (Reed, 2012). Simply put, students must pass through these stages gradually for spelling instruction to be beneficial. Even so, it is important to determine the stage of development that students have achieved to provide the proper lists for practice (Westwood, 2014).

Finally, both groups of students (CCC and Flip Folder) agreed that having a weekly test would increase the efficacy of each technique. The reasoning behind this conclusion was that forcing students to study in preparation for the test would certainly enhance spelling performance. In addition, having a weekly test would expose which words students misspelled. Skinner et al. (1997) asserted that in the CCC technique, students should be assessed regularly, as repeated assessment has been proven to help students progress. In addition, a weekly test has been advised in Flip Folder in order to measure students’ progress and revise misspelled words (Gentry, 2004, 2014).

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