

Bidding Farewell to Baseless Spelling Instruction

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“I think I discovered a new prefix!” The excitement in David’s voice is palpable. “I think <ex-> may be a prefix in exit,” he continues. It is typical for David to begin a learning session by sharing a new hypothesis about word structure, or trying to cajole me into revealing a new grapheme (“Got any more trigraphs?”).

It might surprise you to learn that David is a first grader with many of the hallmarks of dyslexia. His enthusiasm for tutoring is attributable in large part to our use of structured word inquiry as a learning tool. Using this approach, spelling becomes the scientific pursuit that linguists have always known it to be. Rather than an empty exercise in memorization or a frustrating obstacle course of rules and exceptions, it presents as a rich terrain for exploration: how are words built? How do the histories and stories of words help us to gain a deeper understanding of their meanings, and a stronger grasp of their spellings? As an added bonus, spelling instruction becomes a domain in which the adult can learn as much as the child!

I was fortunate to stumble on structured word inquiry while searching for morphologically-based approaches to spelling instruction. This search was catalyzed by the troubling observation that my carefully sequenced multisensory instruction was actually instilling some counterproductive spelling habits in my students. Specifically, I worried about the nearly singular focus on phoneme-grapheme correspondence in the early stages of spelling instruction. I sensed I was inadvertently encouraging students to simply transcribe their pronunciations of words, without considering meaning. Of course, once suffixes were introduced, students were instructed to isolate the base word prior to adding a suffix. However, it seemed that all of their prior training in “sounding out” made pure “encoding” their default mode, and inhibited them from attending to word structure.

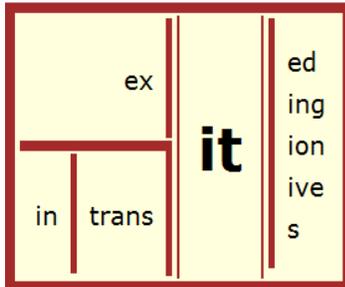
It was both a revelation and a relief to discover structured word inquiry, an approach pioneered by Peter Bowers, and based on a comprehensive set of resources about the English spelling system known as Real Spelling (see [http://www.realspelling.fr/Welcome to Real Spelling/Choose-New.html](http://www.realspelling.fr/Welcome%20to%20Real%20Spelling/Choose-New.html)). While a full description of structured word inquiry is beyond the scope of this article (see Bowers and Cooke, 2012 for a concise summary and Bowers and Kirby, 2010 for research support), its basic thrust is to teach the structure of English spelling to students through an exploratory approach. Structured word inquiry recognizes that English spelling is actually completely regular: morphemes (bases, prefixes, and suffixes) maintain a consistent spelling even when their pronunciations change. When students learn to analyze words into these elements, the regularity of our spelling system reveals itself. For example, even kindergarteners can learn that the plural marker <s> is pronounced /s/ in cats, and /z/ in dogs, but means “more than one” in both cases. Equally important, students learn that spelling conveys the meaning of a word, the key to which is contained in its base. In this way, exploring the spelling of a word reveals a network of connections to words that share its base. As I tell my students, buy one word and get a bunch of others free!

When I first learned about structured word inquiry, I was concerned that perhaps this approach neglected phonemic awareness and grapheme-phoneme correspondence. This turned out to be a misconception. Once students are able to identify the morphological structure of a word, particularly its base, they explore the jobs of the letters within that base’s boundaries. They learn that in addition to serving as graphemes that represent phonemes, letters may play other roles. The <w> in *two* is not pronounced, but marks that word as part of a family of words that denote “twoness,” such as *twin* and *between* (see <http://ed.ted.com/lessons/making-sense-of-spelling-gina-cooke>). A final silent <e> may mark a long vowel, but may also function to prevent the forbidden final <v> in an English word, such as *have* (see <http://spelling.phanfare.com/5152109>, “Functions of Final Non-syllabic

<e>). By starting with meaning, students develop a deeper understanding of how words are built, at every level. By learning the actual rules, the alleged exceptions evaporate.

Another advantage of structured word inquiry is that students become active learners and explorers of the language. Armed with a consistent set of questions--What does the word mean? How is it built? Are there any relatives (words that share a base and/or origin)? How is it pronounced?--spelling becomes word science, and students become word detectives (Bowers, 2009). It has gotten to the point that students stop me in the hallway to offer hypotheses about words that they have been thinking about between instructional sessions.

So back to seven-year-old David: he is not only noticing the words in his environment (the exit signs), but wondering about them. On this occasion, his wondering has led to a specific hypothesis: the structure of the word *exit* is a prefix <ex> and a base element <it>. He turns out to be correct. He is undeterred by the fact that the <it> in *exit* does not correspond to the pronoun with the same spelling, but derives from a Latin verb meaning "to go." Nor is he flustered to learn that the <it> is called a bound base: when it carries the meaning "to go," <it> is not a freestanding word, but must combine with other elements (as in *transit*) to attain that status. Young students don't carry the preconceptions about words that we do. They are free to learn about word structure, without having to first unlearn the litany of false conceptions--including what is "easy" and what is "hard" or "complicated"-- that we adults are saddled with.



ex + it → **exit**

ex + it + ed → **exited**

ex + it + ing → **exiting**

ex + it + s → **exits**

in + trans + it + ive → **intransitive**

trans + it → **transit**

trans + it + ion → **transition**

trans + it + ive → **transitive**

According to my previous training, if David asked how to spell *exit*, I would have asked him to say the word one syllable at a time, then to say the first syllable, tap it out, name the letters and write them, and follow suit with the second syllable. Doing so would completely disregard the fact that *exit* is composed of two generative morphemes that hold the key to additional words in which they surface. David might have memorized e-x-i-t, but his understanding of its meaning—literally, to go out—and its connections to words like *exhale* and *transit* --would be lost. Focusing on word structure also bypasses pronunciation differences that have no impact on spelling: both David and I pronounce the <x> in *exit* as /gz/, whereas

children are typically taught that the grapheme <x> represents /ks/. The key to the spelling is in the meaning, and not in the pronunciation, which may vary across speakers.

Does structured word inquiry remediate all spelling errors? No, but it does instill an understanding of how English orthography works, and the well-placed trust that our spelling system makes sense. If a spelling surprises us, it's not a cue to cite an exception, or to despair about the madness of English; it becomes an opportunity to launch an investigation and make new discoveries. As students become more attuned to how words are built, connections leap out at them--connections that help them make sense of spellings, expand their vocabulary, and approach written language as scientists. So it should be no surprise that David's greeting at our next session was...."I think there's an <ex> prefix in extinguisher. And (as I learned alongside him) he was right!