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Reflection #1

In Peter Bowers' book *Teaching How the Written Word Works*, he overtly states one of the main premises that underlies his approach to teaching spelling: "Critical thinking, not memorization, should be the central tool for spelling instruction" (1). This was one of the most important insights that I took from the reading this week because it presents a new philosophy to guide my future work in the reading classroom. To understand the significance of this claim, I drew a comparison to critical literacy, which as we learned is not necessarily focused on any one particular activity or "critical element" that we bring into our courses; rather, it is enacted by adopting a critical stance in the classroom. Similarly, I think that Bowers' way of conceptualizing spelling instruction through critical thinking is about the attitude that we bring to language and our way of engaging language in the classroom. Yes, it's helpful to have practical examples of word matrices, but what he is advocating for is larger than that. Spelling, like so many other aspects of language instruction in English and related disciplines, should be taught via critical thinking. This approach seems to counter the way I was taught spelling, and it presents a fundamental shift or challenge to the assumptions I made about spelling. In light of this, I'm left questioning why it took so long for us to think about spelling through the critical thinking framework. What is it about spelling that made us assume it was best learned through memorization or isolated facts? With all that we know about schema and its role in helping us

¹ Is the plural of matrix "matrixes" or "matrices"? Are both correct? If so, why do we sometimes use a "c" in place of an "x" when making the word plural? In a related question, why is "syllabi" correct instead of "syllabuses"?

connect new ideas with prior knowledge systems, it seems logical that spelling would be better taught through systems of meaning, not just individual words.

As I read Bowers' introduction, I thought about the activity that we did in class last week. I was completely engaged in the lesson, and I left class wondering why. How could a lesson that is meant for younger children be so engaging for a group of adults? (And why/how am I even teaching English if I cannot place words into families???) Upon further reflection, I see that the most engaging part of this lesson was in the way that it questioned that which we took for granted. Why isn't love spelled luv? Why is there a "w" in the word "two"? At this point, I was beginning to question things that I had never even thought about before, so I was completely curious. What else have I not thought about in regards to spelling? Again, as a student, I might have been given a list of words to spell, define, and use in a sentence. Nothing about that approach utilized generative concepts. Now this is the really ironic part—teaching through memorization made it harder to remember spellings than a morphological approach. Go figure.

One of the other key takeaways from this week's activity was the importance of spelling out the word instead of just writing it down. To be honest, I didn't fully wrap my mind around that rationale when we were in the classroom working on our literacy example together. It wasn't until I completed the exercise in the workbook that I could see how a word like signal could be missed because the phonology changes as the "g" becomes pronounced, not silent. This was something that the activity helped reinforce.

The distinction that Bowers makes between applying rules and observing patterns is a helpful shift as well. Since rules don't apply in a large percentage of instances, they often break down and become confusing. On the other hand, discovering patterns captures the essence of the

structured word inquiry because it makes the study of orthography and spelling more interactive and engaging. Rules seem to exist without the student, but patterns need to be pieced together.

With all of these new ideas, I did have a question about one of Bowers' caveats for his students. He cautions that "the rule for building a word isn't whether it is in the dictionary, but whether they can use it in a sentence" (6). I understand that if students cannot think of a way to use a word, then "they'll not be in a position to need to spell it," but it seems as though the word matrix could be a useful way to build or expand vocabulary. (As we realized, even nonwords could be spelled according to this process.) During our own class activity, we all began to question whether "politer" was even a word. However, using it as part of our activity was still helpful. I just wonder if this restriction limits students from learning new words by connecting them morphologically to other words they know.