

SWI in <action>

A struggling student makes sense of grapheme-phoneme correspondences by investigating morphologically related words with a matrix on the base <act>

Marie Foley has worked as a tutor with dyslexic students for years. As a dyslexic herself, she has an intimate understanding of the challenges her students face in learning to read and spell. She started to hear about structured word inquiry a little while ago through Liisa Freure, her mentor in OG who has studied SWI with myself (another WW Summer Course alum), Gina Cooke and Real Spelling for a number of years now. Marie became interested enough to sign up for the 2017 4-day WordWorks summer course on Wolfe Island. She has been on fire ever since.

She has shared many heartwarming stories of discoveries with her students, and I've had the pleasure of video conferencing with her and her students. While I was working on a WordWorks Newsletter, Marie sent an email with a story that so clearly illustrates how SWI uses the study of morphologically and etymologically related words to not only build vocabulary of meaningfully related words -- but to make sense of grapheme-phoneme correspondences that that previously seemed random. Keep in mind the learning in this story is provoked by a teacher just getting started with SWI.

Peter Bowers, WordWorks, Nov. 7, 2017

Here's Marie Foley's email from Oct 12, 2017

Hi Peter,

I have to confess that I am writing this letter in tears of happiness. I just finished a lesson with an 8 year old student that I have been working with using SWI since September. I have been trying to move her towards thinking about spelling through exploring the structure of words instead of sounding things out.

My objective today was to try and help the student understand the notion that < sh > is not the only spelling for /ʃ/. Over the last few weeks she has been exposed to a lot of new concepts such as the doubling convention when adding on vowel suffixes, and replacing final non syllabic < e >'s. We have also spent a lot of time exploring how the pronunciation of base words is very elastic, but the spelling of base words in word families and the spelling of affixes is very consistent. Today the threads of all that learning finally weaved together and something went click.

act	ing ion or
------------	------------------

I was using a very simple matrix on the base < act > that included the suffix < -ion >.

[Editor's note: To give the reader a reference, I added the matrix at left as an example of one that could have been used for this session. Notice that a small matrix can teach a lot!].

We started out by reading the base < act > and I asked her to tell me what she felt at the end of the word < act >. She said / t / and then I asked her to tell me how the phoneme / t / was written in the word < act > and she said < t >.

Then we build the word *action* using the word sum with the base < act > and the suffix < -ion >. Although she could pronounce the word, the student was unable to identify which graphemes were responsible for the phoneme /ʃ/. Auditory memory is a huge challenge for my student so I turned to the computer and we typed the word < act > into the Mac dictionary and I showed her how the word was written with IPA symbols. This is as new to me as it is to her. Then we typed in < action > and we see the IPA symbol /ʃ/ appear.

act	ækt
action	'ækj(ə)n
nation	'neɪʃ(ə)n

IPA pasted from Mac Oxford Dictionary.

We then looked at other words like *nation*, *invention* and *education* looking for the position of the /ʃ/ and if it was connected to the concept of the grapheme < t > next to the grapheme < i > results in the grapheme / t / being pronounced /ʃ/. It was undeniable, the evidence was there made visible through the IPA. I realize the IPA is an invaluable tool that made the phonemes tangible for my student and enabled her to identify visually where the phoneme /ʃ/ appeared in the word and which grapheme was being used to represent it. It was liberating.

Being visual she also loved the IPA symbol /dʒ/ that she could associate with the < d > grapheme in the word < education >. Now this is my first day of looking at the IPA in my entire teaching career so being true scientist we decided to double check the IPA symbol / dʒ / to see if it would also appeared in words like < jet > and < jail >. Sure enough there it was. And she could see what I have being trying to convey since September, phonemes can be represented by different graphemes. then went back to looking at the word < education > and < educate >, and in that moment she said ...

education	,ɛdʒə'keɪʃ(ə)n
jet	dʒɛt
jail	dʒeɪl

IPA pasted from Mac Oxford Dictionary.

“Look Marie, *education* is spelled:

< e + duce + ate + ion >.”

I could see she was looking at the construction of the word just as I had been talking about for weeks and I asked how did she know the base had an < e > ... and her answer was,

“You are adding on a vowel suffix, silly.”

I have to confess, I had tears running down my face. I could see that she is seeing the structure of words and thinking through what graphemes can represent phonemes in words based on how they are built. I think finally this student has taken a step away from the one sound to one symbol approach that she had been taught

to date and is well on her way to being a smart speller using analyses and accuracy instead of sounding things out.

Peter ... what can I say. I have always wanted to be able to improve how my students spell because not being able to is hard on one's self esteem. Being dyslexic I know that shame of this only too well. I still have so much to learn, and yet I am pleased that what I have learned to date has allowed me to move my students to a better place as they to let go of sounding it out to thinking it out (or spelling it out loud). Thanks for all the questions you take the time to answer, it has helped me a lot and in doing so allowed me to help my students.

Related links:

This story was first published as part of WordWorks Newsletter #90. Consider this story in that context by going to that newsletter [HERE](#).

See a similar story with another tutor new to SWI (highlighted in that same Newsletter) [HERE](#).

Rebecca Loveless is a long-time teacher, tutor and SWI expert who is currently the SWI coach at the Nueva School. She has written two rich stories for WordWorks sharing the process of using SWI to help young struggling students start to read. See the first one [HERE](#) and the second one [HERE](#).

See rebecca's excellent website with lots of ideas and resources for SWI instruction [HERE](#). Hire her for PD at your school if you are in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Some Research to explore...

For a brief overview of the the interrelation of morphology and phonology and the role of the matrix to reveal that connection, see this 4-page paper the International Dyslexia journal *Perspectives*:

Bowers, P.N., Cooke, G. (2012, Fall). [Morphology and the Common Core: Building students' understanding of the Written Word](#). *Perspectives on Language and Literacy*, 31-35

For a more full and recent account of what SWI is, where it fits in the research, and explanations of why we should expect it to be particularly effective for students struggling in the context of typical instruction see this article:

Bowers, J.S., Bowers, P.N. (2017). Beyond Phonics: [The Case for Teaching Children the Logic of the English Spelling System](#). *Educational Psychologist*, 2, 124-141