

## Cobwebs and Actors: An OG tutor and parent of a dyslexic reflects on learning with SWI by Stephanie Walsh

I took [Lisa Barnett's Intro to SWI course](#) in May 2017. I was introduced to [Pete Bowers](#) book over the summer. I am very new and have found much support within the SWI community. In fact if it were not for the support of several individuals I would never have even considered writing this post. I am glad of this support as the writing process itself has further deepened my understanding. I chose to study science as an undergraduate and I moved into computer science for my post graduate studies as well. My son was diagnosed with dyslexia and I found myself questioning the advice of educational professionals. Then I became an OG tutor. Then OG didn't answer all of my own questions...or the questions of many of my learners. The **act** of asking questions led me to SWI.

While I have several learners that can do complete OG lessons, I seem to attract those learners that can't manage the OG lesson structure. It has not been for lack of effort on my part.

I recently did a course to deepen my understanding of IPA with *Real Spelling* and depth of understanding of the English language. There is no going back. I will confess, though, that I am in my own form of cognitive dissonance. But I cannot unsee what I have seen. I have worked over seven months with one student I will call Nick...

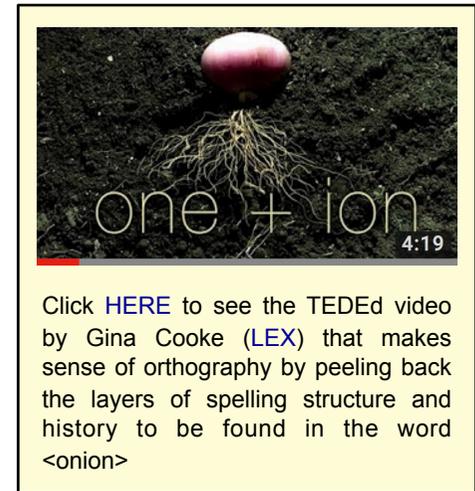


gamifying and making our OG lessons "fun". Or so I thought. I so have tried. He is angry and frustrated and like the layers of Gina Cooke's onion as deep and as meaningful as that onion.

At one of our last tutoring sessions I attempted to use OG syllable division (VC/CV). I wrote the word cobweb on a page as one of the words on the OG word list. He crumpled the page into a ball and threw it to the floor in utter disgust. "I can't read that!" And so the lesson went. Not a great lesson for either of us.

Flash forward to our next lesson --- post cobweb reading fiasco. First words walking into my office, "This is boring. I don't want to read." He walked **in**. His **action** of walking into my tutoring space means he deeply cares and still has hope.

What follows is my best memory of our investigation on the free base <act> we did on that day. I reached a new level of understanding of myself in this session. I didn't realise until I reviewed my session notes exactly how much effort I have exerted over the course of my lifetime memorising language and spelling. It takes an immense amount of work and effort to spell perfectly everywhere, every time without **meaning** or comprehension of the orthographic structure of the English language. I did not realise during that the investigation I was doing on the word <act> was, perhaps, more **meaningful** for me than for Nick.



Act – to do something, to take action.

I handed Nick the act matrix that I took off one of the SWI facebook pages. He looked at it.

re	<b>act</b> <i>take action; do something.</i>	ed		
		ing		
		or		
		s		
		ion	s	
		ive	ist	s
			ly	
		u	al	ly

***It was like I handed him a puzzle that made complete and perfect sense that he had to put together.***

He took several moments to analyse it. I said, “Can you come up with any words that are related to *act*?” Then he took control of the lesson and his own learning.

Nick: “I want to be the teacher.” (*Quite a departure from, “This is boring and I don’t want to read.”*)

Me: “That’s fine...I’ll be the student and just ask questions. What does ‘*act*’ mean?” A shrug of his shoulders. Silence...more silence...awkward...and uncomfortable...silence. I **re**-phrased the question.

Me: “Do you do something when you act? What *act* are you doing on your chair?”

Nick: “Spinning.” (*So he could demonstrate the meaning of act. I can move forward with that.*)

Me: “Stop spinning the chair, Nick”. He did. “What action did you stop?”

Nick: “I stopped spinning the chair.”

Me: “What’s an action?” Another shrug a long pause...and then...

Nick: “It’s something that you do.” (*Yes! Keep moving forward.*)

Me: “Who’s your favourite *actor* in your favourite movie? Googling this led to a brief discussion of the actor that died from one of the action films from the Fast and the Furious. We discussed the genre of **action** films.

Me: “What’s an *actor*?”

Nick: “Someone who *acts* in a movie.”

Me: “Give me a sentence with the word “*actor*”.

Nick: “An *actor* in the Fast and the Furious is Vin Diesel.” He spelled out <actor> as I wrote his sentence.

*I could see that his connection to the matrix was real. I was in a happy place in the session.*

Me: “Any other words you can make?”

Nick: *acts, acted, acting, action, react, actor, actors, react, reacting, reacted, reaction, actual, actually, active, activist* He used a mix of reading and spelling to achieve this. All he was working from was the matrix listed above.

Me: “Spin your chair again. What *action* are you doing?”

Nick: “Spinning.”

Me: “Can you spell out the word action?”

Nick: a-c-t -i-o-n.

Me: “Wait a minute – say that word again?”

Nick: /ækʃən/<sup>1</sup>

Me: “What happened to the <t> in /ækt/? Have we noticed that before? How did you pronounce that <t> in act?”

/ækt/ <t> → /t/ (Nick saying the word “act” out loud, and that the <t> writes /t/ in this word.)

Next he repeated the pronunciation of the word “action” to attend to the pronunciation of the <t> in this word.

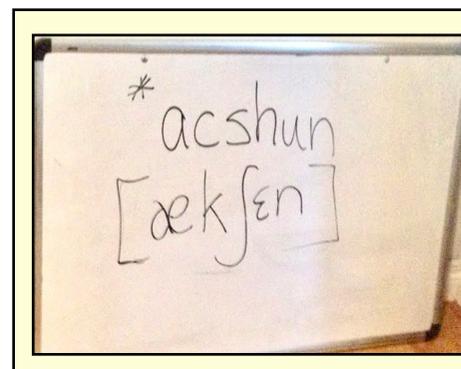
/ækʃən/ /ækʃən/

“What’s happening with the sounds in the last part of action? Say /ʃən/.”

A discussion of the pronunciation of the phonemes /t/ and /ʃ/ ensued. The grapheme <t> is often pronounced as /t/, but when <t> is followed by an <i> (or a <u>) the <t> can also be pronounced /ʃ/.

(The ʃ symbol in slash brackets is how the IPA shows the pronunciation often called the “sh sound” in schools.)

Me: “Why don’t we spell <action> as \*<akshun>?”



Stephanie used IPA to study the grapheme-phoneme correspondences of <action>. In fact, the slash brackets / / should be used to show phonological information. The square brackets [ ] are for phonetic information. Regardless, having a go with IPA helped Nick, and now Stephanie has a prompt to deepen her understanding of the difference between phonology and phonetics.

Nick: “Because it loses its meaning and connection to the base <act>.”

*I could have stayed in this moment to savour it. But to an 8 year old needing to still look cool at tutoring...savouring this moment would have been about me and not him. And so I moved forward.*

Me: “What’s missing in this matrix?”

Nick: “I dunno.” (*He needs more time to think. Think fast, tutor-student.*)

Me: “What’s a nuclear *reactor* got to do with a chemical *reaction*? Is power being generated by the *reaction*?” “If you are the bomb technician what do you do to keep a bomb from going off? You deactivate it. (I had the <re-> prefix but not the <de-> prefix in the

<sup>1</sup> Stephanie asked that I include a note on these IPA symbols used for representing the phonology of words. The “slash brackets” are used to show phonological information. The symbols inside are symbols that mark pronunciation. The initials “IPA” stand for international phonetic association - many refer to it as the international phonetic alphabet. The IPA in the slash brackets /ækʃən/ marks the pronunciation of the word <action>. The IPA is a crucial linguistic tool in structured word inquiry. It provides concrete representations of the abstract phonemes so that we can study the graphemes that represent them. In the context of Stephanie’s story, it helps the reader understand when she and Nick are attending to the pronunciation of words, and when they are discussing the graphemes that can represent the phonemes in related words.

word sum...to take it to whatever level we needed to.) I modelled and gave him the freedom to go wherever he wanted to go.

*(And then with his next statement I knew he truly got it.)*

Nick: "You re-enact things, too."

Me: "What do you mean?"

Nick: "Well, like, from history, wearing costumes and stuff."

He added that entirely on his own. From his own experience. And I was thrilled.

### And then the panic set in.

I did not have a clue how to spell re-enact. Was it <in-> or <en->? Hyphen? No-hyphen? How could I not know this?

This was the moment when I realised that my own learning had to begin all over again. You make a mistake with your learner. You model mistakes! You spell it wrong too. \*<re-inact>.

*Going back to re-think my strategies given to me by my own ingrained phonics background...does it look right? It didn't. But why? I checked my notes the next day and I still spelled it wrong even in my end of session notes.*

Nick and I went on in this session on the word act to create sentences with <act>, <acting>, <actor>, <react> and of course, <re-enact>. More writing content than he ever had with me before. He orally spelled out all the <act> words and I wrote the sentences. He read *act*, *actor*, *actors*, *acting*, *acted*, *actual*, *actually*, *active* (pronunciation discussion), *react*, *reactor*, *activist*, and yes, he even read the word *deactivate*. Quite a departure from the <cobweb> he threw on the floor of our last session.

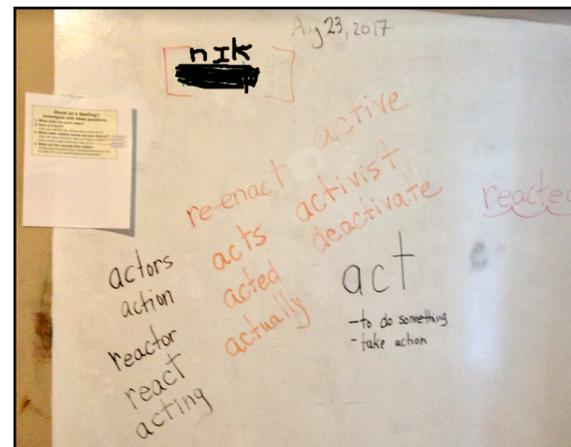


Image of the whiteboard marking the trail of this investigation of the matrix of the word family of the <act> base.

And at the end of the session he did something that I usually do after he leaves. He took a picture of our white board and the word sums to put on his iPad so he could take it home with him.

My act is over. The cobwebs are gone. Now the real learning of meaning can begin. Bring it on!

*[A little while after I got this story from Stephanie, she emailed me with this follow-up account of what Nick has been doing.]*

*From Stephanie...*

Another update on "Nick" - his Mom told me on Monday that he is now reading and attempting words like collection...she said he is getting that! How awesome is that? So excited for him!

*By Stephanie Walsh*

## Some thoughts on Stephanie Walsh's story of learning with Nick

*Pete Bowers, PhD, WordWorks Literacy Centre, Oct. 5, 2017*

Stephanie's story is such a powerful illustration of what can happen when students struggling with learning to read are introduced to the interrelation of morphology and phonology -- even by teachers who are quite new to this understanding themselves.

The story starts with the familiar scene of a learner who has become totally frustrated in the context of standard remedial instruction. At this point the evidence is unequivocal that the standard recommended instruction has failed to offer Nick the understanding needed to motivate him to engage with the process of learning to read.

Seeing that Nick evidently needs something he is not receiving from standard instruction, Stephanie has a go at sharing the new understanding she has been gaining about English orthography through structured word inquiry. She picks a word family to analyze with a matrix and word sums to make sense of meaningful connections between words linked by morphological structure. That morphological context provokes an interesting observation about the pronunciation of the base of this word family when it is a word on its own and its pronunciation in one of its derivations. Given the nature of English orthography, the base is of course spelled the same in both cases. The *interesting thing* is that its *pronunciation* changes across the related words. To study this observation more precisely, Stephanie uses the IPA she has been learning about. This helps make sense of the grapheme-phoneme correspondences of the base in these different words.

And it is here that I want to highlight the irony about a common fear expressed about structured word inquiry. Some fear that it may result in reducing attention to the way phonology is represented by spelling.

But as we see, *it was by studying the morphological structure a family of related words that Nick is able to notice -- and then makes sense of interesting grapheme-phoneme correspondences.*

From the standard "phonology alone" perspective the spelling of <action> would have remained opaque for Nick. Whatever aspects of morphology featured in Nick's previous instruction, the concrete representation of morphological structure with the matrix and the word sum offered an understanding of *phonology* that he did not have before. Only with morphology can Stephanie help Nick *understand* why the word <action> could *not* be spelled \*<acshun>.

One reason morphological instruction is essential from the beginning of formal instruction *is because it is so important to teach how phonology is represented in English spelling.* As demonstrated by this story, in a morphophonemic language, we can't rely on making sense of grapheme-phoneme correspondences without the morphological context.

As we see in Nick's story, the experience of *understanding* spellings that previously seemed impenetrable is transformative. One question educators and researchers should ask in light of this (and countless other stories like it), is how much an assumption that "phonology-first instruction is best" contributed to the frustration we see in Nick at the beginning of this story.

Note that the particular word family Stephanie chose to study not important. The <act> family is simply one of countless word families that can be used to reveal key general principles of how English spelling works in a morphophonemic language. Nick's experience is transformative not because he understands the spelling of <action> -- it is transformative because studying the morphology and phonology of this family is finally giving him traction for understanding how the whole spelling system works.

When instruction is guided by scientific investigation of how orthography works, it doesn't actually matter which word is investigated. (Notice the pronunciation if the <t> in <actually>!) Nick's interest was in the changing pronunciation of the base spelled <act>. Families built on bases such as <do>, <sign>, <heal>, <please>, <rupt>, <fract>, <cause> and countless others offer a rich contexts to reinforce this new understanding -- and to build on it. Perhaps an interesting suffixing change while looking at a pair of words like <please> and <pleasure> will launch another rich learning path while reinforcing what has already been started.

Finally, I want to stress one more time that the transformative learning described here did not require a teacher with years of experience with SWI. In fact it is experiences like these that motivate teachers to keep deepening their understanding of the writing system. I have little doubt that Stephanie is going to continue to deepen her understanding of orthography as a way to help her students.

### ***Related reading...***

- [How do I "Integrate" SWI with my other instructional practices?](#) (Pete Bowers)
- [From OG to Real Spelling -- One tutor's journey](#) (Gail Venable)
- [But what if they are not reading yet?](#) (Rebecca Loveless)