

Structured Word Inquiry (SWI) & The challenge of challenging long-held assumptions

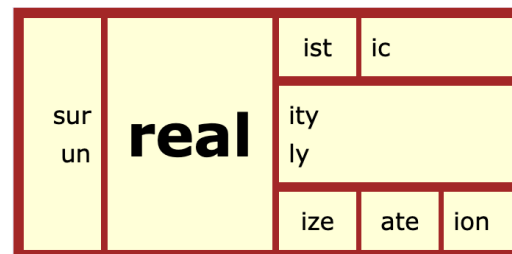
Pete Bowers, Sept 20, 2021

I'm convinced that the greatest challenge for people on their first encounter with SWI is not that the concepts and conventions it describes about English spelling are particularly difficult. Instead, the main challenge is how much these concepts and their implications collide with long-held assumptions built through years of explicit instruction we have received as students ourselves, and then in our teacher/tutor training as well.

The good news is that children have much less unlearning to do. This dynamic clarifies why I so often see young students make sense of and adopt many orthographic concepts more easily than teachers.

I'm also convinced this dynamic is key to why I found my first encounter with Real Spelling so compelling. At that time I was a Grade 4 teacher in my 9th year in the classroom - and I had always been a terrible speller myself. This was my background when I first encountered a matrix from Real Spelling. That matrix was the first time I was introduced to the fact that English spelling favours consistent representation of the meaning structures of words (morphemes) over the consistent representation of pronunciation (phonemes).

See me share my story of this discovery with students in in [this video](#). I explain how the first matrix with “real” in the banner like the one (above, right) introduced me to fundamental ideas about how spelling works that I had never encountered before.



That video shows that I saw my first matrix soon after an incident in which I tried to write the word “really” in a student’s homework book. I had to stop and look it up because I did not know if it was spelled with one <l> or two. The moment I saw this matrix, I *understood* this spelling that had flummoxed me all my life. I knew I’d never have to look it up again. Of course seeing “really” in this matrix would be far less exciting for those who never wondered about the spelling of “really” (most teachers!). The most transformative discovery from this matrix, however, was how it linked the word “reality” with words related in *meaning* and the *spelling*, despite the different *pronunciations* of <real>. Why was it not until my 9th year in the classroom to be introduced to these ideas?

Studying these words with a matrix provided my first recognition that that there was anything beyond “sound cues” to understand a spelling. Pronunciation alone could not explain how many <l>s there are in “really”¹ nor can it explain why its is not spelled with an <ee> digraph like the homophone “reel.” (See video for more detail.)

¹ Note that “steely” as in “steely strong” has the same syllable structure and the same /l/ phoneme, but only one <l>, because it is followed by the adjective forming suffix <-y>, while “really” uses the <-ly> adverb forming suffix.

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My own fraught history with spelling meant that I had no previous understandings about spelling or how to teach it that I had any desire to hold onto. For people like me, the spelling system was a frustrating mess to understand — *and to teach*. I had been teaching for 9 years and had no reason to believe that I would ever get ‘better’ at spelling, nor did I think that there was anything teaching could do to help my students understand English spelling better.

My introduction to the matrix hit me like a lightning bolt and compelled me to study more. Not just to improve my teaching - but to make sense of something that had frustrated me my whole life. Teachers who never had any issues with spelling accuracy, are less likely to have this kind of intense, immediate and motivating response.

SWI ‘origin stories’

I’m fascinated by stories about people’s first steps on this journey. A favourite is [this wonderful 2014 article](#) in “Literacy Now” for the the International Literacy Association by Dr. Kelli Sandman-Hurley. Kelli is an author and founder of the [Dyslexia Training Institute](#). She tells the story being presented with small matrix on the base <sign> scribbled on a napkin at a literacy conference. As she describes in her article, that was all she needed to begin to dramatically rethink the direction of her work and that of her consultancy.

Kelli’s article and my story about “really” are about looking back at the moment our assumptions were first challenged and the transformation that followed. The spark for this piece, however, was an email from a teacher describing her thinking while she is still in those first days of challenging her previous assumptions.

Joey is a teacher new to SWI in one of my [5-session courses](#). Novices and experts in SWI learn together in this course. But there is a particular joy in seeing teachers getting their first glimpse of the order of English spelling.

In her mail, we see Joey working hard to deal with the challenges of seriously considering ideas that are new to her, and which are quite different than the thinking and practice of those around her. See the text of Joey’s mail in blue. My responses to her are in black.

I am enjoying class but I am still very confused about all of this stuff...primarily because besides myself and my co-worker, no one else in the school (small private school) knows anything about this stuff. So, it's hard to try to wrap my head around it without lots of discussion on a daily basis.

This is a lot of new information, and it is often so at odds with long-held assumptions. It makes sense that it is confusing!

But understand that so much of that confusion is the result of the fact that you are being confronted with challenging previous assumptions. This challenge is much more for you than it is for students who have less to unlearn.

The fact that you are engaged and discussing this work is exactly the way to go. There is no hurry to get anywhere. Don’t be in a rush to drop anything in your practice that you think is important. This is time to critically analyze your own past understandings and those that I am presenting. You should not just accept either!

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I have always taught that a prefix/suffix is something added on to a complete base word. But now, I think you are saying that it can be added to a bound base. So, in your example, < mishap >, < hap > is the base although bound to < mis->. So, < hap > is in the matrix as the base because you can add to < hap > to make other words. Is that right?

Exactly...

And we can represent members of that word family with a matrix like this one (at right) from the 70 matrices resource from [Real Spelling](#).

			er
		y	est
un	hap "chance, fortune"		ly
		en	ness
mis			s
			ing
		less	ed
			ly
		hazard	

Prior to this lesson I would have absolutely said that < hap > is not a complete word on it's own and therefore < mis-> cannot be a prefix. Ugh! How many lives have I messed up!?!

I understand that fear of 'messaging up lives' but you can't be blamed for not teaching what nobody taught you! I encourage you to focus on the fact that you have identified a key motivation to keep studying now that you can see that you are in a position to break that chain of misinformation.

You have also identified a reason I avoid ever using the term 'base word' in instruction. When we say 'base word' we build the misconception that only words can be bases. But if we just use the word 'base' when we begin teaching we are not suggesting that only words can be bases.

affixes				Some common ^e bases
prefixes		suffixes		
in-	re-	-th	-er	make shift up act
de-	con-	-ion	-ed	
	un-	-ure	-ing	
		-ive	-ly	
		-s	-y	
		-es	-al	
		-ant	-ful	

The morpheme chart above is one I build with students before being introduced to the term 'bound base' and before we learn the importance of vowel suffixes and consonant suffixes in terms of suffixing.

Morphemic Elements Chart			
affixes			^e bases
prefixes	suffixes		connecting vowel letters
	consonant suffixes	vowel suffixes	
			free bases sign pack please heal
in- re-	-s -ly -ment	-ed -ing -ion	bound bases
de- con-	-ness -less	-ure -ive -y	
un- com-	-n	-al -ist -est -es	hap rupt struct
al- en-		-ish -ent -ence	
inter- dis-		-ity -ate -et	
		-able -ably -on	
		-en	
		-em	

Once we learn these new concepts about bound bases and vowel and consonant suffixes, I adapt the structure of my classroom morpheme chart to reflect that new learning. Now when we identify new morphemes, we have these categories to place them in. This new chart may also spark interest in this concept of 'connecting vowel letters'

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When teachers have this knowledge and encounter the first base that is not a word with students, they can add the descriptor “bound base” and “free base.”

My experience is that kids who have not spent years assuming bases have to be words are totally unperturbed at this discovery.

Also, can you tell me why the <y> in happiness had to change to an <i>?

This is just the regular suffixing conventions for adding any suffix (vowel or consonant suffixes) to a base or stem ending in <y>.

We replace the <y> with <i> unless we have a good reason not to. You have a [suffixing flow chart](#) from Real Spelling in the back of your workshop booklet that you can use to test what the good reasons not to change a <y> to an <i>. But you already know it in many words:

cry/i + es → cries

try/i + ed → tried

hap(p) + y/i + ness → happiness

I'm really trying hard but there's still SO much I don't know.

It's great that you are trying hard. Of course there is so much you don't know yet. You've just started! However, before this course, you didn't know even more than you don't know now! The key difference is that you are now aware of what you don't know.

That is a huge shift. Don't beat yourself up for not learning 'fast enough'. It's just a process of learning more every day.

Thanks for all of your help and enthusiasm!

I did do word sums with a 2nd grader today...just adding <-s> but I think it helped!

Great!

When Joey emailed to give me permission to share the correspondence, she added this lovely follow-up..

Thank you so much for your thoughtful responses!! I did more word matrixes today with my 5th graders and I'm so proud of myself and them!

Nothing motivates like understanding

It is clear from this correspondence that Joey is gaining new understandings of spelling from the first sessions of this course. She is recognizing that bases do not have to be words and is diving into working with matrices with her students before she feels totally confident with these ideas. Despite the newness of these ideas, the response from her students is already very positive.

That combination of her own new understandings and the engaged responses from her students are motivating. Notice that the main challenge she mentions is not about the complexity of the content, but simply the fact that these are not ideas that others around her are familiar with.

As she wrote:

I am still very confused about all of this stuff...primarily because besides myself and my co-worker, no one else in the school (small private school) knows anything about this stuff.

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It is a challenge to take on ideas that your colleagues are not familiar with. That is especially true when some of those ideas are not just new ideas — but ones that may contradict previous assumptions.

Kelli and Joey provide inspiring stories of following new evidence even if it challenges old assumptions and the current assumptions of most of their colleagues.

Think about the students in the video in which I tell my story about “really.” And for another example, consider [THIS VIDEO](#) in which use the matrix and word sums to introduce children to understanding the spelling of “does”.

The biggest challenge Joey describes is the difference between what she is starting to learn and teach and what her colleagues are doing. Unlike Kelli and Joey, students in these videos are not wondering whether they are going to have to change instructional practices they’ve built up over years. They are just trying to understand, and the matrix is making sense where previous instruction didn’t. Educators have challenges understanding the lessons of SWI that are not challenges for students.

The other great news in Joey’s mail is that she dove in with matrices and word sums with her kids while still feeling like a novice — and the response was already positive. As she continues to investigate orthography with her kids in the months and years to come, her understanding and confidence will only grow stronger.

Just as I was putting the finishing touches on this piece, I received an email from another participant in the same course as Joey. Her message provides another clear view of the challenge - and joy - of starting to look at words

and instruction differently after being exposed to the another way of looking at spelling.

She wrote:

I find myself right at the crossroads. I'm starting to teach multisyllabic words to Middle schoolers and the problems with syllable division patterns are jumping out at me. I was working on open syllables (ti/ger division pattern) and one of the words was fixable. Immediately I thought it would be so much easier and meaningful to teach this as a base and suffix fix + able —> fixable. So it's starting to sink in but I'm so new to this position I'm still trying to get my bearings.

Notice that she finds herself at this ‘crossroads’ well into her career as a literacy teacher. What if educators were trained to think critically about these different ways of understanding and teaching words at the beginning of their training? Why should it have taken me until my 9th year as a teacher before anyone pointed me to foundational facts about how English spelling works?

A final challenge...

I encourage educators to compare two options after watching [that video](#) about teaching the spelling of “does” to a young class.

- 1) You can continue to teach children that “does” is an irregular word that has to be memorized.
- 2) You can use the word “does” with the matrix and word sums to teach how spelling represents the morphology and phonology as I do in the video.

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Could it *really* be better to teach children to memorize this spelling rather than explain it? How could it be right to understand the spelling-meaning connection of the base <do> and its relative <does> and *not* share that understanding with students?

But that's not actually the key issue. The real question is whether teachers are open to taking the time to consider the *implications* of this new understanding. If the spelling of this word is understandable, what does that tell us about the way we've been taught to understand spelling *in general* - and how we are teaching it to kids?

The question is whether people who encounter new understandings about spelling respond like Joey and Kelli. Do they take these new understandings as motivation to keep digging into SWI in an effort to improve instruction for their students? The start of this journey is NOT about dropping instructional previous practices that we currently find important. It is about taking time to work with new ideas that bring new clarity to our understanding of spelling. We should take time and critically challenge our old understandings and any new ideas presented by SWI.

If you are interested in considering that discussion further, see my piece from 2017 titled "[How do I 'Integrate' SWI with my other literacy instruction practices?](#)"

After all — what do we have to lose other than misconceptions!

Pete Bowers