

TEC Podcast #6 “Integrating Morphological Knowledge in Literacy Instruction,” Eric Claravall, *TEACHING Exceptional Children*, 48(4), pp. 195–203.

Lorraine: Welcome to this *TEACHING Exceptional Children* podcast. I'm Lorraine Sobson, Publications Manager for the Council for Exceptional Children. Today I'm speaking with Eric Claravall, an adjunct professor in the Department of Elementary Education at San Francisco State University. Eric is the author of a recent article in TEC entitled “Integrating Morphological Knowledge in Literacy Instruction.”

Eric, thanks for joining me!

Eric: Thank you, Lorraine. I'm excited to be here.

Lorraine: Let's kick it off with a few dictionary definitions. Can you define *morphology* and *morpheme*—and why are they so important to reading instruction in English?

Eric: That's such a heavy word. *Morphology* is the study of word structure and its meaning, and the smallest meaningful unit of a word is called *morpheme*. Awareness of word structure could help students understand the meaning of the morphologically complex words and it also helps us develop spelling skills and improving decoding, which eventually could affect reading fluency and comprehension.

Lorraine: In your article, you explain that we need three levels of morphological knowledge to process derived morphemes: relational, syntactic, and distributional. Could you explain these levels?

Eric: Yes. It is important for students to explicitly understand how morphemes work in different levels. The first level of morphological knowledge is manifested in students' understanding of how the base word is related to many derived words. For example, the base word *success* is directly related to derived words such as, *successful*, *unsuccessful*, *unsuccessfully*, and *successfully*.

The second level of morphological knowledge is the understanding of grammatical categories of words in a sentence. For example, a verb becomes a noun when the suffix *ment* is added, so *acknowledge* becomes *acknowledgement*.

Third, the distributional knowledge is the understanding that the grammatical classification of the base word restricts the use of the specific affixes. For example, *ly* is only attached to adjectives, not to nouns; so, we say, *silently* is acceptable but not *silencely*.

Lorraine: In your framework for teaching morphology, you identify four components. The first is morphemic analysis. Can you explain what this is?

Eric: Morphemic analysis is basically a strategy to analyze the structure of a complex multisyllabic words using the child's knowledge of morphology. For example, when the child encounters an unfamiliar word—let's say *disorganization*. The child breaks the word down into the smallest chunk of morpheme such as *dis*, the prefix; *organize*, the base word; and the suffix *ation*. In essence, morphemic analysis is important in vocabulary development, spelling, and decoding.

Lorraine: How can morphology aid in teaching spelling and vocabulary?

Eric: Many students who receive special education services lack the ability to identify base words and other meaningful parts of the complex words. One of the goals of teaching morphology is to incorporate morphemic analysis in teaching spelling and vocabulary. We want to situate spelling instruction within the teaching of vocabulary since most of these sophisticated vocabulary words are hard to spell; ; the spelling–meaning connection is an important principle when teaching prefixes, suffixes, derivation, [and] Greek and Latin roots.

Rather than rote memorization, morphology instruction provides a systematic and efficient way of learning to spell complex words we find in science, math, social studies, and literature.

Lorraine: Another component you mention is contextual reading. Can you explain what that is?

Eric: Contextual reading in morphology instruction is basically situating the lesson within a continuous meaningful text rather than focusing on the teaching of isolated words. We want it to be really within the context of reading and meaning making.

Lorraine: A little while ago, you mentioned the ability to identify the base word and then derived words and prefixes and suffixes. Explicit instruction of morphological knowledge helps students spell, read, and understand words. Can you demonstrate how this would look with the word *knowingly*?

Eric: Let's say the child doesn't know the word *knowingly* but if he has the knowledge of suffixes and is being able to break down the word into smaller structure, then the child will be able to spell the word correctly, decode it when reading in a continuous text, and understand the meaning of the word. In the child's mind, when he sees the word *knowingly*, he starts to break down these words into different chunks, *know*, *ing*, and *ly*. That's the process of morphemic analysis as well.

Lorraine: How does morphological instruction improve reading fluency and comprehension?

Eric: One of the foci of morphological instruction is to develop decoding skills, and there is a direct link of decoding skills to fluency. We know that fluency influences reading comprehension. Educational researchers such as Lesaux and Kieffer were able to establish the link—using morphological instruction—between fluency and reading comprehension.

- Lorraine: You've mentioned the spelling–meaning connection that students develop through morphemic analysis. Can you explore this a little bit further?
- Eric: I think I touched upon this question earlier, but let me add something more about the meaning–spelling connection. Tying vocabulary lessons to spelling instruction can provide meaningful activities for students, unlike the traditional spelling instruction of rote memorization and repeated spelling practice where you give the words, you ask the students to practice it three times, then on a Friday I'm going to give you a spelling test. With the study of morphology, the students are focused on the vocabulary that they need to know and most of these vocabulary words are words that are hard to spell, so we wanted to make it more meaningful for them, that the spelling is also related to vocabulary.
- Lorraine: I think that's a really good point. It makes me think of when my son was in second grade, he was a terrible speller. He would memorize and memorize and memorize and then the day after could not remember how to spell it, so I understand that showing them the connection between the vocabulary and the words is really important. How can teachers incorporate morphology into lessons on the close reading of literature and into writing instruction?
- Eric: The goal of explicit morphology instruction is to develop students' awareness of different structure of complex words in order to improve reading comprehension. One way of incorporating morphology into the close reading of literature is by looking at morphologically complex words in the story and how these words relate to development of the plot and the characterization in the story. A lot of these morphologically complex words could give us some clue to the development of the problem in the story conflict, or these words could give us an idea of the protagonist's emotion.
- As far as writing instruction is concerned, using some of the morphologically complex words in the story as a priming device for students when writing a summary. You can provide for example, 10 words and ask the students to use at least five when writing a summary of the story.
- Lorraine: Should morphology instruction replace existing literacy programs?
- Eric: Absolutely not! I look at morphology instruction as an additional strategy for teaching reading and writing, especially in upper [elementary] grades and middle school.
- Lorraine: Is there a role for technology in morphology instruction?
- Eric: Yes. We want to make our lessons more interesting and fun. Many students love the use of technology to enhance learning. One of the things that I've used in the past is Animoto, PowerPoint, and even Quizlet, where kids log onto their Quizlet account and create their own list of words and use that as their platform to practice vocabulary and spelling.

Lorraine: Thank you so much for talking with me today, Eric.

Eric: It's a pleasure doing this. Thank you, Lorraine.

Lorraine: Eric's article, "Integrating Morphological Knowledge in Literacy Instruction," appears in Volume 48 of *TEACHING Exceptional Children*. *TEACHING Exceptional Children* is a publication of the Council for Exceptional Children. To learn more about CEC, visit CEC.sped.org.