

Newsletter Issue 2, February 2025

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By Dr. Danielle Colenbrander

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CAN KNOWLEDGE OF MORPHOLOGY HELP CHILDREN LEARN TO READ AND SPELL?

BY DR. DANIELLE COLENBRANDER

In a recently published comprehensive review of morphology instruction, we found evidence that morphology instruction can improve children's ability to read and spell the words they are exposed to during instruction. We also found that morphology instruction can have a positive effect on children's ability to spell untaught words that contain one or more taught morphemes – in other words, the benefit can transfer beyond what children are directly taught.

[Read the full article on morphology and how to teach it.](#)

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Can knowledge of morphology help children learn to read and spell?

By Dr. Danielle Colenbrander

What is morphology?

Morphology is the study of word parts and how they combine. For example, the word “repacking” has three meaningful parts, or morphemes. The part of the word that carries the main meaning is called the *base*. In “repacking”, the base is “pack”. *Affixes* are meaningful parts that can be added to the beginning or end of a base to change its meaning or to provide grammatical information. These can be *prefixes*, such as “re-”, which attach to the front of words or bases, or *suffixes*, such as “-ing”, which attach to the ends of words or bases.

Why might knowledge about morphology have an effect on reading or spelling?

Morphological information is often preserved in the spellings of words. For example, the endings of the words “kissed” and “groomed” are pronounced differently, but they are both spelled the same way. This spelling represents the past tense suffix “-ed”. The spelling of some bases also changes when certain suffixes are added. For example, when the suffix “-ed” is added to the base word “hop”, the final consonant doubles (“hopped”). Therefore, knowledge of morphology might be useful for helping children learn to read and spell. Relatedly, knowledge of a word’s history and origin (its *etymology*) might also be useful for reading or spelling. For example, if a student knows that the word “inspection” is made up of the prefix “in-”, the bound base “spect” (from the Latin root meaning “to speak or say”), and the suffix “-ion”, they may be more likely to remember the correct spelling of the word, and less likely to make errors such as “inspekshun”.

Is there evidence that teaching children about morphology can improve their reading and spelling?

Recently, my colleagues and I published a comprehensive review of morphology instruction. We found evidence that morphology instruction can improve children’s ability to read and spell the words they are exposed to during instruction. We also found that morphology instruction can have a positive effect on children’s ability to spell untaught words that contain one or more taught morphemes – in other words, the benefit can *transfer* beyond what children are directly taught. However, effects on untrained words tend to be smaller on average than effects on trained words, and we did not find evidence that teaching morphology leads to improvements in reading comprehension. This may be because morphological skills are only one small part of the complex process of reading comprehension. It may also be because research studies typically use standardised tasks of reading comprehension that are not well aligned to the content of instruction. These may not be sensitive enough to detect small changes in knowledge or skill.

How should we teach morphology?

Unfortunately, there are very few studies that specifically compare different methods of morphology instruction. However, we can draw some conclusions from broader research on reading instruction, and by considering evidence on the types of words that children are likely to be exposed to at different ages. This evidence suggests that it is important to teach the basics of morphology explicitly. It makes sense to begin by teaching the most frequently appearing morphemes (e.g., “-ing”, plural “-s”, past tense “-ed”) as part of a phonics scope and sequence, and gradually introduce more complex morphemes over time, in line with an increase in the complexity of words that children will need to read and spell. Children can learn the basics of morphology during reading and spelling instruction, and then apply this knowledge in the context of discussion about texts, writing activities, and rich vocabulary instruction.

For more information on the complexities of teaching morphology, listen to these podcasts: [The Literacy View Episode 109](#) and [The Teaching Literacy Podcast Episode 60](#). If you would like more detail on the evidence for morphology instruction, [you can access our meta-analysis here](#).

MYTH: “*There is good evidence that morphology instruction is effective for beginning readers*”

Advancing Literacy Conference 2025
Saturday 29 March 2025, Ballarat

FACTS:

1. This is false! There are very few studies of morphology instruction with beginning readers and the results are inconclusive.
2. However, studies of large databases of children’s reading materials show that young children will be exposed to morphologically complex words from quite early on.
3. This suggests that it is a good idea to teach the basics of morphology alongside phonics.

[For more information, listen to this podcast.](#)

[Register here.](#)

Keynote by Dr. Wesley Hoover
The Simple View of Reading & The Cognitive Foundations of Reading Acquisition

Dr. Wesley Hoover | Laureate Prof. Anne Castles | Prof. Saskia Kohnen | Prof. Genevieve McArthur | Prof. Rauno Parrila, Director