Specific ways to get started with morphology instruction in the lower grades -with Fiona Hamilton

Triple R Teaching Podcast #193

Hello, my name is Anna Geiger. I'm the author of *Reach All Readers* and creator of Reach All Readers website. This is the third in our series of episodes about morphology. I really think you're going to love this one, especially if you're looking for ways to actually teach morphology beginning in kindergarten.

Fiona Hamilton is an expert in morphology. I'll link to all her resources in the show notes, in particular her courses, which I've really enjoyed taking myself. I know you're going to love how she gets into the nitty gritty about how to teach morphology in a way that can be understood by very young children.

First we'll talk more generally about morphology, and then we'll get into the specifics. Here we go!

Anna Geiger:

Welcome Fiona!

Fiona Hamilton:

Thank you very much, Anna.

Anna Geiger:

I found you because I've been on a mission to learn as much as I can about morphology and I found your website. I had saved it. It was recommended to me for the resources that you share on Wordtorque and I've gone through a lot of your morphology courses and enjoyed them very much.

I reached out to you, and you were graciously willing to come and talk to me and my audience. Maybe we can start by you explaining why you named your website what you did, and then we'll go back in time and you can talk to us about your history in education.

Fiona Hamilton:

Sure, I'd love to. Yeah, my business is called Wordtorque, which may in fact be a little confusing for your American listeners, because it's W-O-R-D-T-O-R-Q-U-E. I settled on that for a number of reasons. One, that base “torque” means to twist, it's sort of a twisting power, so really it's the power of words, the twisting. Two, it’s the twists and turns that words take on their journey, you know, from when they're born through to present day, because it's never a straightforward path. And thirdly, because T-O-R-Q-U-E is a homophone for me with T-A-L-K. We’re talking words.

Anna Geiger:

Oh! That's what it is!

Fiona Hamilton:

Yeah!

Anna Geiger:

That's funny.

Fiona Hamilton:

That's the fun that I get from an American audience, you know. An Australian, New Zealand, or British audience, they're like, yeah, Wordtorque, we're talking words. It's got this nice play on words. But I think you say "talk," right?

Anna Geiger:

Yes, I say talk.

Fiona Hamilton:

Yeah, right. Exactly. So it's not a homophone with T-A-L-K, but that also proves my point that spelling is about meaning, and even though we pronounce this differently, the meaning is captured within the letters that we use to spell. I get the homophone, you don't get that play on words, but still the power and the twisting force of the journey of words.

Anna Geiger:

That is really fun. No, that never crossed my mind one bit, that it was a homophone.

Fiona Hamilton:

I think I should make that clearer on my website or I should have different people saying the word.

Anna Geiger:

That's really funny.

So you have been all over the place, I know. Now you are in Bangkok, and you grew up in Australia. Maybe talk us through your history, where you've been and what you're doing now.

Fiona Hamilton:

Sure. So yes, I grew up in Australia and started my teaching career in Australia.

Then in my late twenties, I worked in a school with somebody who had worked in an international school and talked about how exciting and interesting it was. So I went for a two year kind of side journey to my career, two years to Indonesia, and I loved it so much that I have spent the last 30 years working in international schools in Asia.

For people who don't know what international schools are, they are schools mainly in countries where English is not the language of the country. Many of them are 50 or 70 years old, but mostly they're for children of expatriates so that they can have schooling in their language.

Of course, we have a lot of children who come to international schools for whom English is an additional language and parents want them to be educated in English, and so we'll have like up to 50 or 60 different nationalities and children within the school, which is fascinating, right? It's so interesting.

Then the teachers are from many places too. I've loved it. As I said, I went for a bit of an adventure and then found how much I found it so stimulating, working with teachers from the US or from South Africa or New Zealand or many English-speaking countries and hearing their perspectives and on what we should do with education. It's been a very interesting journey.

So yeah, I went to Indonesia to Chicago International School, and I worked there for 14 years. Then with my family, we moved to China and now we've been in Thailand.

Anna Geiger:

What sparked your interest in morphology?

Fiona Hamilton:

That's also a great question. I think, like many of us, it was that searching for how best to teach spelling. I hadn't even thought about vocabulary early on. It was really just like, what's going on with spelling? And I think it was really working in an international school that made me realize we cannot just rely on phonics.

I have quite an interesting story about one of the things. I was the literacy coordinator at my school, and a couple of things really brought this to my attention. One, I would go into different classrooms in the younger grades and I would see lists on the wall of what we used to call "word families," rhyming words like cat, bat, fat, and they would have a lists of words.

If I walked into an Australian teacher's room, I'd be like, "Yeah, great list."

If I walked into an American teacher's room, I'd be like, "What is that word doing on that list? It does not rhyme; it does not sound the same."

Then of course, an American walking into an Australian teacher's room would be like, "Weird group of words there, what's going on?"

Yet we're teaching our children that these words all sound the same and this is the spelling pattern, and this is how we can learn to spell.

I think it just makes it so much more obvious that spelling is not just about sound when you are not in a small community where everyone has the same or a very similar accent. You're like, "Oh, okay, accent differences mean there must be something more."

Another incident that happened sort of early on was I had a teacher who was sick and hospitalized and wasn't going to be there for the week. There were no sub notes, nothing, because it was back way before computers when we would have all of that prepared. So the substitute teacher arrived and then came to me and said, "I have no idea what to teach this week in literacy. I have nothing there."

I pulled out a book that I thought was a great book, and it was clearly written with the idea of teaching spelling and different spelling patterns for the same sound. It was about a little dog going across a bridge and he got his paw stuck in the bridge, and all the animals have to come and help. It was called *The Poor Sore Paw*, and I said, "See? These words all rhyme, the poor sore paw!"

She was like, "But they don't rhyme! I can't teach that because that is not a spelling pattern!"

I was like, "Oh, it's a book from New Zealand. Yeah, that's not going to work."

And so I sort of knew that there's got to be something more than… I mean, obviously, letters and correspondences are really important, but there has to be another influence as well.

Then in early 2000, I was at a teacher's conference and I went to a 45-minute session with Real Spelling where it sort of claimed to explain spelling. They claimed that this would help you to understand. I walked out of there… I know other people who I met later who were in that same workshop, Pete Bowers was one. I didn't know him at the time, but years later we discovered that we had both been in this workshop, and a handful of other people as well that I've met since.

We all just walked out and had the same experience of "Oh, there *are* explanations for why words are spelled the way they are."

And it's not just morphology, obviously the history of words really impacts as well. But that really began me on this journey of morphology is important, and we can make it so much clearer to students because morphology is invisible.

I see why we start with letter-sound correspondences because there are letters on the page and we know that they do, for the most part, link to words. We obviously have some that are silent and we have to figure out why, but for the most part, there's a relationship between the letters on the page and the sounds, so it seems a logical place to start.

But I think we also want to start really early on by teaching children that every word has a base and we can add to it. We've got these building blocks and we can build words because that's a puzzle that they love and that we can then show them as well as the letters. They're organized into these building blocks, and we just have to learn how to put those blocks together as well as, or at the same time as, learning about the letter-sound correspondence.

That really was the beginning of my journey.

Anna Geiger:

I think another important thing I've talked with people about too is that so many words that we think of as irregular are only irregular when we don't realize that morphology has an influence on spelling, like in the word "does." I've talked about this before on the podcast, but I think it's important to keep reminding people what factors influence English spelling. Then we can talk about, you sort of hinted at it, but why morphology doesn't always get the attention it should get.

Fiona Hamilton:

Yeah, so there are three factors that influence our spelling. One is phonology, so the sounds. They are obviously a big influence. It's not like we can write every sound a million ways. There is a tight link between letters and sounds, or graphemes and phonemes to put it more accurately, so phonology is an influence.

Morphology is probably the driving force. We've got phonology, we've got morphology, that's prefixes, bases, suffixes, and then we've got etymology, which is the history of words and the links between words. It's also a really big influence.

When we look at those three influences, we have to look at the interrelationship between them, because it is the interrelationship that lands us with what letters are we going to use to spell that word. We can't just sort of like sound it out and then just look at the morphemes because we look at this interrelationship.

Like you were saying, if we don't realize that morphology plays a role, then we forever think that a word like “location” is spelled weirdly because why is there a T in there and why isn't there an SH, because SH makes the /sh/ sound. We have to look and say, oh, because location is about locating something, and when you locate something, that's its location. If I can see the link between those, then that helps me to understand why there is a T.

I just have to really study more phonics; it doesn't stop in grade two, right? We really need to understand this flexibility that we have with letter-sound relationships in English. The more we're able to, and it's not like we have to learn them all by heart… The more we're familiar with fact that English letters don't just have one or two sounds and the letter choice is influenced so much by the morphology, then I think that's helpful.

Anna Geiger:

I think that's a good way to say it, that the letter choice is influenced by morphology. Also something we hear over and over is that the sound may change, but the morpheme retains its spelling, which is why, like you said, with locate and location, we have a T in that original word and we're not going to change it when we add that affix at the end.

Fiona Hamilton:

Yeah, because if we changed it, we'd lose the meaning. I mean, it seems so obvious when we say, well, the primary job of spelling and writing is to represent meaning. It's like, well, of course, because we're reading a page of text and we need to make meaning from it. And we all know those children who can read a whole page and tell you nothing about what they've read. We're like, of course, it's making meaning.

To know that and then know in the foreground that there are two different things. We have just had so much research, so much educational materials, focused just on the letter-sound correspondences and not on starting to look at the other influences and the relationship between them.

Anna Geiger:

I think a lot of us have traditionally thought… Well, first of all, I didn't even know what morphology was like five years ago. That was not a word I'd heard. Then once I started learning about that and realizing how what a big deal it is and why teachers need to understand it and students need to understand it, I think at the beginning I was still thinking this is for third grade, fourth grade, fifth grade without understanding that it should be brought even into kindergarten.

You stated in one of your courses that “the concepts of morphology for young and older learners are the same, it's the pace and intensity that differ.”

Could you share specific ways that you might teach morphology in different grades and how it looks different from kindergarten on up?

Fiona Hamilton:

Yes, for sure. I mean, I think that adage applies to phonics as well. It applies to etymology. It applies to our understanding of how words work. The concepts are the same. I don't think that you ever want to teach something that you have to un-teach.

For example, in terms of phonics, if you tell children that A says /ă/, then you're not actually telling them anything that's incorrect, but by omission of saying “can say”…

I think even just that “can say,” a lot of children will interpret that that's the only thing that A says. And now we have to reteach, “Oh, actually, by the way, it can also say its name. By the way, it can also make these other sounds, because it has four or five different ways that it's pronounced.”

We want to teach children the concepts so that they can apply them and transfer them to other words, and so if the concept is made clear and we just go deeper, then I think we're in great territory.

In terms of morphology, I think there are two very important concepts that we want to teach our youngest children, and I mean even our preschoolers. We can do this orally before even looking at letters, but then we just go more deeply.

As you were saying, what does this look like? For example, in terms of word structure, I think it's really important that we explain that all words are built with meaning-based blocks. Morphemes are the smallest units that contribute to meaning, and we put them together in ordered ways.

For our youngest children, we're talking about the base and that the base holds the core meaning of the word. We are saying, “Oh, jump, jumping, jumps. Oh, you're so jumpy today! Oh, jump, that's the base!” Simple as that. We're talking about how every word has a base and that I can add some affixes.

We want to start to say with our youngest children that we can add prefixes and we can add suffixes and that adds to the meaning of the word. It's still the base that holds the core meaning, but that will add to the meaning.

We start to look for that in words. We start to have cards where we put together the base and a suffix, or we chain, we put a prefix and we then take the prefix away. “What does zip mean? What does unzip mean? What's the difference in meaning?”

We're doing this with words that are in their vocabulary, or words that we're looking at that are stretching their vocabulary, but only in that way that is appropriate. We are working at that level.

Then as we continue to deepen and our children understand that bases, prefixes, and suffixes combine in ordered ways, and there's a way that we do this, then we start to look at suffixing conventions and what happens when we're adding -ing. Sometimes we double the final consonant, and so why don't we start to look at what governs that, why does that happen?

Then we just continue to deepen our understanding because our words get more complex, so the structures get more complex as well, and finding the base, which may not be a free base.

We're starting mostly with free bases with our younger children, but we might look at a bound base or what some people would call a root where it has to have a prefix or a suffix attached to it to serve us as a word. We'll spend more time with those more complicated things. So as vocabulary sort of increases in complexity, then our study increases in complexity.

Anna Geiger:

For those that are listening, because we don't do visual with my podcast, I noticed this is just what you're used to doing. You put out your fist when you were saying “base” and covered it with your other hand. Then you would take two fingers in the front or the back to show an affix. That could be something you could do orally with kindergarten.

Can you can you give us the vocabulary you would use? Pretend I'm a kindergartner and talk me through what you might do to convey this information

Fiona Hamilton:

For sure, I would still use the words base and prefix and suffix. Those are the first three terms that I would encourage every teacher to start to use to discuss morphology because I think we tend to say word endings or word beginnings.

But that's incredibly nebulous, you know? Like cat, what's the end of cat? T or /t/, depending on letter or sound. In teachers, what's the ending? Is it an E-R-S, is it E-R? The ending and beginning are kind of just talking about a place, but not being specific.

Whereas if we talk about how every word has a base and some words are just a base, and I can add prefixes to some words, and I can add suffixes to some words. If I'm doing that by showing them with my hand as well, then we're starting to talk about the actual structures of English.

It's something that I started to do quite a few years ago when I thought we really need to make this clearer to children. They need more scaffolding because they see the letters on the page when they're starting that literacy journey, but there's nothing to show them the morphemes. And yes, we can learn to write word sums, but was there something else we can do quickly that's really visual to show them.

I started to what I would call box the base and underline the affixes, and I know some other some other word study programs do some different things like this. My logic behind putting a rectangle, so really clearly boxing, I call it boxing the base and underlining the prefixes or suffixes, was because the base is the bit that I need to stand out. We need children to see that. That holds the core meaning of the word. No matter what prefixes or suffixes are added to it, the base holds the core meaning and the word that we build by adding other elements has to link somehow to the meaning of the base. We want our children to see that base.

We'll give children a word and we'll say, "Can you find the base in the word jumping? Everybody jump. We're jumping up and down. All right, so let's look at the word, the written word, which part of this word holds the core meaning? Oh, jump, yes. When I'm jumping up and down, it's all about this action of to jump."

And so we put a big box around jump, and then we underline the ing and say, "Oh, we're adding that because that helps me make the sentence. I am jumping. Oh, I jumped, right?"

We want our children knowing about, in particular, those inflectional suffixes, ing, ed, and s really early on in their journey because they use them when they're speaking. They use them when they're writing. You know, we want to them understand E-D so they can write their stories about what they did on the weekend or what happened earlier in the day.

I think that visual of boxing the base and underlining the affixes helps children to understand morphology.

I think then you can look at how is the base built? That's when we can go into sounding out jump, /j/-/ŭ/-/m/-/p/, let's look at the letters and let's work on our phonics.

I do think that we can make morphology really clear for our young children in a really simple, straightforward way.

Anna Geiger:

We've talked already about how this should be started early on; kids need to have this understanding about language. We've talked about those inflectional endings that kindergartners should know about.

But if a kindergarten teacher wants to do this, I know they have their phonics scope and sequence, they know to follow that, but there most likely is not something in there about morphology. So how do they

know? Do they wait until kids learn to read E-D and I-N-G? I'm thinking not, so how do they figure out how to fit this in?

Fiona Hamilton:

That's a great question. I think, yes, the scope and sequence is super helpful. I have one that I have written out over the last ten years and continue to refine that we use in many schools that I work with, because I do think it's fair to say don't just start anywhere or when anything comes up. I do think it's super helpful for teachers just like with their phonics about what letters and sounds. What prefixes and suffixes?

I think the tools or strategies are the place to start. Identifying the morphemes in a written word. As I just talked about, boxing the base and underlining the prefixes or suffixes. Generally, we have great use of suffixes early on, so just even showing that to the children is really helpful. Then I like to circle the graphemes so that we can see within the base. In particular, we just look within the base. What are the graphemes? We're really working on those letter-sound correspondences.

Establishing those tools is what I would suggest. Number one is boxing the base, then underlining the affixes. What prefixes and suffixes might you use? I would suggest that you start with I-N-G, E-D, and S.

Pretty soon E-S is going to come up because there are lots of words that you'll look at where you're like, "Oh, I have to use E-S." You can just notice and name it. Just say, "Oh, look, E-S is a variation of S and we're needing to use that." We don't even have to learn all the rules.

That would be my starting place and I would introduce two prefixes that are very commonly used, R-E and U-N. We can do something, we can redo it, we can undo it. We can notice in some words I can't just put R-E on the front, and then I think of a word where we can't add R-E. Pointing out that it usually means again, sort of going back.

I think those are great starting places.

Anna Geiger:

Maybe when the kids have the phonics knowledge to sound out the base…

Let's say you're doing a lesson with short U words and they're doing run, you maybe not have taught that, maybe that's much farther along, maybe it's not even until first grade, but you can still say, "You know, sometimes if I run and I'm doing it right now, I might say I'm running." You can show them what it looks like. You can box the base. That one might be a little tricky because of the double N, but…

Fiona Hamilton:

But I wouldn't even worry about that. That's where people get stuck because a lot of our words that are frequently used with our younger children will be verbs because we can start to say, "I am running!" Then of course we have to say "They ran," and we can get into that.

But I tell people, don't not look at a word and words that are in the family, because what we're starting to do now, if we're taking the base… What you're suggesting is absolutely perfect. We've done our phonics lesson, we've looked at the base. Is there a suffix that I can add to that? We don't have to worry about do I need to double or not double, so I better not use that word.

If we want to show the children how it's written, then I can put the N and I can write the double N… I can write the word run, we've looked at it on the board, and I can say running, and we can do what I call, notice and name.

That means the power of pointing something out, but without having to go into the full explanation of teaching. It frees us up to look at more things, and so many children pick up on it. But it's not an excuse for not teaching, it's just that we're not ready to teach that particular point at this point in time, but we don't want to ignore it.

I don't want to spell running necessarily if I'm writing it on the board without the double N, so I might say, "Oh, in some words we're going to double that final consonant and we're adding an -ing suffix. Now let's look at jump." We're looking at short U words, so we've got the word jump. "Oh, in this word I just add the ing, right?" And so we're showing that I can add an -ing to it.

Once we've got that small bank of suffixes, just starting with I-N-G, E-D, and S… Although I do think Y as a suffix will be pretty handy early on because, you know, I've got a runny nose or jumpy or itchy skin, it makes adjectives.

Then we can have them written up on a chart and we can say, "Here's our bank of words that we made today in our phonics lesson. Let's take the suffix S. Can we add that to each of our words today? Does it make sense? Can we make a word that makes sense? Run, runs. Yes, who can use runs in a sentence? Oh, she runs across the grass really quickly. Yes, I can use runs like that. What about jumps? Oh, she jumps up and down."

Of course that could lead us into some grammar on it, he, or she, or in a third person singular. But we can also have, if we looked at duck. Then we can say, "Oh yes, we can have more than one duck. We can have some ducks." Actually, you can have some fun with that one because she ducks under the water. "How do we get that term ducks? Because it's like a duck ducking under the water."

Anna Geiger:

That's so funny. I've never thought about it that way.

Fiona Hamilton:

Yeah, then your etymology comes in there, right? Not that you have to know that.

Anna Geiger:

I love that idea of taking a phonics word list that they've been practicing and then testing different affixes at the end. But like you said, that's also a chance to talk about how the phonology is different depending on the word, right? S can spell /s/ or it can spell /z/, and the different sounds of E-D, that they can notice that all initially.

I really like the way you talked about notice and name, because I think there's so much power in explicit instruction that we've been learning about. For many of us, that was not how we taught reading or anything really, it was very constructivist approach.

Then we might feel kind of afraid to do something like that, that's outside of our scope and sequence. So just acknowledging that that's perfectly fine; we're not doing anything wrong by noticing and naming something, but also going by our scope and sequence here on the side.

Fiona Hamilton:

Absolutely, and I think more than not doing anything wrong, it's incredibly powerful. Children do pick up on that and you can notice and name something without obviously investigating it or really having a deep lesson on it, but also without you really knowing what's going on, right?

You can just notice, for example, duck, and I can see some ducks on the water, and she ducks under the water. You might not know that they were etymologically related. You might not know the story, but you can notice, "Oh, isn't that interesting? I wonder if when we say we're ducking under the water, if that has something to do with the duck because I know ducks do that."

You can just raise that question or we can just wonder about it. It's fabulous for children to see teachers wondering.

Anna Geiger:

I just have a quick technical question because I don't want to forget it. If you had the word running and you're boxing the base, would you box R-U-N? You wouldn't box the two N's, would you?

Fiona Hamilton:

No, I would box R-U-N because that is the base. Then it's a spelling convention, an orthographic convention, that we are adding that extra N. I personally put a little carrot, like that little triangle. Not a carrot that you eat, but that other carrot, under the N to show we've added this and to show this isn't part of the base. It's not part of the suffix. It has been added.

Then we can notice that and then when we're in about grade two, we can start to learn the suffixing convention for when do we double that final consonant, and when don't we?

Anna Geiger:

Very helpful, thank you.

Now I would love to hear you talk a little bit about some of the… We've already kind of gotten specific about how to introduce affixes in the very early grades, but you have a really neat activity that you talked about one of your courses, about the meaning and structure test. You had like a hula hoop or something on the ground and a bunch of word cards, and the point was for students to figure out which words were in the same word family. Not the rhyming word family, but meaning word family.

Fiona Hamilton:

Morphological. Exactly.

Anna Geiger:

Can you talk to us a little bit about that and how it could look different maybe in kindergarten versus third grade?

Fiona Hamilton:

Yeah, absolutely. I tend to call that the in/out activity because is it in the family or out of the family? We've talked a lot about the structure of words and looking for the base. Words that are in the same

morphological word family share the same base, and they have to be linked in meaning. They have to be linked in not just having the base, but actually in that we know that the other bits, “This is a prefix we know. This is a suffix we know,” otherwise we just look for the letters and chop off the other bits and say there we have it.

Ultimately for them to prove that words are in the same morphological or meaning family, we have to go back to the history of the word and see that they were sort of born from the same historical root.

But I don't think that we need to do that with most of the words that we're looking at with our younger children, and I think that is very scary to people who know little or nothing about etymology. Understandably, it's scary because it's complex. There's no big book of the history of words. People who love words have kind of figured out and looked at how words were used.

We have that wonderful, wonderful site, Etymonline, that Doug Harper has created, and it remains free for everyone, which helps us to understand the history of words. But if you're new to this, it's too much, right? You're like, “I don't know how to use that yet.”

I think just knowing that words that are in the same family… We have to find the base. We can't decide if a word is in the family unless we find the base, which is why I'm suggesting we start with really simple words and we box the base.

Then we have to ask the children, is this word in the same family? To find that out, we have to say, “Okay, what's the meaning of the base? How do we use that? Now let's look at this other word. Do you think it links in meaning? Can we find the base?” Then that's the structure. If so, yes, it's going to go inside our hoop.

We also need non-examples. We best can find out what something is by contrasting it with something that it’s not. We know that from decades of research that to really solidify our understanding about what something is, we should show examples of when it is not being that thing, and that's going to make it much clearer for us.

The structure test goes beyond saying, “I know this is the base too, and I know this bit's a prefix, and I know this bit's a suffix,” but with our very youngest children, we're really just going to look for the base, and I've strategically put words that you would look at.

For example, to explain that, because I'm waffling a bit there, let's say the word read. I can read a book, right? R-E-A-D. So I might just choose six words and we're going to sort them with a small group or the whole class if you can manage that. Obviously, to start with, a small group might be easier. We're going to look at them, and then we've got the word reading, and we've got the word reader and reads. But I can also include bread, B-R-E-A-D. We can look at that. Of course I can read the word R-E-A-D as read as well. It's one of those special strong verbs that mark the past tense differently.

With our young children, we might just be talking about read, show me what it looks like to read. Then out of a bag, you know, it's always fun to have a few tricks up your sleeve for younger children, I can pull out this card that says reading. I’ll say, “Do you think that reading is in the read family? What do we have to do?”

You might have written up there, “We have to give two ticks. If it has two ticks, then it gets to be in the family. You have got to have two things to be a member of this cool word family. So reading, what does reading mean? Oh, show me what it looks like to be reading. Let's put the word reading into a sentence.” You can do it if the children can't. “I am reading a book. I like reading books. Ah, so does it have something to do with read? Yes. Now let's find the base.”

We box the base. “Ah, it has the base in there.” I might just put it in, but I also can point out, “Oh, it's got that I-N-G suffix that we've already learning about. I am reading. It passes the meaning test; it's linked in meaning. It passes the structure test; I can find the base, and this is a suffix I know.”

Now we pull another one out, bread. And you know, I can tell the children what it says. They don't have to read it. I could even have a picture that goes with it. “What is bread? Oh, bread is something that you eat. Does that have something to do with it? No. What do you think about the spelling?” Some child will find R-E-A-D and say, yes, it's in the family.

I've got a choice then to say, “Well, I don't think that B is a prefix,” or I can ignore that and say, “Ha! It might be in the family because we've found R-E-A-D, but it has to pass the meaning and structure test. Does bread have anything to do with reading? Nope. It can't be in the family then,” and I put it outside the circle.

I might have some words that don't have the letters at all, and I put them in there so that the children get to say, “Oh yeah, it links in meaning, but no, it doesn't have the letters.” This is for our very youngest children.

I might have book, for example. “Book has something to do with reading, yeah, we read books. Oh, okay, so it's sort of got something to do with the meaning. Let's check for the letters. Oh, it doesn't have the same letters,” even if they can't read all their letters yet. That's a great activity for those children on that journey because they're matching, matching, matching, and they're like, “No, it doesn't have the same letters. It can't be in our family, right?” That's at our very simplest level.

When we get just to the next level, we have to prove, do we know that prefix? Do we know that suffix?

Something like the play family is a great example. I can include the word splay. You know children won't know that; it's new for their vocabulary. You talk about splaying out your legs and then we can say, “Well it does have P-L-A-Y, but do we know S as a prefix? I'm not to say that it's not a prefix, but we haven't encountered it yet so I don't think it's a prefix.”

I'd be wary of saying something is definitely not a prefix or a suffix because, as you would know, there are so many we don't know about. There are so many that we didn't know about, so I would just be wary. To my knowledge, I've never seen S as a prefix.

But a word like display, D-I-S-P-L-A-Y, that's likely new in grade three and you can choose a simple word like play. That's going to generate a lot of discussion because we already know D-I-S from I dislike something and it's kind of like it negates it. So for display, people will often immediately put that in because they're like, “Oh, I can see the base play. I can see D-I-S, I know that's a prefix, yep, that must be in the family.”

But you've got to come back to meaning, and you've got to say, what does a display have to do with playing, right? And if you're unsure, then I always say, put it on the line.

We might have a hoop, and we might have some cards for our younger children, even our older children can do this sometimes. For one that we're not sure about, just put it on the line, that's okay. We don't have to solve all the problems.

As a teacher, that's the hardest, hardest thing, I think. So many teachers may think, “But how can I show them that I'm not sure of something?” There's so much power in showing children that adults don't have all the answers, and that we can be wondering about words too.

It's fine to say, “I don't know about display. It seems like it's not linked, but I can sort of see some structure. Maybe it is, maybe it isn't. Let's just leave it on the line.”

And of course, you can do the same activity without a hoop and cards. You can just draw up lines and make a column. It's in, it's out, we're unsure. Three columns. You can sort some words that way.

Anna Geiger:

And it's a very fun thing to do for everybody. There is so much conversation and so much you can get out of that.

You talked about trying to decide if something is a prefix or not. For me, for sure all the years I was a teacher and a lot of years after, I know I learned this somewhere, that if you take the prefix off, what you think is a prefix, but what's left is not a word by itself, then it's not a prefix.

For instance, in the word reject, I would have thought that R-E is not a prefix, because ject is not a word all by itself.

Now I understand that we can have those bound morphemes that have to be connected to a prefix or a suffix to exist, but they're not words on their own, but that doesn't mean that that affix is not an affix.

You have a whole course about testing affixes. Is that what you call it?

Fiona Hamilton:

Attesting. Yeah. Attesting or proving, to attest is to prove. Yeah.

Anna Geiger:

Can you explain a little bit more about how we can do that?

Fiona Hamilton:

I think that it's so important for children to be involved in the learning process. That's why I talk about word inquiry because we want to start with a question. That is the biggest thing. That's the historical root that the Q-U-I-R-E comes back to, to ask, to seek, to gain. It's about questioning, and I think that's important.

It doesn't mean there's not a lot of explicit teaching. Of course there are masses of explicit teaching. And not every lesson begins with a question, but I do think it's powerful to say, "Huh, I wonder if...," and then we're going to help the children to do that attesting.

I think they remember that prefix or that suffix so much more strongly if you've had a lesson together than if they just saw it on a public chart that's up on the board, and sometimes those charts are not always 100% accurate. They've been involved in figuring out what does it do, and what's going on.

You could look at the word, the prefix R-E, for example, because you brought that up in reject. We could look at that with our kindergartners and we could look at that with our grade five or our middle school, high school students because it's a very commonly used prefix and we can start with simpler words and more obvious meaning links, and then we can go to words that are more complex.

What I would do to test a prefix is... We know that R-E can function as a prefix, it comes at the beginning of words, so I would choose five or ten words, not more than that, even just five would be fine, that start with R-E.

Now we're going to look and we're going to see, can it be a prefix? Just because it comes at the beginning of a word doesn't mean it always is a prefix. I might choose redo and reread and R-E-D, the color red, right? There's an R-E at the beginning of all of those. I've just got three words there actually.

How are we going to prove it? We're going to box the base because we have to. That's why I think boxing the base is so powerful because we're going to say we know every word has to have a base, so we're going to try and find the structure. We're going to try and find the meaning. That's that meaning and structure, meaning and structure continuously.

Let's look at the word reread. “What does reread mean? We have to think about meaning. We like to reread our favorite stories, so what's going on with that? Oh, we read them again. Ah, so what do you think the base in reread is? Read, it's all about reading.”

And of course, you get them to turn and talk and to think about this, and if they're confused, then I'm going to explicitly show them. I'm going to say, “I'm going to box the base in red, and I might even write the word reading beside it and show that we love to reread some book in the class that the children always ask for. We reread it, we read it again.”

I'm going to box the base, R-E-A-D, go to underline R-E and say, “We can read something again.” We know, and of course the children now often have fluency passages that they reread to practice for fluency. “We know that rereading is really powerful and important to help us become better, stronger readers, so it sort of seems to me that I'm doing that again.”

“Let's look at another word, redo, for example. We can say, “Oh, I can do something. Everybody show me something that you're doing, and the let's do it again now. Let's redo it.”

Now let's look at the word red. “What do you think? Is there a prefix in red?” Well, somebody's going to say yes, because they can see the re.

“Let's think about what does it mean?” Now we need to find something in the class that's red or somebody's got some red on. “Oh, it's a color. Yeah, it doesn't seem to be about doing something again.”

This is where you can just explicitly tell them, “It seems to make sense that R-E-D is a base all by itself, so let's put a box around the base.”

Now I can see that R-E can be a prefix, but it also can just be the letters at the beginning of a base, which is why I think we want to not just talk about words, we want to talk about bases so much you can’t say it just comes at the beginning.

I think we need three examples of R-E being a prefix for the children to be really convinced. At least that's what a lot of teachers have told me over the years. If we just find two examples, we're all still wondering later on. We're all still like, oh, is it so?

Now I might present some more, or we might be on a bit of a mission to find some more words during the day that have R-E where it means again. “Oh, rewrite! Oh yeah, let's add that to our list!”

We can involve the children in it, rather than just always presenting to them. It’s kind of cool to have them be able to then use what they know. Then they'll come up with all sorts of things, funny things and things that, that someone will say. They'll say something where we’ll have to say, ”Oh yeah, we wouldn't quite say it like that.” But they're going to collect a list of words that can have this prefix, R-E.

One of my friends, Angela, came up with this, “Strive for five, two's too few.” Then another teacher added to it and said, “Three is key.” He's like, “I always say to my children, ‘Strive for five, two's too few, but three is key.’”

The point about that strive for five is it's great if we can find five examples. We do not need 55 examples to convince us of a prefix or a suffix because otherwise then you've got older children who are just fixated and they're racing to see who can get the most examples, when really our job is to feel convinced that this can function as a prefix. We need three examples where we can look at the structure, we can talk about the meaning, we can see the base, we can peel it off, and then we're convinced.

The meaning of many of our prefixes and suffixes is not just… Just like letters don't have one sound, prefixes and suffixes don't just have one job. They might have one major job, just like a lot of our letters have one default sound, but they'll do other things.

That R-E means back or again, and you can kind of see that back to do something again, you're sort of going back, but sometimes it has a stronger force of back. Then it can also be sort of used to intensify, to tell me more about the base with some words that are a bit obscure, and you can't get the sense of what's going on there. So just be aware not give a really strict definition.

If we look at reject, like you said, that J-E-C-T is what I would call a bound base, because it's not a word on its own, but it has this force. It still holds the core meaning, it has this force of to throw. When you are rejecting, what is happening? When you reject something, you're throwing it back, right? I'm not doing it again, I'm throwing it back. That's where we see that sense of back. Back can lead to again, but sometimes it's just back, I'm throwing it back.

Then for eject too, right? That E means out. Most of your audience won't remember ejecting cassettes from the VCR, but some of us remember that. To eject something, like floppy disks out of your computer, and so on.

That's when you start to see the force of different prefixes and the power of looking at a word and figuring out what's going on. How is the meaning of the base kind of enhanced when we add a prefix?

Anna Geiger:

I would definitely encourage anyone who's listening to check out your workshops, which I will link to in the show notes. I really enjoyed them. I think I've gone through them all, but I may have missed one or two that I'll go back to and check. All the things you're talking about, which are things we might not think about on our own, as far as ways to teach morphology are there.

You also have a resource called Engage with the Page. I looked at it briefly, and it looks like what you're doing there is helping teachers use a read aloud to find ways to dive into a word a little more specifically.

I think someone new to this might say, “Wow, she sounds like she knows how to pick out any word and just talk about it, but I don't even know where to start.” You're giving teachers the tools to do that.

Can you talk a little bit about Engage with the Page and what you're doing with that?

Fiona Hamilton:

Yeah, for sure. With two colleagues, Angela and Lauren, we started this a few years ago exactly for the reason that you said. People would be like, “I don't really know where to start, and my school doesn't have a scope and sequence.”

For that reason, we started to say, well, you can use a picture book either to reinforce what you are teaching, or as a provocation to lead into something that you're going to teach that week. If you have a book that has what you want to talk about or teach that week, if that's prevalent within that book, then that's a perfect way to gather some words to talk about. It can be as a provocation, while you're teaching, or as consolidation later.

We should use beautiful literature with our children, we really want them to be engaged in lovely literature. We can do more than just read the story, we can use it as a way to supplement our word inquiry, not as our total word inquiry, but as a way to support that.

So we started Engage with the Page, which you can find on my website, and we've got like 130 books or something on there. For the last couple of years, we've met sort of weekly, or at least every two weeks, to make a five-minute video where we talk about the things that you could investigate.

Then we post a thing link, which is here's what you could look at if you're looking at the letters and sounds in this book, it would be great for it. Here's what you could look at in terms of a word family. Here is what you could look at in terms of a prefix or a suffix.

We also do classroom connections which would be great if you are looking at the start of school, for example, this book would be awesome for that. It has different classroom connections that you can make.

Then we always have a downloadable activity. We tend to make them really pretty straightforward because the intent was to help support people who might not have a lot of background in this.

A couple of weeks ago we did *We Are a Class* because it's the start of the school year in many places, not in Australia, but in the Northern Hemisphere. This book's lovely for making class agreements, so the family, the base, agree, is great. We made a little activity that you can just download. Our activity that you download has the base, agree, it has a list of prefixes and suffixes, and it says build some words. Make a word web with some words in this family. There's D-I-S and there's S and E-D and A-B-L-E and we can make disagreeable, agreeable, agreements, disagreements, and you can build some words. It's there for you.

Just recently we have launched, after two years of development, Search Engage. Because so many people have been using Engage with the Page, and now there are so many books, they asked us how do we search? How do we find? I want something on ED, because I'm doing ED this week, and I want a great book! So we have launched Search Engage, which you can find through my website, at what we hope is a very reasonable cost, and you can have a yearly subscription to over 300 books and you can search by a prefix or you can search by a grapheme. If you're looking at OU this week, what books have we found that would be great that would tie in?

There are books for younger readers, there are books for older readers, there are classroom connections, there's telling the tale, there are links to stories. We will then show you if you use that book, here are the things that we think this would be great for to supplement your work study.

Anna Geiger:

Very exciting. And I know that the books with Engage with the Page are free, but then if people want that extra resource to get more information it is paid, and I'll link to all of that.

One more thing to talk about, and that is your current project of teaching high frequency words. Can you talk a little bit about that and what project you're finishing up?

Fiona Hamilton:

Sure, so during the pandemic, Rebecca Loveless, who I'm not sure if you know, but she works in California. Rebecca Loveless and I started this project called The High Frequency Word Project because there has to be a better way to teach those high frequency words.

Thankfully, a lot of people are now saying we don't just have to teach them as sight words, to look at the whole word and learn it, but we can talk about the letter-sound correspondences which is great.

But we still have this part that is making a sound that we don't expect. Really the way to understand a lot of why is this word being spelled like this, why are these letters sounding like this, is to tell the tale of the word. We can figure out the history of the word.

It's also a lovely way to introduce children to etymology and that words have stories. We like to say that just as we use words to write stories, words have their own stories. Children, like all of us, are endlessly fascinated by stories, so if we're able to tell them the story of a word, then that helps them to understand the spelling. Then we're going to map that spelling more quickly.

Because as Linnea Ehri tells us, the process of orthographic mapping is making a connection between the sounds, the letters, and the meaning of the word. If we can put those three together, then we're going to map that word way more quickly.

The challenge, I think, with high frequency words, one of the reasons that many of them… Not all of them, some of them are very regular, and we learn to spell and read them way more quickly than others.

But the challenge with them is that to anchor the meaning of the word is very challenging because they're not concrete, right? They're not nouns and verbs, most of them, so I can't just picture it.

I can picture a cat, I know what it looks like. I mean, there are different sorts of cats, but I've got this image, and so that makes that connection with meaning stronger early on when we're trying to learn the link between the letters and the sounds.

Yet with high frequency words, most of them are function words, right? They fill in the space between the content words, but they're grammatical, and so we talk about using them in a sentence. We always talk about this three-step process of anchor, analyze, practice.

Anchor the meaning of the word, which we can do with all of our words, content, whatever, this is what we've been talking about, the morphology and the word families. Anchor the meaning.

Then analyze it. Is it just a base? What are the letter-sound correspondences?

Then practice, practice, practice, practice, practice, and more practice. We do need lots of practice.

Anchoring the meaning of high frequency words can be challenging. We need to use them in sentences. We also need to talk about how many of them are used in a way that does not just have one usage.

You know, a word as simple as on, we tend to teach children, “What does on mean?” We show them putting a cup on the table, but when we actually use that word, we use it in so many different ways. We turn on the light. We say what's on our mind. I've been on a holiday. We use it in a variety of ways that have nothing to do with placement.

For our children, particularly our children who have English as an additional language or come from homes where they don't have strong oral vocabulary and usage, that becomes really challenging. We’ve selected sentences, because on the spot who can think of a sentence? I can't. So there are sentences there for you to read with the children to show the usage of the word.

Then there's a tale. Rebecca has spent many, many, many hours researching the history of these words, and then we have rewritten that in child-friendly language. It's just a couple of sentences to explain it, but when we explain and tell the tale, we're helping them to see that words have stories. We're helping them to understand how that word was used and how it ended up being spelled the way it was.

A word like was, for example, W-A-S, which I might pronounce the A like a short O, you probably pronounce it like a short U, neither of us pronounce it like a short A. But guess what? Back in the olden days, they did. They would say /w/-/ă/-/s/! Then kids have fun going, “Oh, I /w/-/ă/-/s/ going!”

We're helping them to understand by telling the little story and saying pronunciation changes over time, but the spelling often remains consistent. We're building up that understanding.

We have a series of workbooks that you can buy the PDF and download, and they have the tale included, they have the phonics information included, plus loads of games and activities and dictations and all that you need.

We are actually in the process of taking all of those, with another 30 words, and turning it into a book so that you have all of the information, but alphabetically you can just find the word that you want. You can find the story, you can find the sentences, you can find phrases, and you can find the phonics information about what's going on with the letter-sound correspondences. We've analyzed the words so that you can see the letter-sound links, so it will all be there for you. We're super excited that hopefully in the next few months that will come out.

Anna Geiger:

So this will be a physical book that people can buy?

Fiona Hamilton:

Absolutely, yeah.

Anna Geiger:

Oh, exciting, exciting. Wonderful, I'll look forward to that!

Well, we could talk much longer, but we'll wrap this up. Thank you so much for sharing so many things about morphology and words, and it'll be a long set of show notes linking to all your resources.

Is there anything else you want to share before we sign off?

Fiona Hamilton:

Yes, one last thing. You asked me about an entry point for teachers who are just dipping their toes in. I do have a self-paced workshop called Phonics and Morphology: A Love Story. It's not long and it has examples from kindergarten through years five or six, and it is showing the simple way that you can start to do what we talked about today.

Anna Geiger:

Wonderful. Well, thank you so much, Fiona. It was so nice to meet you and to hear all your information.

Fiona Hamilton:

Oh, it was a pleasure. I really enjoyed talking with you.

Anna Geiger:

Thank you so much for listening. Be sure to head to the show notes to get more resources from Fiona. You can find them at reachallreaders.com/episode 193. Talk to you next time!

Closing:

That's all for this episode of Triple R Teaching. For more educational resources, visit Anna at her home base, reachallreaders.com, and join our teaching community. We look forward to helping you reflect, refine and recharge on the next episode of Triple R Teaching.