Quick tips for teaching morphology in the primary grades

Triple R Teaching Podcast #232

Hello, this is Anna Geiger, author of *Reach All Readers* and creator of the Reach All Readers website. Today I'm very excited to bring back Sarah Paul from Sarah's Teaching Snippets. Sarah is an educator and full of knowledge about many things, but today we're going to talk about morphology.

I apologize the sound quality isn't the very best, but I did what I could with it. I also always have a full transcript of all my episodes in the show notes. This is definitely worth checking out those show notes if you can't make out some of the words because she's got some really valuable practical ideas for teaching morphology in the primary grades. Here we go!

Anna Geiger:

Welcome back, Sarah!

Sarah Paul:

Thank you. I'm so excited to be here.

Anna Geiger:

Thank you for coming back, this time to talk about morphology in our Quick Tips for Teachers series.

Before we do that, can you remind us who you are and what you're doing now?

Sarah Paul:

My name is Sarah Paul and for most of my career, I've been a reading interventionist, but right now I wear a few different hats. I support early literacy at different school sites through a new high-impact tutoring program in my district. I tutor students from kindergarten through fifth grade, and I also still run Sarah's Teaching Snippets where I share science of reading ideas.

Anna Geiger:

Your Instagram account is especially helpful. I know for a long time you were doing kind of longer blog posts. Are you still doing that, or is most of what you share on social media?

Sarah Paul:

I took a little break from blog posts and now I've gone back and actually been revising them because when you say long, you are right! That's not very snippety, right? It was very long. I'm going back and editing them a little bit, and I've added a few more recently too.

Anna Geiger:

Okay, wonderful. We'll link to some of my favorites in the show notes because you've definitely spent your time really researching and sharing things in a very clear way.

We're going to talk now about morphology. Can you define that for us, and also morphological awareness? That's not a word we use as much.

Sarah Paul:

Yeah. Morphology is the study of morphemes, which are just those smallest units of meaning in our language. Some familiar terms might be prefixes, suffixes, and bases. Those are all morphemes.

Each of those morphemes individually holds meaning, right? Then when they come together to form new words, they're contributing their meaning to that word.

When we're studying morphology, we're exploring how these morphemes are combined to form words.

When we talk about morphological awareness, we're talking about having that understanding that words can be broken down into these smaller meaning parts. It's not just about sound, it's also about meaning, and that these parts can change a word's meaning or job in a sentence.

Believe it or not, kids actually do come to kindergarten with some morphological awareness. They might not be conscious of it, but that's our job, right? We take what they know through their oral language and make that morphology piece visible.

They already understand “dogs” means more than one “dog.” They know that when they say they're the “fastest,” that's better than just saying they're “fast,” right? They know it means the most of something.

When you hear errors like “runned” or “goed,” even though those aren't the correct form, that's them showing signs of morphological awareness because they know on some level that adding that little sound means that it already happened.

Even though they're using morphology in their everyday speech and they might have some morphological knowledge, they're not totally consciously aware of it, so we want to start including that morphology in our instruction to make that knowledge visible.

Anna Geiger:

Yeah, and I think any parent who's had a toddler has seen how kids play around with morphology without realizing what they're doing. My favorite story for that is when my nine year old was four, he came in and hung a swimsuit on the rack after being outside, and he said, “Mom, I hanged up my swimsuit.”

I said, “Oh, you hung it.”

And he said, “Yep, it's hunging!”

Sarah Paul:

Oh, I love that!

Anna Geiger:

It’s a really good example of being aware of the morphemes, but not quite sure how they go together.

We know that kids, even toddlers, are using morphemes, but I think so many people think that morphology is something we don't teach until third or fourth grade. Can you talk to us about why it's important to get started with this early on?

Sarah Paul:

Yeah, this is one of my favorite topics because I think the issue is that we think of morphology as Greek and Latin bases or some of the more complicated suffixes, but that's a misunderstanding of what morphology actually is because, like we just talked about, even kindergartners do start to read and spell multimorphemic words.

That's just a fancy way of saying words with more than one morpheme or meaning part. The word "runs" is multimorphemic, right? It has two morphemes, the base "run" and then the suffix S.

We already talked about how kids naturally are starting to apply morphology in their oral language, but they are encountering it in print, even in some decodable texts. Think about how we use ED, ING and S. I don't see it as something new that we're adding. I see it as bringing awareness to something they're already exposed to every day and then giving them the tools to tackle that with decoding and spelling.

The truth is morphology doesn't need to stand apart from phonics. It really weaves really nicely in with it.

Our language, as you know, is morphophonemic. Again, another big word that sounds really fancy, but all that means is that the words in our language are built on both sound and structure.

We've done such a great job as a community in the science of reading movement to bring a lot of focus to sound, but structure is just as important and that understanding does start in kindergarten. It starts really young.

Anna Geiger:

Today you're going to share five routines to help kids tune into how words are built. Can you share those with us now?

Sarah Paul:

Okay. I'm excited!

The first routine I'm going to share is just an oral one and it can be playful before print is even introduced. You can act it out if you want some flair.

I might bring a lock in and say, "What do I have here?" They're going to know probably it's a lock, so we're going to say the word "lock."

Then I'm going to act out, "I'm locking this. Now it's locked." I'm narrating as I'm doing it. "Wait, I need to unlock it. Oh, I better relock it now."

Once I've done all that, I'm going to ask my students, "What was the same about all of those words? I said locked, relocked, unlocked, locking."

They're probably going to figure out it was "lock."

"Oh, you know, they all kind of shared a meaning and they all have 'lock' somewhere in it. Well, what was different?"

They're going to probably focus on sound. "You said lock-ING and RE-lock."

What we're doing here is just taking 30 seconds to show them that these words are buildable, that these words are made up of different little pieces. We're focusing on both sound, structure, and then of course meaning within it.

Another quick routine that I like are morpheme chains. I'm sure that you've talked a lot about regular word chains where we're changing one sound at a time, but with morpheme chains, we're changing one morpheme at a time. You can start this even in first grade after you've taught suffixes S, ED, and ING Those are three different suffixes.

You can even play with words in your phonics instructions. Say we're working on consonant clusters, I might take the word "helped." "Let's go ahead and spell that word. Now turn 'help' into 'helped.' Let's turn 'helped' into 'helping.'"

It's just a way for them to play with words and, again, it's not something extra. You can use it during your dictation time, what you're already doing.

You could even then go from "helping" to "jumping." It's another word where they get to use their phonics skills to figure out the spelling of "jump" but they're also seeing that these meaning pieces are attached to it.

Should I just keep going?

Anna Geiger:

Yes, I love it.

Sarah Paul:

Okay. Word sums are another favorite of mine because they take little to no prep. A word sum is similar to a math equation. It shows the structure of a word by separating a morpheme with plus signs, and then showing the completed word on the other side of an arrow.

I'll use an example to try to help us visualize this. The word "jumped" has two morphemes. We have the base, J-U-M-P, and then we have the suffix, ED.

To write that as a word sum, you would write, "jump + ed -> jumped". You have that whole word.

The plus sign shows how the word parts come together, and the arrow points to that finished word. It's just a visual way to show how words are constructed.

You could even pull words straight out of a text you're already reading and write quick word sums on the spot.

Let's say you have a decodable text when you're at your reading table, "Let's get out the whiteboards. I see a few words there that have more than one morpheme." Or you could use the word suffix, "I see some words with a suffix. Let's write a word sum together." You are just bringing that awareness and attention to those morphemes.

One of the biggest benefits of a word sum too is that when you get to some of those suffix rules, like dropping the E, the word sum makes it more visual.

For example, if I come across the word "baking" or "baker," I can show that dropped E within that word sum. I would write the original word, which has that E: B-A-K-E. I make that plus sign and ING. But then after my arrow, I have the word "baking" without the E. Students get to see and capture that step and understand why it's spelled the way it is. We'd even do a line over the E to show that we're crossing that E out, we're dropping it.

It's just such a great way to explore morphology, and it's nothing extra. You just grab a whiteboard and use the text you're already using.

Anna Geiger:

So much of this requires a teacher to just to be tuned into these opportunities, right? Just to remember that, even if we're just doing CVC words, we can still... If you're doing "run," you can turn it into "runs." If you're doing "jump," you can turn it into "jumped," and we've all seen the kids that spell it with a T at the end. Starting very early on, you can help them see that just because it sounds like /t/, it's not necessarily spelled that way.

Like you said, the English language is morphophonemic. It's not just about sound, and the sooner we can teach them that, the better, because this is such a foundational understanding about language.

Sarah Paul:

Exactly, and with these you're weaving in, you're still going to do your lesson on ED so that you can explicitly teach them that ED can make three different sounds, but then you don't stop there.

I think the key is that... I used to, early on, I would be so proud of myself. I'd teach my lesson on ED and I'd say, "Great, I did it!" Not realizing that there are opportunities every single day to revisit that lesson without adding a new lesson to the docket.

The next routine is another great one because it focuses on a base, and it's all about the base, as Michelle Sullivan and I always say. It's all about the base. What it does is it helps students to see that words are actually connected in families.

I'll try to describe a word matrix. You can visualize as I talk about it. A word matrix is what I call the ultimate graphic organizer. It shows all of the prefixes and suffixes that can attach to a single base, thinking of all the different words you can make. It helps kids see that one base can actually unlock an entire family of related words.

So picture three columns. The base goes in the middle because that's the core of the word and the whole matrix is built around that base. Then prefixes go in one or more columns to the left of the base and suffixes can go in one or more columns to the right of the base.

Let's do a simple example. If we're exploring the base, P-L-A-Y, that would go in the center.

As a quick side note, you've noticed that I've been spelling out morphemes, and that's because as students get older with bigger words, that pronunciation can vary, and it can shift when you're adding different morphemes. Spelling keeps the focus on that structure, which is consistent, whereas that pronunciation isn't always. I didn't want to veer too much, but I wanted to explain that real quick.

So you always start with meaning. If P-L-A-Y is our base, we're going to talk about what that means to everybody and build that shared understanding. "When you use the word 'play,' what do you think of?"

Then the next steps with building a matrix can vary, but one way you can do it is just by brainstorming some words with "play" in it. Kids can often come up with lot of these words, but you can also guide them.

You might say something like, "Well, I want to 'play' a song again. What word could we use?" The beauty of doing this with a group is somebody's going to say "replay." If they don't, that's okay too, because it's a great moment. "Have you ever heard the word 'replay?'" You can just bring that to their attention.

Brainstorming is great because it's exploratory and it's explicit at the same time. They're going to come up with something, and I'm going to bring it back together and make sure that they really got the point that I wanted them to get.

Once you have your list of words, now we can start filling in this matrix. You have that opportunity to break apart some of these words.

For example, with “replay,” we're going to look at it and say, “Find your base! Does everyone see the base? Let's underline it. P-L-A-Y. So now we have RE. Can we think of other words that also use R-E? ‘Refill’ or ‘reload,’ there are so many words. Let's put RE on the prefix side.”

Then on the suffix side, you have suffix S, ED, ING, and the list goes on. FUL for “playful.” ER for “player.”

Another great thing about matrices is that I could just stop there if I think that’s plenty of words for my class to explore, or you could add another column to make “playfully” next. Adding another column to make a three morpheme word instead of just the two with “playful.” You could also add compounds, like “playroom.”

Your finished matrix becomes this visual representation of the family. Instead of just learning the word “play,” think about all these words that they've learned.

I always say remembering two or three morphemes with consistent spelling is so much easier than memorizing a sequence of eight or ten letters that changes from word to word, right? These are consistent. They're going to see the same morphemes over and over again.

Once you build your matrix, it doesn't stop there. You could then do several different activities.

You can display it, and it could be sort of a decoding activity. If I display my matrix and I point to RE and then to PLAY and then ED, I'm going to give my students time to think about what that word is. That's decoding. “What could that word be? Oh, replayed.”

That's a little bit more structured where I'm choosing the words, but then they could take a partner and they can find words. They could use that matrix and say, “Let's see how many words we can find. How many are real and how many are not real? Let's use them in a sentence to explore if they are real.”

Then one of my favorite things is to bring in grammar and meaning by using sentences.

For example, I might write on the board or even just say orally, “My new puppy is very…” Then I'm going to ask my students to look at the matrix and mix and match to find a word that makes sense. If a student needs scaffolding, give them a partner. Let's think of a word. Then to get maximum participation, they each have a whiteboard, and they're going to use that matrix to spell the word. “The word is playful. My new puppy is very playful.”

Here we have that maximum participation. They're getting in practice spelling these morphemes. They have that scaffold with that matrix up there.

Then I can reinforce. “Oh, the suffix FUL turned ‘play’ into a describing word. That's kind of fun. What do you picture when I say a puppy is playful?” I can build on it. “I can change the sentence. What if I wrote my new puppy playfully tugged on the rug?” You can just talk about how the job changed there.

They don't need to memorize that when you add LY, now it's an adverb. I'm not asking first graders to do that yet. But I am asking them to notice the job of the word.

Again, we're seeing, we're spelling, and we're manipulating morphemes that they'll encounter over and over and over again.

What you're doing is it's not just a lesson on the base “play.” We're going to look at “care,” we're going to look at “help,” and we’re going to think about those similar morphemes. We’ll do “careful,” “carefully,” and they'll see it again.

Each time you explore a base, you're reinforcing meanings and jobs of affixes as well. By the time I teach a prefix or suffix officially, sometimes my students have laughed at me and been like, “We know!” because they've seen it so many times.

Again, that was a simple example, and I know you have some great matrices that you've shared on your Instagram page and that you sell that have free bases and bound bases for older students, second grade and beyond, that can get pretty large with those multimorphemic words.

Everyone here can participate. Striving readers find success because it is easier for them than reading a list of random words. Advanced readers love it because they can kind of keep stretching and making these new discoveries.

For those of you who love phonics out there, this absolutely connects to your phonics lesson because if you're teaching a phonics pattern, you can just choose a base that fits that pattern.

The other day I was working on DGE with a student and we did a matrix for “judge.” There are not a ton of words, but there are enough words, and we really needed to practice that DGE. I also wanted to kind of build in these concepts of morphemes for this student, because that's one thing I'm noticing in his spelling.

He blew me away. The first thing he said was, “You know, I feel misjudged sometimes.” He didn't know that MIS meant wrong or whatever, but he knew the meaning of that word.

Anna Geiger:

That's so interesting.

Sarah Paul:

Isn't that interesting? After building that matrix, he can use that understanding from misjudge next time he sees that prefix, MIS. I just love it.

With much younger students, I often use morpheme cards. I don't always just write it. I'll get a pocket chart. If anyone out there is listening who follows me, I hope you're chuckling! You know I love my pocket charts. I have like 800 of them!

I love building matrices in a pocket chart. Kids can manipulate that, and it just becomes a really fun activity.

Anna Geiger:

People can't see you because this is just audio, but you've got a big smile on your face. I know that you're really passionate about this and it comes through, and it's just really fun to think about all the ways to use a matrix. I had not thought about all those ways and all the stretching that you can do with it.

Also once you’ve built the matrix, they can use it to make word sums, and some kids might make just very basic word sums, and you may have kids who are more advanced and they can make the harder ones.

I know that you and Michelle Sullivan, who I just got to see in person at The Reading League, we talked morphology and other things… I know that you and she have partnered together to share some morphology resources. Can you talk about that a little bit?

Sarah Paul:

Yes, so this is my new venture and I'm so excited about it. I love Michelle so much. She's amazing. We have created a set of courses, and our first course has been done for a little while now.

The first course is more of a foundational course that a teacher that teaches any grade could benefit from. It's giving them the background that Michelle and I wish we had when we first started this journey. We both have been exploring morphology for about a decade each, and we've had to look in so many different places to learn this knowledge, so we thought we want to just put it all together in one place. We're so proud of that course and all of the knowledge that it can bring to a teacher.

Then our second course, which we're currently finishing, is specifically for kindergarten through second grade students and teachers and it is a lot of stuff I'm talking about, but with a curriculum that's attached to it. It's giving teachers which words to use, what suffixes should we teach, what prefixes, and just sort of laying it out like that with some more background knowledge.

Then our third course is going to be for third through fifth grade.

Anna Geiger:

Well, those are very needed, and I'm hoping many people take advantage of them. We'll definitely link to what's available in the show notes.

Thank you so much for coming on to share your ideas about teaching morphology in the lower grades.

Sarah Paul:

Thank you so much for having me! This was so fun.

Anna Geiger:

You can find the show notes for today's episode at reachallreaders.com/episode232. 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.