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**Sounds, Syllables, and Spellings:
The Case for a Morphophonemic Approach to Word Learning**

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Author's Note

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Abstract

This exploratory article examines some current practices associated with systematic phonics instruction and the challenges associated with such practices as identified in the literature. Morphological instruction, having been found to benefit students with reading and spelling difficulties, strengthens arguments in favor of morphophonemic approaches such as Structured Word Inquiry (SWI). SWI is presented as an instructional approach that gives teachers and students an additional perspective to consider in the teaching and learning of word meanings, word reading, and spelling. SWI is presented as a morphophonemic approach to word analysis that reveals the logic of English spelling and its role in the prioritization and preservation of meaning. Viewed through the lens of critical literacy, SWI interrogates the prioritization of phonics over meaning-based approaches as well as the power dynamics associated with teacher-centered instruction. The multiplicity that is a hallmark of critical literacy applies to SWI's multiple dimensions of morphology, phonology, and etymology, all of which interact in the process of learning to spell, read, and define words. SWI has been postulated to enhance student motivation for word learning, so its potential utility for fostering literacy development in adolescent struggling readers is considered.

Keywords: systematic phonics, syllable division, alphabetics, spelling, morphology, morphophonemic approach, adolescent struggling readers, Structured Word Inquiry, motivation

Sounds, Syllables, and Spellings: The Case for a Morphophonemic Approach to Word Learning

This exploratory article examines differing perspectives toward teaching basic reading skills to students beyond the elementary grades for whom reading and spelling continue to be a struggle, whether due to disability (e.g., dyslexia) or otherwise. The first part of this article discusses some common assumptions and practices associated with systematic phonics instruction. It explores historical and current perspectives regarding associated instructional practices such as syllable division; the positioning of morphological instruction as secondary to phonics; the practice of labeling some words as irregular, or exceptions to the rules of pronunciation or syllabication; and insufficient emphasis on spelling. Possible reasons for considering instructional alternatives are offered. Also noted are (1) a challenge to the assertion that English is a purely alphabetic language; and (2) the counterview that English is a morphophonemic language, the spelling of which represents not only sound, but importantly, meaning.

The second part of this article discusses the morphophonemic nature of English spelling and how this understanding of spelling potentially empowers educators with an additional vantage point from which to guide students through a process of inquiry in order to develop vocabulary, word reading, and spelling skills. Although systematic phonics programs may include morphology and spelling, the priority and emphasis tend to be phonics. Morphological approaches place greater—and earlier—emphasis on spelling (i.e., orthography) and its inherently logical, meaningful nature. Discussed are morphological instruction in general and Structured Word Inquiry (SWI; Bowers & Kirby, 2010) in particular. Although the body of efficacy research on SWI is small, and more research is needed, its logic renders it worthy of consideration as an approach to teaching spelling and morphology that supports growth in literacy skills. Finally, as a method of inquiry in which both teacher and learner investigate the etymological, morphological, and phonological aspects of words together, SWI—when viewed through a lens of critical literacy—may be seen as a challenge to the power dynamics of teacher-centered instruction and the positioning of phonics first.

Nothing in this article should be construed as dismissing the importance of alphabets, phonics, or a knowledgeable teacher; each plays a role in helping students develop literacy skills. Rather, this article is an examination of the practicality of certain longstanding practices associated with systematic phonics instruction, especially with older struggling readers and spellers. Also, it is an exploration of the possibility SWI holds as an alternative approach to fostering literacy development and motivation in adolescents whose basic reading challenges persist despite systematic phonics instruction.

Part I. Concerns and Considerations Around Common Practices

Systematic Phonics Instruction

The Report of the National Reading Panel (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2000) defined systematic phonics instruction as “a way of teaching reading that stresses the acquisition of letter-sound correspondences and their use to read and spell words” (p. 2-89). Systematic phonics programs vary in their approaches, but all follow a planned sequence of phonics concepts to be taught explicitly and systematically, and all share a common goal of helping learners gain sufficient command of the alphabetic code. The focus of systematic phonics is to help students learn the alphabetic system through explicit instruction and to enable students to apply letter-sound knowledge, also known as grapheme-phoneme correspondences (GPCs), to the decoding of unfamiliar words and to the automatic and accurate recognition and reading of familiar words. Systematic phonics aims to help both beginning and struggling readers (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2000).

Some concerns about systematic phonics may be found in the literature. For example, Bowers and Bowers (2017) argued that systematic phonics does not give sufficient attention to the morphophonemic, as opposed to the alphabetic, nature of English spelling. They suggested also that instruction should target the strengths of struggling readers rather than their phonological processing weaknesses (Bowers & Bowers, 2017). Kearns (2020) noted that phonics instruction is important for learning GPCs but that no guidance exists regarding the extent to which they should be taught and at what point such instruction should stop. Kearns (2020) noted also that instruction in syllable division patterns persists, not because of scientific evidence of its efficacy, but because of its association with systematic phonics and the science of reading, and because of its longstanding history in the teaching of students with dyslexia. Cooke (2011) wrote that syllable instruction persists despite lack of supporting research evidence.

Syllable Division

Remedial strategies for teaching students who struggle to decode words often involve instruction in syllable division patterns (i.e., syllabification, syllabication) as part of systematic phonics instruction. The syllable division strategy aims to guide readers in the identification of a word’s VC [vowel-consonant] structure, allowing them to apply an associated syllable division pattern in order to divide the word into syllables, pronounce the vowel, read each syllable, and ultimately read the word (Kearns, 2020). However, the extent to which vowels make their expected sounds based on syllable patterns is a concern associated with this strategy. Even so, syllable division is taught within Orton-Gillingham approaches used to teach

reading to students with disabilities (e.g., dyslexia) and is included among educational practice standards at state and national levels, despite the scarcity of studies on the extent to which the syllable division patterns are consistently reliable indicators of vowel sounds (Kearns, 2020).

Fifty years ago, the research Groff (1971a) reviewed in his monograph indicated that instruction in syllable division in accordance with dictionary syllabication rules did not consistently lead to greater gains in reading and spelling than the absence of such instruction. Most phonics writers and educationists advised teachers to teach dictionary syllabication as a means of helping children learn to read and spell despite lack of linguistic evidence to support dictionary syllabication for this purpose (Groff, 1972b). Cooke's (2011) review of Groff's (1971a) monograph forty years later noted that syllable instruction persists in approaches associated with science based reading instruction and multisensory structured language education, despite absence of direct support for its efficacy.

Syllables. Linguists understand the nature of syllables differently from the way phonics writers, educationists, and teachers do (Groff, 1971a). Phonetic, phonological, and phonics-based syllables differ from one another (Cooke, 2011), so there is a problem of definitional differences. Although linguists vary among themselves in their understandings of the nature of the syllable, they do agree on several aspects, including that syllables—not phonemes—are the irreducible units of speech sounds; that only certain combinations of consonant and vowel phonemes are allowed in English syllables; and that the English language is stressed timed, with stressed syllables alternating with unstressed syllables (Groff, 1971a). In contrast, teachers and educationists are said to view syllables as units of writing (Groff, 1971a; see also Cooke, 2011), as well as units of speech or units of pronunciation (Cooke, 2011). Despite consideration of the syllable as a unit of speech, instructional emphasis tends to be on visual indicators of syllable count, type, and division points in printed words (Cooke, 2011).

Although the extent to which syllable division improves reading and spelling has been questioned (e.g., Groff, 1971a, 1971b; Cooke, 2011; Kearns, 2020), the importance of syllables themselves continues to be recognized. Syllables themselves are distinct from the practice of syllable division (Bowers, n.d.). Syllables are fundamental in that they arrange phonemes in ways that allow them to be spoken. A sense of syllables aids oral language development in that learning to speak necessitates awareness of syllable stress (Groff, 1971a). Syllables may be important to English spelling because the ability to identify the stressed syllable in polysyllabic words can help with the correct application of some spelling generalizations (e.g., consonant letter doubling), and spelling may be facilitated also by the ability to count syllables based on each syllable containing at least one vowel (Bowers, n.d.). Breaking polysyllabic words apart based on every syllable

having at least one vowel has been offered by Kearns (2020) as one alternative to syllable division rules or patterns.

Syllable Boundaries. Challenges associated with syllable division pertain not to the number of syllables in a word but rather to the division points, or boundaries, of syllables (Groff, 1971a). Disagreement over boundaries persists because pronunciation, of which spelling is merely a reflection, does not provide a basis for orthographic divisions (Hall, 1964, as cited in Groff, 1971a). While syllable division has been postulated to support word analysis and retention for both reading and spelling, it may actually be more problematic than helpful, given that spoken and written syllables do not always correspond and that syllable boundaries are not always clearly defined. Syllable boundaries lack the consistency and clarity that educators might prefer (Cooke, 2011). Cooke stated, “Because...pedagogical frameworks for syllable typing and division risk violating the nature of English phonology, we must question the efficacy and value of the continued teaching of multistep theoretical processes as aids to literacy” (p. 11).

Syllable Division Patterns. Kearns (2020) responded to Groff’s (1971b) call for a regathering of information on the hypothesized value of instruction in dictionary syllabication. Kearns (2020) examined the extent to which the V_a/CV_b and V_aC/CV_b syllable division patterns consistently reflect actual pronunciation of V_a in bisyllabic and polysyllabic (three or more syllables) words frequently occurring in texts for students in grades one through eight. Syllable division strategies commonly teach that V_a is generally long in the former and short in the latter pattern.

Kearns’s (2020) study yielded four key outcomes: (1) bisyllabic and polysyllabic VCCV words frequently followed the expected pronunciation of the VC/CV pattern, especially in analyses that compared long and short vowel cases and excluded reduced and other vowel sounds, but relatively less frequently when all vowels (long, short, reduced, and other) were analyzed together; (2) bisyllabic words with VCV letter strings followed the expected pronunciation of the V/CV pattern in just under half of occurrences and about two-thirds of the time when limiting the analysis to the comparison of long and short vowel cases; (3) in VCV words with more than two syllables, the V_a had the expected long sound in about one-third of instances; and (4) unstressed sounds applied to V_a contributed to generally low pattern reliability.

The limited reliability of syllable division patterns (especially the V/CV pattern) resulted from efforts “to impose order on a quasiregular orthography” (Kearns, 2020, p. S-153) that is not syllabically divisible (Bowers, n.d.). Based on his findings, and consistent with Cooke’s (2011) questioning of syllable division efficacy, Kearns (2020) concluded that the time spent on such an “effort-intensive” strategy as syllable division is not well justified (Kearns, 2020, p. S-153).

Acknowledging that students still need strategies for reading longer words, Kearns (2020) noted Goodwin and Ahn's (2013) finding that teaching students to identify and use morphemes to read words has helped students at the elementary and middle school levels. Cooke (2011) noted that English orthography is morphophonemic and that teaching it with respect to morphology makes sense, as does keeping graphemes and morphemes intact rather than compromising them for the sake of syllable division patterns (Cooke, 2011). More research is needed on morphological approaches to instruction, but the emerging evidence is so far encouraging (Cooke, 2011).

Sequencing

Approaches such as science based reading instruction and multisensory structured language education tend to treat morphological and etymological aspects of orthography as advanced concepts to be reserved for later in their instructional sequences (Cooke, 2011). According to Bowers and Bowers (2018c), the practice of introducing morphology later in the instructional sequence has been referred to as the “‘phonology first’ hypothesis” (p. 3); lacks an evidence base; assumes that the English language strictly follows the alphabetic principle, which maintains that letters represent sounds and that these letter-sound correspondences must be taught first; and does not consider that “most words that children need to learn at the start of instruction are multisyllabic and/or multimorphemic, and these words are far less regular in terms of phonics” (p. 3).

Irregularities / Exceptions

Cooke (2011), Kearns (2020), and Bowers (n.d.) all challenged the labeling of phonetically irregular words as exceptions when they do not follow an expected pronunciation rule based on spelling or syllable division pattern. Kearns (2020) stated that, for V/CV patterns in his study, the so-called exceptions were more the rule. Cooke (2011) suggested that the existence of words that might be deemed exceptions to syllable division rules necessitates that teachers choose words for instruction that follow the patterns and that students guess when words do not—processes that do not seem very scientific. According to Bowers (n.d.),

syllabification cannot function because it isn't a consideration on which English orthography evolved—so it doesn't actually work. Anyone who has worked with syllabification tells me that there are many exceptions. Those exceptions are supposed to be telling us something. When a hypothesis fails to explain a significant portion of the data (has “exceptions”) we are not supposed to blame the data

(spelling) and continue to hold onto that hypothesis. We are supposed to reject the hypothesis and try alternative ones that do explain the data. (para. 12)

Exploration of alternative hypotheses may be done through a process such as Structured Word Inquiry (SWI; Bowers & Kirby, 2010), which does not dismiss multisyllabic or multimorphemic words as exceptions or irregularities when pronunciations are unexpected based on their spellings or syllable types. Rather, consideration is given to the fact that English prioritizes consistent spelling of morphemes over the consistent spelling of phonemes in order to preserve meanings and therefore is not purely alphabetic but rather morphophonemic (Bowers & Bowers, 2018b).

Spelling

Spelling has been postulated to support reading development, but improved reading does not necessarily lead to improved spelling (Kilpatrick; 2015; Cunningham, Nathan, & Raheer, 2011; Moats, 2006). Furthermore, spelling reportedly benefits little from phonics instruction. The National Reading Panel (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2000) specifically noted that phonemic awareness training had little impact on the spelling skills of disabled readers, and systematic phonics instruction did not improve the spelling skills of older readers. The Panel noted that advancement through the grades coincides with a need for knowledge of “higher level regularities” that facilitates memory for word spellings, and this type of knowledge is “not covered in phonics programs” (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2000, p. 2-95). The NRP report provided the following explanation:

as readers move up in the grades, remembering the spellings of words is less a matter of applying letter-sound correspondences and more a matter of knowing more advanced spelling patterns and morphologically based regularities which is not typically addressed in phonics instruction. (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2000, p. 2-116)

The preceding quotation is significant because it (1) has implications for orthographic memory in older and struggling readers, (2) acknowledges the limitations of phonics instruction with respect to spelling outcomes, (3) and recognizes that remembering spellings has to do with knowing advanced patterns and morphologically based regularities. Given that improved spelling may

translate to improved reading, it makes sense to emphasize morphology and related orthography (spellings) early on within instruction program sequences.

Orthographic Processing/Mapping

How readers come to know the more advanced spelling patterns and morphological regularities noted above likely has to do with orthographic processing. The field has not always agreed on how to define the construct of *orthographic processing*. Cunningham et al. (2011) proposed the following operational definition:

the ability to form, store, and access orthographic representations, which (a) specify the allowable order of letters within the orthography of a specific language, and (b) are themselves tightly linked to phonological, semantic, morphological, and syntactic information within the language in which they operate. (p. 263)

It would seem that an accurately processed and stored orthographic representation is one that has been orthographically mapped for future access. Orthographic mapping is a theory posited by Ehri (e.g., Ehri, 2014) to explain how children (1) develop mental representations of words such that words are recognized and read with automaticity, (2) spell words from memory, and (3) acquire new vocabulary from print (Ehri, 2014).

It is worth noting that Cunningham et al. (2011) linked orthography not only to phonology, but also to morphology, which deals with morphemes and their meanings, which in turn can promote not only vocabulary development but also memory for spellings because of their connection to meaning. This link reflects the idea that spelling is morphophonemic (Venezky, 1967), in that it reflects meaning first, and then sound. The connection between spelling and meaning may have implications for students with reading disabilities (e.g., dyslexia). As Bowers and Bowers (2017) explained,

one obvious point to note is that most struggling readers are typically failing in the context of a curriculum that already emphasizes grapheme-phoneme correspondences. It may be that the continued emphasis on phonological training is less than optimal, especially for those children who have poor phonological-processing skills. By contrast, morphological instruction emphasizes the role that meaning plays in organizing spellings, and

accordingly, morphological interventions for struggling readers may take advantage of compensatory, as opposed to restitutive, processes.
(p. 135)

Thus, an approach to spelling (orthography) that targets only letter-sound correspondence and ignores the meanings that morphemic spellings represent would be incomplete and would likely be less helpful to students identified as having the phonological processing challenges associated with dyslexia or reading disability.

But what about so-called irregular words or exceptions—words with patterns containing imperfect letter-sound correspondences? How are they orthographically mapped? Circling back to the topic of phonetic regularities and so-called irregularities (exceptions), we will now begin to explore an instructional approach that aims to address this matter by helping learners connect spelling to meaning. Such connection of spelling to meaning reveals that English spellings are not irregular or exceptional.

Part II. Morphophonemic Approaches to Spelling and Reading

Morphological Instruction

A meta-analysis by Goodwin and Ahn (2010) found that morphological instruction helped improve the phonological awareness, morphological awareness, vocabulary, reading comprehension, and spelling of children with literacy challenges. The authors suggested that morphological instruction might help support students with phonological processing weaknesses. A second meta-analysis by Goodwin and Ahn (2013) found that morphological instruction overall benefitted morphological knowledge, phonological awareness, decoding, vocabulary, and spelling of children with a range of learning profiles. Effects were greatest for younger students. The meta-analysis by Bowers, Kirby, and Deacon (2010) found that morphological instruction benefitted less able readers and was similarly effective in both younger and older readers.

These outcomes suggest that morphological instruction helps struggling readers. They challenge instructional sequences that emphasize morphology later rather than sooner (see also Bowers & Bowers, 2017) and that prioritize phonology (Bowers & Bowers, 2018c). As Goodwin and Ahn (2013) explained, “early morphological instruction may be particularly helpful perhaps because of the synergistic relationship between phonology and morphology and the larger repertoire of root and affix meanings available for use” (p. 279). Arguably, there is no compelling reason to prioritize phonological over morphological instruction.

Based on the previous discussion of systematic phonics and its references to the alphabetic system and alphabetic code, readers may discern that the alphabetic principle underlies systematic phonics instruction. The alphabetic principle maintains that the function of letters is to represent speech sounds (Bowers & Bowers, 2018a, 2018b) and that word spellings depend on word pronunciations (Bowers & Bowers, 2017). To be clear: the importance of learning grapheme-phoneme correspondences (GPCs) is not disputed (J. Bowers, 2020). But what is challenged is (1) the idea that English is strictly alphabetic, and (2) that words with unexpected pronunciations based on their graphemes are irregular, or exceptions. Even though there are experts who admit that English has an abundance of inconsistencies, they maintain that English is an alphabetic language (Bowers & Bowers, 2018b). In contrast, Bowers and Bowers (2018b) echo other experts (e.g., Venezky, 1967) in describing English as a morphophonemic language in which spelling represents both meaning and sound, prioritizing preservation of meaning through spellings.

Morphology is the study of morphemes, the smallest units of meaning that form words. Bases, prefixes, and suffixes are morphemes that combine to build multimorphemic words (Bowers, Kirby & Deacon, 2010). Structured Word Inquiry (SWI; Bowers & Kirby, 2010) is a process of morphological problem solving. This process entails analysis and synthesis of the morphemes to discern the meanings of unknown words. The idea, supported by research evidence, is that knowledge transfers from explicitly taught words to untaught derivations of the same words (Bowers & Kirby, 2010).

Structured Word Inquiry (SWI)

The body of research literature on Structured Word Inquiry (SWI) is still small but promising (Hastings & Trexler, 2021). In 2010, Bowers and Kirby described the instructional philosophy of their study's experimental program with the name "structured word inquiry" (p. 524), a guided problem solving process of investigation of how word structure conveys meaning. Study results indicated that fourth- and fifth-grade students developed the knowledge and skills needed to expand their vocabulary beyond words they were taught as long as they knew the meaning of the base. The authors posited that morphological analysis might help students recognize a learned base in multimorphemic words that they might otherwise not notice without the knowledge gained through instruction. Their results suggested that students who were better able to apply the morphological problem solving process, the ones who knew what to look for, were the ones better equipped to recognize the morpheme that linked an unfamiliar word to a familiar one (Bowers & Kirby, 2010).

The investigative process that underlies SWI is illustrated in the following expansion of an example borrowed from Bowers and Kirby (2010). It illustrates

the aforementioned point about knowledge transfer. It also illuminates some confounds relative to alphabets and syllable division.

A student who has been explicitly taught the word *sign* now has a basis for understanding words containing the morpheme *sign*, such as *design* and *signal*. These two derivations apply affixes (prefix and suffix, respectively) to the base *sign*. This shows how morphological instruction calls attention to relationships among words built from the same base. It also shows learners that the silent < g > in *sign* (which, in an alphabetic approach, might have been rendered an exception or a sight word to be memorized) actually has a role in marking the /g/ sound in *signal*.

Taking this example further, let us consider the related words *designate*, *signature*, *signify*, and *insignia*. Even though one may not have encountered these words in the past, the ability to link them to the word *sign* theoretically provides clues about meaning and explains why the word *sign* maintains its < g > even though, in *sign*, it is not pronounced. Going even further to understand more about the < g >, an inquiry into the etymology of *sign* reveals the word's historical ties to Old French *signe* and Latin *signum* (see Etymonline.com).

Finally, circling back to the earlier discussion of syllabication and syllable boundaries, and using the word *designate* as an example, four observations can be made: (1) the word *designate* can be found in online dictionaries divided typographically as *des / ig / nate* and (2) phonetically as /'de-zig- ,nāt/ or /dĕz-ŷg-nāt'/ (see Merriam-Webster.com; see also thefreedictionary.com); (3) even though the < s > is pronounced /z/ rather than /s/, one familiar with the base *sign* is not likely to spell *designate* with < z > because spelling prioritizes meaning over sound representation (Bowers & Bowers, 2018b); and (4) morphological analysis would have the division be *de sign ate* (prefix, base, suffix) in order to keep the meaningful units (morphemes) intact.

The preceding examination is the nature and process of Structured Word Inquiry (SWI; Bowers & Kirby, 2010): it is indeed an inquiry into the intersection of orthographic morphology, phonology, and etymology. When spelling is taught with this problem-solving approach, the logic and order of spelling are revealed. And arguments and teaching practices favoring a purely alphabetic system, typographical syllable patterns and divisions, and irregular or exception words seem to lose their power.

SWI and Critical Literacy

Hastings and Trexler (2021) viewed SWI through the lens of critical literacy, examining and challenging the power dynamics of common instructional practices and philosophies. Critical literacy assumes the stance that ideology shapes practices within institutions and promotes interrogation of the connection between language and power. These authors argued that lack of knowledge depth with

respect to the triad of orthographic morphology, phonology, and etymology perpetuates the classification of nonconforming words as exceptions, or irregular, and leaves both educators and students with little other than memorization as an approach to address the nonconformities. The authors argued that such a surface-level approach, combined with the roles of teacher positioned as expert and student as passive recipient of instruction, is a call for transformation by way of disruption that allows teachers to increase their own knowledge through shared inquiry alongside their students (Hastings & Trexler, 2021).

Hastings and Trexler (2021) suggested that the process of investigating words through SWI creates a more equitable learning situation for both students and teachers. They posited that *inquiry* implies that neither teacher nor student initially possesses the answers. Perhaps this means that no one is an expert on every single word, and a process of inquiry allows both teachers and students to explore words as the need arises. As Hastings and Trexler (2021) explain,

inquiries that derive from students' questions more noticeably disrupt the expectation for educators to determine the curriculum or fulfill the role of "expert,"—thereby challenging hierarchical power dynamics by constructing reciprocal learning opportunities. In reciprocal relationships, educators and students inspire each other's curiosity and share in the role of leading one another towards deeper understanding. (p. 16)

This is not to say that teachers should not be knowledgeable or well-prepared or experts; rather, it means that the process of inquiry is shared, rather than the teacher assuming a position of power and control over the entire lesson from start to finish. SWI is a process that involves teachers and students working together to apply a problem-solving process to word learning.

A hallmark of critical literacy is the notion of multiplicity. The three dimensions of SWI (morphology, phonology, and etymology) are consistent with the notion of multiplicity in that the single dimension of phonology is not privileged over the other dimensions of morphology and etymology (Hastings & Trexler, 2021). As Venezky (1967) stated, "the simple fact is that the present orthography is not merely a letter-to-sound system riddled with imperfections, but, instead, a more complex and more regular relationship wherein phoneme and morpheme share leading roles" (p. 77).

Motivational Considerations

Hastings and Trexler's (2021) critical literacy perspective brings us full circle. If we view SWI through the lens of critical literacy, we may see that it challenges some longstanding practices and ideas associated with systematic phonics (e.g., phonics first, irregularities and exceptions, syllable division) that persist. In their argument against phonics for older students, Ivey and Baker (2004) noted that too much focus on systematic phonics interventions detracts from the multidimensionality and interactivity associated with literacy growth and reading experiences, and that it does not motivate adolescents to read independently beyond the classroom. A critical view (Hastings & Trexler, 2021) gives us pause to consider that teacher-centered, scripted programs with strict scopes and sequences delivered to passive students are unlikely motivating and may not be the best approach, especially for struggling readers with phonological processing problems (Bowers & Bowers, 2017).

Conclusion

Nothing in this discussion should be construed as dismissing the importance and necessity of learning foundational skills such as grapheme-phoneme correspondences, the concept of a syllable, or phonics. Rather, this discussion considers where the instructional emphasis should be, when, for how long, and for whom. Even though some of the literature found morphological instruction most beneficial to younger students, older struggling readers and spellers arguably may need something more than, or different from, systematic phonics. Offered for consideration is that older students, especially those who have not succeeded with phonics-based approaches due to phonological processing weaknesses, may benefit from—or be more motivated to engage in—instruction in word recognition and spelling that is thoughtful and age appropriate (Ivey & Baker, 2004), that promotes understanding of the logic of English spelling and its representation of meaning, and that could potentially motivate independent reading for enjoyment (Bowers & Bowers, 2018b). This exploratory article examines the research literature challenging the late positioning of morphology within instructional sequences and considers the interaction of morphology, phonology, and etymology in word learning that, because of its meaningful nature, may have the potential to help students anchor spellings in orthographic memory, build their reading vocabulary, and potentially motivate them to read on their own.

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