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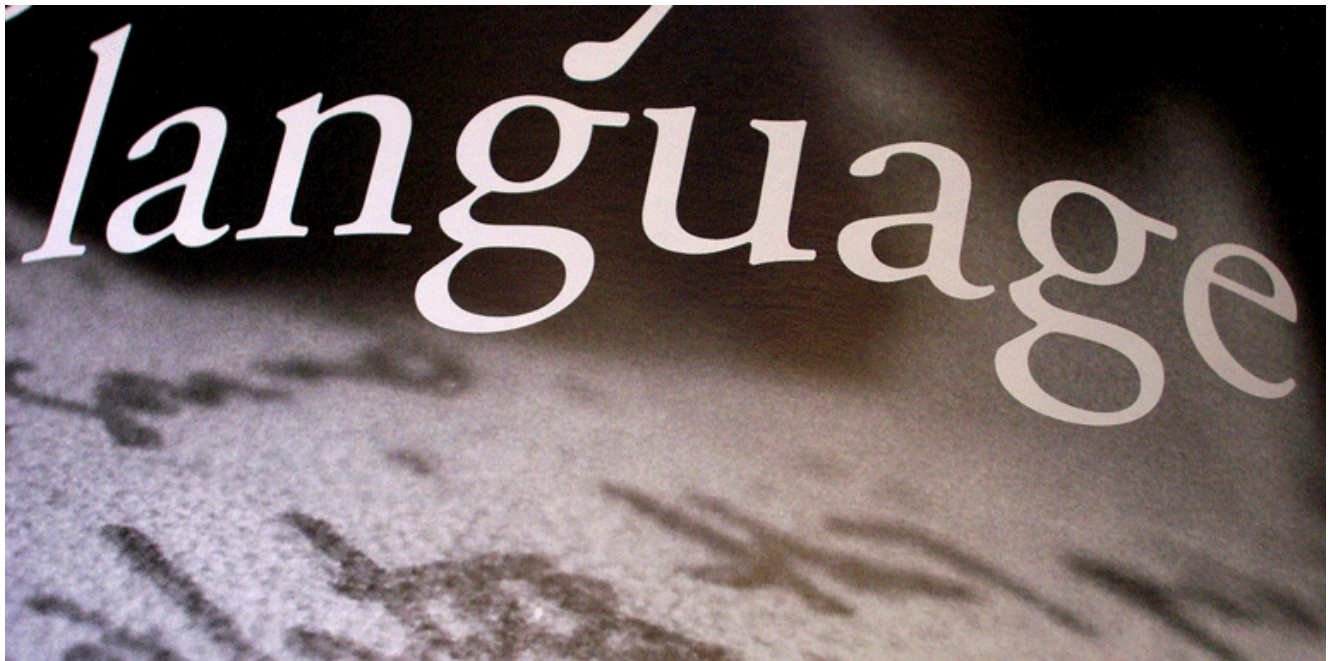


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Making the Words Add Up

HOW MORPHOLOGY — VIEWING WORDS AS A COMBINATION OF PARTS — CAN BECOME AN INSTRUCTIONAL TOOL FOR BUILDING READING SKILLS

BY [RUTH E. C. PRINCE \(/TAXONOMY/TERM/37241\)](#), ON JULY 25, 2010 11:01 AM



Many children who enter kindergarten with few English language skills successfully learn to read and comprehend text during the early grades. They also acquire oral English language skills that enable them to communicate effectively with their teachers and classmates. When these students reach the upper elementary years, however, many of them lack the necessary academic language skills to work with higher grade-level texts. As a result, English language learners may score in the 80th percentile on a word reading test, but in just the 19th percentile on a test of reading comprehension.

In a study of 90 English language learners in a Southern California public school system, Harvard Graduate School of Education (<http://www.gse.harvard.edu/>) Professor Nonie Lesaux (/node/126552), along with then-doctoral students Michael Kieffer and Amy Crosson, took a closer look at why these children fall behind, and how new instructional strategies might redress the balance.

CHALLENGES TO READING

Even before children enter the school system, according to Lesaux, students in lower-income schools are likely to have more limited vocabularies than children in higher-income schools. English language learners, of course, face an additional set of challenges as they struggle to learn the new language.

"Reading comprehension is a very complex process that draws mainly upon one's oral language skills," says Lesaux. "Good readers tend to have very large and sophisticated vocabularies in the language in which they are reading. A lot of English language learners are still acquiring that vocabulary, and so they don't bring with them enough vocabulary to make meaning from the text."

UPPER ELEMENTARY GRADES

Schools primarily focus on reading instruction from kindergarten through third grade. In fourth grade, however, the reading material becomes significantly more complex. "All of a sudden, students need to read not just for the sake of reading but in order to do their math," says Lesaux. "Textbooks function very

differently from a story book or narrative kind of text, never mind the technical language that is in there. Every kid, in order to read a book and have good comprehension, needs to know 80 to 90 percent of the vocabulary in the book. That's just way too high for most English language learners."

LESAUX'S STUDY

Substantial differences do exist, however, among the achievement levels of individual English language learners. This suggested to Lesaux that some students develop their own strategies to improve reading and comprehension. By identifying some of these strategies, Lesaux hoped to find the tools to help all students increase both their vocabulary and comprehension.

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Lesaux and her doctoral student colleagues examined how fourth and fifth graders break down words in order to extract their meaning. In the study, students were asked to extract a root word from a complex word in order to complete a sentence. For example, students were given the word "popularity," and had to finish the sentence, "The girl wanted to be very ____." Students were also given a range of standardized tests assessing reading comprehension, word reading fluency, and vocabulary. What quickly became clear was that the students who could break down words and make connections between similar words and word parts also scored higher in reading skills and word reading fluency.

WHAT IS MORPHOLOGY?

Morphology literally means the study of shape. An awareness of morphology begins in early childhood through adolescence. While younger children learn to add an "s" in order to make a word plural, older children may decipher the meaning of words by identifying their common roots with other words. Lesaux found that those students who take unfamiliar words and break them down into smaller parts, or morphemes, have increased success in deciphering unfamiliar vocabulary.

"What we looked for in the study were specific skills that lend themselves towards comprehension but also towards instructional strategies," says Lesaux. "We looked to see if morphological awareness was predictive of comprehension ability over and above just having a good vocabulary. When we found that it was, the next question was, how do we turn this into an instructional strategy? How do we get teachers keyed into working with kids to learn the roots of words?"

TAKING MORPHOLOGY INTO THE CLASSROOM

Building on previous research in this area, Lesaux came up with **four main instructional strategies** to be tested in classrooms.

1. Morphology should be taught as a distinct component of a vocabulary improvement program throughout the upper elementary years.
2. Morphology should be taught as a cognitive strategy to be learned. In order to break a word down into morphemes, students must complete the following four steps:
 - Recognize that they don't know the word.
 - Analyze the word for recognizable morphemes, both in the roots and suffixes.
 - Think of a possible meaning based upon the parts of the word.
 - Check the meaning of the word against the context.

3. Students also need to understand the use of prefixes, suffixes, and roots, and how words get transformed.

4. Students who have a developed knowledge of Spanish can use cognates (words with similar spelling and meanings in both languages) to help their reading comprehension in both languages.

A DIFFERENT KIND OF LEARNING

While traditional instruction has focused upon reading words quickly and precisely, Lesaux's research suggests that English language learners need a more focused kind of reading instruction – in the domain of academic language – that continues beyond the early elementary years. For example, another focus of this research has been on kids' understanding of connectives, words such as "therefore" and "however." These words can carry a lot of meaning in a paragraph, and many students – particularly those who speak English as a second language – need help understanding exactly what that meaning is.

Lesaux believes that helping students decipher academic language and explaining meaning is something all teachers need to do. "Even a high school math teacher can't just think about math. They have to think about the vocabulary words, and key into the fact that some of the kids may not understand the directives on the worksheet. We need to spend more time talking about language."

With increased instruction in academic language, and increased attention to understanding of morphology and connectives, Lesaux hopes to close the gap between students' reading skills and their comprehension. "The kids in the study have been in the system since kindergarten," says Lesaux. "I have great conversations with them on the playground because they have well-developed oral proficiency. But when they work with a textbook or have to write an essay,

they just don't have the command of the academic language or vocabulary they need. It's time to make reading instruction for these kids a K through 12 experience."

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Nonie Lesaux's research is driven by the goal of increasing the literacy-learning opportunities for today's linguistically, culturally, and economically diverse students. Bridging developmental and intervention research, her work generates evidence and strategies for policymakers and practitioners.