

SWI/REPertoire THEORY DIAGNOSTIC SPELLING ASSESSMENT
By Mona Voelkel

In December of 2017, I was reading a professional journal and the phrase "makes phonics makes sense" or something similar jumped out at me from an article describing Structured Word Inquiry (Bowers & Kirby, 2010). It described a meaningful approach to spelling instruction that gave students a deep understanding of orthography as the inter-relationship between morphology, etymology, and phonology.

I read Dr. Peter Bowers book, *Teaching How the Written Word Works* (2006, 2009, 2013) which provided a great introduction to SWI and then took several of his engaging and informative online classes through his *WordWorks Literacy Centre*. I also took classes with Mary Beth Steven and Rebecca Loveless, who provided a wealth of resources, and shared an inspiring overview of Structured Word Inquiry in their classrooms. It was so interesting to discover that -tion is NOT a suffix (it's <-ion>) and start referring to "silent e" more accurately as "final, non-syllabic <e>". As I learned more, I discovered that spelling is a system where meaning is prioritized over pronunciation so I had to banish "sound it out" as my go-to strategy for helping students spell unknown words. Phonology is still addressed within Structured Word Inquiry (SWI), but within the meaningful morphological and etymological contexts.

In Structured Word Inquiry, teachers facilitate a word investigation guided by the 4 questions of Structured Word Inquiry (Bowers & Kirby, 2010):

1. What is the meaning?
2. How is it built? (Morphology)
3. What are its relatives? (Etymology and Morphology)
4. How is the pronunciation represented? (Phonology, Morphology and Etymology)

SWI was the answer for meaningful, accelerated, and joyous spelling instruction. Every SWI investigation knit the morphology, etymology and phonology of a word together within the meaningful framework of a word family and there was an immediate positive impact on spelling achievement and attitudes toward spelling, especially for dyslexic students. After spending years in a dark forest where spelling made no sense, SWI turned on blazing lights of understanding. The difference between SWI and other spelling frameworks is not magic, it's that SWI inquiry-based morphological, etymological, and phonological framework mirrors the reality of how the English orthographic system is organized.

Still think spelling makes no sense? Let me share a recent SWI investigation of <friend>:

<friend>

1. **Meaning?** Companion.
2. How is it **built**? <fri> is the base element. fri + end friend
3. What are its **relatives**? <Friday> was named after **Frig**, the goddess of love and friendship, and shares a historical root with <friend>. **The <i> in <friend> is an unpronounced grapheme in <friend> that emerges in <Friday>**, another word in the morphological family, sharing a base and sense of “love and friendship.”

Words in the <fri> family include *friend, Friday, befriend, friendship, unfriendly*

As part of our morphological investigation, I might use a linguistic tool, called a lexical word matrix to show how words in the family, which are words that share a base and meaning, are built. (See the screenshot below using the Mini-Matrix Maker (Ramsden) but students can easily construct their own matrices.)

Mini Matrix-Maker Results

[Morphology Home](#) / [Matrix Home](#) / [Matrix Edit](#) (closes window) / Matrix Results

be un	fri "love"	day		
		end	ly	ness
		ship s		

4. How is the **pronunciation** represented?

Let's look at how pronunciation is represented in the <fri> base in the word "friend:

Representing the pronunciation of the base of <friend>

< f r i > 3 graphemes

↕ ↕ ↕

/ f r ø / 3 phonemes (*including a phoneme that is not pronounced.*)

In <friend>, the <i> has a zero pronunciation, but it is pronounced in another word in the family: Friday. This meaningful connection to Friday will assist students in spelling <friend> and help them understand **why** "friend" is spelled <friend>.

Once students see that spelling is more than pronunciation, that it is the inter-relationship of meaning, morphology, etymology **and** phonology, they make the progress and learn with the joy that I always imagined was possible.

So, although Structured Word Inquiry had a positive impact on spelling achievement, my spelling assessment was still based on a hierarchial “stages of spelling” theory while SWI most closely mirrored an alternate theory of spelling development called **repertoire theory**. Repertoire theory, according to Misty Adoniou (2019):

(Repertoire Theory) has grown from analyses of students’ spelling showing that effective spellers draw upon multiple sources of knowledge when tackling any one word. Even children as young as 5 years old draw upon a range of spelling knowledge when attempting to spell words. For example, the student who wrote *I goed home* used phonological, orthographical, and morphological knowledge in the spelling of *goed*. It is grammatical knowledge of irregular tense formations that is missing, not spelling knowledge.

SWI embraces repertoire theory as it builds understanding of a word by giving students, not just phonological or visual or memorization strategies, but an inquiry/questioning **framework** that develops a repertoire of morphological, etymological **and** phonological strategies and understandings. The exploration of one word helps a child understand **a family of words** that are connected by meaning. (This is unlike most other spelling programs that refer to a family of words as words that share the same rhyming pattern.)

Unlike hierarchical spelling programs which favor a mastery of phonology before you “graduate” to morphology and etymology, SWI introduces students to the inter-relationship and richness of morphology, etymology and phonology of words. Right from the beginning, it tells students the truth about spelling.

SWI also has the added benefit that, as students grow in understanding, they develop the understandings to launch their own word investigations. Students are empowered to ask their own questions about spelling and make hypothesis and test those hypothesis within a supportive community. The SWI process creates a thirst for understanding that extends far beyond the spelling classroom.

So, it only makes sense that Structured Word Inquiry would need an assessment that reflects **repertoire theory** rather than **stage or hierarchial theory**. Since I couldn't find an adequate assessment, I designed my own diagnostic assessment to yield the necessary information after seeing a sample in the article, *Literacy Leadership Brief: Teaching and Assessing Spelling* by Misty Adoniou (International Literacy Association, 2019). Here is my version, called the "SWI/RT (Structured Word Inquiry/Repertoire Theory) Diagnostic Spelling Assessment", along with an invented student assessment, Spelling Assessment Analysis and Goals. I hope that you find this useful as you teach spelling using Structured Word Inquiry or explore the repertoire theory of spelling. Feel free to contact me (mvoelkel@me.com) with any questions, comments or suggestions.

SWI/RT Diagnostic Spelling Assessment

Meaningful Word	Student Spelling	Morphology			Phonology			Etymology
		# of Base(s) spelled correctly	# of Affix(es) spelled correctly	Suffixing Conventions for future instruction:	# of phonemes represented in base (whether spelled correctly or not.)	# of graphemes correctly chosen in base	# of markers	
Word Sum								Connections for future instruction
beautiful -> b <u>ea</u> u+ <u>ty</u> / <u>l</u> + <u>ful</u>	<u>butyfull</u>	0/1	1/2	Changing <y> to <i>	2/2	1/2	n/a	<beau> is a loan from <u>French</u> . <-ful> is influenced by English <full>
physical -> <u>ph</u> y s + <u>ic</u> +al	<u>fizikill</u>	0/1	0/2		3/3	1/3	n/a	The grapheme <ph> appears usually in bases of Greek origin
helpful -> h e l p + <u>ful</u>	<u>helpfull</u>	1/1	0/1		4/4	4/4	n/a	<-ful> is influenced by the English <full>
really -> r e a l + <u>ly</u>	<u>realy</u>	1/1	0/1	Add the cons. suffix to base	3/3	3/3	n/a	<-ly> is a suffix forming adjectives meaning, "having qualities of" from OE
scared -> s c a r e / + e d	<u>scerd</u>	0/1	0/1	Remove final e & add vowel suffix	3/3	2/3	n/a	Alteration of Middle English <u>skerren</u> : highlight concept of grapheme choice
undefeated -> un + de + f e a t + e d	<u>undifetd</u>	0/1	1/3	"	3/3	2/3	n/a	The grapheme choice of <u>feat</u> vs <u>feet</u> (foot) or <u>fête</u> is related to its Latin root <u>fact</u> and homophone <u>prin</u> .
pleasant -> p l e a s e / + a n t	<u>plezant</u>	0/1	1/1		4/4	2/4	n/a	The grapheme choice of <ea> is related to the Latin <u>placere</u> and the need to have a single grapheme that can represent different <u>phoemes</u> /as across the family.
friend -> f r i e n d + <u>ly</u>	<u>frendly</u>	0/1	1/1		5/5	5/5	0/1	<Friday> was named after <u>Frig</u> , the goddess of love and friendship and shares a root with <friend> so, as we are considering <friend> a base, the <i> represents an etymological marker
Total		2/8	4/12		2727	2027	0/1	

SWI/Repertoire Theory Spelling Assessment

Meaningful Word	Student Spelling	Morphology			Phonology			Etymology
		# of Base(s) spelled correctly	# of Affix(es) spelled correctly	Suffixing Conventions for future instruction:	# of phonemes represented in base (whether spelled correctly or not.)	# of graphemes correctly chosen in base	# of markers	
Word Sum		/	/		/	/		Connections for future instruction
		/	/		/	/		
		/	/		/	/		
		/	/		/	/		
		/	/		/	/		
		/	/		/	/		
		/	/		/	/		
		/	/		/	/		
		/	/		/	/		
Total		/	/		/	/	/	

SWI/RT Diagnostic Spelling Assessment

Directions for Administering: After administering a spelling assessment or collecting misspelled words from student writing, complete the “Repertoire Theory Diagnostic Spelling Assessment.”

1. Column 1: **write the correct spelling of the word and a lexical word sum.** (This is a necessary step so you can document your understanding of the morphemes and graphemes in a word. For example, one teacher might understand beautiful -> beauty/ⁱ + ful while another teacher understands beautiful -> beau + ty/ⁱ + ful)
2. Column 2: write the student spelling of the word.
3. Column 3: Write the **number of base elements spelled correctly.** For example, in the word <sunflower>, a child spelling the word <sunflower> would have spelled 1 out of the 2 bases correctly.
4. Column 4: Count the total number of affixes and write the **number of affixes spelled correctly.**
5. Column 5: Make note of any **suffixing conventions** that require further instruction.
6. Column 6: Note the total number of phonemes that are in the base and then **note the total number of phonemes represented in the base, whether the child has spelled them with the correct grapheme. Has the child used a plausible grapheme to represent a phoneme?**
7. Column 7: Note the total number of graphemes appearing in the base and then note the number of graphemes that the student has chosen correctly.
8. Column 8: Note the number of markers the child has written and the total number of markers in the word.
9. Column 9: Note any etymological connections for future instruction that would help this student understand the word.

Repertoire Theory Diagnostic Spelling Assessment Analysis (Sample)

Name:

Teacher:

Strengths:

Phonological Knowledge: The student demonstrates good phonetic knowledge. All words were attempted and had plausible phonetic spellings.

Needs:

SWI Word Investigations: beautiful, physical, scared, undefeated, pleasant, friendly

Morphology:

Based on the assessment, the student would benefit from a deeper understanding of morphemes (bases, affixes) as the building blocks of words.

Bases to be studied within a SWI framework: <beau>; <phys>; <scare>; <feat>; <please>; <friend>

Affixes to be studied within a SWI framework: <-ful>, <-ic>, <-al>; <-ly>, <-ed>, <un->, <de->, <-ant>.

Suffixing Conventions: Changing the <y> to <i>; Adding vowel and consonant suffixes

Phonology:

Graphemes to be studied within a SWI framework: <eau>; <ph>; <y>; <ar>; <ea>

Etymology to be studied within a SWI framework includes:

<beau> is a loan from French;

<-ful> is influenced by English <full>

The grapheme <ph> appears usually in bases of Greek origin

<-ly> is a suffix forming adjectives meaning, "having qualities of" from OE

Homophone principle

Grapheme and etymological marker choices within a historical, morphological and etymological context.

Name:

Date:

Teacher:

Spelling/Vocabulary Goals (Sample)

Instructional Goals:

Goal 1: In six weeks, student will be able to show understanding and spell the following words and related words in the word family:

Beautiful, physical, scared, undefeated, pleasant

Evidence: SWI investigations, word sums, student-constructed matrices, spelling assessment, student writing

Goal 2: Student will continue to build phonetic and phonological knowledge while deepening understanding of morphology (bases and affixes) and suffixing conventions.

Evidence: Student writing samples, word sums, phoneme/grapheme charts, evidence banks.

Goal 3: Student will select at least six words for classroom from subject area and/or content area learning and demonstrate understanding and spelling knowledge:

Evidence: SWI investigation, word sums, student-constructed matrices

At-Home Connections

Student will collect a question bank of questions about words from their reading and teach family members about words using the SWI framework. Family members are invited to share their own questions about words for possible in-class investigations. Families are asked to use a “spell-it-out” prompt when a child comes to an unknown word.

Bibliography

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