INTRODUCTION

Our programme is about giving children a rounded understanding of how writing represents meaning. Written words and sentences convey their meanings in several different ways. One is through letter-sound relationships. The alphabetic letters in a written word tell us about the sounds of the word, and when we know what these sounds are, we can often, though not always, tell what the written word means. Letter-sound connections are certainly important, and play a central part nowadays in teaching children to read and write, but they are not the only way in which writing represents meaning. Another important set of connections are based on morphemes.

Morphemes are units of meaning, and a large number of words in English are made up of more than one morpheme. There are two types of morphemes: stems which can often appear on their own, and affixes, which cannot appear on their own. These are added to stems and influence the word’s meaning. The word “read”, for example, has a single morpheme, which is its base form. We add “s” to “read” when we are referring to the third person singular of this verb (he reads, she reads). We can also add the suffix “er” to “read”; “reader” is a person who reads. We could add the suffix “able” and have the adjective “readable”. To this word we could add the prefix “un” and have the word “unreadable”. Children who have a good level of awareness of morphemes – both stems and affixes – also have a sound word attack strategy that can help them with spelling and in developing their vocabulary.

Morphemes are important in written language because the way in which words are spelled is strongly affected by their morphemic structure. Take the words “missed” and “list”. They end in exactly the same sounds, but these shared sounds are spelled differently, because “missed” is a two morpheme word (“miss-ed”) and the second morpheme (a suffix) tells us that this is a past verb. This suffix is spelled as “-ed” despite the fact that the last sound in “missed” is a t-sound. “List,” on the other hand, is a one-morpheme word and its ending is spelled phonetically.

Another interesting example of the effect of morphemes, and therefore of meaning, is the difference in the way the last syllable is spelled in the two words “magician” and “education”. The sound of the end syllable is the same in both words, but the spelling is different. This is because the “-ian” ending is a morpheme which signifies that this is something that a person does: so magic followed by the “-ian” ending means someone who does magic, just as “mathematician” and “logician” mean, respectively, someone who does mathematics and someone who does logic. In contrast, “education” is an abstract noun formed by the stem “educate” and the suffix “-ion” which makes the word into the familiar noun. The endings of abstract nouns formed from verbs in this way are invariably spelled as “-ion”, and never as “-ian”.

So, meaning in the form of morphemes has an important and, we claim, helpful effect on reading and spelling. Our hypothesis is that children benefit from being told about morphemes and their striking effect on spelling words in English, since this reduces a great deal of uncertainty in English spelling. We also argue that any explicit teaching about morphemes is bound to draw children’s attention to grammatical categories, which in turn will involve some discussion about the structure of sentences. Our project, therefore, is about the effect of including teaching on morphemes and sentence structure in literacy classes.
Previous research

We have already gathered a great deal of evidence to support the idea that teaching children about morphemes and sentence structure helps their spelling and reading comprehension. The four key conclusions of this research are:

1. Children’s knowledge of the relation between morphemes and spelling, assessed when the children were aged 8-9, is a good predictor of their performance in KS2 and KS3 English tests. The assessments given at 8-9 years separated out the children’s ability to use phonological and morphological information in word reading and spelling. Their ability to use morphological information was a better predictor of KS2 and KS3 English achievement than their ability to use phonological information.

2. Primary school children of all ages have difficulties with spelling words when the spelling cannot be predicted from the way the word sounds. Their ability to use morphemes in spelling is a good predictor of reading fluency and reading comprehension.

3. Children’s difficulties with the spelling of many words can be reduced by making them aware of the morphemes that compose the words. Thus, teaching children about the connections between morphemes and spelling does improve their reading and spelling.

4. Making children more aware of morphemes also has a positive effect on their vocabulary growth.

The teaching programme

The teaching programme that you will help to evaluate in your school has two strands. The first focuses on developing the children’s awareness of syntax and its connection to meaning; the second aims to develop their awareness of morphemes as units of meaning that have a fixed spelling. These two strands work together, not in sequence. In fact, the same letter or sequence of letters can be one morpheme when used in one word class and a different morpheme when used with another word class. For example, the letter ‘S’ marks the plural of nouns and the third person singular in verbs in the present. As the children become more aware of sentence structure and the grammatical categories of words, they can also learn more about morphemes.

All new concepts and morphemes are first introduced through teacher led activities; slides for these activities and answer sheets to be printed for the children are provided in the CD rom. Teacher led activities should be used before other activities about the same topic are implemented in the classroom. In all teacher led activities, the slide presents a question, the children are asked to discuss their answers in pairs and then in a whole class discussion. Only then the teacher shows the answer that is provided on the slide.

Following on from teacher led activities, there are further exercises, board games, computer games and books devised for work with the same grammatical concepts and morphemes. The books are used for reading comprehension and extension activities. The computer games are directly accessed by the children on our website and should be used after the teacher has taught the relevant concepts and the children have read the books in school or at home.

The activities are organized in ten units to be carried out in 12 weeks. Figure 1 gives an overview of the programme and the plan for Unit 1.
The sentence structure activities

The list of activities in Figure 1 shows how children progress from the simplest sentence structure in English to progressively more complex structures that use adjectives and adverbs. Some teachers working with older children have introduced grammatical terminology in parallel with the sentence structure and helped the children connect the description “who does what?” with “subject, predicate (verb), object”. If you find this too demanding for Year 2 children, you can focus on the description “who does what?”.

The books used at the start of the programme will be easy reading for many children. Their aim is to help the children focus on sentence structure. For example, in Book 1 of Week 1, the children go through a series of pages with just one sentence about one person doing something. This is expected to set a grammatical structure for them to write about what sorts of things their family do; they can make a book about their own family. Some books include the suggestion of asking the children to write a parallel book, which gives those who struggle with writing some support. But we realise that there will be children in Year 2 who can go beyond the sentence structures used in the books who should be free to do so. The writing activities associated with the books are a great opportunity for extension work for the children who are ahead in literacy.

As the children build on this basic sentence structure by using pronouns, adjectives, and adverbs, they are asked to carry out activities that focus on these different classes of words. Some of the sentence structures towards the end (there is/there are) should help your children distinguish between “there” and “their”, a distinction that cannot be made on the basis of how these words sound.
Morphemes and word level activities

Many of the word level activities may seem easy for the children, as they are being asked to focus on parts of words that they already know. The aim of analysing words into morphemes is to raise the children’s awareness of how words can be analysed into these units. Children have much experience of analysing words into sounds, and also of putting sounds together to form words. They need similar amounts of experience of analysing words into morphemes and putting morphemes together to form words. These activities are always carried out in ways that help them focus on meaning, which helps them think of reading for meaning. The children are also invited to think of invented words, an activity that helps them realise that they can figure out the meaning of words that they have never heard. Children encounter in text many words that are not common in oral language. It is useful to have tools which enable them to interpret such new words.

Overview

This programme focuses on sentence structure and morphemes, which are aspects of the language crucial to understanding the meaning of words and text. It complements the teaching that is currently done in schools, which focuses largely on how words sound.

It contains teacher-led activities that are used to introduce new concepts, which are followed by worksheets, books and computer games.

The programme allows for differentiation in the classroom as well as inclusion. After all children have participated in the teacher-led activities, the programme has suggestions for a more personalised approach by including easier and more advanced activities using the same concept. The easier activities are more structured and are carried out with the teacher. The more advanced activities allow for more independent work.

AN INTERVENTION TO IMPROVE CHILDREN’S PERFORMANCE IN LITERACY IN KS1

Terezinha Nunes, Peter Bryant, Deborah Evans & Rossana Barros
Department of Education, University of Oxford

in collaboration with the Education Endowment Foundation and the NFER

Contact us:
Children Learning Research Group
Department of Education
15 Norham Gardens
Oxford OX1 6PY

t: 01865 284893
e: terezinha.nunes@education.ox.ac.uk