Abstract

This article demonstrates that the teaching of morphological awareness, though not explicitly mentioned in the Programme de Formation de l’École Québécoise, is consistent with those ministry guidelines that govern the teaching of English as a second language in Quebec. It discusses how the teaching of morphological awareness fits into the three competencies and the various sub-skills that fall under each competency, all of which are set as goals for the English language education of students in the province.
1. Introduction

Teaching in Quebec, including the teaching of English as a Second Language (ESL) is governed by the guidelines provided by the Ministere de L’Éducation du Québec (MELS) in its Programme de Formation de l’École Québécoise (PFEQ/QEP). There is no explicit mention of morphological awareness in the ministry documents, so teachers may be wary of incorporating its teaching into their lessons. Our purpose is to demonstrate that the teaching of morphological awareness is entirely consistent with the goals set out in the ministry guidelines.

2. Fundamental Concepts

One of the most used definitions of morphological awareness refers to individuals’ “conscious awareness of the morphemic structure of words and their ability to reflect on and manipulate that structure” (Carlisle, 1995). This definition can be divided into four key skills: identification, discrimination, interpretation and manipulation (Wang & al., 2006). This means, in the context of an ESL classroom, that students who have a strong degree of morphological awareness should be able to identify the different morphological elements of a word (prefixes, suffixes, roots), discriminate them from one another (different prefixes, suffixes, parts of a compound), interpret their meaning, parts of speech, in what context they are to be used and, finally, use them to form new words and express desired meanings.

Before explaining the different links between morphological awareness and the MELS main competencies, it is also necessary to explain what the competencies entail. In the MELS curriculum for the secondary level, there are three broad competencies on which the students are evaluated. They are given in (1):

(1) Three competencies expected of students
   i) Competency 1: Interacts orally in English
   ii) Competency 2: Reinvests understanding of texts
   iii) Competency 3: Writes and produces texts

Competency 1 focuses on oral production, that is, speaking and listening in communicative exchanges. The second competency focuses on reading written materials and listening to audio and visual materials and applying the new knowledge in other activities (reinvesting). The third competency focuses on writing and the production of media texts (e.g., posters, photo stories, videos, multimedia computer presentations or Web pages).

Considered in more detail, the first competency embodies three components or sub-skills, which are given in (2) (MELS, p.591):

(2) Three sub-skills of Competency 1: Interacts orally in English
   i) Further develop fluency and accuracy
   ii) Constructs meaning of the message

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1 This document gives teachers and students guidelines as to the different school years’ desired outcomes and approaches to teaching.
iii) Becomes aware of personal development as communicators

The first component means that the student must expand his/her vocabulary and improve his/her pronunciation and be able to have conversations about a variety of topics. According to the second skill, the student must, in the course of an exchange in English, be able to remember what he/she knows about a given topic, understand the interlocutor and have a meaningful conversation. The third skill comes up in all of the three competencies: It is basically the ability to self-regulate learning. That is to say, a desired outcome of teaching is that the student becomes an autonomous, self-directed, continuing learner.

The second competency, which focuses on understanding written and oral English, embodies four key sub-skills (MELS, p.593):

(3) Sub-skills of Competency 2: Reinvests understanding of texts

i) Uses a personalized response process
ii) Carries out a reinvestment task
iii) Broaden knowledge of text types
iv) Becomes aware of personal development as listener/reader/viewer

Using a personalized response process basically means that the student creates a meaningful and personal connection to the text. They can relate what they hear and read with their own experiences. To do this, the student must have a broad mental lexicon, i.e. have acquired sufficient vocabulary, and must know a broad range of functional chunks and expressions that help him/her communicate efficiently.

The first sub-skill skill relates closely to the second, which requires that the student be able to use the knowledge he/she has learned. The student shows a higher level of understanding because of being able to apply what has been read or heard to new tasks and situations. The third sub-skill allows the student to read and become familiar with the characteristics of a variety of text types, including books, magazines, information-based texts, etc. The fourth sub-skill is the self-regulation competency that always comes around. The student is able to reflect on his/her learning, weaknesses and strengths and learns how to maximize his/her learning style and potential. The third competency, writes and produces texts, embodies the following sub-skills (MELS, p.595):

(4) Three sub-skills of Competency 3: Writes and produces texts

i) Uses personalized writing and production processes
ii) Broadens personal repertoire of text types
iii) Becomes aware of personal development as a writer and producer

The first sub-skill allows the student to approach his/her writing in a systematic way, following a personalized set of steps that allows him/her to express himself/herself. The second allows the student to write different types of text such as short stories, newspaper articles, etc. The third sub-skill is, again, an expression of self-regulation.

Another important component of the MELS curriculum is called the “Related Content”. This component is a group of five broad categories of knowledge that should be included in a lesson plan. The five categories are presented in (5):

(5) Five categories of knowledge that lessons should cover

i) Culture
ii) Language Repertoire
iii) Strategies
iv) Processes
v) Texts
The cultural element is divided in three aspects, the aesthetic, the sociolinguistic and the sociological. Essentially, that means that a lesson plan should include aspects about fine arts, popular culture, language, cultural awareness, and so on. The language repertoire sub-skill includes mastery of functional language (e.g., “I’m sorry”, “Can you repeat that?”, “What does that mean?”, etc.), vocabulary growth and language conventions (pronunciation, intonation, grammar). Strategies is a category that embodies the self-regulation of learning, being able to monitor one’s own learning. It also embodies communication strategies such as how to communicate effectively, how to listen, how to overcome communication breakdowns etc. The fourth component of the Related Content processes is essentially the knowledge of how to meaningfully respond to, and systematically write and produce texts. The “texts” aspect of the Related Content is a component that is both in the second and third competency. It means that students must be taught with a variety of authentic texts and text types, i.e. texts written by native speakers and intended mainly for native speakers. Indeed, students should engage with popular, literary and information-based texts.

*Implicit discussion of morphological awareness in the MELS document*

This discussion is intended for teachers of secondary one, cycle one students\(^2\). At this level students are explicitly required to use learning strategies to recognize words and infer their meaning as well as the meaning of broader texts and discussions. Students are also required to use several cognitive strategies such as being able to compare and “recombine (put together smaller meaningful elements in a new way)”(MELS p. 590), which fits exactly with the concepts behind morphological awareness, as will be discussed. In the light of this link to the MELS (2012) related contents and the fact that morphological awareness, as discussed in some of the accompanying articles, allows for further vocabulary recognition and development (see Jornlin, this volume for more information on the matter and for several references), secondary one, cycle one is the most appropriate grade to begin teaching morphological awareness to speakers of English as a second language, since it provides a valuable tool for later years in high school, notably in reading and listening to learn.

### 3. Morphology and phonological awareness

Closely linked to the concept of morphological awareness is the concept of phonological awareness which can be defined as “the ability to focus on the sounds of speech as distinct from its meaning: … [including] its intonation or rhythm” (Deslea Konza, 2011, p.1). Simply stated, phonological awareness is the discrimination of different sounds in a word and the awareness of a word’s sound structure, including stress. Why should phonological awareness be taught in conjunction with morphological awareness? It mostly comes down to word stress. It is important for French ESL learners to be explicitly taught the word stress patterns of English because correct stress is vital to intelligibility in English, and because awareness of the stress patterns of English is not likely to develop spontaneously in French-speaking learners of English. This is due to the fact that the French word stress pattern is radically different from the English one. In French, stress is completely predictable (e.g., or.di.na.teur, te.le.vi.sion, a.ca.de.mie). In English, however, stress is unpredictable (e.g.: com.put.ter, te.le.vi.sion, a.ca.de.my), insofar as there is no particular word position to which word stress is always attached. It is stable for a given word, but the pattern can be quite different from one word to another. Moreover, there are a number of phonetic differences between English and French in regard with stressed syllables as seen in Table 1, taken from Poisson (2014, p.10).

A number of researchers have observed that these differences in terms of word stress are the source of francophones’ common and recurrent pronunciation errors when speaking English, i.e., misplacing or not producing word stress (Poisson, 2013). Lepage (2014) demonstrates that incorrect stress interferes with intelligibility in English, mainly when the stress placement is rightward, which is the way francophones naturally place stress when they transfer the French stress pattern directly to English. Furthermore, as stated in Table 1, unstressed syllables are subject to reduction in English, which is not the case in French. The phenomenon makes French speaker produce mistakes such as pronouncing chocolate [tʃækəlet], instead of [tʃɪkəleɪt], which can also impair intelligibility. ESL students who are not aware of the importance of English word stress cannot tell apart words that are spelled the same. For example, they cannot tell from the stress

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\(^{2}\) Students at this level are 12-13 years old and are entering a 5-year high school program.
whether a word is a noun or a verb (e.g., *produce*\textsubscript{N} vs *produce*\textsubscript{V}, *reject*\textsubscript{N} vs *reject*\textsubscript{V}, etc.) or distinguish nouns that are segmentally alike (e.g. *desert* vs *dessert*), but are distinguished orally by stress placement.

**Table 1: Phonetic differences in English and French word stress**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>English</th>
<th>French</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The stressed syllable is longer in duration</td>
<td>The stressed syllable is longer in duration</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There are degrees of stress: primary, secondary and unstressed</td>
<td>A syllable is either stressed or unstressed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The stressed syllable is higher in amplitude (louder)</td>
<td>Amplitude is the same for stressed and unstressed syllables</td>
<td>Pitch is the same for stressed and unstressed syllables</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The stressed syllable is higher pitched</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The vowel in the stressed syllable is clearly produced, less subject to reduction</td>
<td>The vowel in the stressed syllable is clearly produced and not reduced</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unstressed vowels tend to be reduced to schwa</td>
<td>Unstressed vowels are not typically reduced to schwa</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tense vowels in primary stressed syllables are subject to emphatic processes such as diphthongization in NA English</td>
<td>The vowel in the stressed syllable is not subject to emphatic processes such as diphthongization</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

English word stress interacts closely with morphological processes, such as compounding and suffixation in English. For example, *whitehouse* and *greenhouse* are distinguished from the phrases *white house* and *green house* by their different stress patterns. One cannot rely on orthography to identify compounds in English, since only some are written as single words (*fireman, drugstore, flagstone*), even fewer are written with a hyphen, and many, if not most, are written as two separate words (*eye shadow, fire truck, window washer*). Also with respect to morphology, certain suffixes are linked to particular stress patterns. For instance, the suffixes –*ity* and –*ic* (as in *profundity* and *academic*) require primary stress to be on the syllable immediately preceding the suffix. Other suffixes such as –*aire* and –*eer* (as in *millionaire* and *volunteer*) require main stress to be on the suffix. As noted earlier, omitting or misplacing stress can interfere with intelligibility. The effective teaching of morphology therefore necessitates the teaching of stress. Because word stress, which is clearly and obviously linked to the first competency, is inextricably linked to morphology in English, the two must be taught together.

4. A closer look at the competencies in relation to morphological awareness

Teachers may ask about the purpose of teaching morphology and more specifically morphological awareness to high school students. The other contributions to this volume address this in much more detail, but the following section is, nonetheless, a brief answer to such questions. It also offers an insight into the importance of such instruction in the context of the three ESL competencies of the MELS’ curriculum.
4.1 The advantages of morphological awareness

Before addressing the three competencies of the MELS curriculum directly, one must consider the benefits of morphological awareness. Research suggests that the main advantages of morphological awareness include the following: It helps learners to decode words and create a mental representation of the different components of a word (Wagner, 2007; Tabatabei, 2011; Kuo and Anderson, 2006). It helps to increase vocabulary size (Tabatabei, 2011; Jarmulowicz, 2007; Nagy 2013) and helps to develop learners’ mental lexicon exponentially (Nation, 2001) (see Jornlin for more information and several more references). Morphological awareness increases a student’s spelling skills (Nunes, 2006; Chomsky, 1970) and it plays a role in reading comprehension both at the word and text level (refer to Schano, this volume, for more information and several references). In short, the first advantage of morphological awareness is that it is a tool to decode and learn (various aspects of) words. Indeed, with morphological awareness, students implicitly understand how a word is made of different elements (e.g., advantageous is made of advantage and -ous) and how all these elements play a role in the meaning and function of a word (e.g., -ous transforms the noun roots to which it attaches into adjectives that have the meaning of “having or providing the quality of X”, where X is the basic meaning of the root).

Once the student understands the role and meaning of the morphological elements, he or she can apply this knowledge to other words and decode these words accordingly. Morphology thence becomes a “decoding machine” students can use to create and decode new words. In turn, this machine helps students to increase the size of their active and receptive vocabularies. Since very many morphological elements (prefixes, suffixes, roots) share common characteristics (e.g. position in a word, similar phonologically patterns, the type of word to which they attach, the part of speech they create, and meaning), the mental lexicon can develop exponentially, new words leading to new discoveries and so on.

Finally, through morphological awareness, students also develop their spelling skills. For example, the suffix –ous, pronounced [əs] is consistently spelled <ous>. Contrast this with the spelling of similarly (but not identically) pronounced [əz] in plurals (churches, bushes, matches). Understanding that words such as healthy and heal are morphologically related helps the reader understand and remember their similarities of spelling, despite different pronunciations ([hɛlθi] and [hil], respectively). An awareness of morphology also benefits oral production and comprehension. The development of the mental lexicon and the ability to decode words signifies more accurate and, as will be discussed later, more fluent interaction. All these advantages will serve as a reference to explain how, when considered in the light of the MELS’ competencies, morphological awareness becomes an important part of the student’s skill set.

4.2 Morphological awareness and Competency 1: Interacts orally in English

We will now look more closely at the link between the three competencies and morphological awareness. As explained earlier, the first competency basically refers to oral interaction. As Hilton (2008, p.162) points out, the most constraining aspect of fluency for ESL/EFL learners is the lack of vocabulary. Since morphological awareness plays a key role in helping to develop the learner’s vocabulary, teaching it will de facto contribute to students’ fluency. Knowing more words increases word accuracy both in production and comprehension. With the decoding machine, students are able to make better choices and to understand another speaker’s use of complex words.

As discussed in section 3, morphological awareness is directly linked with intelligibility, mostly through stress. By teaching word stress in conjunction with morphology, students become more intelligible to others and others become more intelligible to them. This simultaneous development of fluency, accuracy and intelligibility links directly to the first sub-skill of the first competency: Further develops fluency and accuracy. This competency also states that students should construct meaning of the message. Students are able, with the use of the decoding machine and morphology, to be more accurate on the topics and, consequently, have more meaningful conversations and to draw more meaning from what they read and hear.
4.3 Morphological awareness and Competency 2: Reinvests understandings of texts

As stated previously, the second competency focuses mostly on reading comprehension. We indicated that morphological awareness plays a role at decoding words and building the mental lexicon, which in turns helps decoding texts. This advantage of morphological awareness fits in with the first sub-skill according to which the student is required to build his own mental lexicon and tools to understand texts. The MELS requires more than simple comprehension from students; it requires them to extend their understanding of meaningful and authentic texts to material not explicitly taught. Teachers have to find authentic texts which, in most cases, expose students to a variety of novel vocabulary. Nation (2001) found that learning from “meaning-focused input can best occur if learners are familiar with at least 95% of the running words in the input they are focusing on.” (p.2). In order to reach the MELS targets in an optimal fashion, students should therefore understand 95% of the words they encounter. Does this mean that the ESL reader must look up every single new word? Not necessarily. With an understanding of morphological structure, students are much better equipped to accurately guess at the meaning of words. For example, if the reader knows the word good, and understands the function of the suffix –ness, then goodness, even if not previously encountered, can be understood. Even when the reader must consult the dictionary, understanding morphological structure can speed up the process and help him / her get the most out of the dictionary definition. For example, if the reader knows that words ending in –ity are nouns and that the suffix is associated with stress and vowel changes, the word profundity, derived from profound, may seem less aberrant, more part of a known pattern. In sum, with the help of the morphological tools and the development of the mental lexicon, students are more likely to approach the 95% criterion. By achieving this, students can have optimal meaning-focused learning and reach the MELS expected outcome on text comprehension.

4.4 Morphological awareness and Competency 3: Writes and Produces Texts

Morphological awareness supports the writing of text by giving students tools for self-correction through the “decoding machine” and by increasing their vocabularies. These are important tools for students when writing and correcting texts without having to refer to dictionaries for each problematic or relatively new word. Furthermore, students are able to use more specific words and be more accurate in their writing. These self-correction tools fit in directly with the “uses personalized writing and production processes”3 sub-competency.

5. Conclusion

The idea of teaching English morphology explicitly and helping students to develop morphological awareness is relatively new. Student teachers or even practicing teachers already in the school system might wonder whether such teaching fits with the ministry guidelines, which make no mention of it. Our intention has been to demonstrate that the teaching of English morphology and teaching designed to help students develop morphological awareness is entirely consistent with the Programme de Formation de l'École Québécoise (PFEQ/QEP).

References


3 See section 2 for more explanation of the competency.


Poisson, D. (2014) *Specifically teaching word stress to French Canadian adult learners of English as a second language is a vital component of an ESL program*. Unpublished M.A. Thesis, Laval University, Quebec City, Quebec.

