Navigating Literacy Landscapes Within One District: Tailoring Word Recognition Instruction for Secondary Settings

by Lindsay Young and Lindsey Chapman

Recent federal and state initiatives have renewed the call for evidence-based reading instruction grounded in the science of reading, and the effects of these efforts have largely centered on early literacy in elementary grades. However, the need for change is not limited to elementary classrooms. Adolescents' word recognition needs are often concealed by high-stakes comprehension-based testing, leading secondary teachers to believe word recognition is no longer an issue (Hock et al., 2009). Yet, secondary students who struggle with reading still have word-level difficulties (Hock et al., 2009), and this need is frequently left unaddressed. In secondary contexts, general educators often consider themselves to be content-area experts and may not expect nor feel prepared to address foundational reading skills (Leko & Mundy, 2012). Barriers related to time, availability of resources, and/or training can lead secondary special educators to also feel ill-equipped to meet this pressing need (Leko et al., 2019; Young, 2023).

For the past thirteen years, Dr. Young has been a secondary special educator, and more recently, a literacy instructional coach for a large urban school district in the Southwest United States. Over the past ten years, the district has demonstrated a commitment to implementing the science of reading and has made great strides in implementation across its elementary schools. However, attempting to replicate this progress in the district's secondary classrooms has posed unique challenges. One problem of practice that district leaders have recently been grappling with is how to increase effective multisyllabic word recognition instruction for secondary students. Historically, word recognition instruction had been nearly nonexistent beyond the district's specialized intervention programs, a pattern consistent with broader trends in secondary education (Capin et al., 2022; Swanson, 2008).

Approaches to Multisyllabic Word Recognition Instruction

Word recognition refers to the ability to read words automatically and effortlessly. It encompasses the component skill of decoding, using knowledge of phoneme/grapheme correspondences to sound out unknown words (Castles et al., 2018). While decoding is often associated with early literacy, it is also an important component of secondary word recognition instruction. In secondary settings, word recognition instruction should focus on the use of word attack strategies for decoding multisyllabic words, which comprise 90% of new words encountered in text beginning in the 5th grade (Kearns & Whaley, 2019). However, the process of choosing and implementing a word attack strategy is more complicated than you may think.

Word attack strategies can be thought of as existing on a continuum that ranges from analytical (i.e., using orthography and syllables to break down a multisyllabic word) to flexible (i.e., using morphemes and syllables to break down a multisyllabic word). To illustrate the differences in strategies across this continuum, we use the word *irresponsible* as an example.

An analytical strategy using orthographic and syllabic rules might include having students do the following:

- Note the double r differs from the single r-controlled syllable, which explains the sound of the first *i*.

- Label each syllable: exception (*ir*), open (*re*), closed (*spon*), consonant -*le* (*ble*).
- Note the second *i* in the syllable (*si*) is an open syllable in the middle of a word, so it makes a schwa sound.
- Read syllables of the whole word: ir / re / spon / si / ble.

A flexible strategy of breaking down syllables and morphemes might direct students to follow these steps:

- Identify prefixes and suffixes: *ir*, *re*, *ible*.
- Underline and note the pronunciation of the vowel(s) in the remaining syllable of the word: *spons*.
- Read the morphemes and syllable of the whole word: *ir* / *re* / *spons* / *ible*.

Although there is not enough research to say that one approach is more effective than the other (Austin et al., 2023), this district had historically prioritized an analytical approach to word attack in its professional development (PD).

Using Improvement Science to Change Course

In the 2020-2021 school year, the district's division of secondary instruction decided to try something different, following the lead of its elementary counterparts. They offered paid PD for one cohort of secondary educators that focused on building teacher knowledge of word recognition instruction rather than program implementation. It included a 30-hour, self-paced, on-demand training where teachers learned an analytical approach to word attack with a certified Orton-Gillingham (OG) fellow from outside the district. The training was comprehensive in terms of rules and theory but left many secondary teachers unsure of how to translate this information into their instructional practice. District leaders were concerned that despite such a large investment in time and resources, there was little impact on practice.

Shortly after the initial training, Dr. Young partnered with the division of secondary instruction to establish a systematic framework for continuous improvement focused on this concern (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). The team first engaged multiple stakeholders to understand the root causes and contributors to the problem as well as possible improvements that were studied through iterative Plan, Do, Study, Act (PDSA) cycles (see Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). This continuous improvement process highlighted the need for the district's approach to PD to change course in four critical ways.

Change 1: Move From Highly Analytical to Flexible Approaches in Word Attack

The district needed to do a better job of meeting its secondary teachers where they were rather than the other way around. While the district had prioritized curricular programs and strategies aligned to an analytical approach, its secondary teachers prioritized feasibility and practicality. Teachers expressed uncertainty about how and when to incorporate word attack strategies into their curriculum, given competing demands for time and instruction.

There are practical benefits to prioritizing more flexible approaches in terms of time, adaptability, and the ability to implement word attack strategies with existing grade-level materials, all of which were priorities expressed by district teachers (Young, 2023). Shifting to a more flexible approach also helps acknowledge the variability in teachers' comfort with breaking words down into their component parts rather than waiting for them to learn the complex rules needed for a highly analytical approach. For example, teachers can be directed to analogize when unsure of a particular affix or vowel sound by thinking of a word that contains that sound/affix. Thinking of words such as manage, footage, and usage can help a teacher recognize that the suffix -age is pronounced like /ij/ or /uj/, depending on one's accent.
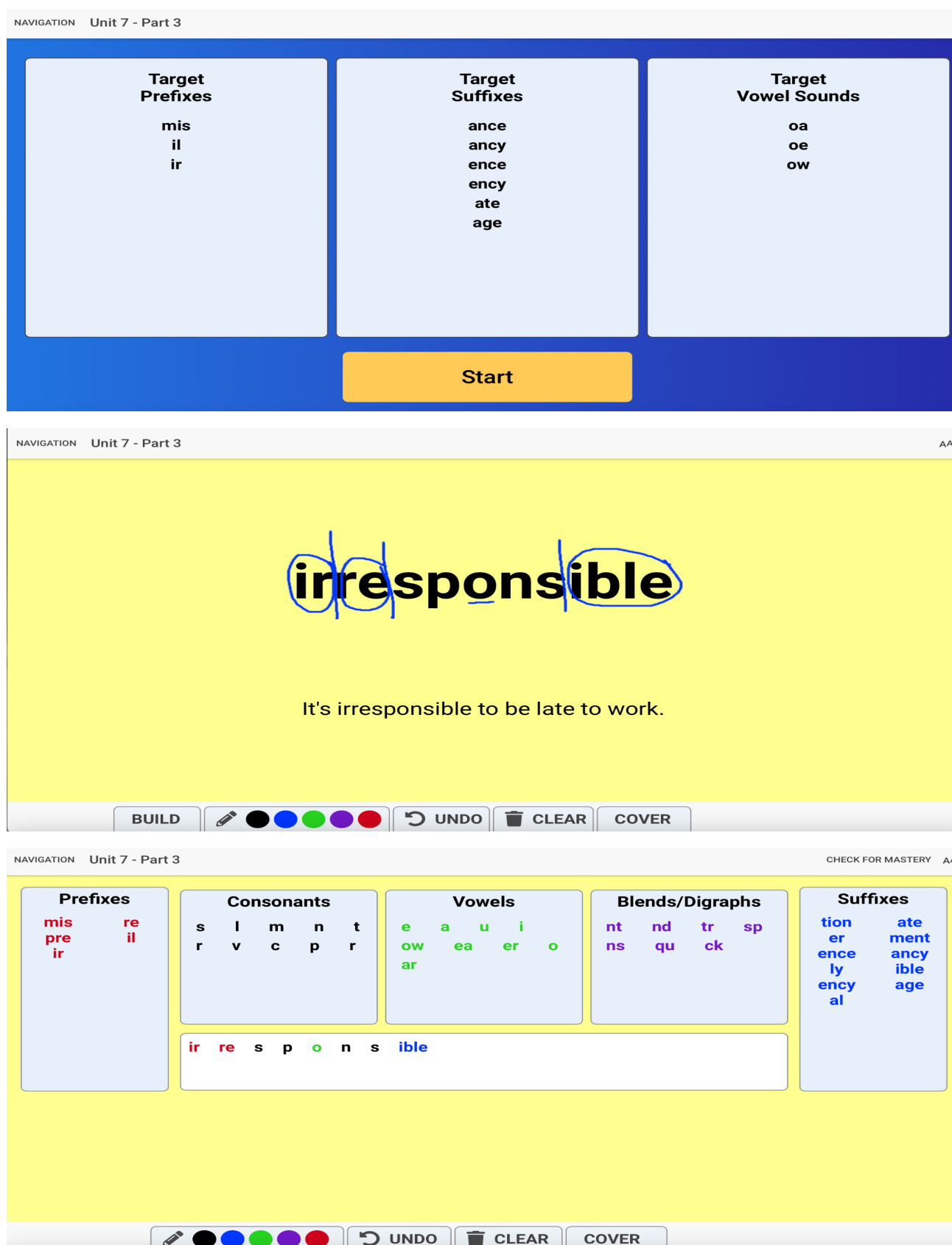

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Change 2: Pair the How and Why of Word Recognition Instruction

Previous PD addressed the *how* and *why* of word recognition instruction in isolation; some training emphasized the implementation of curricular programs, and others focused on theory. A key feature of the more recent efforts to support teachers is prioritizing knowledge paired with practical application (Leko &

Figure 1

Unit Start Screen, Breakdown Screen, and Build Screen From WordBuilder Unit 7

Target Prefixes	Target Suffixes	Target Vowel Sounds
mis	ance	oa
il	ancy	oe
ir	ence	ow
	ency	
	ate	
	age	

Start

irresponsible

It's irresponsible to be late to work.

BUILD   ●●●●●   UNDO   CLEAR   COVER

Prefixes	Consonants	Vowels	Blends/Digraphs	Suffixes
mis re	s l m n t	e a u i	nt nd tr sp	tion ate
pre il	r v c p r	ow ea er o	ns qu ck	er ment
ir		ar		ence ancy
				ly ible
				ency age
				al

ir re s p o n s ible

●●●●●   UNDO   CLEAR   COVER

Note: WordBuilder can be found at http://www.wordbuilderapp.com

Mundy, 2012). For example, follow-up support after the initial OG training focused on building teachers' understanding of morphology and connecting this knowledge to the application of a flexible word attack strategy using a practical instructional tool called WordBuilder.

WordBuilder is a free web-based application that supports teachers and students in applying a flexible word attack strategy to multisyllabic words by cumulatively building knowledge of affixes and vowel sounds (see Figure 1). It was developed in the district using feedback from both teachers and students through CALI Reads, a five-year project to improve literacy outcomes for adolescents funded by the Office of Special Education in partnership with the California Department of Education, Special Education Division. Unlike standalone curricular programs, WordBuilder offers more flexibility in terms of how and when it can be implemented, including use with grade-level curricular materials.

Another related change was in how the practical application was facilitated and supported. Videos were provided of word recognition instruction in secondary settings. These videos feature local classroom educators and instructional coaches using and adapting WordBuilder in different subject areas, instructional settings (e.g., whole group, small group), and class sizes. Although time-intensive in preparation, including these videos in PD has been significant in helping teachers with their role in supporting students' word recognition skills, regardless of the subject they teach. This video bank is also accessible to teachers after the PD.

Change 3: Encourage Teachers Not to Get Hung Up on the Tool
Prior PD in the district emphasized the implementation of curricular programs "with fidelity" in a way that promoted an all-or-nothing view from teachers. Now, teachers are encouraged to not get hung up on the tool as the only means to an end. While WordBuilder provides an array of resources that teachers have found valuable and feasible to implement, the goal of using a tool like WordBuilder is to help students learn a flexible word attack strategy well enough so that when they encounter unknown words in grade-level text, they can use the strategy independently.

Whereas special education teachers or secondary reading interventionists may choose to explicitly teach the scope and sequence provided by WordBuilder, a flexible approach

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allows all teachers to support students' use of the word attack strategy, with or without the tool. During PD, teachers are given opportunities to practice using their knowledge of word recognition instruction and WordBuilder's flexible word attack strategy to adapt or supplement their existing instruction. This includes frequent modeling and opportunities to practice selecting and breaking down high-utility multisyllabic words from content area texts. For example, from one history text, a teacher selected *extraordinary* and *incarnation* for his students to break down using the word attack strategy, but he did not select *bodhisattva*.

Change 4: Provide the Conditions That Support Teacher Learning and Implementation
To support changes in practice, the district needed to listen to and address teacher feedback about barriers they experienced in regard to learning and implementation. Lack of time, including for instructional planning, was a recurring concern. Now, PD includes collaborative planning time when teachers can work with one another to design lessons using the content covered in the PD. Similarly, the district has begun using a spaced model of delivery for PD. Teachers expressed the need for time to process information and opportunities to practice on their own. In a spaced model, teachers attend an initial session and are provided three to five weeks to process information and practice using the strategy before reconvening for a second session.

Support also cannot stop when the session ends if changes in practice are the goal. Due to the large number of teachers who attend district trainings, providing follow-up coaching from the district for all attendees,

although most effective (Kraft et al., 2018), is not always feasible. An online Professional Learning Community (PLC) using the district's Learning Management System has been a beneficial and more sustainable alternative. The online PLC offers teachers a community of support (e.g., weekly drop-in "office hours" and spaces to share success stories, discuss challenges, and ask for feedback) and ongoing access to resources (e.g., modules, modeling videos, new "tips and tricks" added to the feed). When time is a barrier, teacher participation is entirely voluntary. Teachers reported that while they may not always post, they do look at and appreciate the updates and easy access to resources.

Looking Ahead

In this district, building secondary teacher knowledge and practice of word recognition instruction is an ongoing process that is now part of a systematic and continuous improvement process. However, changing course in the approach to PD in ways more responsive and contextualized to the perspectives of the district's secondary teachers has been an important step in the right direction. Since beginning this improvement process, secondary PD offerings have expanded to reach even more secondary teachers, and there is growing evidence of implementation across the district as a result.

As more and more districts have successfully moved away from Balanced Literacy approaches and embraced the science of reading, new questions and challenges related to reading instruction are emerging. Many district and school leaders may once again find themselves needing to change course, but now, they'll be identifying the most effective ways to improve, support, and sustain meaningful implementation and instructional practice. Yet, much of this discussion has been too narrowly focused on elementary settings. Responding to the complexities and unique characteristics of secondary students and their teachers requires a different approach. In summary, it is essential that these efforts are systematic and intentional, being sure to include teachers' perspectives in the process. ■

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