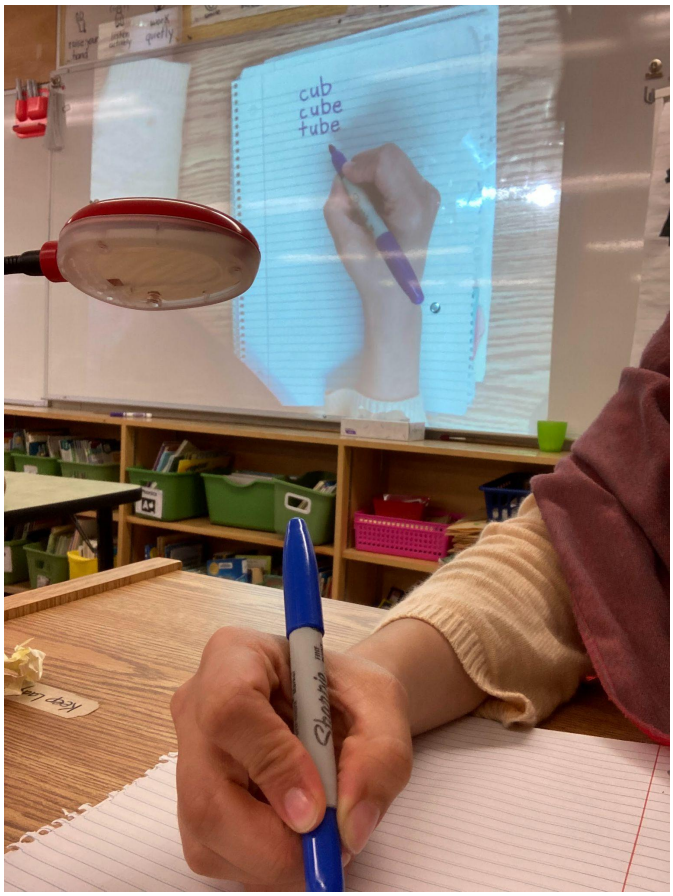
# Structured Literacy Approach: A Critical Reflection




PED3112: Teaching at the Primary Division: Language Arts and Social Studies

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## In the Classroom

- I believe that what is essential for one, is good for all.
- I believe that teachers should meet students where they are at in order to build learning.
  - I understand that students learn to read and write at various speeds and directions, and so individual feedback is crucial for students to progress.
- I believe that quality instruction can be a deciding factor for student success. I aim to select effective practices and continue learning throughout my career.

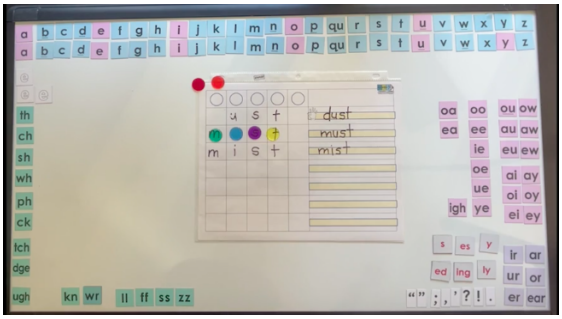
I remember a student saying "I don't know how…" with a strong realization that I also "didn't know how" to teach the linguistic concepts this student needed. I also struggled to even identify what exactly was the learning gap. Last year, my practicum was in a grade 2 ETFI classroom where I felt continuously overwhelmed trying to figure out how my associate teacher (AT) knew where the gaps are, and how to address them in the Language Arts classroom. I felt strongly that I needed to meet students where they were at and I knew I needed to learn about teaching literacy. I was desperate for a manual but my AT kept giving me tools. I learned about strategies for our ELL students, phonics, word ladders, mini-lessons, reading workshop rotation boards, read alouds, guiding reading, shared reading, and various types of reading assessments. While there was a scope & sequence she followed for introducing phonics, it seemed like a messy knitting room where the owner was the only one that knew how all the ropes came together.

My practicum is currently in a grade 4/5 classroom with a broad spectrum of literacy abilities. I am excited to pursue learning through the lens of vocabulary with my students. I am curious to explore new tools in my toolbox such as Elkinon boxes, word building tiles, word maps, and etymology.

## Future Questions to Explore

As an educator, I wonder what training I can request and seek to be more confident in making assessments. I remember feeling in awe as I observed my associate teacher last year carefully and competently recognize the students struggles and identify the gaps in their learning. I also wonder what type of feedback should be on students' assignments to improve writing and reading skills.

I appreciate that this Structured Literacy Course was spread out over the semester to allow time to digest concepts while I can see student work in my practicum. I wonder how to decide what tools to use as we explored a variety of them in class. Having my tool kit ready will greatly assist in my teaching and I anticipate many learning curves ahead.




## Structured Literacy Workshops: The Process

The Structured Literacy Workshops were presented as 4 mini-course series to address important concepts in teaching literacy. I enjoyed the varied instructional components (lecture, videos, independent modules) and the ability to move at different paces. I found the independent modules and quizzes very effective to help guide and motivate my learning. I would recommend using the independent modules to cover the content as much as possible, and then using the 'live' time with Liisa to practice applications to the classroom. It would also be motivating to have time dedicated to practice or prepare an activity for our specific practicum.

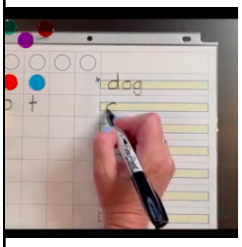
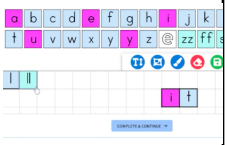
It was challenging to connect with Liisa in the classroom due to difficulties with the interactive components: we could not use our computers to respond orally due to microphone feedback and it was also challenging to have someone running around with the microphone. A consideration could be to have multiple microphones, or have students in groups using one computer, or let students connect via zoom from different locations.

I frequently felt lost and not sure where to place the modules in my teaching practice. I remember feeling that a lot of jumps were being made and I was struggling to determine what I was supposed to take away. Liisa often summarized key messages after presenting content — I would have wished these were shared before too, to better situate the content. Some activities left me feeling unsure of what the learning intention or application was.

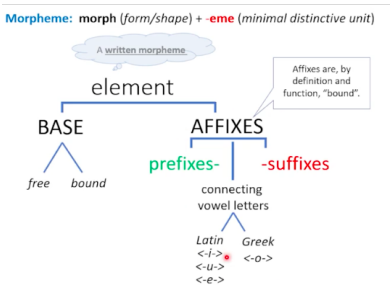
Overall, I am left with respect for the expertise it takes to teach literacy concepts. I am genuinely looking forward to using the power of vocabulary as an access point for deepening concepts in my practicum this December.

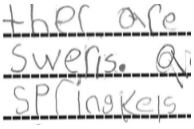
**Table 1: Content Summary, Implications, and Current Applications**

**not to be posted on my digital hub, but for the purpose of PED3112, see here for my "Running Record" and course folder with all files & slide decks from the Literacy workshops

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| **Module 1**<br>What are all the letters doing?<br>(Sept 26, 2022)<br><br><br> | • grapheme-phoneme correspondences<br>  ○ For graphemes, we use < > angle brackets - which means letter names, not pronunciation.<br>  ○ Letters are the ingredients that make up the grapheme<br>  ○ The pronunciation = phoneme<br>• Phonological awareness does not develop naturally<br><br>Implication for curriculum design, delivery, and assessment:<br>• need to consider the history of words (etymology) to understand their spelling (instead of just memorizing = not sustainable)<br>• the more efficiently students can access word meanings from their written forms = more resources become available for processing higher order meaning<br>  ○ Elkonin Boxes<br>  ○ Mapping-Final Cluster<br>  ○ Word building with tiles<br>• when teaching literacy, avoid saying "always" and lean more towards often, most often, most likely,<br>  ○ "most likely to be pronounced as___<br>  ○ can mean… often means…<br>• Current practicum grade 4/5: I started a unit of geometry with the and using vocabulary to structure my first lesson. We explored the words mostly from its definition and etymology. I felt that I would need to increase the pacing. I was often referring to my notes because I would forget. I could consider screen sharing my computer as we all looked up the meaning or even making this a group activity where students can create their own definitions. |
| **Module 2**<br>Leveled Text vs. decodable text<br>(Oct 3, 2022) | • **'leveled' texts**: determined by readability formulas, estimate text difficulty based on text features<br>• **Predictable texts**: follows a pattern, don't need to decode to read<br>• **Decodable texts:** a text is only decodable if the students know all the words (can decode them)<br>• **Readability formulas:** highly unreliable, different formulas for the same text will give different results (in class examples of syllables and sentence length)<br>• The history of readability formulas |

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| | ○ level of readability: what is a level? How do you measure?<br>■ consider high frequency words and sight words<br>● The Three-Cueing Approach<br>○ Semantics: meaning<br>■ Promotes use of: background knowledge, picture clues, context, story sense<br>○ Syntax: grammar, what sounds right<br>■ Prompts use of : language structure and patterns, vocabulary, grammer<br>○ Graphophonics: phonics, what looks right<br>■ Prompts use of: sight vocab, print conventions (directionality, words/spaces, letters, beginning/ending punctuation, analogies, sounds and symbols)<br><br>Implication for curriculum design, delivery, and assessment:<br>● The Three-cueing approach has been commonly used by teachers but not backed by researchers. Be kind and curious when working with other teachers.<br>● Be critical and curious about the practices I use in my classroom and where/how I determine its effectiveness<br>● Be mindful of the types of text I give to students for learning<br>● Current practicum grade 4/5: My AT and I are struggling to find a variety of texts for guided reading for the various levels at our small school. My current practicum school is a french immersion site with several bookshelves of french leveled texts compared to a couple shelves for english. I haven't observed a strong structured literacy approach from my AT but I wonder what it'll look like when we start reading groups. We also have several students who speak English as a 2nd/3rd/4th language who are comfortably situated in their expected grade level range for Language Arts. They're generally motivated students that I forget English is their nth language and the support they need to understand. |

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| **Module 3**<br>Teaching Vocabulary<br>(Oct 31, 2022) | • Understanding concepts can be strengthen through the power of exploring word structures (teaching vocabulary)<br>• Tiered words (1,2,3)<br>  ○ Tier 1: basic words<br>  ○ Tier 2: meanings that most students know, many have seen but may not know how to define/explain the word, crosses many domains<br>  ○ Tier 3: low frequency, domain specific words<br>• Base of the word: can stand alone (free base and bound base)<br>• Root of the word: where that word (and its root) comes from<br>• Affex: always bound to the base (ex. prefixes and suffixes), can have multiple<br><br>• Mastering word identification does NOT mean mastered understanding<br>• in order to fully learn a word and its connotations, a student needs multiple exposures to the word in different reading contexts<br><br>Implication for curriculum design, delivery, and assessment:<br>• Identify and organize the vocab words of a unit/lesson. Teaching these words can strengthen learning and consolidation of concepts.<br>• Expect Oral and written vocabulary knowledge is different (receptive and productive abilities vary)<br>• Support students to understand polysemy and recognize that kids take words literally<br>• Prepare lots of opportunities to practice spelling conventions: Students needs multiple exposures to the word in different reading contexts<br>• Current practicum grade 4/5: I was also thinking if the math activities I was preparing could be considered “decodable”. In my first geometry lesson, the class created a word list with definitions. With words like geometry, symmetry, angle, acute, and obtuse, I enjoyed that it was the word “shape” that the students were highly engaged in as they debated what counts and doesn’t count. It seemed like such a simple word that everyone felt familiar with, but it took several rounds of refinement to reach a definition the students, myself, and the dictionary could agree on. |

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| **<u>Module 4</u>**<br>Analyzing Spelling errors (Nov 14, 2022)<br><br>Gr. 2 Sample Student Writing: Swirls Sprinkles<br> | ● Orthographic Conventions : An orthography is a set of conventions for writing a language: ex. spelling norms, when to use punctuation, word breaks, stress, capitals etc.<br>○ Deep orthography: there isn't a simple one to one correspondence between spelling and pronunciation<br>○ ex. When to double the last letter? "Buzz Off Miss Pill"<br>● Why do I need to know morphology, phonology, and etymology? English has "deep orthography" = oral and spelling have been altered and grown<br>● Function words: have little meaning of their own, give information about the function of lexical words, unstressed, spelled with as few letters as possible so they don't follow our orthographic conventions (spelling patterns)<br>● Lexical words: have a meaning, nouns or verbs, we could describe them, minimum 3 letters<br><br>Implication for curriculum design, delivery, and assessment:<br>● When assessing student work, try reading it outloud to help you understand their text and their errors to inform future practice/lessons. A Spelling Error Analysis is a window into a student's understanding.<br>● Consider using a wonder wall: for questions to explore now or later. It's ok if you don't know too, check back later and then you can teach that spelling convention.<br>● Addressing spelling —match the students' spoken language with the orthography. Cultural dialect is not "incorrect", instead "oh you say it that way, I say it this way. This is how we write it (even though we say it differently)<br>● Have students say the word out loud: ask "what are you feeling in their mouth". Show them how it matches up to the orthography.<br>● We want student to have efficient letter formation from an early age because habits are very hard to break<br>Current Practicum Grade 4/5:<br>● I was able to spend the day in kindergarten where I got to teach the letter R and how to write it. I followed the teacher's guide on how to lead it and enjoyed seeing the students' awe about this letter. I don't remember learning how to print letters, but I do remember learning how to do cursive writing that felt more like an art class.<br>● I asked my AT about incorporating frequent mini vocab spelling lessons that relate to the types of errors students are making. This course has made me think about the feedback to students. The |

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| | students are writing every week and the current strategy is to underline misspelled words, give a letter grade, and a checkmark. It feels like a waste of my time since I don't see improvement when students are repeating spelling mistakes like for the word "birthday" (-er/-ir/urf).<br>● In the primary classroom last year, the mistakes made determined what time of word latter, or guided group activities I was going to do that week. I still don't have a grasp of what Language Arts looks like in the Junior Classroom. I couldn't judge if there's just a different approach that might be related to age/stage of learning, or can I just return to spelling conventions as I would in primary (individual conferences, guided groups and class lessons). I'm glad this course has given me more confidence to authentically engage with my AT about what would support student learning. My AT is enthusiastic about improving student reading and writing, and is also interested in implementing effective ways to do so. I've been assigned to set this up for December, and while I feel confident in identifying errors and their related spelling conventions, I wish we had more time to practice working with the tools provided in class. |