

# Knowledge of building blocks of words plays an important role when deaf children learn to read, analysis shows

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An understanding of how words can be broken down into smaller units of meaning plays a key role when deaf and hard of hearing children

learn to read, analysis shows.

This knowledge of roots, prefixes, and suffixes—morphological awareness—helps children to learn new [words](#) and expand their [vocabulary](#). This is the first meta-analytic study to show its importance for those who have [hearing loss](#).

Morphological awareness can even be more important for them than phonology—and the use of phonics. The meta-analysis says this suggests opportunities for deaf and hard of [hearing](#) students to use knowledge of morphemes and morphological structures to actively construct words. The [meta-analysis](#) raises the question of whether this should be an essential part of the classroom.

Deaf and hard of hearing children often experience barriers to literacy, and researchers hope their work will help improve their access to teaching and learning.

The study, published in the *Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education*, was carried out by Dongbo Zhang and Hannah Anglin-Jaffe from the University of Exeter; Sihui Ke, from The Hong Kong Polytechnic; and Junhui Yang, from the University of Central Lancashire.

Dr. Anglin-Jaffe said, "A focus on using phonics in schools could have obscured the way morphological awareness can be beneficial to deaf and hard of hearing pupils when they learn to read. We hope this study will begin the process of challenging the accepted ways of thinking and teaching and play a part in raising the status of deaf culture and communities."

Researchers examined studies available about morphological awareness, which in total covered information about the reading-related abilities of 556 deaf and hard-of-hearing students. The results showed high mean

correlations of morphological awareness with word reading, vocabulary knowledge, and reading comprehension.

The study found those with severe or profound hearing loss may tend to rely more on morphographic analysis than on graphophonemic analysis for word reading.

Dr. Zhang said, "Our research suggests morphological awareness could be even more important a factor in DHH students' word reading, particular in consideration of their reduced access to phonology. This of course does not mean that phonological skills are unimportant for DHH students.

"This is strong evidence morphological [awareness](#) is reliably important for vocabulary development disregarding language, stage of reading, and ways of assessing MA or vocabulary knowledge. This lends clear support to an instructional focus where morphological problem-solving should be emphasized for promoting DHH students' lexical engagement and vocabulary development."

**More information:** Dongbo Zhang et al, Morphological Awareness and DHH Students' Reading-Related Abilities: A Meta-Analysis of Correlations, *Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education* (2023). [DOI: 10.1093/deafed/enad024](https://doi.org/10.1093/deafed/enad024)

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