

Building Vocabulary Through Prefixes, Roots & Suffixes

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Introduction

Are you looking for an element of English language study that is utilized in every aspect of language usage? Are you frustrated that vocabulary building in textbooks is limited to memorization of individual words? Would you like to systematize vocabulary building so that your students can continue to learn vocabulary once they are out of your class? If this is the case with you, I recommend the study of prefixes roots and suffixes. This is not a single class exercise, nor a single lesson plan. It is an introduction to the most utilized word parts that, in their many combinations, make up 50% of the English language. It requires perseverance, but is rewarded by students who are grateful that they have become comfortable with the ability to recognize words they are not immediately familiar with. And confidence with vocabulary goes a long way in reading, writing, listening, speaking, and with standardized test-taking.

Purpose

English vocabulary is enormous and grows steadily with technological and cultural assimilations. The vast majority of the new words introduced, and a great percentage of the words used to express abstract ideas, are complex words that are made up of simple word parts (prefixes, roots, and suffixes) that have their own definitions and, when familiar to the student of English, can be understood in context without an exact definition. This is the foundation of the system which I present to my students. By slowly and steadily studying the most prominent prefixes, roots, and suffixes, students can acquire a vocabulary that is far greater than the sum of its parts.

Necessities

The most crucial requirement in this system is a basic understanding of the most prominent prefixes, roots and suffixes in the English language. There are many resources for obtaining support information, on the Internet and in books, but below is a short list of some of the predominant prefixes, roots and suffixes:

Prefixes	Roots	Suffixes
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ab - away	vis, vid - to see	-tion, -ion, -sion - n. condition
ad - to, toward	ject - push	-al - adj., relating to
con, com, co - with, together	press- press	-e - makes a noun or verb
de - down, from	cis, cid - cut, kill	-ive - adj., relating to
ex, e - out of, from	pend, pens - hang	-able, -ible - able to, can
in, im - in or not	fac, fici, fec - make, do	-ia - n. condition, disorder
micro - small	lat- carry	-ly - adverb
mono - one	mit, mis- send, do	-ology -study
multi - many	nav, naut - sail, boat	-ary, -ory - place
ob - to, toward	ten, tend, tain - hold	
pre, pro - before, near	ped, pod, pus - foot	
re - back, again	cept, ceiv - take	
	rupt - break	

The source I use is the dictionary *The Structure of English Words*, 4th ed., by Clarence Sloat and Sharon Taylor, Kendall Hunt Publishing Company, 1996, ISBN 0-7872-2248-8. I have never seen any book with a better collection of prefixes, roots and suffixes, as well as listings of the words that each word part is used in. Another book worth looking into is *English Words from Latin-Greek Elements*, by Donald Ayers and Thomas Worthen, University of Arizona Press, 1986. Check out these websites for

more truncated, but still effective, lists:

- www.ccps.org/ccps/pvms/Challenge/Vocabbuild.html
- www.lexfiles.info
- www.southampton.liunet.edu

Method

It does not matter if you are teaching a reading, writing, or listening/speaking class. It does not matter what text is being used, or if there is any text at all. Any paragraph written in English will have at least a few words that are made up of prefixes, roots and suffixes, and this is where the method begins. This system should be introduced on the first day of class (to great incomprehension, no doubt), and should be dealt with in no more than 10 or 15 minutes per class.

After reading a paragraph, the teacher should excerpt a few complex words, for example 'invisible' and 'decision.' The teacher then tells the students that these words are made up from word parts and that a great many words in English are as well, and that studying these parts increases vocabulary immensely. The teacher breaks the words down into their parts, writing on the board what each part means. Then, introduce other words that have the same roots in them, for 'vis,vid' television, video, and even view, for 'cis, cid' scissors, homicide, and suicide. Then define the prefixes and suffixes of those words. This will lead to a list of 8 or 10 words. This kind of brainstorming should be kept to a minimum in the first weeks and then indulged in more freely as the students gain in confidence. The students will be confused at first. Just remind them that this is a process that gets easier with repetition. The next week, quiz the students on how to break down last week's words into prefixes, roots and suffixes, and what each word part means. I usually chose 5 words and the quiz is worth 10 points, one point for identifying the correct prefix, root, and suffix, and one point for correct definitions of each word part. (If the word is broken down incorrectly, for example 'inv- in, -isi- to see, -ble- able to,' one point is taken off. If one part is defined incorrectly, '-vis- to scare', one point is taken off.) After the quiz, or during the reading time in class, I introduce half a dozen new words and word parts for the following week.

There are complications, for example 'in' in invisible become 'im' in impossible, and 'ob' in obvious becomes 'op' in opposite. There are 'stem extenders' which mean nothing but help with pronunciation, like '-ac-' in tenacity, which is a noun related to holding. But these exceptions dwindle in significance as the presentation of new word parts and words and the repetition of quizzes occurs over a period of weeks. In my classes, students' scores begin at the 2s and 3s, and increase to 8s, 9s, and 10s over a few weeks.

Conclusion

In a matter of weeks, students will not only be comfortable identifying complex words in their own reading and writing, but also of breaking those words (and others with which they are not familiar) down and attempting to understand their meaning by the meanings of their parts. They will know the most popular prefixes and suffixes (ad-, de-, ex-, in-, and -tion, -ate, -al) because they will have seen them and heard them repeated many times over. I reward students who utilize complex words in their writing or speaking with extra credit points. This system is daunting at first, but over time and with repetition, students naturally become more confident, and learn how to teach themselves the language. Their growing confidence is easy to see in their increasing quiz scores. I generally finish the term presenting the students with a list of the words that they have encountered – students are astonished at just how many words they have seen and can handle. The ultimate reward any ESL teacher can attain is to see the students learn a difficult task and apply their learning to their everyday lives. To my mind, there is no aspect of language that is more important than vocabulary building and comprehension. Using this system, I have been rewarded over and over again by grateful students. With patience and perseverance, I am sure you will have the same experience.

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