A case for teaching Latin etymology with a communicative component

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This investigation into the teaching of Latin etymology was prompted by an English class gone sour. Though presented with only six basic Latin forms for memorization biweekly, students in our largely female, freshman newspaper reading class objected to the growing burden of studying for cumulative tests, stating that they saw no relationship between the forms and vocabulary in their academic-level readings. Following a model of first language vocabulary acquisition developed by David Corson (1995), we redesigned our etymology lessons to include a negotiated discussion pair activity. Student scores and attitudes improved noticeably. Through this experience we learned that it is not only possible to teach Latin forms in lessons with a communicative component, but that it may be preferable to facilitate the learning of communicatively-oriented groups.

この研究は失敗したある授業を改善する目的で始められた。一週おきに6個の基本的なラテン語の形態素を暗記する課題を出したのだが，その新聞読解のクラスの学生たち（一年生で女子が多い）は定期的な小テストを負担に思うようになっていった。彼らはそれらの形態素と新聞等に用いられる語彙の相関関係が見出せないでいたのである。そこでデイビッド・コールソンの提唱する第一言語の獲得モデルに基づき，学生がペアワークなどを通してラテン語語源の単語を無理なく修得できるように工夫を凝らした。すると学生の点数と学習に対する姿勢は際立って改善された。それによりコミュニケートを重視する授業にはラテン語の形態素学習が可能なばかりか，学習を容易にするのにはより好ましいということが分かった。

This investigation and the lesson presented herein were the result of an English reading class gone sour. We were presenting only six basic Latin forms for study biweekly to our largely female, freshman level newspaper reading class. In this discussion *form* refers to an individual prefix, stem, or suffix. These were taught for passive recognition as an aid for decoding vocabulary in course readings. Week by week students began objecting to the growing burden of reviewing for regular, cumulative tests

in which they matched words containing the forms to their Latin-derived meanings. Test scores were low, and in a questionnaire near the end of first term more than half of respondents indicated they saw no relationship between their study of Latin forms and the English language newspaper reading they did for class or any benefit to their other skills. Some called the forms *useless*. As a result, we decided to reexamine our goals and materials.

Teaching etymology

Linguistic justification

It was not difficult to justify our teaching of Latin etymology, that is, the meaning of Latin forms found in English words, to students reading at near academic level. There is a high concentration of Latin-based words in the English language. Herein a word is termed *Latin-based* or *Latin-derived* if it contains a Latin stem. Over 60 percent of English words are of Latin origin, over 90 percent in the area of science and technology (Green, 1990). The English language contains 178 Anglo-Saxon roots but 280 others, almost all Latin and Greek (Skeat, 1917). *Root* is here defined as "that part of a word-form that remains when all inflectional and derivational affixes have been removed" (Bauer, 1983, p. 20). Henry (1993) states that by using 12 Latin and 2 Greek roots, together with 20 of the most frequently used prefixes one can generate an estimated 100,000 words in English. Also the *University Word List* by Nation (1990), a collection of the 1,000 words most represented in ESL college textbooks, consists almost entirely of Latin-based words. Clearly, instruction in Latin etymology could aid university students in decoding many new words in their readings.

Literature review

Psycholinguistic research on word storage may provide further evidence. The work of Harré and Gillett (1994) strongly suggests that the brain's neurological mechanisms change as the result of differing social environments and discourse practices. Corson (1995) takes this a step further and concludes that lexical organization and processing of morphemic units also changes as a result of language learning. Though he does not directly claim that all words containing the same morpheme are stored together in the brain, he cites others who do, including Taft (1994) and Marslen-Wilsen (1994). He maintains that Latinate words learned together with their morphemic meanings will be more easily remembered and more available for active use than these same words learned without the extra stimulation that their etymological meanings provide. To some extent Corson could be faulted for oversimplifying an enormously complex mental process for which others have offered equally plausible explanations. Aitchison (2003), for instance, based on her more recent study of malapropisms and errors by aphasics concludes that words are clustered in the brain according to similarities in their beginnings, endings, or rhythmic patterns. In cases where a prefix begins a word, she believes the word is probably stored with others having the same prefix. Other researchers present convincing support for the existence of semantic groupings of words in the lexicon. Corson's claim, then, needs to account for much contradictory evidence. Still, few would dispute his observation that the more stimulation a learner experiences with regard to a word, the more likely he is to recall and use it. In Corson's view, stimulation means access to word

meaning through morphology but also includes any further encounters the learner has with the words in written or spoken contexts.

Justifying our lessons

Our next step was to reevaluate our lessons on Latin forms. These were usually well-received in class, within the abilities of even lower students, and organized logically from recognizing the meaning of Latin forms in familiar words to decoding the meaning in unfamiliar ones. Experience showed that our students were comfortable working with six new forms per unit. We presented forms with high frequency and transparent meaning in words and grouped and sequenced the forms so that large numbers of English words could be generated from their combination. Whenever possible, we introduce Latin forms with words in the students' repertoires. According to Pierson (1989), new information connected to something already learned is more likely to be remembered and generalized to other contexts. In these lessons known words serve as reference points for new words with the same forms that are introduced in later sections. Our exercises were not communicative, but that did not seem an issue. We assumed along with Kelly (1991) that whatever techniques we used to teach etymology, students would be focusing on words as linguistic objects and not as components of speech or writing.

Model of first language acquisition

David Corson (1995, 1997), however, maintains that whether students are native speakers of English or not, our goal should be for them to both remember and use Latinate words in speech and writing. He stresses the necessity of three steps in a child's learning of difficult words for active production. Taken together, these steps could be considered a model of how children learn and begin to use advanced vocabulary in their first language.

Corson's steps in advanced vocabulary acquisition among native-speaking children

1. Initial encounter in reading

   Children encounter most new words through reading.

2. Actual learning in a spoken context

   The child asks for help, and a parent provides pronunciation, definition, and context for the new word.

3. Negotiated discussion of text

   The child attempts to use the new word by talking about the text in which it occurs, with the parent providing interactive feedback. This step must occur for the child to be able to use the word.

Corson (1995) observes that because ESL students often lack opportunities to use English outside of the classroom, they sometimes finish their courses with little improvement. He urges teachers to include negotiated discussion as an integral part of their vocabulary lessons, and reports the process works best in content courses when foreign students pair with native speakers.

There is general agreement in the literature that literacy and parents' verbal input have a positive effect on children's language development. Corson's model also resembles the second language vocabulary learning paradigm of Nation (2005), who states that meaning-focused input, language-focused learning, and meaning-focused output are necessary steps to fluency. Still Corson's model of first language vocabulary acquisition may be criticized on at least two grounds. First, it may appear to suggest that active use of new words by children is acquired exclusively through this strategy, ignoring many other established theories on vocabulary development. Nowadays a growing number of researchers, such as Kameenui, Dixson, & Carnine (1987) and Hague (1987), look upon vocabulary learning as a much more complex process involving language aptitude, background knowledge, instruction, repeated exposures, and chance for practice.

Second, Corson's theory alone would probably not account for the phenomenal growth in the vocabulary of children that occurs with literacy. McKeown (1987) estimates that vocabulary roughly doubles in size between the third and seventh grades. Nagy (1985) calculates that students increase their vocabulary by 3,000 words per year and have knowledge of 40,000 words upon graduation from high school. He credits incidental learning through reading for this increase. Newton (1995) found that although negotiated discussion usually resulted in learning, the bulk of vocabulary acquisition came about through meeting words in context, simply because it occurred so much more often.

Corson's basic theory, however, seems relevant to both first and second language learners and to adults as well as children. A number of researchers of second language learning, including Mackey (2002), note the positive effects that interactional feedback has on the oral production of learners of all ages. We had only one reservation in applying Corson's model to our teaching. We wondered if differences between this typical children's learning strategy and our adult female students' preferred learning strategies would compromise our success. Ellis (1994) indicates that children use task-specific strategies, whereas adults employ generalized strategies. However, he finds that younger learners and women both favor social and interactive strategies, and that strategies that involve functional practice help to develop communicative competence. Further support for interactive learning comes from Jones (2000), who found that oral work in pairs brought vocabulary learning advantages for both mnemonically and contextually instructed students.

We reasoned that our students were not receiving enough stimulation to store and retrieve our Latinate forms. A communicative, socially interactive learning strategy seemed appropriate for use in negotiated discussion, and in keeping with Ellis' conclusions, so we decided to put Corson's model to the test in our class. We kept our existing exercise format, since it roughly approximated the first two steps of Corson's paradigm. That is, the target language was introduced in a written context, modeled for pronunciation, defined, and presented in additional contexts. In Corson's paradigm children deal with one word at a time, but we felt justified in continuing to present multiple forms based on our adult students' demonstrated ability to handle them. What we lacked was negotiated discussion. We believed one way to

generate it was to present a reading on a topic reflecting our students' experiences and interests and containing Latinate vocabulary from the current and previous lessons, with review exercises, culminating in a discussion activity. These days there is general agreement among educators that reading can facilitate vocabulary comprehension (Coady, 1993). Reading topics that relate to the experiences of students also allow them to draw upon their *schemata* (Bartlett, 1932), that is, their knowledge of or experience with the topic, to better understand the vocabulary and content. We were encouraged by the experience of Pritchard (2004). He witnessed dramatic improvement in his EFL engineering students' attitude and performance in his reading classes by responding to their schemata in choosing material and allowing them to negotiate meaning. Finally, in our classes we felt that meaningful texts containing the target vocabulary could serve as a springboard for discussion.

Negotiated discussion component

The following are excerpts from the reading and exercises which we added to our existing lessons to move students into communicative exchanges using textual information, target vocabulary, and their background knowledge of the topic. Each reading also recycles Latinate vocabulary from previous lessons to provide students with repeated exposure to these words.

Exercise 5. Read the following information about mobile phones. Do not write anything. Do not use dictionaries. Guess the meanings of any words you don't know.

Mobile Phones: Danger to Health

The mobile phone is a wonderful invention, but many
1._____ 2._____
people say it can pose dangers to people's health if used
3._____
improperly. When your ear touches your cell phone, the
4._____
phone introduces EMFs into your head. EMFs are electric
5._____
energy, invisible to the eye….
6._____

Figure 1. Reading

This reading is followed by vocabulary decoding (Exercise 6) to give students practice deciphering Latinate words in context, and next by factual questions, which require use of the target words in answers (Exercise 7). If solicited orally by the teacher in class, responses can function as students' first use of the words in speech with a native speaker.

Exercise 6. Go back to the reading. Guess and write the meaning of each underlined word in the story above. Each word has one or two Latin parts. Try to use the meaning of the Latin parts in the answers you give.

Example: The mobile phone is a wonderful invention.

1. able to be moved 2. something coming in

Figure 2. Decoding

Exercise 7. Underline a sentence in the reading which answers each question. There should be one or more Latin-based words in every answer.

1. What is the mobile phone?
2. When can it pose a danger to people's health?
3. What happens when you hold a mobile phone to your ear?

Figure 3. Scanning and speaking

The most critical part of the process follows (Exercise 8), where students answer opinion or personal questions related to the theme of the reading, using the Latinate forms. Here group work is between nonnative speakers but is still beneficial as learners have many more opportunities to use the target language than in teacher-centered activities. Also, discussion among students can make the teacher's input more comprehensible, and output can be modified, as when one student asks another to explain what he has just said. Stahl and Clarke (1987) reported that even students who only observed negotiation about their task learned just as well as the students doing the actual negotiating. Finally, the discussion questions can be assigned as homework to allow for additional feedback by the teacher. We encouraged students to use Latin-based words from the readings in their responses, but any Latin-derived words which answered the questions were accepted.

Exercise 8. With a partner ask and answer the discussion questions truthfully. Try to use at least 2 Latin-based words in your answers. You can add extra information that you have learned through newspapers, magazines, TV, or conversations with friends. If you do not have a cell phone, you can answer about a friend or family member's phone.

1. Have you inspected your phone for the watt or power level? If yes, how many watts are you exposed to when you use your phone? If not, do you think your phone poses any danger to you?
2. This report about mobile phones is controversial. Some scientists say the phones are dangerous. Some say they are not. What is your opinion about portable phones? If you think that they might be dangerous, tell the information you agree with in this report. If you think they are not dangerous, tell what information you do not agree with. Use as many of the Latin-based words as possible.

Figure 4. Discussing

Discussion and conclusion

Corson (1997) urges instructors to combine etymology lessons with content courses. Kasper (1994) also found ESL reading courses paired with academic courses led to enhanced student performance in both areas. Smoke (2001) in her credit course for ESL students and native-speaking classics majors at Hunter College uses readings on classical languages and language learning. In our classes alternate lessons are devoted to the newspaper. Students read and complete exercises on features of the newspaper containing Latinate vocabulary from previous lessons. In pair activities they report on a newspaper article which they chose and prepared for homework, defining key vocabulary and responding to standard who-what-when-where-why-how questions about their accounts. This seems in keeping with Corson's view (1997) and the general consensus in the literature on language learning that students need to meet newly learned vocabulary again in a variety of contexts and take more opportunities to use these words.

We included the reading-negotiated discussion component with every new set of Latin forms introduced second term. Readings took various forms: topical quizzes, partner interviews, information gap activities, even palm reading, all performed with another student. We turned to Baudoin, Bober, Clarke, Dobson, and Silberstein (1994), Green (1990), and McKim (1994) for help in selecting words but otherwise wrote our own material. Our classroom atmosphere lightened week by week. Test scores rose. Final evaluations of the class were glowing, and some students wrote that they liked the lessons and that their English had improved.

Our experience alone does not prove that Corson's paradigm, applied to EFL students, will take them to active use of Latin-derived words. However, it does suggest that it is possible to teach Latin forms with a communicative component, and that this may provide the stimulation needed by more communicatively-oriented learners. With the boom in TOEFL and TOEIC courses, the popularity of study abroad programs, and the call by the Ministry of Education (Japan, 1998) for universities to promote graduate studies and produce professionals capable of representing Japan on the world stage, both in publishing and in speaking, students need an efficient way of acquiring large amounts of English vocabulary for active use. Studying Latin-based vocabulary for production in speech and writing could be one of those ways.

Summary and further considerations

Our students were frustrated first term because our etymology lessons did not provide them with adequate stimulation for learning and did not accommodate their learning style. The addition of communicative activities to our existing lesson resulted in better student attitude and performance on tests.

We acknowledge the limitations of our study including the small number of students we worked with, the failure to collect statistics to validate our exercises, and the lack of quantitative data to support our final observations. We hope to address these shortcomings in future studies and adapt our lessons for use in TOEIC and TOEFL courses.

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