

# A Little Latin and a Lot of English

by Rick M. Newton and Evangeline Newton

**C**onsider this: In the fifth grade alone, our students will meet about 10,000 new words as they read. Sixty percent of those words will have recognizable Greek, Latin, or Anglo-Saxon word parts (Nagy et al., 1989). About 4,000 of the 10,000 words will be derivatives of familiar words (compound words and words with prefixes and suffixes). And 1,300 more of those words will be inflections of familiar words (for example, laugh, laughter).

“But, Miss Cassell, we don’t want to translate Julius Caesar’s Gallic Wars on Fridays!” Thus began the 1964 revolution of the ninth-grade Latin class of Hanley Junior High School in University City, Missouri, a suburb of St. Louis. Back then in that school district, all ninth graders were required to take a foreign language. Our choices were French, German, Russian, Spanish, and—yes—Latin.

Mandatory foreign language study in University City public schools actually began in the eighth grade. In the ninth grade we were allowed to continue with the same language or start over with a new one. Most of us picked the language our friends picked so that we could use our time in foreign language class to socialize. (What else would one expect from a 14-year-old?) If our friends had changed since the eighth grade, we might pick the new language of our new friends. With my stagnant social life, I stuck with the same friends and stayed with Latin. The die was cast.

All the foreign language classes met at the same time: Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, 2:00-3:00 in the afternoon. Every Monday and Wednesday afternoon, the entire school was abuzz, acting out dialogues in mock restaurants and railroad stations, conjugating verbs, making flash cards, and memorizing vocabulary. But on Friday, the modern language students—i.e., every language class except Latin—did “fun” activities. Students in Spanish were making piñatas, the French students were building miniature guillotines and creating powdered wigs, the German students were preparing for a mock Oktoberfest, and the handful of Russian students (it was the Sput-

nik era) were playing Theodore Bikel folk records with balalaika music.

But Miss Elaine Cassell, our brand-new Latin teacher with an MA from Stanford University, was intent on making us complete her favorite selections from Julius Caesar by the end of the year so that she could send us to high school fully prepared for Cicero. While we were being chided for misspelling the name of the barbarian Vercingetorix, the smell of hot tacos came wafting down the hall from the Spanish class. Even Miss Cassell would comment on how she wouldn’t mind having one! It took the better part of the fall semester for us to wear her down with our conspiracy of Friday whining, and to this day, I am not sure if our conspiratorial complaining did the trick or the smell of those tacos. If the latter, thank you, O Mexico!

But Miss Cassell believed that doing something “fun,” like building a Roman chariot, would take too much time from our real studies. Wearing togas to school was out of the question in the 1960s: No shorts, no jeans, no T-shirts, no exposed shoulders were allowed in the building! But our teacher finally did compromise. She made every Friday “Roots Day.” Her idea of fun—if you can believe it—was to lay Julius Caesar aside for one hour, cast our declensions and conjugations to the wind, and just learn English vocabulary from the Latin roots.

It didn’t sound like much fun to us, but it did sound like a lot less work, and so we feigned enthusiasm. Instead of having to remember that the preposition *per* always governs the accusative case or that *sub* takes the ablative, on Fridays we had only to know that *per* meant “through,” as in words like *permeate*, *percolate*, *perforate*, and *percussion*. We were responsible only for knowing that *sub* meant “under,” as in *submarine*, *subconscious*, and *submerge*.

So every Friday, “just for fun,” Miss Cassell passed out 3 x 5 index cards and scissors so that we could make our own flash cards for Latin prefixes, suffixes, and bases. Wow—using scissors in Latin class—what a novelty! We were

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allowed to use class time to memorize our cards (what a relief—any other day of the week, this would have been a homework assignment) and then compete with one another, sometimes in teams and sometimes individually, to see who could generate the greatest number of English words from a single Latin root.

Even Miss Cassell got into the game. She created columns of words, following each word with as many blanks as the Latin roots it contained. We had to “slash” each word to identify the Latin roots and then deduce the definition. *Quadruped* had two blanks after it, so we whipped out our flash cards for *quadru* and *ped* and filled in the blanks with *four* and *foot*. *Dissect* had two blanks: We filled in *cut* and *apart*. *Compose* had two blanks: We filled in *put* and *together*. We earned points that we could claim for extra credit toward our final grade for the course. This was serious fun!

After a month or so of these Fridays, we Latin students finally could compete with our modern language peers. We had no guillotines to show off, but we did have an impressive stack of flash cards and some awesome vocabulary! Just like Gus Portokalis, the father in *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, we would go around the school building and say to teachers and classmates, “Give me a word, any word, and I’ll tell you it’s from Latin!” Of course, we made few new friends with such sophomoric behavior (we were only freshmen!), but within our own peer group of Latin-loving nerds, we thought we had invented sliced bread.

By the end of the year, like Pavlovian dogs, we had become highly trained etymological dynamos. After all, there are only around 30 Latin prefixes. You don’t even need to be a Latin student to learn them. These prefixes abound throughout our English vocabulary. For every Latin base we learned, we could generate at least 5—and often 15 or 20—English words. From *greg* (meaning “flock, herd”) we formed *congregation*, *aggregate*, *gregarious*, *egregious*, *segregate*, and *desegregate*. And these were not just “dictionary words.” These words appeared over and over in every course we took throughout high school and into college:

words like *perturb*, *revoke*, *providential*, *impediment*, and *implement*. The same words showed up on the ACTs and SATs. I still remember encountering *vivisect* on the SAT. I had never seen it before, but I was able to hazard an informed guess that it had something to do with “cutting” something “alive.”

“Divide and conquer” was one of the slogans we learned when we read Julius Caesar in the ninth grade. But Miss Cassell taught us to divide and conquer vocabulary by showing us how to search for meaningful “semantic units” within words that may at first sight intimidate or baffle us. Indeed, some 80 percent of the words students find “difficult” in literature, in textbooks, and on standardized tests derive from Latin or Greek. Just having such a tool at my disposal—the habit of dividing a word into its component parts as a way of decoding its meaning—has proved to be one of the easiest and yet most powerful learning aids in my life of literacy.

### What Can We Learn from Roots Day?

In Miss Cassell’s “Roots” class, Rick became a lifelong lover of words. For the last 30 years, he has been teaching them to students at Kent State University. Since most of our students will not take Latin and few of us can boast Miss Cassell’s impressive command of English morphology, what can we learn from this story? We believe there are three implications for vocabulary instruction of adolescents.

- 1 ***We need to teach students how to divide and conquer word parts, especially those of Latin and Greek origin.*** Rick’s journey began when Miss Cassell demonstrated a strategy that showed him how to divide and conquer word parts to unlock their Latin-based word meanings. Ohio’s English Language Arts Academic Content Standards underscore the importance of this linguistic principle. Grade-level indicators from the first through twelfth grade call for the study of prefixes, suffixes, roots, and word origins. In fact, from the seventh grade on, the indicators specifically designate the study of Greek, Latin, and Anglo-Saxon roots.
- 2 ***We need to provide regular opportunities for students to practice and discover words on their own and in the company of others.*** After teaching the strategy, Miss Cassell created an authentic—and social—purpose for applying it. Rick and his classmates enjoyed competing with each other to discover new words. They boasted about their unique skill. In a surprisingly short time, they grew into independent and confident word sleuths. Research tells us that for

students to master a word, they need to meet it multiple times in conversation or through reading and writing, and Roots Day provided such opportunities (Blachowicz & Fisher, 2002).

- We need to share our own love of words and invite students to share theirs.*** Ultimately, Roots Day was about how a teacher used her passion for Latin to ignite her students' curiosity about English. Quite naturally, by engaging with her students through "serious fun"—and even competing against them—Miss Cassell modeled the innate pleasure of exploring and using words. And like her, these students also became lifelong lovers of words.

### How Do We Begin?

Use these guidelines and resources to get started. It will be easier than you think!

- ***Tuck “word talk” into all lessons.*** Begin by sharing your own love of words. Each of us has favorite texts that we turn to because the words move us to laughter or tears. Read these aloud to your students, and talk about the power of words. Invite your students to do so as well. Learning new words means learning new concepts—or new labels for familiar concepts. If students will be tackling a new or difficult concept in language arts or the content areas, begin by reading them a picture book or story that addresses the topic. For example, consider reading *Miss Alaineus: A Vocabulary Disaster* (Frasier, 2000) to initiate discussion of the complex spelling and multiple meanings of English words.
- ***Encourage students to become word sleuths.*** Most students come to us with some word analysis strategies. Reinforce—and expand—the strategies students have already learned. They know how to use context clues, although they may not apply the skill efficiently. They know how to use a dictionary, but they may not know the enormous variety of electronic and print dictionaries now available. They know the concept of synonym and antonym, but they may not know how to use a thesaurus. (Some of the electronic ones available are really fun to use!) Explicit practice with all these strategies for unlocking word meanings will help students learn to use them automatically.
- ***Teach the word analysis strategy of divide and conquer.*** Most of our students already know that affixes and roots are word parts. What they may not know is that by separating and analyzing each of those parts they can figure out a word's meaning or build new words on their own.

What are the most common Latin prefixes and bases? Two good resources are Janet Allen's *Words, Words, Words* (1999, pp. 121-123) and Blachowicz and Fisher's *Teaching Vocabulary in All Classrooms* (2002, p. 196). Unless the district's course of study identifies specific affixes and roots (or bases), no need to worry about tying specific parts directly into the curriculum. If concerned that you may lack an in-depth understanding of those meanings yourself, rest assured that there are plenty of easily available resources to help. The web also has lots of ready-made activities. Try the Flip-a-Chip strategy from Read-Write-Think ([http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson\\_view.asp?id=253](http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=253)) to show students how to build words from affixes and bases. For more teaching support, check out [http://www.ohiorc.org/adlit/documents/in\\_perspective\\_158.pdf](http://www.ohiorc.org/adlit/documents/in_perspective_158.pdf).

- ***Provide direct instruction for key vocabulary.*** The National Reading Panel (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000) found that some direct instruction is useful. There is, however, no core list of vocabulary words students can expect to meet in a particular grade. New vocabulary usually comes from the texts students read, and these vary from district to district. Teachers are often left to identify key words for direct instruction before reading. While preteaching key words through direct instruction is worthwhile, research tells us that only about 8 to 10 new words each week can be learned effectively through direct instruction (Stahl & Fairbanks, 1986). Because of this, select those words carefully. Choose words that represent a significant concept, are needed for a specific reading assignment, and are likely to be encountered in other texts (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002). Recognize that students will not master those words unless they have opportunities to use them in multiple oral and print contexts. For some more quick classroom tips on how to choose and teach words, read the Scholastic professional development tutorial (<http://teacher.scholastic.com/reading/best-practices/vocabulary/development.htm>): “Teaching Vocabulary with Francie Alexander,” a tutorial on increasing vocabulary.
- ***Just as every story has words, every word has a story.*** Did you know that the word *school* actually comes to us from the Latin word for “leisure”? Or that a computer *cursor* and a race *course* both come from the Latin word for the verb “to run”? Students might find those nuggets of information interesting. Whet their appetites by sharing interesting word histories, and then show students how to explore the origin of lots of words themselves. Post a list of websites or print



resources. Encourage students to share what they discover with the class.

- **Make time for “word play.”** Remember that words themselves are just plain interesting and our ultimate goal is to create lifelong word lovers. Giving students time to do crossword puzzles and word scrambles or to create riddles and tongue twisters is not only fun—it’s good instruction. Make time for students to play and explore word games on their own or with others. There are countless easily accessible word activities available for students to play on the Internet. You may want to begin with Bingo Lingo.
- **Promote wide reading on a variety of topics.** Research tells us that we learn more new words “incidentally,” when they appear in our reading or listening, than we do through direct instruction (Lehr, Osborn, & Hiebert, n.d.). The more students read, the better. Establish different purposes for reading—including pure pleasure—and urge students to choose texts at various levels of difficulty. Even a simple text can generate conversation that will expand students’ conceptual knowledge and increase their overall word awareness.

### Final Thoughts

Rick observes: What Miss Cassell instilled in us, through Friday Roots Day fun and games, was not just vocabulary that would help us for the rest of our lives when we read literature and textbooks, or took the SATs, ACTs, and GREs. She instilled curiosity about words—where they came from and how they could be used. She instilled a love of words that continues long after we have left her classroom. Perhaps just as importantly, she instilled in us the confidence that when confronted by a new and difficult word, we often have the resources within ourselves to grasp its meaning. We have these resources, that is, if we know just “a little Latin.” □

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