

Can Latin Help Younger Students Build Vocabulary?

By **Liana Heitin**

Fairfax, Va.

With students gone for the day, 6th grade teachers Joy Ford and Ryan Rusk sat in a classroom discussing the Latin root *temp*.

After determining that "contemporary" and "temporary" share the root, which refers to time, the two Woodlawn Elementary teachers then turned to the word "temptation."

"I'm tempted to eat this chocolate," said Ford. "That doesn't have to do with time."

"But if I'm tempted, I want it now," responded Rusk. "So could it?"

Along with a half-dozen other K-6 teachers, the two were participating in a study group in which they meet weekly to learn how to incorporate Greek and Latin roots into their daily instruction. The group was doing a "word sort" activity from the book ***Greek and Latin Roots: Keys to Vocabulary Building***.

The theory behind teaching Latin and Greek prefixes, suffixes, and bases, which some teachers are doing with children as young as 1st grade, is that it helps build vocabulary more quickly than learning definitions of individual words.

"A single root can generate over 100 words," said Joanna Newton, the reading specialist at Woodlawn, who runs the professional-development group. "If you teach a kid even 10 roots over the course of a year, that's like 1,000 words they can potentially unlock on their own."

Teaching root words also gives students a way to play with language and see it as something they can reason through. "It makes them more aware of words, that words hold meaning, and that the language is purposeful," said Emily Ulrich, a 4th grade teacher at Woodlawn, who has been using the approach for three years. "It gives them confidence, too, when they're reading and they see parts of words they're familiar with."

The exchange between Ford and Rusk about *temp* (which, by the way, is not the root of temptation) mirrored the kinds of conversations the teachers were hoping to inspire in their own classrooms. And in many classrooms, it seems to be working—students are finding root words in

their group and silent reading, chatting with their peers about what words could mean, and bringing words they're curious about to class.

"It's a paradigm shift in the way we teach vocabulary," said Newton.

'Breaking the Code'

A group of Ohio professors from Kent State University and the University of Akron—Timothy Rasinski, Nancy Padak, Rick M. Newton, and Evangeline Newton—wrote the 2008 book, *Greek and Latin Roots*, and designed an accompanying curriculum, which some teachers in Fairfax and other schools around the country are using. (Woodlawn's Newton is the daughter of Rick and Evangeline Newton.)



Aubrey Eisele, a 1st grade student at Hatton, works on a root-word exercise during class.
—Dustin Franz for Education Week

According to Rasinski, a literacy education professor at Kent State, teaching young students about morphology (the study of word forms) and word patterns improves their ability to gain meaning from unfamiliar words, which helps with reading overall. "This is one of the most promising ways for developing word knowledge," he said. "Anybody who's ever taken Latin in high school sees how profoundly it's affected English and can help build vocabulary."

Latin class has long been a staple in high schools, but the idea of teaching Latin in elementary schools isn't new either. In a [1984 Commentary piece for Education Week](#), Rudolph Masciantonio, then an administrator in the office of curriculum for the Philadelphia school district, wrote about efforts in Baltimore, Chicago, Cincinnati, Los Angeles, and other cities to teach Latin to young students. "Educators have long believed that a pupil who knows the Latin roots, prefixes, and suffixes has the keys to unlock the meaning of countless English derivatives and cognates," he wrote.

However, some teachers using root words now say they don't focus too much on the idea of introducing a whole new language, which can seem overwhelming. "I don't think [students] see it as 'I'm learning Latin,' " said Chris Schmidt, a 3rd-5th grade gifted education teacher in North Carolina's Buncombe County district. He uses a program called [Caesar's English](#) to teach vocabulary with Greek and Latin roots. "They see it more as a puzzle. 'This is something I'm trying to figure out. There's a code in here, and I'm trying to break that code.' "

In many traditional elementary classrooms, students get a list of words to master by the end of the week—perhaps 10 or 20. But in classes using Latin and Greek stems, students often only study one root word per week. From there, they build out dozens of words as a class, and students look for words on their own in other contexts. Many of the activities students do with those root words involve creativity and inquiry. A task called "odd word out," designed by Rasinski and his colleagues, asks students to figure out which word is different in a set. Sometimes a set will include a word that doesn't use the same root. But often, there is no clear right answer. For instance, students might see the words "precook," "preheat," "premixed," and "pretest." One student might say pretest is different because it doesn't have to do with cooking. Another might choose premixed because it's the only one with an -ed ending.

"The conversations students have with each other, that's really that reasoning we're after," said Rosemary Floccari, an instructional coach for Akron public schools, who learned about the

approach while taking courses at the University of Akron several years ago, and now leads professional development on it.

During a lesson on roots one morning, Ulrich asked her students to figure out the definitions of made-up words. She showed them a story she'd written in which the father was referred to as an "unporter" because he didn't help bring the groceries inside the house. The students had learned that the prefix *un* meant not, and *port* meant to carry. Then Ulrich had students make up their own words using prefixes, suffixes, and roots they had learned.

"I wanted to reiterate that each of these parts hold meaning, and when you move them around it does affect the meaning of the word," she said in an interview after the lesson.

Newton said that, while teachers shouldn't use a steady diet of nonsense words, that kind of activity can make for an engaging and helpful review of learned roots. "We want to show the kids how those bases can connect, that they're the building blocks of words," she said.

Between 2014 and 2015, Woodlawn saw increases in its standardized test scores for reading, particularly at the grades in which most teachers were using Latin and Greek roots. (The percentage of 4th graders passing went up by 28 percent, and for 5th grade, it rose 19 percent.) However, Newton was reluctant to attribute the gains to the vocabulary approach, since it wasn't formally required and because of the many other school factors that may have contributed.

False Etymologies

The approach is seemingly in contrast to another vocabulary instructional method that's gained prominence recently: teaching words in context, **through thematic units** that build background knowledge. Some reading experts, including those who helped write the Common Core State Standards, say the best way to learn new words is by learning about individual topics deeply.

Schmidt, the Buncombe County gifted education teacher, agrees that teaching in context is ideal, and he has students apply their roots in research projects. But overall, he said, learning roots individually is a timesaver.

"Sometimes, it's just expediency," he said. "One of the lasting things the kids take from Caesar's English is the fact that when you learn one stem you have some knowledge of countless words, and that hooks them," he said.

The common core does ask students to learn common Latin prefixes, suffixes, and roots as part of its language standards starting in 3rd grade. But some educators say the vocabulary-building approach is useful even for students who are in the early stages of reading.

Diane MacBride, a veteran 1st grade teacher in the Akron school district, went to a professional-development session on teaching Latin and Greek roots three years ago and has been using the method ever since.

"I thought this would be a great way to develop the kids and help them take control of their learning," she said. "Having conversations about words in 1st grade is huge. It's amazing to watch."

With her students, a root word often takes two weeks, rather than one, to fully learn. "That was definitely one of the challenges—I was trying to do it too fast in the beginning," she said. "We weren't going deep enough."

She said her students get excited when they see the roots they've learned in a book they're reading on their own. And the roots have helped in other subjects—for instance, students picked up on what regrouping meant in math quickly because they'd learned the prefix *re*.

One challenge with the approach is that students at all grade levels often stumble on false etymologies. A student who learned the prefix *un*, for example, might think it applies to the word "uncle." But teachers say that kind of mistake can lead to productive conversation—the kind the Virginia teachers were engaging in at their after-school book study meeting.

During that meeting, the Woodlawn teachers also discussed what to do in a common, yet even more thorny scenario—when even the teacher is stumped by a word's etymology.

"You don't have to own all this knowledge," Newton told the group. "You can put 'words we want to know more about' on the board and say, 'Does someone want to go home tonight and look up some of these words?' We're sharing that ambiguity with kids. ... That's what real readers and thinkers do."