

Knowing Word Roots Can Aid Comprehension

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A few years ago several colleagues and I were engaged in a study of reading fluency in high school students. Our study involved having ninth-grade students from a local urban high school read orally a relatively short informational text. Our intent was to check their reading rate (words read correctly per minute) to see if fluency may be an issue that is causing students difficulty in their reading. Our findings confirmed our hypothesis. Many 9th graders experienced difficulty in fluency and this appeared to be a contributor to their reading difficulties.

Another finding, however, from our study us insight into another reading concern. The passage we asked students to read was on the Wright Brothers; in fact a picture of the Wright Brothers flyer appeared above the title. In this passage of approximately 200 words, one particular word appeared three times. That word was *biplane*, a fairly simple word that was supported by the picture of the flyer with its two main wings. Over the half the students pronounced the word in an unconventional way – instead of bi- plane, they read it as bip-lane, with the vowel in the first syllable pronounced as a short i. We asked the students what a “bip-plane” and not one was able to provide an answer. This episode led us to wonder about the degree to which comprehension is affect when students make up words. When the word is mispronounced three times in a 200 word passage, it seems inevitable that comprehension would be hindered.

What do you think might have happened if someone in the elementary grades had taught these students that the prefix “bi” as in bifocals, biceps, biannual, bicycle, bivalve, and many more such words refers to “two.” Do you think they would have been more likely not only to pronounce biplane correctly but also access the notion that a biplane is an airplane with two main wings. Systematic teaching children knowledge of prefixes such as uni, bi, and tri, as well as many other meaningful morphemes, needs to become part of our curriculum in the elementary, middle, and secondary grades. When that does happen we will stop having high school students make up words that don’t exist in the world and make a great leap forward in their overall reading comprehension.