

# Building Vocabulary with Word Roots Builds Reading Comprehension – Part 1

Alan Becker

My journey with using Greek and Latin roots as an educator began in 2011. I was a 5<sup>th</sup> grade Language Arts and Social Studies teacher in a state designated “high needs” school. The school was known as having a very large migrant population as it was located in an extremely rural area known for its cotton and soybean farms. It was about six weeks into the school year when I realized that the traditional vocabulary instruction, I was delivering from our basal series was not effective with this population.

I remember visiting my principal at the time and I just simply stated, “I want to teach vocabulary differently and I am thinking about taking a morphological approach.” He then reached for the end of his desk and handed me a professional resource and said to me, “It is your name on the test scores at the end of the year.” He smiled and I smiled and I took off to my classroom. Over the next few weeks I found time to read the resource, *Greek and Latin Roots: Keys to Building Vocabulary (Rasinski, Padak, Newton & Newton, 2008)*. Based on what I read, I devised a “plan of action” which changed my life as an educator and became much more of a benefit to my students than I could have ever imagined.

I conducted my own research on the most common and reoccurring Greek and Latin Roots in literature and informational text from grade ranges K-6. Based on that research I developed a pacing plan for the rest of the school year in which I would teach one prefix, one suffix, and three root words each week. Introduction of the word roots and English words that belonged to that word root family took place on Mondays (e.g. tract [meaning pull, draw, or drag]: attract, attractive, abstract, distract, retract, subtract, tractor, traction), explicit instruction in brief mini-lessons took place on Tuesday through Thursday, and an assessment was given to the students on Friday. Each day students were exposed to the word parts in whole and small-group instruction as well as interacted with them in a “Word Work” type of independent setting. I was developing my own vocabulary quizzes for the end of each week. Each quiz consisted of three parts. Matching the root or affix to its meaning, filling in the blank of a sentence with the correct word, and then reading a short passage and defining the underlined words as they were used in the sentence or paragraph. A most obedient teachers do, I graded the assessment, recorded the score, and then it was time for the weekend!

Truth be told, I never had the time to reflect on this new practice I was implementing into my classroom due to the mounds of extracurricular tasks that were assigned to me by the school and the school district. On a random day in November, though, I experienced what can only be described as “forced reflection” on the newly imposed vocabulary practice within my

classroom. Next to my guided reading group sat a cluster of students reading on a beginning of 3<sup>rd</sup> grade reading level. As they were reading a text about ocean exploration, I hear one student question another, “why do they call it a submarine?” The response I heard next truly made the hair on my arms stand straight up as goosebumps swelled all over. “Come on man, you know why. Marine means water and sub means under. It’s a thing that goes under the water.” Marine and sub were covered several weeks prior to the students reading that particular text. Not only was meaning constructed from a word that was read but there was retention from my vocabulary instruction to actual reading!

Over the next few days I found time to read a few of the morning work journal entries that my students were completing. I am not going to pretend that my students writing was perfect, nor will I pretend that my writing instruction was either. But what I read was truly amazing. My students were using some of the roots and affixes in their writing. Now, sometimes the words were completely made up, but I will say that even the nonsense word that they had created made sense within the context of their constructed sentence or paragraph. It was at this point that I decided to step up my vocabulary instruction a notch and immerse the students fully within a root and affix rich environment.

When my students walked down a fifty to sixty-yard stretch of hallway to get to my classroom. instead of seeing a typical commercial bulletin board on the walls to my room they were greeted with a “The Wall of Roots and Affixes.” It was roughly about a twenty to twenty-five-foot-long posting of every root and affix that had been taught to the students at that point in the year with plenty of blank space to write more. Each word part also had the definition off to the side and divided into Prefixes-Roots-Suffixes. Instead of students having to complete an exit ticket to leave class, now they had to complete an entrance ticket and develop a real or made up word using the word parts and their meanings from the wall and correctly define the word. I called this activity “Word Math.” I learned quickly that I was helping my students improve their reading comprehension regardless of their reading level. They were using and reading word parts correctly which was helping them in their general reading and reading in other content areas. That first year with those 5<sup>th</sup> grade students proved to be particularly memorable because in just one year of instruction my school lost its “low performing” status.

Over the next few years I refined this method of teaching vocabulary and sought to make it benefit my colleagues who were teaching math, social studies, and science. I started to pick apart the vocabulary words they were teaching and isolate the roots to teach in my ELA class. I was working towards better comprehension across content areas and we became a very successful group of teachers. They taught their content and I focused on the vocabulary and comprehension side of things. My last year in the classroom proved to be one of the most rewarding as far as hard work is concerned. Out of twenty elementary schools in the district the three classes of ELA that I was teaching a day produced the highest reading comprehension

growth in the county according to the results of our state wide end-of-grade test. I wanted to share my love of Greek and Latin Roots as an approach for building vocabulary and improving reading proficiency with other teachers, so I applied for and was hired as the ELA District Specialist for my county.

To Be Continued.

Rasinski, T. V., Padak, N., Newton, R., & Newton, E. (2008). *Greek and Latin Roots: Key to Building Vocabulary*. Huntington Beach, CA: Shell Educational Publishing.

Rasinski, T. V., Padak, N., Newton, R., & Newton, E. (2020). *Building Vocabulary with Greek and Latin Roots: A Professional Guide to Word Knowledge and Vocabulary Development* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Huntington Beach, CA: Shell Educational Publishing.

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## **Building Vocabulary with Word Roots Builds Reading Comprehension**

### **– Part 2**

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Moving from classroom Language Arts teacher to K-5 District ELA Specialist my first order of business was to gauge where we were with reading scores when compared to the rest of the state. We fell well below the state average in Reading Informational Text, Reading Literature, and Language subtests. Beginning in year one of my new position, I created a pacing guide of Latin and Greek roots and affixes to be taught as early as Kindergarten and ending with 5<sup>th</sup> grade. I then developed and delivered extensive professional development on the Why, What, and How to go about teaching this way when it comes to vocabulary instruction. I developed strategies and activities for teachers so that they could be successful with this new initiative. Each new year required me to train new teachers and teachers new to the district so that my goal of exceeding the state averages in reading would be accomplished.

At the district level, the teachers that I trained saw incredible growth in their students from year to year. We saw that growth in the mid-year assessment data across all of K-5. Even though I worked with elementary grade teachers, several of the middle school teachers at the feeder school up the road remarked how impressed they were with the word attack skills, vocabulary, and fluency that our students entering 6<sup>th</sup> grade demonstrated. I would often have high school principals ask me to train their teachers using the roots instructional model

due to the importance of the SATs. That wasn't "my lane" so I stuck with the K-5 grades, but I could see that it was having impact even into high school.

At the end of each year, the district that I was working in saw 2%-5% gains in student performance in reading, always inching closer to my goal of full proficiency in reading and reading in the content areas. By using Greek and Latin roots to teach vocabulary the district met and exceeded predicted growth models in reading. My take away from my own experience is that when we teach students where words come from, how words are formed, how they are related to one another through common word roots, why and how they are used, in various academic areas, and why words mean what they mean, we give students from all backgrounds and nationalities a much stronger ability to comprehend the meaning of unknown words and the texts in which those words appear. I would often tell teachers, "Why teach just ten words a week and hope by the end of the year they have learned 360 new words, when we can teach them the one to three Greek and Latin Roots a week and give them the tools to determine the meaning of well over 10,000 new words, many of which are academic words found in math, science, and social studies, by the end of High School?"

Rasinski, T. V., Padak, N., Newton, R., & Newton, E. (2020). Building Vocabulary with Greek and Latin Roots: A Professional Guide to Word Knowledge and Vocabulary Development (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Huntington Beach, CA: Shell Educational Publishing.

