

Coding Aids for Building English Vocabulary

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Codification Theory Basis

Elements of language education have long been associated with code processing activities, changing abstract thoughts and ideas into concrete media of transmission (Cook & Seidlhofer, 1995). Discussions of listening and reading skills have used the expression of “decoding” in reference to the skill of understanding the message conveyed. Correspondingly, the expression “encoding” has been associated with the processes of speaking and writing of intended communications. Additionally the coding concepts have been used in literature dealing with particular linguistic aspects such as grammar, syntax or vocabulary. While functional ability in language cannot be properly explained by one of these aspects in isolation, it does seem that concepts of decoding and encoding are particularly useful as a framework for teaching of English vocabulary (Jolly, 1999). Johnson & Johnson comment on this as follows:

[C]reating associations within the language (e.g. by organizing vocabulary according to topic and studying word formation) can promote learnability. Interlanguage associations are also useful, particularly in the early stages. The more words are analysed or enriched by association, the greater the possibility they will be remembered. (1998, 369)

If we posit the case where the basic aspects of a given language (characters of alphabet, phonemes, rules of grammar, normal patterns of syntax, etc.) have been mastered to some basic minimum, then we can theorize that functional ability in that language can be increased by a factor related to the increase of one's inventory of vocabulary of that language. This appears to be intuitively correct, and it seems to have influenced the practices of previously favored language teaching methods such as the grammar-translation method, the reading method, or the direct method (Finocchiaro, 1982 and Johnson & Johnson, 1998, 368). This conclusion then gives way to the easily accepted concept of vocabulary lists to be memorized with each lesson to promote progressive language facility. Such practice undoubtedly contributed to the characterization of the mentioned language-teaching methods as being merely “rote learning” in light of later transformational and communicative theories.

Vocabulary memorization requirements of language lessons should not be denigrated out of hand, however, since it is essential to attain permanent acquisition of at least the basic word forms (as well as the grammar and other aspects) of any language to be able to function in it. It is the abusive continued and sole reliance on such method of vocabulary building that merits the criticism. If the only way to learn the proper uses of

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words such as “bright”, “brightness”, “brightening”, and “brightly” is to memorize each separately and as unrelated words, then there are gross inefficiencies of teaching/learning effort and disregard of the innate analytical abilities that allow us to derive meaning from context. Besides, memorizing long lists is not one of the more motivating aspects of language learning. Also continued use of assigned listed vocabulary beyond the applicable lesson is sometimes difficult without some mnemonic device to aid retention and recall.

This is where a coding approach to teaching of vocabulary can be of particular value -- providing some “fun” aspect to the process and mnemonics aids to ease the decoding and encoding of appropriate words for the context. This coding approach referred to here is certainly nothing new and is the commonly applied in current English language textbooks in some form or another. It can be described as the “word roots” approach to vocabulary learning, but it has not been given any particular recognition as to being related to other language coding theory. That is what we are attempting to appreciate in this discussion.

Codification Process

In application, this coding approach is based upon the recognition of words as combinations of specialized morphemic parts. As applied to English vocabulary, words are some combination of a word root that contributes the basic meaning of the resulting word, a prefix that further particularizes the root meaning, and a suffix that is the principle determiner of the grammatical function of the word. Typically there is only one word root, but the number of prefixes and suffixes may vary. This can be illustrated by this example:

Prefix	+	Word Root	+	Suffix
[none]		duct		[none]
pro	+	duce		[none]
[none]		duc	+	tile
[none]		duc	+	til + ity
intro	+	duc	+	tion
pre + in	+	duc	+	tion

Around this basic structure, words are created to convey the intended meaning (or encoded) by selection of appropriate parts, or the message of a given word can be deduced (or decoded) according to the combination of meanings of the word parts¹ used and the context in which the word is used. This does not mean students can freely create new words, nor can they simply take the sum of the literal meanings of each part as the accepted meaning of a given word. For learning stages we are dealing with the established, finite inventory of currently recognized and accepted English words, and our purpose is to provide an aid to retaining as much of that as is possible in a student's personal working vocabulary. The encoding process here enables the speaker to discern the difference in accepted vocabulary words like “promotion” and “demotion”, such that he or she can chose the proper one for the context. The decoding process here provides the learner a

mnemonic to remember that such a word as “attract”, composed of constituent parts of prefix {ad}² (meaning “to, toward”) and word root {tract} (meaning “to pull, draw), expresses the combined meaning of having one’s attention drawn toward an object or to find it appealing. It also helps in decoding to appreciate the commonality of meanings when various combinations of word parts are used, such as in “attractive”, “unattractive”, “attractively”, and “attraction”.

Coding Application

At this point we move on to consideration of the source of these word-building parts. The lists for these are comparatively short (the lengths depending on the level of functionality one seeks), and the more one can learn and commit to memory, the greater facility one can attain in the coding approach. Fairly exhaustive lists for each kind can be easily compiled from the entries of the more complete English dictionaries that give etymology (such as Merriam-Webster (1993)). However, complete lists are not necessary for effective teaching, and indeed it is probably more beneficial to the students if you can get them started with shorter lists of the most commonly used prefixes, word roots and suffixes, to ease the memorization load. Once they master the technique, they can thereafter add to their lists as they encounter unlearned parts. Fortunately there are several textbooks and references available which have lists (of varying lengths) and provide lessons for relatively easy acquisition of each of the three word parts (such as Hanejima & Seya (1985), McKim (1997), Takahashi & Usui (2001) and Tashiro (1984)).

Most of the textbook lists are of Latin and Greek word roots, but we should remember that the coding principles apply to German and Anglo-Saxon roots as well. For example the word root {hand} gives rise to more than 100 related English words and expressions. Again perhaps over simplifying, it can be observed that most of the English vocabulary related to our personal bodies, homes, relationships and everyday activities are derived from Germanic or Anglo-Saxon sources. Correspondingly the more complicated terminology of business, science, social organization and arts or of abstract words and philosophical concepts are mostly derived from Latin and Greek sources. The expectation then would be that the word roots at the elementary levels of English instruction will contain word roots mainly derived from the Germanic or Anglo-Saxon sources, while those of the more advanced levels, Latin and Greek roots would tend to prevail (Bourcier, Clark & Oizumi, 1991). In regard to the prefixes and suffixes, it is difficult to make such distinction and introduction and application of these from in early instruction stages would be necessary. However, we can note that there are some prefixes or suffixes that are more commonly applied to one set of word roots than the other (Bradley & Potter, 1970). For example, it can be observed that some prefixes (such as {un} or {mis}) and suffixes ({less} or {full}) are more often used with Germanic or Anglo-Saxon roots while other prefixes (such as {de}, {ex} or {sub}) and suffixes ({ous} or {ate}) are usually associated with Latin roots.

Available literature does not indicate there any recommended lists of word parts to be taught at various levels of English language instruction, so the individual teacher is pretty much on his or her own in to devise the best program suited for the group of students being taught. For students who have not been exposed to this concept of using word roots for encoding or decoding assistance, it would be well to review and instruct for permanent retention of the most commonly encountered prefixes and suffixes as a starting point. Thereafter the application in actual conversational or reading contexts can be handled as various word roots appear in the lessons of a textbook or from lists of the most commonly encountered word roots devised by the teacher. Considerable innovation and adaptation in lesson planning is available in application of this process.

Conclusion

From the foregoing then we can see that while we cannot eliminate the necessity of memorization in acquisition of English vocabulary, it certainly can be transformed from an attitude of “rote learning” (i.e., boring and burdensome) to that of discovery and ease of retention with the help of mnemonic aids. In the initial stages memorization of basic constituent parts will have to be used to acquire an adequate working inventory of parts. At the same time some basic rules of construction or coding will have to be learned in order to put the method into practice. If this can be done while instilling a sense of adventure and accomplishment into the students such that they are motivated to investigate and expand on their own, then the “rote” part will quickly change to mnemonic-assisted memory recall for greater language facility.

The early stages of word parts memorization can be greatly assisted by grouping prefixes, word roots and suffixes into related sets rather than dealing with them randomly in alphabetic lists. Prefixes can be roughly thought of as directionally oriented groups, such as those indicating position at or movement toward the front or upward (e.g., {pro}, {pre}, {ante}, {super}, {ultra}, {hyper}) as opposed to those thought of as positioned or moving back, behind or below (e.g., {post}, {sub}, {de}, {re}, {hypo}). Word roots can be grouped by common factor or action, such as body parts (e.g., {manu}, {cur}, {ped}, {ora}, {cap}); numbers (e.g., {semi}, {uni}, {bi}, {dec}, {cent}); or various activities (e.g., the soft actions, hard actions, and coming and going used by McKim (1997)). Suffixes probably are best grouped according to their related grammatical functions (e.g., {tion}, {ment} for noun endings; {ize}, {ify} for verb endings; {ate}, {ic} for adjective endings; and {ly} for adverb endings). The mechanics of this can be adapted by the teacher to whatever best inspires the students, and motivating learning of new vocabulary is the whole purpose of the exercise.

For the motivational part, it is important that the students realize that they have a means, if they only take it seriously, to boost their functional vocabulary considerably by themselves. The encoding and decoding activity has a sense of game and fun about it that should naturally work toward enthusiasm. There is a danger here, however, that this method give rise to the expectation that it works automatically and new words

or meanings will pop out without effort. Care has to be taken to make sure that personal effort is properly expended and the whole process properly seen as an aid to learning, not something to take the place of study and learning effort.

As Johnson & Johnson state, "Learners cannot be taught all the vocabulary they will need and therefore must develop inferential strategies for dealing with unfamiliar vocabulary." (1998, 368). The application of encoding principles, or word-root method, to vocabulary teaching seems to provide the very thing called for in that statement. It is not particularly new language technology as can be seen by the extent of use already made in the cited textbooks and references, but perhaps it is not widely appreciated as having a firm theoretical basis in language teaching. With increased awareness and innovative applications, ESL/ETL teachers can make the process of increased vocabulary acquisition a more meaningful and enjoyable endeavor for the students.

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Notes

1. In this paper the term “word part(s)” is used to refer to the basic units of word construction used as prefixes, word roots and suffixes. These might be properly referred to as “morphemes” in linguistic terms, but an attempt is made to avoid complicate the discussion here by inclusion of all possible morphemes such as “s” used in plural formation, “s” used in creating possessives, or “ed” used for past tense.
2. In order to avoid confusion with established linguistic notation, the brackets { and } are used to set off and identify the word part (prefix, word root, or suffix) used for illustration purposes in this paper.

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