

FOR-PD's Reading Strategy of the Month



ETYMOLOGY
January 2007



(Developed by Smith, L. & Zygouris-Coe, V., 2007)

Rationale:

Ever wonder what the etymology of the word "etymology" might be?

Your students might wonder too.

Etymology, the study of the origin and history of a word, is derived from the Greek work *etymologia* and from etymon, which means *true sense*, and from logos meaning *word*. The English language has an abundance of words borrowed from other languages, many with a rich heritage and a story all their own. Successful vocabulary instruction begins with the building of meaningful schemata through interesting and useful strategies. Using the study of word origins can help students remember meanings and grasp the relevance of words, beyond their definition (Readence, Bean, & Baldwin, 1998).

Take the word "nice" for instance. When considering only the definition, one might note that "nice" means pleasant or pleasing. While this is relevant and true, the origin of "nice" brings about an entirely new perspective of the word. Formed from the Latin word *nescius*, meaning ignorant, "nice" came to be considered someone or something that was foolish in Middle English, the English language period from 1100 to 1500. Perhaps calling someone nice during this time was not exactly, well, nice.

Helping students gain practice in identifying and considering word origins can enhance their overall vocabulary development. "A study of the etymology of certain words has a good deal of value in expanding 'the basic vocabulary and in generating an appreciation for the English language's diversity, flexibility, and capability of growth'." (Johnson & Pearson, 1978, p. 50). Etymologies can provide students with an appreciation for words of the present by investigating their past. "Knowing that so many words have come from mythology, literature, and historical events and figures provides important background knowledge for students' reading in the various content areas." (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 2004, p. 263)

How to Use the Strategy:

Using a Dictionary

A majority of dictionaries have word entries that include an etymology reference, usually following the pronunciation and part of speech. While some etymology entries can be simple and to the point, others can provide interesting backgrounds on the words chosen. A colorful example is provided below (Readence, Bean, & Baldwin, 1998). While chauvinism, taken from French soldier's name, once meant loyalty and patriotism, it has changed over the years to refer to men who are only loyal to their gender. When students partake in lively discussions that will often arise, a new understanding of the word will develop and provide them insight on how the word was and is currently used.

[F "chauvinisme," fr. Nicholas "Chauvin" fl 1815 F soldier of excessive patriotism and devotion to Napoleon]

Abbreviations are often used within the entry to offer the reader a language of origin. "F" is often French, "ME" is Middle English, "OE" is Old English, and "fl" or "L" is Latin, just to name a few. "fr" often translates to "from". Remember to review the dictionaries opening pages with students as it contains the information on how the languages are abbreviated.

Eponyms

An eponym is a word that reflects the name of someone or something. As in the example above, "chauvinisme" was derived

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from an actual person. There are many eponyms found in a variety of subject matter. The word boycott is derived from Charles C. Boycott, a snooty Irish landlord. The word dahlia comes from Anders Dahlia, a Swedish botanist. Why do these matter? Discussion of words and their origins can impact learning by creating linking words to background knowledge and integrating new information into the students' schemas. A story, even of a word, can benefit memory and retention.

Graphic Organizer: Investigating Etymologies

Graphic organizers come in handy when studying content and vocabulary. Helping students make connections between the new words they are learning and the old words they know can be accomplished with an organizational chart.

Word	Definition	Word Origin	Use	Related Words

In this organizer, the word, origin, definition, use of word, and related words can be compared and contrasted for easy reference.

Word	Definition	Word Origin	Use	Related Words
axis	The central or most important part of anything.	Old French, from "axis of wheel" (Latin: "axis")	The Earth's center line is a very important feature and the axis of the Earth.	axiom, axis, axial, axon, axle
mesa	The portion of the earth between the coast and the sea.	Old English, "mesa" from Latin "mesa" (table).	Area that has been flattened by the force of the earth's crust.	mesa, mesa, mesa, mesa
magpie	A bird that steals other birds' eggs.	Old English, "magpie" from Latin "magpie" (magpie).	Magpie that steals out of the nest is called a magpie.	magpie, magpie
sediment	Material that has been deposited by some natural process.	French, "sediment" from Latin "sedimentum" (a settling, settling).	Small particles of gravel, sand, and mud.	sediment, sediment
arid	The practical meaning of dry or without moisture.	Latin, "aridus" (dry, empty).	Water, soil, and the other things.	arid, arid, arid, arid

This example takes into account a study in World Geography on landforms.

Assessment:

Assessing students and their understanding of the concepts and use of etymology can be done with written or oral tests, rubrics, or observations. Teachers should use etymologies to enhance understanding of words used in stories or texts.

A teacher may want to have students discuss how the origin or the word relates to the definition. The student could describe the history of the word, how it has changed, and how the definition has changed. Assessment could also be accomplished with an etymology project. Students would create a word analysis on a specific topic and link together words and the content covered.

Resources:

Visualizing Vocabulary

<http://www.writingproject.org/pub/nwpr/quarterly/Q2002no3/simmons.html>

Eileen Simmons, a high school teacher from Tulsa, offers ideas on infusing etymology instruction with other vocabulary techniques in order to increase writing skills.

Online Etymology Dictionary

Etymology

<http://www.etymonline.com/>

Includes the history and evolution of more than 30000 words, including slang and technical terms.

English Words from Classical Mythology

<http://fayette.k12.in.us/~cbeard/calliope/vocabindex.html>

All sorts of key words from Latin and Greek mythology, games, and worksheets.

Robertson's Words for a Modern Age: A Dictionary of Latin and Greek Words used in Modern English Vocabulary

<http://www.wordinfo.info/>

Type in a simple English word to find its Latin or Greek equivalent.

The Word Detective On the Web

<http://www.word-detective.com/>

This is the online version of a newspaper column answering readers' questions about words and language written by Evan Morris.

Oh My Words! Great Word Sites on the Net

http://www.education-world.com/a_curr/curr096.shtml

An article by Sharon Cromwell in Education World which includes links to some of the best word play related sites on the Internet.

References:

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Readence, J. E., Bean, T. W., & Baldwin, R. S. (1998). *Content area literacy: An integrated approach*. Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt.

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