

# The Role of Roots and Affixes in College English Vocabulary Learning

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**Abstract:** At present, traditional vocabulary learning methods struggle to meet college students' needs for English vocabulary acquisition and retention. When preparing for College English tests, students are required to memorize a large number of new words. If they still rely on rote memorization, their learning efficiency will be significantly reduced, and their interest in English learning may even be undermined. To explore the feasibility and effectiveness of root-and-affix associative memory and help students memorize words more efficiently, this paper explains how this method enhances college students' vocabulary retention ability—starting from the definition, characteristics, and application of root-and-affix associative memory—and elaborates on the application and significance of root-based teaching in College English vocabulary instruction. Compared with traditional word-formation teaching, root-based teaching demonstrates greater advantages and feasibility in College English vocabulary teaching.

**Keywords:** Roots and affixes, Vocabulary memory ability, Teaching and learning of college English.

## 1. Introduction

Memorizing words by word roots can quickly enlarge students' vocabulary in a short time and effectively improve the efficiency of memorizing words. This paper mainly introduces the meaning, classification and word formation of word roots, as well as the application and significance of word roots teaching in college English vocabulary teaching. Affixes are morphemes attached to roots to express grammatical meaning and some secondary lexical meaning. Because it has no concrete lexical meaning, it is also called virtual morpheme. Affixes are divided into prefixes and suffixes according to the position of word formation. Prefixes are affixes that can only appear before words. In English word formation, a root can be used to form a word by itself or with a different root or the affixes are combined to form a word. In words composed of the root plus other grammatical elements, the meaning of the root plus the meaning of the preceding and the meaning of the suffix produces the meaning of a word. Therefore, it is theoretically believed that as long as learners remember the meaning of English word root and other grammatical units, especially the meaning of prefix and suffix, and can identify the basic form of word root and its corresponding variants from the word, they can be relatively easy to understand the meaning of a new word. At the same time, since the same root can produce different words when combined with different roots or affixes, it also has different business meanings. Many derivatives have a common root, which fully shows the meaning of "root". Although many words are formed by following the rule of "root + affix meaning", that is to say, as long as learners know the root and the meaning of affix, the basic meaning of the word will be clear. Common English vocabulary memory methods include associative memory, homophonic memory, cyclic memory, and root-and-affix memory. Among these, root-and-affix memory is highly recognized by English educators and learners, mainly because it enables learners to achieve twice the result with half the effort, and its feasibility has been proven by many self-directed learners. (Duan Youguo, 2011; 161)

## 2. An Overview of English Roots and Affixes

### 2.1 The Definition and Characteristics of English Roots

The root, linguistically speaking, is "the part of a word that has the main meaning and that its other forms are based on". In short, the root is the root of the word composition, representing the meaning of the word, and on this basis, the meaning and form of the word can be changed either by a single root, or by a combination of roots, or by affixes. For example, prologue, epilogue, neologism, dialogue, apologize, eulogy and so on have a common core part log which is the root of the words. Affix refers to a letter or group of letters added before, in the middle, and after a word to cause a change in the meaning or part of speech of the word. Affix can be divided into prefix, infix, and suffix according to the position of the word. For example, in unhappy, UN - is a prefix for happy, meaning "no, no"; in careless, -less is a suffix for "no, nothing"; and "ee" in feet and geese is an infix for "foot" and "goose", meaning inflection. (Xu Shasha, 2015:92)

### 2.2 The Definition and Characteristics of English Affixes

Affix belongs to adhesive morpheme. Generally speaking, affix can be divided into inflectional affix and derivational affix according to function. According to its position in the morpheme group, it is divided into prefix and suffix. Bloomfield defines affixes in their order of precedence: affix is the adhesive form attached to the base form in a derived structure. The affix before the base form is the prefix, such as be is the prefix of behead, and the affix after the base form is the suffix, such as -ish is the suffix of boyish, and the affix added in the middle of the base form is called the infix. Taylor thinks that affixes have the following characteristics: (1) affixes should be attached to the root or stem, and there are no other morphemes between them when they are combined with the stem; (2) like, affix is not stressed parts; (3) at the phonological level, affix morphology is affected by the stem, and vice versa; (4) affix is highly selective to the stems it adheres to; (5) affixes cannot be used independently of the stem. (Wu Yuanzhen, 2009:131)

### 2.3 Categorization of Word Roots and Affixes in English

With the increasing difficulty of English tests in China, the vocabulary requirements for students are also rising. However, short-term mechanical memory—driven by eagerness for quick results or perfunctory task completion—fails to enable students to fully understand and correctly apply words. This section attempts to use the important theories of categorization and prototype in cognitive linguistics to explain English roots and affixes, helping students break free from tedious rote memorization, identify the regularities between word forms and meanings, and improve vocabulary learning efficiency.

### 2.3.1 Categorization of Word Roots

The theory of categorization can be used to analyze the relationship between many root words and words in English. For example, words with root, such as very (real), verify (verify), verity (authenticity), and so on, the central meaning of truth and truth represented by root VER is very prominent. Another example is that the root word art means “skill, artificial”. The meaning is embodied in the following words: article (article, object); artifact (artifact); artist (artist); artisan (craftsman), etc. It can be found that these words with root art are very prominent in the central meaning of “skill, skill and labor”, although they are added with morphemes to express other meanings. It can be concluded that a series of words produced by the combination of the same root and other morphemes can be regarded as belonging to the same category if the prototype meaning of the root is taken as the cognitive reference point, and its meaning has certain connection, which is called family similarity. According to the theory, words can be divided into different categories according to their roots, such as Root Category, art Root Category and so on. For example, the following words all contain the central meaning of “seeking” which is expressed by the root of the sticky word “quest” or its variant “qui”: question; request; inquire; inquiry, etc. These words can also be put into one category, because their meanings also have family resemblance and are related to “seeking”. Because categorization works on the basis of matching the external information features of perception with the existing knowledge or schema stored in the human brain, according to this theory, students can first master some frequently used root words, and then classify the words family according to these root words, so as to achieve the learning effect of twice the result with half the effort. (Zhang Ying, 2011:82)

## 3. Current Situation of College Students' English Vocabulary Learning

### 3.1 Students' Problems in Vocabulary Learning

Nowadays, many college students, whether English majors or non-English majors, need to pass some English tests. Memorizing words is a more utilitarian thing for them. If students do not find the correct and effective method of memorizing words, they will become resistant to memorizing words and may affect their English scores.

#### 3.1.1 Study with an Utilitarian Attitude

Affected by utilitarian purposes such as CET-4 and CET-6 students now regard “passing grade” as the only purpose of

learning foreign language, and the way of memorizing words mainly depends on the vocabulary function of special vocabulary lists, electronic dictionaries or even mobile phones, instead of paying attention to the internal connection between words and the contextual function of meanings. Such a learning attitude and method, in the short term, its shortcomings are not particularly obvious, many students also get lucky with a variety of English exams, but after passing the exam, the original memory of the vocabulary is forgotten.

#### 3.1.2 Rigid Memory Method

Influenced by traditional teaching, students often forget the words they have memorized. For example, when memorizing new words, students frequently use the method of repetitive spelling: they memorize the letter sequence and Chinese meaning by repeating them mechanically. This rigid, mechanical memory only forms short-term retention, making it difficult to leave a deep impression—let alone enable flexible use of the words.

#### 3.1.3 Lack of Initiative in Vocabulary Learning and Use

Most students rely too much on their teachers, mainly learning English vocabulary with them in class, but they can't review the words in time and effectively after class. According to the interview with the students in our school, most of the students can't actively review, and they can only learn by relying on the supervision and discipline of the teachers. They often only complete the assignments arranged by the teachers and lack the desire for knowledge about the new knowledge. Some students only deal with the homework, but don't really grasp the knowledge. Quite a few students are willing to spend their time after class on the word learning. As for the vocabulary that should be mastered in the University, it can't be mastered effectively. As for the vocabulary that has been learned in junior high school and senior high school, it will be partially forgotten due to infrequent application and review. Many students said in the interview that when they started to enter the University, they had a lot of knowledge about English vocabulary on the basis of previous learning, but after spending a year in the University, they found that many words had been forgotten, and the impression had been learned, but they could not speak them out or apply them. This is far from the goal of College English vocabulary.

## 4. The Function and Application of Roots and Affixes Associative Memory Method

### 4.1 The Function of Root and Affix Associative Memory Method

Root affix memory is a kind of scientific and interesting vocabulary learning method. Giving full play to its role can achieve twice the result with half the effort in College English teaching, which is helpful to improve students' overall English ability.

#### 4.1.1 Interesting, not Easy to Forget

The process of inspiring students to associate is often very interesting. Students' brain enters into a positive state of thinking, which improves the degree of attention. At the same

time, root, prefix and suffix play different roles in word formation, and create an associative memory environment. By constantly changing the structure of words, the repetition memory of words with certain new meaning is carried out. Because of the constant changes of the structure to avoid the sense of boredom and rejection brought by mechanical repetition to the brain, the impression of the brain is deepened and the degree of brain fatigue is relieved. Therefore, memorizing words in this way can get twice the result with half the effort and the rate of forgetting is low.

#### 4.1.2 Strong Regularity, Easy to Learn and Remember

In most cases, the meaning represented by roots and affixes is regular, so when users have mastered the meaning of basic roots and affixes, they can make use of the connection of English vocabulary itself to make association, comparison, induction and summary. In this way, we can use the old words to memorize the new words, think of the other words associated with one word, or infer the unknown words according to the known words, so as to expand the vocabulary effectively and improve the English learning level. And the structure of root is relatively simple, the number is limited, and the meaning of their representatives is not complex, so it is easier to learn than memorizing a large number of unrelated words. It only needs a certain English foundation, relatively speaking, the threshold is relatively low, and the effect is fast, and it is easy to build up students' learning confidence.

#### 4.1.3 Increase Vocabulary

In traditional Chinese English teaching, the expansion of vocabulary often needs long-term accumulation. When learning a word, we often learn pronunciation first, then teachers explain the meaning, and give examples. In the unit centered on a certain scene or topic, we can promote the understanding and memory of words through sentences, texts, listening, speaking, reading and writing activities. This method has a positive significance for mastering the specific usage of a word in different contexts. But the disadvantage is that after learning an article, you need to remember more than a dozen or even dozens of words that have no intrinsic meaning. We can learn by rote, use root affixes association memory method, master word formation method, learn word formation analysis, and combine the sound, form and meaning of words, so that we can rise from the perceptual knowledge of words to the rational knowledge, and transform from the mechanical knowledge to the meaning knowledge, so that we can achieve the effect of "looking for the meaning" and "expressing the meaning by form" according to judgment and reasoning. In this way, we can not only remember a lot of single root words very quickly, but also learn a lot of words of the same family from here to there, breaking through the difficulty of memorizing words in quality, quantity and speed.

### 4.2 The Application in College English Teaching

#### 4.2.1 Insert the Roots and Affixes Memory into the Traditional Vocabulary Teaching.

At present, College English teaching materials are based on a topic as a unit, mainly on text, interspersed with listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. Most of the teachers will

let the students preview the words first, then explain them in class, then read the text or carry out listening and speaking training. In the process of explaining words, it is mainly to explain the meaning of words, supplemented by examples to deepen understanding. We can use this method together with the root affix associative memory method. On the one hand, we can review the word groups related to the word repeatedly to help students strengthen their memory by increasing the frequency of the word occurrence; on the other hand, we can create an active and interesting classroom atmosphere by inspiring association to improve students' subjective initiative, So as to achieve twice the result with half the effort. (Zhan Li, 2010:29)

#### 4.2.2 The Training of Reading Ability

Traditional English teaching tends to clear the barriers of new words in reading before reading. For some strange words, it emphasizes to infer the meaning of words through the meaning of context. In fact, we can also use the knowledge of roots affixes to infer the meaning of words. After students master the roots affixes memory method, they can analyze the structure of new words through the knowledge they have mastered, and infer the meaning of strange words with the familiar words with the same root or affixes they have learned. Even if we can't accurately infer the meaning of a word sometimes, the analysis of the root of an affix can help us to understand the components of the word in a sentence, whether they represent positive or negative meanings. These information are conducive to improving the ability of understanding a sentence. (Zhan Li, 2010:29)

#### 4.2.3 In Writing Teaching

One of the common mistakes in students' writing is the misuse of part of speech, for example, the verb form that should have used the word is mistakenly written as a noun form. This kind of error can be effectively avoided by learning the roots affixes memory method. Students who have mastered the roots affixes memory method can use words with different parts of speech to serve as the corresponding sentence components more accurately. From another perspective, they can improve their grammar ability and avoid the misuse of parts of speech in writing.

### 4.3 Specific Application Method of College Students

#### 4.3.1 Prefix Method

The prefix method is to use the known prefix or variant and its root or a free morpheme to form a new word. Since we are already familiar with the meanings of prefixes and roots, the essence of memory is the process of integrated review. For example: expose=ex+pose, "ex" is prefixed with the meaning "out", and the root pose means "to put", and they make up the new word expose, which means "expose".

#### 4.3.2 Suffix Method

The function of suffix is to change the part of speech of root or morpheme, but rarely change the meaning. The principle of suffix memory method and prefix memory method is basically the same, it can be decomposed into the following

several methods.

### 1) Enumeration Method

The enumeration method is to enumerate the words with the same suffix, find out the corresponding collocation relation between these suffixes and morphemes or word roots, and strengthen memory to prevent forgetting. Compose a after verbs such as: to have one at the end of the verb: beautify, simplify, humidify, purify and identify, qualify, intensify, testify, modify, acidify, prettify, etc.

### 2) String Memorization

String memorization compares certain words with their different roots. So it can strengthen the understanding and use of vocabulary. For example, the verb, noun and adjective concatenation have a same root (beautify, beauty and beautiful).

## 5. The Limitation of Roots and Affixes Associative Memory Method

In the process of English learning, only with a certain vocabulary can we develop the basic skills of listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation. If students want to make better use of the roots and affixes association memory method they need to have a certain vocabulary foundation and understand some basic roots and affixes. However, the memory of vocabulary is rather difficult, and the expansion of vocabulary is more difficult. English affixes usually have more than one meaning, which is difficult for students with poor foundation to understand. English affixes refer to morphemes which are attached to roots to express grammatical meaning and some secondary lexical meaning. They cannot exist alone or be used independently, so they are also called virtual morphemes. English affixes can be divided into inflectional affixes and deviational affixes from the perspective of morphological changes. Inflectional affixes are affixes without any grammatical meaning. They represent plural nouns, genitive nouns, past tense verbs, past participles, comparative adjectives, etc. Derivational affixes, which determine the part of speech, are semantic affixes. They can be divided into prefixes, infixes and suffixes from the position of word formation. Prefixes are usually attached to morphemes. Like English words, English affixes have many complex semantic relations, such as synonymy, antonym and polysemy. Basically, all of these characteristics are derived affixes, so most of the polysemy phenomenon of affixes is that derived words composed of derived affixes have many parts of speech.

## 6. Conclusion

This study discusses the impact of root-and-affix associative memory on college students' English vocabulary memorization, covering both English majors and non-English majors. The advantage of this method is its obvious clarity and ease of understanding. However, there are still some issues that warrant further consideration—such as its inapplicability to non-derived words (e.g., monomorphemic words like sun or water) and the need for targeted guidance for students with weak language foundations. Future research

could explore how to complement this method with other memory strategies to address its limitations.

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