# How understanding the meaning and function of prefixes can help students improve their English

## Why should we teach the meaning and use of prefixes?

One of the ways that native speakers enlarge their vocabulary is through knowledge of word building devices like affixes. Gaining control over affixes helps understand knew words "by relating them to known words or prefixes and suffixes" and helps us build new words (Nation: 2001). In fact affixation is "the most common way of forming new words." (Yule: 2006).
An important study related to my focus on this essay is, as mentioned in Nation (2001), that of White, Power and White (1989). It focused on the four prefixes *un-, re-, in-, dis-* . The result was that (with help of some other guessing techniques) up to 80 % of words with those prefixes could be understood by knowing their meaning, which is, I think, remarkable and a good reason to spend class time on teaching prefixes.
Students need to be able to guess from context (Thornbury: 2002) if they want to become independent and efficient learners and users of English. As a learner of English myself, I can say that knowing the meanings of the parts of words definitely helped me in becoming a more proficient in English.
The reason why I have chosen prefixes as my topic for this essay is that not much attention is given to prefixes in general English classes. I have looked through several course-books and found that there is usually only one word building exercise in a complete book or maybe one page about affixation. In exam preparation course-books (e.g First Certificate Gold), there is a bit more focus on affixation as one part of the exam is directly about affixation and knowledge about it is necessary for basically all vocabulary related questions.

## Affixation and prefixes

All affixes are bound morphemes originating from Latin, Greek and native English (Yule: 2006). They have to be attached to words. One exception might be the prefix *dis-*[1]. English has grammatical and lexical affixation. The grammatical affixations are all suffixes and they are inflectional. Their number is limited to eight according to Yule (2006) and nine according to Kenworthy (1991). They change the grammatical form of a word (listened, listens, listening. The lexical affixations are all derivational. They can be suffixes, which usually change the part of speech (friend*ly*, friend*ship*) or prefixes which usually change the meaning of a word (*un*friendly, *bi*cycle, *anti*-bacterial, *post*-war).

[1] The prefix *dis-* is also used as a verb now (to dis - dissed (inf) = act or speak in a disrespectful way toward sb.). I think, however, when being used as a verb, it can no longer be considered a prefix but rather a conversion, which is a type of word formation.

"Prefixes are affixes which are added initially to a word to change its lexical meaning" (David Crystal: 1991).

Example are:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **un**-happy | **uni-**sex | **intra-**personal |
| **dis-**content | **bi**-cycle | **inter-**national |
| | **tri-**angle | **trans-**port |
| **in-**dependent | | |
| **ir-**relevant | **pre-**school | **over-**worked |
| **im-**polite | **ante-**chapel | **under-**achieve |
| **il-**logical | **post-**natal | |

**Meaning**

With prefixes we can express antonymy. A special form of antonyms are reversives. *Un-dress* is the opposite of *dress* but it doesn't mean *"not dress"*. It actually means *"do the reverse of dress"*.

Many prefixes are used to express negation. The variety of prefixes with the same meaning is due to the fact that they originate from different languages (Latin *in-*, Greek *dis-*, English *un-*).

In a number of studies, the frequency of prefixes has been investigated. Some well-known studies are those of Stauffer, Braun and Saragi. Braun compiled a list of 20 prefixes and 14 root elements (appendix 1) as a key to the meaning of over 14,000 words (Nation: 1990). Frequency has important implications for choosing which prefixes to teach and in what order to introduce them.

A few prefixes do not change the meaning of the base word[2]. In some instances they change the part of speech[3]. Another rarity are words with several prefixes[4].

## Approaches in the classroom

There are two approaches we can use: teaching the rules or item teaching (lexical approach). Both have advantages and disadvantages. Rules can be very helpful in giving students some guidance as how to make decisions when choosing a prefix. However, "the scope of the rule is not always clear" (Thornbury: 2002). Item learning, "seems to be the way words are acquired naturally" (ibid.). Therefore, learners need plentiful exposure to prefixes. This alone,however, would take too long. To speed up the process we need to help students to notice them by exposing them to prefixes in addition to consciousness-

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[2] *Inflammable* means the same as *flammable* but is usually used figuratively. The opposite is *non-flammable*. *Invaluable* does not mean *not valuable* but rather more that valuable - its value can<u>not</u> be estimated.

[3] e.g. *non-drip*

[4] e.g. *antidisestablishmentarianism* (Celce-Murcia; Larsen-Freeman:1999)

raising activities, which is a key principle underlying the lexical approach (Thornbury: 2002).

**What do students need to know about prefixes?**

Receptive knowledge
For students to be able to understand new words they have to be able to recognise how they are composed of various parts, know what these mean and how they come together to form new words with related meanings.

Productive knowledge
If students also want to be able to use their knowledge of word parts productively, they need to have even more detailed knowledge such as spelling, pronunciation and which word parts can be combined.

**How should we teach prefixes?**

Nation (1990) suggests "mini-syllabuses" teaching the affixes one by one.
Nagy suggests (Nation: 2001) that inflected and derived forms of a word are stored in the brain as a group, making recognition easier. In order to be able to do this, we need to learn affixes intentionally.

**Problems learners have with prefixes and suggested strategies to help them**

**1. Meaning**
Some prefixes have more than one meaning, e.g. *in-* (not, into), *ex-* (out, beyond / former). Also several prefixes have the same meaning (e.g. *un-, in-, im-, ir-, dis-*).

Solutions
I give my students matching-up exercises with prefixes and their meanings. The words usually come from a reading or listening text which I used with the students before (appendix 2).
Sometimes I do dictionary work with my students in discovery exercises where they have to find words with unknown prefixes and look up their meaning in a monolingual dictionary. Learning how to find relevant information in a dictionary makes them more autonomous. Guided discovery exercises also raise students' confidence.

**2. L1 interference – meaning and structure**
Same affixes might have different meanings or be used differently in other languages, e.g. ***un-*** *unangebracht* (German)/ *inappropriate*
What is expressed by a prefix in on language might be done by a suffix or a separate word in another, e.g. non-alcoholic / alkoholsüz (Turkish)
In some languages such as Bontoc (Philippines) and Ulwa (Nicaragua) there are also infixes. Circumfixes, which are affixes attached around a stem, can be seen in German past participles.

Example for Ulwa:

| | |
|---|---|
| suu+**ki**-lu | my dog |
| suu+**ma**-lu | your (Sg) dog |
| suu+**ka**-lu | his/her/its dog |

Example for German:

| | |
|---|---|
| **ge**+brüst+**et** | brüsten (to boast) |
| **ge**+säusel+**t** | säuseln (to rustle) |
| **ge**+täuscht+**t** | täuschen (to deceive) |

Solution2

Besides exposing students a lot to the English usage, contrasting L1 and L2 can help. If not overdone this is a helpful technique, especially in monolingual classes (David Atkinson: 1987). This was very useful with my German students. We can just highlight the forms on the board but also do guided discovery exercises by giving students a list of meaningful sentences or a text containing "problem" prefixes and have them find out their meaning from context.

**3. Structure – building words with prefixes rather than avoidance**

For students whose L1 does not have prefixes (e.g. Turkish, Arabic), the structure will be new and needs explaining (i.e. deductive approach). For these students, recognising prefixes and being able to extract them from a word will be more difficult than for students who are familiar with them. Those who use prefixes in their L1 might use them in different ways (e.g. inflectional or derivational but to change the part of speech).

Solutions

Especially at lover levels, when they come across prefixes for the first time, awareness-raising limited to a few common prefixes helps. I use words that came up in a text and point out some prefixed words which we then study and see what they do to the word (Is it still an adjective? Does the meaning change when we take it away?).
'Correct-the-text' activities help students look more carefully at the context. Some teachers do not like to expose their students to texts with mistakes. Although, I think they have their place, especially in exam preparation classes. I myself also use 'Change-the-text' exercises, in which students have to change a text with positive adjectives into negative (appendix 3, exercise 1. At higher levels, this can be extended to a written practice where they are asked to make any other relevant changes in order for the text to makes sense.

**4. Structure – choosing the right prefix**

This is a problem mainly concerning higher levels when students have been exposed to many different variations of prefixes and words that go with them. In addition, it has many facets.

- Interference of several forms with same or similar meaning: *Dis-, in-, un-* all have the meaning "not".

- Spelling: *il-, ir-, im-* are all variations of *in-* and which to choose usually depends on the first letter of the word the prefix is attached to. This makes recognising them as a prefix difficult and choosing the right one, too.

- Hyphenation: Some prefixes like *non-, co-, ex-* are hyphenated.

- Exceptions: There are many exceptions to the spelling and hyphenation rules (*illegal* but *disloyal*, also, *unlawful, disrespectful / coworker - co-worker)*

Solutions
We can…
1. expose students to many of these words which have these prefixes.
2. make students get into the habit of noting common prefixes along with the word they are learning. Whenever appropriate, I note common prefixes along with a new word that I highlight on the board and point out any exceptions in spelling. Sometimes, I give them time in class to look up a word and note down prefixes it can combine with.
3. provide them with exercises where they have to match up prefixes and words, do gap-fill exercises (appendices 5, 6 exercise 4, appendices 7, 8)
4. use dictation for spelling and hyphenation problems.
5. avoid interference by not teaching similar forms at the same time. Later, when they have been exposed to all forms, students can be given matching or discriminating task (appendix 4, exercise 2).
6. provide guided discovery exercises (appendices 3, exercise 3 b, c and 5, exercise 1 and 3).

**5. Identifying prefixes**
Some words look as if they have a prefix attached to them but in reality it is a *bound stem* (e.g. *record, repeat, react*). As this is very often the case this is an important issue.

Solution
In the past, it happened that I asked students to find more examples for a word with a particular prefix and they come up with many bound stems. Now, I point out that such words exist and how to test whether it is indeed a prefix. If the word still makes sense after the "prefix" has been removed, it is relatively safe to assume it is a prefix. This does, however, only work with words of which they know the roots or when they can use dictionaries.

As a guided discovery exercise I often use a set of cards with words like "unit, unique, undo, regard, etc." which the students have to put in two groups and try to come up with the rule.

**6. Pronunciation**
In contrast to suffixes, prefixes do not usually change word stress and are weak. Students sometimes shift word stress. However sometimes prefixes are stressed for emphasis or contradiction (e. g. "You are overpaid for the work you do." - No, I'm not overpaid, I'm underpaid").

Solutions
With a deductively approach we can highlight word stress on the whiteboard and point out that it does not usually change when a prefix is added to a word.
Inductively we can ask our students to listen to pairs of words (with and without a prefix) and ask them to say whether the stress has changed. This can be done by the teacher reading out loud or saying the words (appendix 3, exercise 2) or from a recording (appendix 5, exercise 4). I always follow-up such noticing exercises by a guided, or semi-guided speaking exercise where they have to say the words (appendix 9).
To practise that word stress can change for emphasis, again a controlled speaking exercise (mini-dialogues) can help (see example above). My students find these funny, because of the situations in the dialogues and the exaggerate stress. As students often have a rather "flat" intonation when speaking English, there is a double benefit in such exercises.

**7. A word means the same with and without the prefix**, e.g. *valuable / invaluable*. This is very confusing for students.

Solution
This concerns a limited number of words. I usually deal with them when they come up and point them out as "special".

**8. Words can have a prefix but removing it from the root does not give us a word related in meaning**, e.g. *inhabitant / habitant, disappointed / appointed*

Solutions
This is not frequent and comes up at higher levels. As they do exist, I sometimes give students texts including these words and they have to find out what they mean using the context.
Another activity is giving students a stack of cards with this kind of words and words like *insufficient*, *dislike*. Students then have to figure out the difference and group them accordingly.

**9. Storage, retrieval and recall**
There are many prefixes with various meanings, variations in spelling, etc. Students have often no problem in understanding these prefixes but remembering when to use which and recalling them when needed.

Solutions
We can …
1. plan mini-lessons and "quizzes" on a regular basis to review prefixes. (My students like quizzes which they create for each other. These can be gapped sentences with previously learned vocabulary or questions like "Which of these prefixes has a different meaning / is the odd one out".
2. expose students regularly to texts containing prefixes and draw their attention to these items (guided noticing).
3. create memorable situations in which they can actively use prefixes.
4. play games which are fun and create in-class motivation which help students remember more effectively (appendices 7,9).
5. train learners in how to record and learn vocabulary more efficiently (e.g. writing complete phrases, personalised sentences, looking up which prefixes a word can take and noting them together with the word, using index cards or vocabulary software).
6. help learners group words into families using mind-maps (appendix 10)
7. allocate time in class for students to go through their own record of words and look up which prefixes they are used with.
8. show how using the dictionary can help them to develop affixation (see problem 4. solution 2).

   I use part of the first couple of lessons for learner training and show my students different ways of recording vocabulary. These sessions can be in lecture form but I find students learn far more when they can find out and discuss about different ways.

## Conclusion

I know from my own experience as a learner how valuable it is to be taught how to deal with prefixes and to learn what they mean. Therefore, when I began teaching English in Brazil and Germany, I integrated teaching prefixes into my courses. However, after having done research for this essay, I realise that I did not teach them in a structured way and tried to teach too many in one lesson. In future, I will make teaching word formation, especially prefixes and suffixes, an integral part of my courses, planning many „mini-syllabuses“. I will also take a more balanced approach between teaching inductively and deductively. In the past, maybe being used to analysing language, I tended more to deductive teaching. I am now also more aware of some problems I had never thought about before (e.g. pronunciation problems). Now, that I will be teaching in Turkey and Turkish does not have prefixes at all, I will have to plan more exercises dealing with prefixes, using the strategies I pointed out above.

(Word count 2,653)

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