Examining the Language-Based Components of the Head-to-Toe Method of Associations for Vocabulary Acquisition

Part 4

by Patrick T. Randolph
University of Nebraska—Lincoln

I. Introduction

"Hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature."—Hamlet (Act 3, Scene II)

While introducing the language-based components of the Head-to-Toe Method, I have brought to light how personal and even intuitive language can be if we seek to discover and approach it from a fresh, new, and unconventional perspective. Language is not just a pragmatic tool for communicating, but it is also a whole, exciting universe in and of itself.

The language-based components of the Head-to-Toe Method that I have previously surveyed are (1) understanding lexical items as friends by personifying them; (2) feeling the sound and spirit of words through mindful pronunciation; (3) defining the lexical items through the Socratic method; (4) identifying the terms' "grammatical psychology" through their parts of speech; (5) feeling the lexical items by their "verbpathy"; (6) understanding the words' essence through emotion-based associations; (7) defining the terms' register; and (8) reinforcing students' understanding and use of the lexical items with teacher- and student-generated example sentences and corresponding visual images.

In this last installment for language-based components, I will focus on word parts (i.e., prefixes, roots, and suffixes) and word partnerships or collocations. First, I will offer a definition of these components, then point out important caveats for instructors, and conclude by offering fun and useful activities for each component.

II. Word Parts—The DNA of Lexical Items

The word parts in English include prefixes, roots, and suffixes. Not all lexical items are made up of all three parts, but for our students studying at colleges and universities, the majority of the terms they will encounter for their major or their general everyday academic life will, in fact, include at least two parts. Often, however, all three parts are present in high level academic lexical items. As a consequence, the more of these they know, the easier their life will be in terms of identifying the meaning and function of words.

For the sake of review, let's take a brief look at the role and placement of each word part. The **prefix** helps define the word by adding meaning to the root (e.g., pre- in "preview"). There are also cases in which two prefixes help construct words (e.g., reincarnate or uninformed). Prefixes come at the beginning of words. The **root** contains the main or central meaning of a word. Its location in a lexical item can be at the beginning (e.g., **cogn**ition), in the middle (e.g., col**loc**ate), or at the end (e.g., re**view**). The **suffix** helps identify the word's part of speech (e.g., -ate as in colloc**ate** or -ation as in colloc**ation**) and comes at the end of words.

Caveats

- **Do Not Assume Your Students Have a Prior Knowledge of Word Parts**

One should not assume that all English language learners (ELLs) have previously been exposed to or learned the basic word part functions, placements, and meanings. It is, therefore, best to go over the basic word parts at all levels. Of course, what the students know will vary from class to class, and some classes might be more knowledgeable than others, but the basic rule of thumb is not to assume a prior knowledge of the idea of word parts or even what the basic ones mean. For instance, last spring in one of my high-level credit classes only two of 18 students knew the functions of the word parts and the meanings of basic prefixes.

- **Simple is Best**

Students are already learning the meanings, the uses, and other aspects of the lexical items (e.g., verbpathy and register), so it's best to keep the explanations simple and focus on the essentials of the word parts. This means, although instructors generally love words and are most intrigued by their etymology, they should concentrate on the basic explanations and not go into the Greek, Latin, or Germanic history of the words. I suggest simply identifying the parts, going over the meanings and showing how they work together to construct the words, their meanings, and parts of speech.

- **Review Frequently and with Enthusiasm**

As with any kind of new material, the most effective way to ensure that the students learn it is to review it; spaced repetition is especially useful and seems to help all students from diverse backgrounds (Medina, 2009). Once a word part has been taught and the students have been exposed to it, I recommend reviewing it as often as possible.

Activities: Holding the Mirror Up to Nature

Giving our ELLs the ability to identify word parts and know their meanings is, of course, a major benefit and asset for their academic career. However, if we offer our students activities that will reinforce their understanding and manipulation of word parts, their learning experience will be even more fun, dynamic, and fulfilling. Below are six activities I've developed that my students enjoy while learning English affixes and roots.

1. The Mindful Noticer

The Mindful Noticer is a journal activity I use for my upper level ELLs. The objective is to help them in two ways: (1) to become good observers of their target language and (2) to become more aware of word parts and how they work together in a word. This activity can be used to review the material studied in class or to search for and record new affixes and roots.

After guiding students through a chosen number of word parts, I have them find those we studied in class or look for new prefixes, roots, and suffixes in the textbooks from their other academic classes. In addition, they can search for prefixes, roots, or suffixes in the local city or campus newspapers (both print or online), or on billboards, signs, or kiosks in the downtown or on the university campus. Students record the word parts, their meanings, the lexical items that are formed from the word parts, and the location they spotted them. They also note whether it's a review word part or a new one, and then write an original example sentence for each word. They record 10-20 word parts and submit them twice a month. I recommend that lower level learners submit fewer word parts per assignment but do it more frequently. Below is a sample entry:

Word Part	**Word/Phrase**	**Location Spotted**
prefix: anti- (against)	antiracism rally	found on a poster at the student union

Type: Review—learned anti- in class
Example: The ***antiracism rally*** will hopefully raise student awareness on campus.

Word Part	**Word/Phrase**	**Location Spotted**
prefix: epi- (upon, near to, in addition)	epigram	found in the English 150 course syllabus

Type: New
Example: We will write an ***epigram*** in the narrative essay for English 150.

2. Warm-Ups with Student-Gathered Word Parts

This is a Friday activity in which the students bring examples of word parts they find outside of class and share them with their classmates as a pre-class warm-up. The word parts offered by the students can be in the form of mini-presentations where they briefly write them on the whiteboard and explain them, or they can stand at their seat and explain the discovered word parts. The main objective of this activity is to encourage ELLs to find the word parts currently being studied in class and reinforce that learning with what they find in their research and observations. The activity also allows them "to teach" their fellow classmates any new material they find while being acute noticers/observers of their target language.

3. Pop Reviews

Pop reviews are short oral review sessions or brief oral pop quizzes where I ask the students to identify the word parts we've studied in class and the meanings of those word parts. These "pop reviews" can be done at the beginning of class or during a transition from one activity to another. The basic idea is to encourage the students to become familiar with recognizing the word parts and learn their meanings or functions in a non-stressed environment. These pop reviews or oral quizzes can easily become an effective tool for any lesson and will yield immediate and energetic student responses.

4. Drama with Word Parts

Drama with Word Parts is a fun, student-centered activity which personifies the word parts on a very personal and humanistic level. The focus is to create brief dramas or skits in which the students "become" the word parts and act out short scenes. One crucial point of importance to keep in mind is that when writing the script, the students should make sure that their characters embody the essence of the word part's meaning. For example, if someone plays the part of "bio," they should exude "life" and be vivacious; if someone plays the part of "labor," they ought to epitomize the spirit of "work." Prefixes and roots work best for this activity; however, certain suffixes like –able/-ible, -esque, -ful, -less, and -ship will work as well.

The dramas can either be short scenes with unrelated word parts (e.g., sub- and trans-) or focus on one word (e.g., preview) and create a drama around that word. The later option has proven to be more entertaining and useful for the students. Below is an example of a short scene about "Preview," starring "Pre-" and "View."

The History of Preview: A Romantic Encounter

Time: Early morning
Place: A college campus

Pre: Hello, View! Wow! You look nice today! How are you?
View: Great! You know, I think you're the first person I've seen this morning.
Pre: There might be a deep reason behind this…

View: What do you mean?
Pre: Never mind (a bit embarrassed). Are you watching the birds?
View: Oh yes! I've a fine view from this hill. I've already seen so much today. Not as much as you, though. You seem to see everything before everyone else.
Pre: I know. I get up before the whole campus. I like to be first, you know.
View: I see that.
Pre: I'm glad I was the first to see you today.
View: Me too. (smiling)
Pre: You know, I think we make a pretty neat pair. I foresee…you and me as
View: A couple?
Pre: Yes! Preview!

Word Part Poetry

This activity is an innovative way to play with word parts by creating short poems. Much like the characters in the word part dramas, the poems focus on developing the meaning of a word part through a narrative about the word part's "personality."

The poems can be in any style, from a structural, short Japanese tanka to a longer free verse. For lower level learners, acrostic poems can be particularly effective, easy, and fun. For intermediate to advanced learners, any style works well. As in the previous activity, the main point is to make sure that the poem or character in the poem represents the meaning of the word part. Below are examples of one acrostic poem (Trans) and one free verse (Chron).

Trans (across, beyond)

Trains move across the prairies,
Railroads stretch far beyond the Nebraska horizon,
Allowing people to come and go—a
Nonstop celebration of friends meeting friends—
Smiles spread across the country and beyond!

Chron (time)

I control all things great and small with
My power to give all entities time to live
On this amazing green earth.

I lift the sun up in the morning,
Let shadows play at noon,
At night, I help the stars to sing.

I am Chron—the endless Mr. Time—
I am Chron—the tick-tock that starts your day
So you can wake, dance, and find time to play!

III. Collocations—Lexical Neighbors That Enjoy Each Other's Company

Folse (2004) claims that "the single most important aspect of knowing a word for nonnative learners—besides or in addition to the obviously requisite synonym or denotation meaning—is the collocation(s) of a new vocabulary item" (p. 16). Although I consider collocations important, I'm not sure I agree that they are "the single most important." I do, however, consider them significant enough to include in the 10 essential language-based components of the Head-to-Toe Method.

A collocation is a combination of two or sometimes more words that frequently occur together. For example, "quick" and "shower" are collocations. We say, "James took a quick shower," but we would not say, "James took a rapid shower." So, "quick" collocates with "shower" whereas "rapid" does not.

There are two standard kinds of collocations: (1) *grammatical collocations* and (2) *lexical collocations*. Grammatical collocations are, for example, where a certain verb collocates with a particular preposition (e.g., elaborate + on) or a tri-part phrasal verb collocates with a noun phase (e.g., look forward to + the movie or the vacation). Lexical collocations deal with certain parts of speech that form predictable collocations, for instance, the adverb + adjective collocation of "pleasantly" + "surprised;" "pleasantly surprised" is a common word partnership. Another kind of lexical collocation is the verb and noun collocation; for example, the word partners "commit" + "fraud," form the frequent collocation of "commit fraud."

Caveats

Before moving on to activities to help familiarize our students with collocations, I'd like to point out two important caveats. The first caveat deals with using the terms "weak" and "strong" when teaching collocations; and the second caveat looks at the difference between collocations and idioms.

Strong vs. Weak

Based on my own students' reactions to the terms, I recommend that instructors refrain from using the labels "weak" and "strong" when teaching collocations. These terms seem to confuse the situation more than helping it. Linguistically, a "strong" collocation is one that collocates with very few words; for example, "auspicious" has limited word partners (e.g.,

occasion or moment). On the other hand, "comparatively" is a "weak" collocation because it has many word partners or collocations; for instance, "comparatively" collocates with "speaking," "difficult," "unique," and a whole host of other adjectives.

My students feel that "auspicious" should be "weak" because of its "few" collocations, and "comparatively" should be "strong" because of its "many" collocations. Such terms—weak and strong—only seem to unnecessarily muddy the waters. I've found it best to simply use descriptors like "few" and "many." These terms are clear and to the point.

Collocations vs. Idioms

The second caveat involves the confusion between teaching collocations and idioms. I've seen both teachers and online resources refer to idioms, and even some compound nouns, as collocations. According to Brenner (2011), "[i]dioms have a meaning that is different from or extends the literal meaning of the individual word or words" (p. 3). As above, a collocation is a combination of two or sometimes more words that frequently occur together. A fixed idiom like "raining cats and dogs" is very different from two or more words occurring together (e.g., "quick" and "shower"). It is important that instructors know the difference between the two categories as not to confuse their students. Moreover, I've also seen certain compound nouns like "fast food" and "parking lot" defined as collocations. Again, these are set compound nouns and are found as such in dictionaries. These are not cases of two random nouns frequently occurring together, as some online resources would like us to believe.

Activities—Strengthening Understanding Through Awareness and Use

We can address collocations in our classes to help our students become aware of their presence and importance, and indeed, this should be done at every opportunity we get. However, the time we have to do this on a weekly basis is limited. It is therefore important to offer supplemental activities for our students so that they can develop an awareness of collocations on their own and strengthen their use of them on a daily basis. Below are four activities I use to help my students get a better feel for collocations and acquire a deeper understanding of their lexical and grammatical patterns.

1. Start with the Obvious—Use Your Textbook as a Competition

Once the students (usually at the intermediate or advanced levels) have learned a number of collocations in class and feel comfortable and confident with these word partners, I have them try to locate as many as they can on their own in an assigned reading. I ask them to make a list and submit it at the beginning of the next class. The student with the most identified collocations gets an extra point for the assignment related to that particular reading. This game-like task gets the students excited and motivated to both look for collocations and be the winner of the competition.

2. Collocation Journals

Similar to the word part journals, this activity helps the students become more aware of the language. For the purpose of finding the collocations, students can use the class textbook, textbooks from other classes, pleasure reading material, or newspapers and articles they read online or in print. Once they locate collocations, ones learned in class or new ones, they record them in their journals. And, as they do with the word part journals, they also write original example sentences using the collocations. This helps them both recognize and use the collocations in a personal way.

3. Collocation Presentations

This activity is the same as that discussed in the activities for the word parts. Students find collocations on their own; then, as a brief warm-up before class, they present their findings to their classmates. It is recommended that the students who are listening to the presentations write down any new collocations in their journals. In this way, each member of the class becomes an important "scholar of collocations" and contributes to his/her classmates' education.

4. Collocation Study Groups

This activity requires students to form study groups of three to four class members, search for collocations during the week, and then meet once a week to exchange and teach each other about the collocations they find. Each week the groups appoint a new leader who records all of the collocations on a list. These are, then, submitted bi-monthly to the instructor. The results can either be shared during the mini-presentations or on a shared class website. This activity not only helps the students become aware of and learn many new collocations, but it also gives them the experience of forming and working together in a class study group.

IV. Concluding Remarks

The primary goal of the language-based components of the Head-to-Toe Method is "to [h]old, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature" and show how language reflects life, people, and the events that help complete our daily lives. Thus, the function of each of these components is to transform the often conceived abstract nature of language into something personal, concrete, palpable, and human—from understanding lexical items as people (an idea from the first installment) to working with word parts and collocations. These language-based components encourage teachers and students to embrace the English language as a dynamic entity and

befriend it. For the more students look at language as a living phenomenon, the more intrigue it evokes, and the more prospect there is to approach language learning from a new angle and use it in ways that will create success and confidence in the acquisition process.

References

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Correspondence concerning this article can be addressed to patricktrandolph@yahoo.com.

PATRICK T. RANDOLPH has received two "Best of TESOL Affiliates" awards for his presentations on his own contributions to vocabulary pedagogy (2015) and his seminar on preventing plagiarism (2018). He has also received the "Best of CoTESOL Award" for his 2017 presentation on Observation Journals. He teaches in PIESL at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and specializes in vocabulary acquisition, creative and academic writing, speech, and debate. He has created a number of brain-based learning activities for the language skills that he teaches, and he continues to research current topics in neuroscience, especially studies related to exercise and learning, memory, and mirror neurons. Randolph has also been involved as a volunteer with brain-imaging experiments at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He lives with his wife, Gamze; daughter, Aylene; and cat, Gable, in Lincoln, NE.

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