

# Word-formation for upper-intermediate level students

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## Introduction

This article explores how to assist upper-intermediate students with word-formation. Word-formation processes are highly significant given that they allow students to expand their range of vocabulary with relative ease.

In my experience, one of students' biggest challenges is that of enhancing their lexical competence and this is partly due to the fact that they find it somewhat hard to "acquire a critical mass of words for use in both understanding and producing language" (Thornbury, 2002, p. 2). Lessons that focus on word-formation are "likely to pay dividends for the learner both receptively and productively" (Gairns & Redman, 1986, p. 48). The three main word-formation processes in English are compounding, affixation, and conversion (Bauer, 1983), each one of which I shall consider in turn.

## Compounding

Compounding is the process by means of which words are formed from two items that can exist independently, producing compound nouns, compound adjectives, and compound verbs. Compounds are formed by a modifier + head. The head is usually the right-hand element and it is this "that determines the word-class of the whole compound" (Plag, Braun, Lappe, & Schramm, 2007, p. 97).

## Compound nouns

Compound nouns are "the commonest type of compound in English" (Carstairs-McCarthy, 2002, p. 60). They are either written as two words or as a hyphenated word, however, some compound nouns may be written in both ways (e.g. letter box, letter-box). They may be countable or uncountable (e.g. tea-bag, cotton wool) and used only in the singular or plural (e.g. brain drain, sunglasses). Compound nouns are commonly formed in three different ways: noun + noun (e.g. feature film); possessive noun + noun (e.g. goat's cheese); and prepositional structures (e.g. the bottom of the hill). Other ways of forming compound nouns include the following (*Learn English Grammar*, n.d.):

- adjective + noun (e.g. weekly ticket)
- verb + noun (e.g. swimming pool)
- preposition + noun (e.g. underground)
- noun + verb (e.g. haircut)
- noun + preposition (e.g. hanger on)
- adjective + verb (e.g. dry-cleaning)
- verb + adjective (e.g. blow-dry)
- preposition + verb (e.g. output).

## Compound adjectives

Most compound adjectives involve the use of a participle adjective (McCarthy & O'Dell, 2001). Adjective/adverb + past participle is perhaps the most common pattern (e.g. cold-blooded, densely-populated). Compound adjectives are not hyphenated when adverb + past participle combinations are used with a copular verb and follow the noun they modify.

e.g. The curtains in this room are brightly patterned.

This house seems old fashioned.

Compound adjectives can also be formed by means of other patterns, some of which do not involve the use of a participle adjective (*Learning English*, n.d.):

- adjective/adverb/noun + present participle (e.g. good-looking, record-breaking)
- noun + past participle (e.g. sun-dried)
- noun + adjective (e.g. world-famous)
- adjective + noun (e.g. deep-sea)
- number + noun (e.g. forty-page)
- adjective + preposition (e.g. hard-up).

Compound adjectives are described as productive features of English (Huddleston, 1984) and hence permit a level of experimentation on the part of the speaker.

## Compound verbs

According to Carstairs-McCarthy (2002), "verbs formed by compounding are much less usual than verbs derived by affixation" (p. 60). The most common pattern is probably preposition + verb (e.g. input). Other ways of forming compound verbs include the following (Carstairs-McCarthy, 2002):

- Verb + verb (e.g. stir-fry)
- Noun + verb (e.g. air-condition)
- Adjective + verb (e.g. whitewash).

## Pronunciation of compounds

Lieber (2005) explains that "stress often – but not always – distinguishes compounds from phrases in English" (p. 376). Usually the left-hand element is stressed (e.g. 'apple cake, 'truck driver), however, this is not always the case (e.g. apple 'pie). In fact, Roach (2009) suggests that the rule saying that stress always falls on the first element in a compound is "not completely reliable" (p. 85). These are some examples of compounds that receive stress on the second element (Roach, 2009):

- adjective + -ed morpheme (e.g. bad-tempered / bəd temp. d/)
- number + noun (e.g. third-rate /,θɜːd re t/)
- compounds as adverbs (e.g. upstream /,ʌp stri m/)
- compounds as verbs (e.g. ill-treat /,ɪl tri t/)

## Affixation

Affixation is the process of adding prefixes and suffixes to the root in order for a word to change its meaning; in some cases this also forms a new part of speech.

e.g. love

love + ly = lovely

un + love + ly = unlovely

un + love + ly + ness = unloveliness

Affixation sometimes also affects the stress and pronunciation of an item.

e.g. history /'hɪs.tər.i/

historic /hɪ'stɒr.ɪk/

mania /'meɪ.ni.ə/

maniac /'meɪ.ni.æk/

maniacal /mə'naɪ.əl/

## Prefixation

Prefixes "can be classified semantically according to the kind of change they produce in the meaning of the original lexeme" (Linàs i Grau & Reeves, 1998, p. 41). The main semantic categories of prefixes in English are the following (Quirk & Greenbaum, 1973):

negative	e.g. unkind
privative	disability
pejorative	malformed
degree or size	underfed
attitude	antisocial
locative	intercontinental
time and order	prehistory
number	bipolar

Even though prefixes usually retain the same word class, there exist a number of prefixes that change word class:

be-	noun/verb/adjective	e.g. bewitch	» transitive verb
en-	noun	» verb	enthrall
a-	verb	» adjective/adverb	afloat

“...teachers’ beliefs in terms of L1 use are shaped by many factors, including teaching experience, teacher training, experience as language learners, and perspectives of others, such as colleagues, managers, policy makers, and teacher educators.”

## Suffixation

Suffixation “is probably the most widely used process of word-formation in English” (Llinàs i Grau & Reeves, 1998, p. 43). According to Gairns and Redman (1986), “suffixes may indicate parts of speech and have little semantic value” (e.g. *-tion* in *indication*) or else “have an intrinsic value” (p. 47) (e.g. *-less* in *soulless*). English has an extensive list of suffixes but perhaps the two most common ones are *-ed* (e.g. *walked*) and *-ing* (e.g. *walking*). These two suffixes have an important grammatical function in that they form past and present participles. Other common suffixes and their meanings (as well as relevant examples for upper-intermediate level) are the following:

<i>-er</i>	one who	e.g. <i>forger</i>
<i>-able</i>	relevant to, able	<i>fashionable</i> , <i>assessable</i>
<i>-ful</i>	full of	<i>frightful</i>
<i>-ly</i>	like	<i>fiercely</i>

Usually suffixation leaves the spelling of the root word intact but a number of word groups experience a change in spelling with the addition of a suffix. For example, some words require the doubling of their last consonant when a suffix is added to them (e.g. *beginner*) while other words require a change in the last letter (e.g. *noisy*).

## Conversion

Conversion is the process that allows an item to function as two different parts of speech without changing its form. It involves “the derivation of a new word without any overt marking” (Plag, 2003, p. 107). Conversion “is similar to suffixation in that syntactic and semantic changes may be involved” (Gairns & Redman, 1986, p. 48). However, no affixes are used in conversion and this is why the process is sometimes referred to as zero affixation. These are the most common types of conversion (Plag, 2003):

- noun to verb (e.g. *the water*, to *water*)
- verb to noun (e.g. *to spy*, a *spy*)
- adjective to verb (e.g. *empty*, to *empty*)
- adjective to noun (e.g. *blind*, the *blind*).

The above “pairs of words ... are derivationally related and are completely identical in their phonetic realization” (Plag, 2003, p. 107). However, certain examples of conversion require changes in pronunciation (e.g. *to permit* /pə'mɪt/, a *permit* /'pɜː.mɪt/) and spelling (e.g. *to advise*, the *advice*).

## Potential errors

When teaching word-formation it is important to be aware of a host of potential errors that students might make.

## Compounding form errors

I have sometimes found that my students attempt to form a compound noun or adjective by combining two words that are not usually combined together. Usually this happens either because students attempt to describe something for which there already exists a compound word that they have not yet learnt, or else because they cannot remember that specific compound.

e.g. two-floor bus

seasonal ticket

whitepainted

## Affixation form errors

My upper-intermediate students sometimes make affixation errors by inserting a prefix or suffix in the wrong position, thus producing words that do not feature in English.

e.g. considerationness

unuseless

demaginary

lovelyful

The most common mistakes are related to spelling. Students tend to misspell words that take certain prefixes and suffixes because they are unsure about the rules governing the formation of such words.

e.g. beautifull

illegal

happyness

responsable

## Affixation meaning errors

In my experience students sometimes find it very hard to determine the meaning of a particular affix and hence they tend to misunderstand the meaning of a particular word. This happens most often with prefixes like *in-*, which has two different meanings: not and in/into. So my students tend to assume that *flammable* and *inflammable* are opposites. Other examples that give students problems include the following:

e.g. relay: to lay again

calculable: able to calculate

I have learnt that when students are not used to an explicit analysis of affixation they usually find it hard to break down a word in terms of its constituent parts in order for them to work out its meaning. For example, one particular upper-intermediate class could not work out the meaning of words like *lawlessness* and *joyfulness* despite being familiar with the roots.

## Conversion errors

The most common mistake that my students make when it comes to conversion is that of confusing words like *advice* (n.) and *advise* (v.). Words like *record* (v.) /rɪ'kɔːd/ and *record* (n.) /'rek.ɔːd/ also give them problems because they tend to confuse stress patterns. Another common mistake is to use a word as if it were one part of speech whereas in English it does not yet function as such. This tends to happen with nouns that are incorrectly used as verbs.

e.g. We footballled against their team.

I mobiled my mother.

## Pronunciation errors

Very often my students apply the rule of stressing the left-hand element in a compound indiscriminately. Hence they end up mispronouncing words and causing a strain on the listener.

e.g. coolheaded /'kuːlhɛd.ɪd/

one-handed /'wʌn,hæn.dɪd/

downgrade /'daʊn,ɡreɪd/

Sometimes they also mispronounce words containing affixes, perhaps not realising that in certain cases affixation changes a word's pronunciation.

e.g. terrific /'ter.ə.fɪk/

optimistic /'ɒp.tɪ.mɪs.tɪk/

## Effective teaching activities

In the next few sections I discuss five activities that I found to be effective in helping upper-intermediate students with word-formation. The teaching of vocabulary is meant to develop both comprehension and production strategies but the teacher “needs to draw a clear distinction between comprehension and production, for these seem to be different skills that require different methods in the classroom” (Nattinger, 1988, p. 62). The first three activities target comprehension strategies while the last two focus on production strategies.

## Compounds in a news broadcast

(adapted from Nation, 1994, p. 53)

**Aim:** To help students understand the use of compounding in a news broadcast.

**Procedure:** Students first listen for gist and then answer a few comprehension questions about the broadcast. Then they read the tape script and underline all the examples of compounding they can find. They try to derive the meaning of these compounds from the meaning of the two constituent units and from context.

**Commentary:** This activity presents the target language in context and hence allows students to employ their comprehension strategies in order to identify the meanings of compounds in the text. It is a cognitional activity because learners need to make

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decisions about the meaning of these compounds based on the meaningful context in which they feature (Stevick, 1976).

## Meaning of prefixes

(adapted from Oxenden & Latham-Koenig, 2008, p. 111)

**Aim:** To help students understand how prefixes determine the meaning of a word.

**Procedure:** Students read a text and underline all the words containing a number of prefixed words. In pairs they discuss the meaning and class of these words and use a dictionary to confirm their guesses. Subsequently all the prefixes in the text are matched with their meanings (e.g. *anti-* against) by means of a table.

**Commentary:** This activity allows students to understand the meaning of a number of prefixes by first presenting them with the target language in context. Thornbury (2002) points out that “words need to be presented in their typical context, so that learners can get a feel for their meaning” (p. 30). The act of matching the prefixes with their meanings helps students to transfer this learning to similarly prefixed words in English.

## Form and meaning of suffixes

(adapted from Cunningham & Moor, 2005, p. 20)

**Aim:** To enable students to understand the form and meaning of suffixes.

**Procedure:** Students first match a list of words with suffixes organised in table form before deciding on the noun forms of a set of adjectives and verbs. Finally, they read a text that provides two alternatives to choose from for each key word (e.g. enjoyable/enjoyment).

**Commentary:** This activity enables students to inductively work out which suffixes are added to which words and to become aware of how suffixes change the class of a word. The multiple-choice task enables students to understand the different meanings given to a base word by different suffixes. Students are encouraged to realise that “some affixes are very selective about what parts of speech they are added to” (Bauer, 1998, p. 26).

## Personalised use of compound adjectives

(adapted from Acklam & Crace, 2006, p. 22)

**Aim:** To enable students to use compound adjectives as a means of talking about themselves.

**Procedure:** Students read a short reading text and underline six compound adjectives

used to describe the man in the article. They discuss the meaning of these adjectives as used in the context and how each one is formed. Then they are given two lists of words and asked to combine them to make compound adjectives after which they insert these compound adjectives in a gap-fill text. Finally, they ask each other a number of questions using these compound adjectives.

**Commentary:** By encountering the compound adjectives in a text students are being encouraged to guess meaning from context (Schmitt, 2000) and to notice different ways in which compound adjectives are formed in English. This then allows them to apply these rules to form other compound adjectives and see whether they fit the context. The questions encourage students to personalize the use of the target language and to be creative if need be, especially “since the meaning relationships that hold between the two parts of a compound are not strictly limited” (Bauer, 1998, p. 23).

## Pronunciation of affixes

(adapted from Vince, 1992, p. 90)

**Aim:** To help students with the pronunciation of affixed words.

**Procedure:** Students first complete a gap-fill exercise in which they have to form a suitable word by means of the given prefixes and suffixes. Then they mark the syllable with the most stress in each one of these words. After that they listen to a recording of each word and check their answers. At the end of each recorded word, students can repeat saying the word.

**Commentary:** This activity helps students to come up with the right form from the given affixes and enables them to improve their pronunciation of multisyllabic words. Thornbury (2002) points out that “teaching should direct attention to the sound of new words, particularly the way they are stressed” (p. 30). Students inductively work out where to put stress and become aware that affixation sometimes changes the way a word is pronounced.

## Conclusion

In this article I have explored how upper-intermediate students may be helped to address their lexical gaps by means of word-formation processes. For Nattinger (1988), “teaching the most productive of these to students may help ease them to greater fluency by giving them ways of filling these gaps” (p. 71). Hence, by making students fully aware of how to employ such processes, we would be enabling them to expand their vocabulary in an autonomous manner.

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