



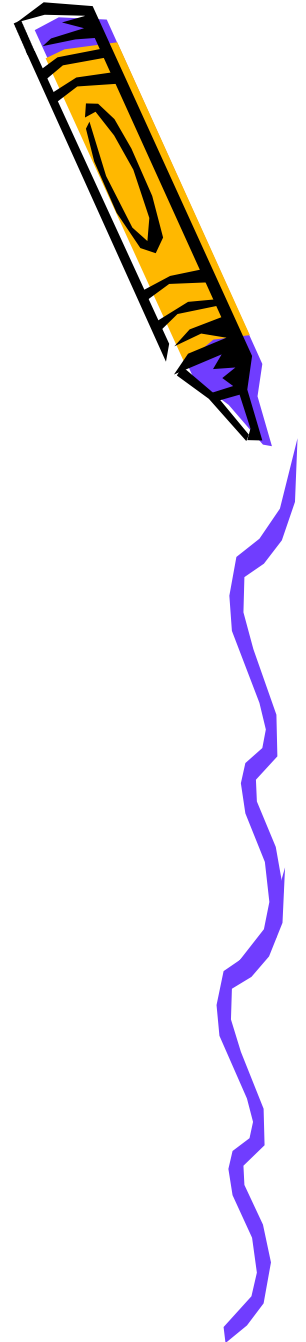
Derivational Morphology as an  
Instructional Tool to Increase  
Vocabulary Knowledge in Third Grade  
English Language Learners

by Sandra Nahmias



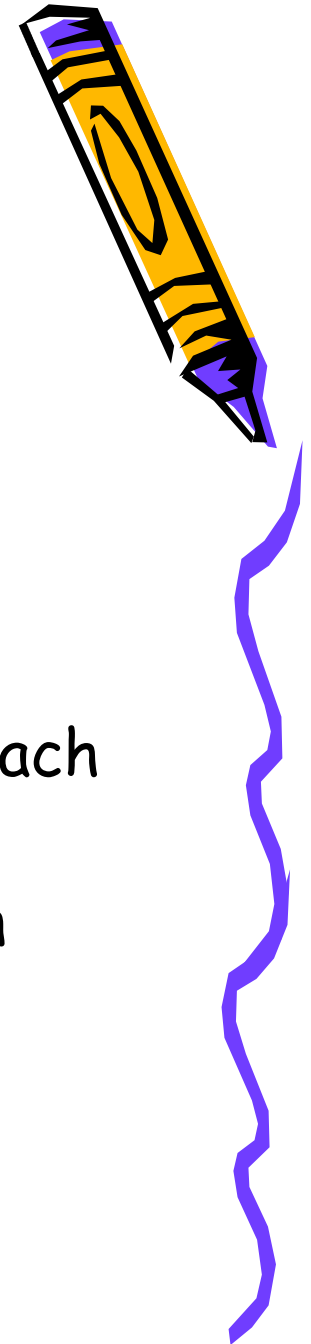
## The Issue

- In order to be literate, ELLs must be able to access the academic vocabulary of all content areas.
- ELLs enter school with smaller receptive and productive vocabularies in English than their English-speaking peers.
- Research shows that it takes ELLs upwards of 5 - 7 years to acquire academic language.
- Tremendous gap exists between English-only students and ELLs.
- ELLs held to rigorous standards as a result of NCLB.



## Why is Teaching Vocabulary Difficult?

- School-age children encounter up to 3,000 unfamiliar words each year.
- Vocabulary instruction is time-consuming.
- Traditional vocabulary instruction does not teach word-learning strategies.
- Vocabulary becomes more complex as children progress through school.
- It is difficult to "know" a word.



## What Does the Research Say?

- Most research done with older English-only students; only a handful of studies with ELLs.
- English-only students have an awareness of parts of words as early as first grade.
- Children encounter more and more morphologically complex words as they progress through school.
- Introducing morphological awareness early contributes to vocabulary acquisition.
- Morphological awareness → depth of vocabulary knowledge → breadth of vocabulary knowledge.
- What works for English-only students works for



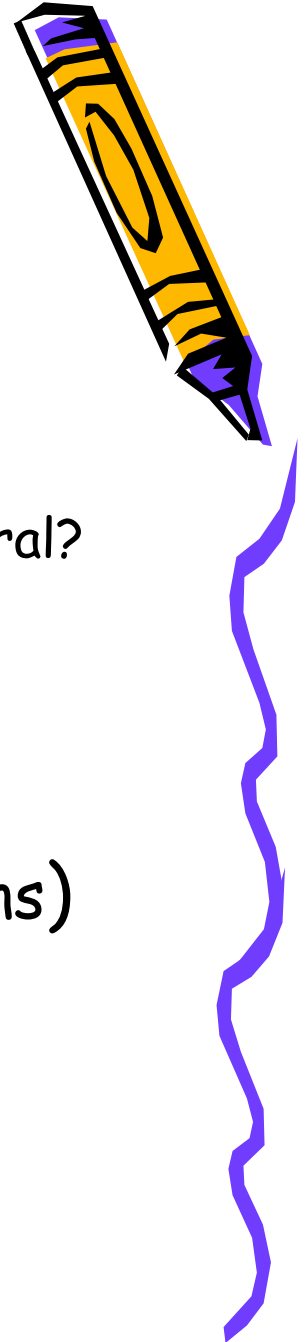
## Questions:

- Can derivational morphology\* be a successful vocabulary-building tool for ELLs?
  - Can it work as early as third grade?
  - Can it lead to a greater awareness of words in general?

## Answer:

**YES!** (with some modifications)

\*derivational morphology refers to the addition of prefixes and suffixes to base words, and the formation of compound words, to change the meaning of words and create new words.



# Research Design

- A 12-week, 30 session action research study
- Population: Third grade ELLs at varying proficiency levels in a Bilingual/ESL classroom
- A focus on a narrow set of prefixes and suffixes
- Creation of a detective theme
- Hands-on materials
- Visuals
- Posters
- Graphic organizers
- Notebooks

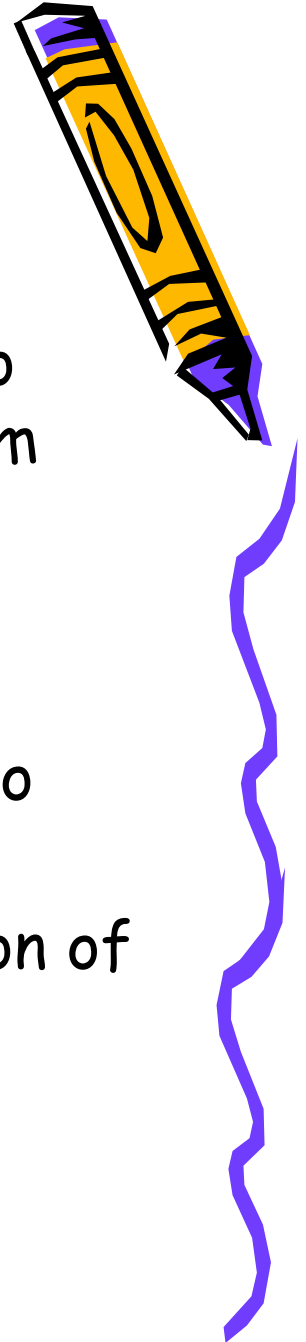
Word Walls

Interactive games



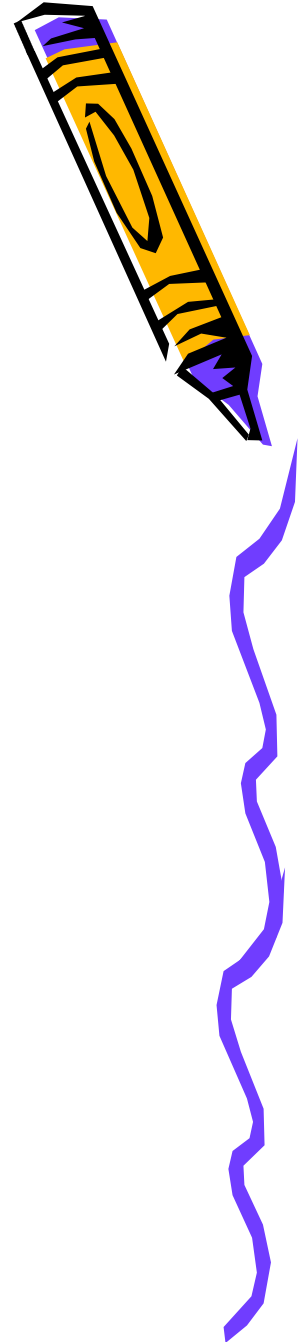
## Findings

- Intervention effective in teaching students to manipulate word parts and derive meaning from them.
- Intervention successful in building a greater awareness of words in general.
- Intervention successful in enabling students to take ownership of the words they learned.
- Intervention successful in building a foundation of future morphological knowledge.
- Some modifications required.



## Why Successful?

- "Less is more"
- Words taught in context whenever possible
- Repeated practice
- Active engagement with words
- Gradual release of responsibility
- Teaching *new* words subordinate to teaching *about* words
  - increase in amount of words developed naturally



## What Next?

- Derivational morphology should become part of an instructional toolbox in the teaching of vocabulary.
- The intervention should be used with English-only primary school-aged children.
- The Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) initiated a five-year long project, VIAS, to test the effect of several vocabulary interventions, some employing aspects of derivational morphology.
- CAL: "Further research is desperately needed to address the gap in knowledge about effective vocabulary interventions for ELLs."

