

INTRODUCTION

You know this language that we speak,
Is part German, part Latin, and part Greek.
Peter, Paul, and Mary

English is rapidly becoming the most widely used language in the world. It has a vast number of speakers: an estimated 343 million, an additional 350 million for whom English is a second language, and perhaps as many as a billion who are learning it as a foreign language. Speakers of English now exceed those of Mandarin Chinese. Thus English is well on its way to becoming a universal language. For centuries, Latin was the common language of European peoples; it was the language of the Church, and it continues to be taught in schools and universities in the twenty-first century. French has long been the language of diplomacy. So, you may wonder, how is it that the language of a small island attained such importance?

In part, the spread of the British Empire, on which, at its height, the sun never set, accounts for the dominance of English. The Industrial Revolution was another factor. But there are other more recent elements at work: the tourist trade, which continues to be dominated by American travelers; radio and television; Hollywood's position in the film industry; World Wars I and II, as well as the conflicts in Korea and Vietnam (American servicemen took their lan-



Copyright material by PRO-ED, Inc.

guage to the countries in which they served). World wide, English is the language used by pilots to communicate with controllers, and it is the language of computers and of scientific research (Pyles and Algeo 1993, 233).

But there is another factor. English has the largest vocabulary of any language—well over 650,000 words (of which about 200,000 are in common use). By contrast, German has 184,000 words and French and Russian fewer than 100,000 each (Bryson 1990, 13). English has amassed this vast vocabulary by its capacity to absorb elements from other languages. Never have the English tried to keep out foreign elements, as have the Germans (e.g., by making such substitutions as *Fernsprecher* “distance speaker” for *Telephon*) and the French, who even have an academy charged with maintaining the purity of the language. Recently the French announced a ban on English for official use. Currently there are 3,600 words the French are not supposed to use in school or government. A *walkman* is to be called a *balladeur*, and a *jumbo jet*, a *gros porteur*. Outlawed are words such as *beefsteak*, *on-line*, *brainstorming*, *bulldozer*, *airbag*, *log on*, and *makeup*.

For those of us who are teachers, the very richness of our language complicates our task. When we teach English, we are not teaching one but at least four languages. Even though scholars classify English as a Germanic language, Germanic, Teutonic, or Anglo-Saxon (the terms are synonymous) actually accounts

for less than one percent of our language. But this one percent includes all the most common and familiar words. English idioms use the Anglo-Saxon forms. Thus we ask, “Why on *earth* did you do that?” We talk of something past as “*water* over the dam,” and we say of an enthusiast that he is “all *fired* up.” All the words on the Dolch list of “sight words” are of Germanic origin, as are all the words on any list of high-frequency words. Anglo-Saxon words are short, often contain silent letters, and present problems for both reading and spelling to a greater extent than do the more phonetically regular words of Latin and Greek origins. Latin words, over half of the English language, are longer and often composed of prefixes, roots, and suffixes. Greek words are the most abstract and scientific sounding and account for about ten percent of the words we use. Compare *earth*, *fire*, and *water* with the Latin *terrain*, *ignite*, and *aquatic* and with the Greek *geographic*, *pyre*, and *hydrogen*, and you will begin to get the idea of a language that moves from concrete to abstract. (For a listing of these elements, see Appendix F). You can make the same comparisons with any set of common Anglo-Saxon words and the Greek and Latin derivatives, e.g.,

Anglo-Saxon	Latin	Greek
<i>star</i>	<i>stellar</i>	<i>astronomy</i>
<i>sun</i>	<i>solarium</i>	<i>helium</i>
<i>man</i>	<i>virile</i>	<i>anthropology</i>
<i>woman</i>	<i>feminine</i>	<i>misogynist</i>

Germanic, Latin, and Greek words do not account for all the words we use; many words are derived from other languages or are of unknown origin.

French words have been entering our language since the Norman Conquest. In British schools, French was introduced to children at an early age; in this country its teaching has recently been widely displaced by Spanish language instruction. French words are numerous and challenging to teachers because they pose problems for both reading and spelling. Fortunately, for the most part, they constitute an advanced and sophisticated vocabulary not needed by young children. They are best taught to younger children on a need-to-know basis. However, they are important for high school and college students (see Appendix F).

Because the languages that form the basis of English are so different, they need to be approached in different ways. English is not “crazy,” but it is highly complex, and English words reflect their origins by having their own structure and phonology. In general, the Anglo-Saxon elements are the first to be learned by young readers. But by the time children reach the fourth grade, they begin to encounter the Latin words in their social studies and science texts, and by high school they need to master the Greek-derived terminology of science courses. So it is that students should start to become familiar with Latin prefixes and roots in fourth grade and with Greek elements in seventh and eighth grades.

The reasons for the extraordinarily large vocabulary of English lie buried in the history of the language, and if we are to understand and appreciate our language, we have to begin with its history. A teacher equipped with knowledge of the history and elements of our language can enrich any lesson with information about words and their origins

© copyrighted material by PRO-ED, Inc.