

# COVID-19 infecting global vocabulary: Implications for EFL/ESL teaching and learning

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## Abstract

Language is dynamic and keeps changing due to the influence of a number of factors, including global pandemics. COVID-19, commonly known as Coronavirus, has affected not only people's health around the world but also their vocabulary. Focusing on the English language, one can see that many Corona-related medical words have entered the daily vocabulary of its speakers, and interestingly, many languages have been using those words to broadcast the news about the disease. The outbreak has also spawned new words, corona coinages, and new uses of old words in the language. This article intends to raise EFL/ESL teachers' awareness of the word-formation processes evident in the new COVID-19 vocabulary and to teach learners how words are created. It also argues that making learners conscious of these combinatorial processes can be a way to increase their lexical resources and serve as a strategy to promote their autonomous learning. The authors demonstrate how these objectives can be achieved via two example activities. The article concludes by enumerating several issues that need to be taken into account when teaching such vocabulary.

Keywords: *COVID-19, vocabulary, word formations, EFL/ESL, second language*



## Introduction

Language is a dynamic system (Cameron & Larsen-Freeman, 2007; Chun & Lo, 2016; Fromkin et al., 2018); it serves the needs of its speakers with amazing efficiency, meaning they can appropriate this system in different ways to understand and express their, sometimes new, experiences. Languages are also affected by the changes happening in the world, changes such as advances in technology, socio-political upheavals (e.g., racism, immigration, conflicts), globalization, and pandemics. COVID-19, an infectious virus which started in the Chinese city of Wuhan toward the end of 2019, soon turned into a global pandemic and afflicted most countries ever since. With the spread of this deadly disease, *social distancing*, which was later changed to *physical distancing*, has been the primary solution, until an effective vaccine is widely available.

It is no secret that the outbreak has directly affected every segment of our society, including education (Gao & Zhang, 2020). In the initial stages of the Coronavirus pandemic, UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) suggested that educational institutes take an alternate approach, which had to be Virtual Teaching (VT). Being forced to adapt to the new situations, English language teachers have endeavored to utilize social media as educational tools to instruct students and keep them motivated. The authors of the present article propose that the new situation can offer English as a foreign/second language (EFL/ESL) teachers (and learners for that matter) opportunities to harness the many words and expressions that have been introduced into the daily lingo of the English language speakers via COVID-19 and are widely used on social media networks. Taking a glimpse at social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook, one may come across words such as *coronnil*, *coronapocalypse*, *covidivorce*, *covidiot*, *moronavirus*, *social distancing*, and *zumped*. Like social distancing, some of them existed before the Corona outbreak, but now almost everyone knows the concepts by heart. Other words like *Coronageddon* (Corona + Armageddon) or *Coronapocalypse* (Corona + Apocalypse), however, have been created by the pandemic and did not exist before. This article argues that such neologisms can prove beneficial to EFL/ESL teachers because they demonstrate word-formation processes which can be employed not only to teach the systemic processes through which words are created in the English language but also to encourage learner autonomy and produce more lexically competent language users. Prior to going through the implications these new COVID-19 words have for vocabulary learning and teaching in EFL/ESL contexts, we need to discuss the word-formation processes that created them. We draw on the processes introduced in Yule (2020) to demonstrate these processes. Moreover, we present the COVID-19 lingo to exemplify each process.



## Word formation processes

### Blending

It is the process of joining the beginning of one word with the ending of another to form a new word (e.g., *brunch*, which is the combination of *breakfast* and *lunch*). Examples from the Coronavirus include *covidiot* (a person behaving irresponsibly in conditions of containment), *zumped* (breaking up with someone over video chat), *locktail* (lockdown cocktail), *coronacation* (cessation of study or work due to the pandemic, viewed as a holiday), *quarantini* (a blend of quarantine and martini), *coronalusional* (suffering from disordered thinking as a result of the COVID-19 crisis), *drivecation* (time spent in your caravan or camper van parked at home during lockdown), *isobar* (an at-home isolation bar), *morona* (a person who is behaving moronically during the pandemic).

### Borrowing

Borrowing is the process of taking words from other languages like *piano* (Italian), *sofa* (Arabic), *yogurt* (Turkish). Examples from COVID-19 include *coronaspeck* (kummerspeck, from German), *hamsterkaufing* (stockpiling and/or hoarding, from German), *pestilence* (a fatal epidemic or disease, from French).

### Compounding

It is the process of combining two (or more) words to form a new word like *bookcase*, *doorknob*, *fingerprint*, *sunburn*, *textbook*, etc. Examples of words created through this process include *coronadodge* (physically avoiding others out in public so as not to contract the virus), *corona-waltz* (maneuvering around other people in public, like a dance, to avoid being close to them), *corona-cuts* (a hairstyle during the pandemic), *zoom-room* (the one corner of the home that is kept clean for video conferences), *entry screening* (measures taken by a government to monitor people coming into its jurisdiction, whether by foot, boat, motor vehicle, or plane), *superspreader* (a person infected with a pathogen who transmits the infection to an unusually large number of people), and *armchair virologist* (someone who does not know anything but is posing as an expert).

### Neologism

Neologism is the process of making a new word in a language like *spangler* (an electric suction sweeper invented by J. Murray Spangler; this device eventually became very popular and could have become known as a spangler). Examples from coronavirus time include *coronacoma* (the period of shutdown due to the spread of the virus, or that deliciously long quarantine sleep), *self-monitoring* (checking oneself for COVID-19 symptoms, including fever, cough, or difficulty breathing), *upperware* (words people have



made up to describe the clothes visible during video calls), *moronavirus* (another term for a *covidiot*), *doomsurfing* (the tendency to continue to surf or scroll through bad news, even though that news is saddening or depressing), *coronials* (the term used for the babies who will be born after Corona-induced lockdown), *zoom-bombing* (the action of people hijacking or interrupting a video conference), *locktail hour* (a cocktail hour in lockdown), *smize* (smile with your eyes).

## Collocations

A collocation refers to two or more words that frequently occur together, like *salt and pepper*. Examples of collocations made during coronavirus time include *the COVID 19* or *COVID 15* (extra body weight accrued during quarantine), *shelter-in-place* (a protocol instructing people to find a place of safety in the location they are occupying until the all-clear is sounded), *covidian worry* (the type of worry and depression that rapidly and virally spreads during times of uncertainty, such as during a pandemic), *panic buying* (an act of buying large quantities of food or supplies due to a fear of forthcoming shortage or price increasing), *drive-thru testing* (medical staff will take a swab test usually done through the nose to collect cells to test for COVID-19).

## Metaphor

A metaphor is a figure of speech that describes an object or action in a way that is not literally true but helps explain an idea or make a comparison like *Love is a battlefield*. Metaphor examples in the time of Coronavirus are *flattening the curve*, *new corona wave*, *the unwelcome visitor*, *corona as an enemy*, *battle against corona*, and *frontline corona warriors*.

## Implications for EFL/ESL vocabulary teaching and learning: Two practical examples

There are a number of ways through which we can make best of this pandemic situation; we offer some practical steps in the following paragraphs.

First, teachers can use the Corona-related words as an activity at the beginning of the class. For instance, teachers can display photos of some people on the street who are not wearing masks and gloves to teach words like *covidiot* and *morona*, referring to those people who are ignoring safety guidelines (depending on location) by not wearing mask and gloves. This is a contextualized and entirely real-life activity that both teachers and learners might find appropriate, be it in virtual or real classes. Different scenarios can be applied for other words and expressions like *covidivorce*, *drivecation*, *dracula cough* and *sneeze*, *social distancing*, etc. At the end of this activity, teachers can go over the word-formation processes that birthed



these words and teach students those processes so that students can recognize the same processes in other words in the future exposure.

In another scenario, teachers could ask learners to ponder on expressions or metaphors in which disease-related words are employed to talk about predicaments or unpleasant situations. The teacher can pair up learners and ask them to exchange ideas about the topic and note down their expressions on a piece of paper. After collecting the pieces of paper, the teacher draws a two-column table on the board, and on one side writes the expressions and on the other side writes the same expressions minus the disease word. The teacher then encourages students to name a new Corona-related word(s) to fill the slot. For instance, learners may come up with the expression *avoid someone or something like the plague*, and learners can, on their own or, with the teacher's help, tweak the expression using a Corona-related word to create *avoid someone or something like COVID-19*.

One further way to teach Corona-related words to learners could be through lexical priming, which seeks to relate corpus-linguistics concepts such as collocations and colligations to the experimental findings of psycholinguists interested in the impedance and acceleration of word association (Hoey, 2013). To implement this technique, teachers should spend some time gathering words that can be grouped together and then teach them to learners. As a result, this technique can consolidate words and their associations, which leads to better retaining and recalling of words by students (Kök & Canbay, 2011).

## Conclusion

Anderson and Freebody (1981) have made the distinction between two dimensions of vocabulary knowledge: breadth and depth. They argued that vocabulary breadth refers to “the number of words for which the person knows at least some of the significant aspects of meaning” while vocabulary depth is “the quality or depth of understanding” (p. 93). In other words, breadth of vocabulary refers to how many words a person knows whereas depth of vocabulary refers to how well a person knows these words (Li & Kirby, 2014). Teaching word formation processes can have a great effect on learners' vocabulary breadth and depth since they will not only know more words but also have a deeper appreciation of the processes that led to creation of these words. Knowledge of these processes might also help learners tap, to a great extent, into creativity on their way to use language (Tin, 2013). Moreover, this awareness enables learners to guess the meaning of new and unfamiliar words.

Dik (1967) maintains that “to learn a language is not so much to memorize a set of sentences; rather, it is to familiarize oneself with a linguistic system in such a way and to such extent that one is able to construct sentences and other linguistic structures on one's own” (p. 352). In English classes, language learners are



normally left single-handed in mastering word-formation skills, and they gradually learn them through exposure and using a dictionary. However, teachers can now teach learners the word-formation processes to foster learners' autonomy and familiarize them with the linguistic system of the language that is being learned; through this process learners can take the responsibility of language learning, here specifically vocabulary learning, on their own. They get more independent in vocabulary learning since they are equipped with the word-formation skill, and they can decode words and find the ways through which words are formed. Also, learners would not need to refer to a dictionary for each and every unfamiliar word they encounter. We end this discussion by asking readers to keep two points in mind. First, COVID-19 words are rather advanced, so the above-mentioned implications best suit high proficient students, although intermediate or high-intermediate students could benefit from them with more visual support such as more photos and videos. Besides, to teach students with lower proficiency, teachers can use their imagination and use other methods to let learners with lower proficiency benefit from this opportunity. Some words lend themselves to the Total Physical Response (TPR) method (Asher, 1969); for instance, *social distancing*, *hand hygiene*, or *flattening the curve* can be taught through TPR by gestures and role play. Second, Corona words, due to the fact that the virus is a global phenomenon, have entered many world languages, so the recommendations in this article are not language-specific and can be applied to any other language that serves as L2.

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