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English Comparative-superlative

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Mathematics appeals to some students who might otherwise choose English, and the reason is not the subject but the teaching method. Students like mathematical problems, with their testable answers. They do not like the subjective approach often made to English.

The following problem illustrates how a mathematics-like approach can be used in certain areas of English teaching.

Problem: Describe the variants of the comparative and superlative morphemes in the following lists.

hard	harder	hardest
tall	taller	tallest
nice	nicer	nicest
old	older	oldest
beautiful	more beautiful	most beautiful
ancient	more ancient	most ancient
difficult	more difficult	most difficult
delicious	more delicious	most delicious

Answer: The comparative morpheme is more before long adjectives, -er suffixed to short ones. The superlative morpheme is most before long adjectives, -est suffixed to short ones.

2. Comment₁ The student is instructed to confine his answer to the data given. This avoids the problem of an infinite corpus of data, representing possibly divergent dialects. It also makes it possible to present data for which a testable answer can be given. Thus neither student nor teacher is held responsible for knowing all about the English language, but only for right handling of the material given.

In this problem, a supplement can be added, if desired, giving examples such as more tall and most tall, with a note that they mean the same as taller and tallest. It is then explained that more does not contrast with -er, nor most with -est. They are therefore morpheme alternates, either of which may occur with short adjectives, but only the longer form may occur with long adjectives.

English Once, Twice, Thrice

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Problem In the sentence I saw him once last week, the word once may be replaced by twice (or two times), thrice (or three times), four times, five times. Describe the variants of the word times, and their distribution. Describe the variants of the words two and three and their distribution.

Answer: The word times may be replaced by a suffix written -ce after the words two and three. When this suffix is used, two becomes twi- and three becomes thri-.

Comment: This is an example of a problem designed to teach English as mathematics is taught. Since persons using this problem may not know phonetics or phonemics, no attempt has been made in it to distinguish between spelling and pronunciation. It would not appear advisable, in this problem, to draw attention to the relation between twice and twin, unless the teacher is prepared to go into a discussion of phonetic and/or phonemic considerations.