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Patrick Groff
San Diego State University

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DIRECT INSTRUCTION VERSUS INCIDENTAL LEARNING OF READING VOCABULARY

Patrick Goff

ELEMENTARY EDUCATION
SAN DIEGO STATE UNIVERSITY

Advice to teachers that the direct teaching of reading vocabulary to children is an inferior procedure for gaining this linguistic goal is still circulating. It is easy to find recent statements from reading authorities that are intended to substantiate the belief that extensive reading will develop children's vocabulary better than direct instruction. For example, Smith (1978) maintains "The best way to acquire a large and useful vocabulary for reading is by meaningful reading" (p. 168). Johnson and Pearson (1978) would not apply this rule at the very beginning stage of reading instruction, but would put it into force quite early in the reading program. They note that "once children have acquired some basic proficiency in reading, that proficiency develops with practice, practice in reading, not in doing work sheets" (p.178).

Other reading experts disagree. Dale and O'Rourke (1971) protest that there must be "an organized, systematic way (provided) to improve their vocabulary" (p. 2). The defenders of direct instruction in reading vocabulary emphasize the idea that "without (such) a plan, their vocabulary grows sporadically at best" (p. 2). Weintraub (1968) concurs, saying "directed vocabulary instruction utilizing numerous useful techniques appears to be the most promising approach."

Because of the sharp dissent among reading experts over this issue, it is not easy to decide if children develop their reading vocabularies best through wide reading or from the direct teaching of words. The sharp division of views over this topic leave one in a quandary. Is it wise to assume that vocabularies will develop satisfactorily as a result of extensive reading? In practical terms, should teachers eliminate

the formal teaching of reading vocabulary, such as that now carried on in basal reading lessons? It is clear that answers to these elemental and critical questions cannot be determined from a study of the opinions of the experts in this field.

The resolution of these basic questions must come from a more objective source of information; therefore, we must inquire as to what the research on reading vocabulary development says about this matter. Although there has not been a great deal of research on this fundamental question, empirical evidence that is now available does suggest that there is a preferred method of teaching reading vocabulary.

Research Favoring Direct Teaching

There have been empirical studies from the 1930's to the present whose findings indicate that the direct teaching of reading vocabulary is a superior manner in which to develop this knowledge with children. Holmes (1934) and Gray and Holmes (1938) found that the direct method is significantly more effective in this respect than are incidental procedures like independent reading. This finding is duplicated in the study by Bedell and Nelson (1954) and in that by Eichholz and Barbe (1961). Vanderline (1964) discovered that children who made a direct study of mathematics vocabulary achieved significantly higher scores on a math problem solving test than did children not given such direct instruction.

In addition, the research offers clues as to what kind of direct instruction in reading vocabulary is the most effective. Clifford (1976), Sinatra (1977), and Gipe (1980) found that a sentence context method is the superior type of direct instruction for reading vocabulary development. These findings appear more impressive than those of Hafner (1965) who reported that the sentence context method has no significant advantages in teaching reading vocabulary. It is fair to say that the quality of the design of Hafner's study does not match that of Clifford or Gipe.

Research Favoring Extensive Reading

Extensive reading does not appear to have empirical evidence to support it in the comparison of methods for building reading vocabularies. The research that has been conducted so far appears to contradict the notion that the best way for children to acquire a reading vocabulary is through their wide reading.

Conclusions

The sharp disagreement among reading experts

today as to the relative effectiveness of teaching reading vocabulary directly to children versus their learning these words through extensive reading has been described. It has been demonstrated, however, that the research on this issue suggests that direct instruction in reading vocabulary (especially if this is done with sentence contexts) is likely to result in greater reading vocabulary growth in children than is possible through extensive reading.

This conclusion challenges a fundamental tenet of the psycholinguistic approach to reading instruction. This principle is: "All the teacher can do (for the pupil) is provide the raw material, the written word and its 'name'" (Smith, 1971, p. 225). The research evidence cited in this discussion contradicts this precept. To the reverse, it notes that the teacher in fact can profitably do much more, to teach reading vocabulary, than merely present words to children while assuming that they will develop, on their own, a satisfactory knowledge of words.

It is recommended, therefore, that teachers continue to teach reading vocabulary to their pupils in a direct and systematic fashion throughout the grades of the elementary school. In short, there is no evidence at present that confirms the notion that once children have acquired some unspecified basic proficiency in reading that the direct teaching of vocabulary can be properly discontinued in favor of extensive reading by pupils.

This recommendation is not meant to imply that extensive reading by children has no appreciable effect on the development of their reading vocabularies. It does insist, however, that unless children through the grades receive direct instruction in reading vocabulary that their growth in this word knowledge will be handicapped. In 1940 Seegers was right in concluding that "little of concrete value has been presented" as to "how one can best develop the vocabularies of children" (p. 30). There have been surprisingly few studies made of this critical issue since that time. However, the uniformity of the findings of the studies that have been made does suggest that a recommendation for the direct teaching of reading vocabulary is justified. As Petty, Herold and Stoll (1968) state, "it is possible to note accumulating evidence to dispel the widely held notion that having students 'read, read, read' is a satisfactory method for teaching vocabulary."

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