

10-1-1976

Reading in the Secondary School: Teaching Students How to Add Words to Their Vocabulary, Part I

Kenneth VanderMeulen
Western Michigan University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons



Part of the Education Commons

Recommended Citation

VanderMeulen, K. (1976). Reading in the Secondary School: Teaching Students How to Add Words to Their Vocabulary, Part I. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 17 (1). Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol17/iss1/15

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Special Education and Literacy Studies at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.

READING IN THE SECONDARY SCHOOL: TEACHING STUDENTS HOW TO ADD WORDS TO THEIR VOCABULARY: PART ONE *

Kenneth VanderMeulen

It is not difficult to collect a number of statements by the experts on why we must teach vocabulary growth. Words are the tools of communication, and, words are units out of which we build all thought and philosophy. Those are the truisms of yesterday, too old to attribute to a single person, and seldom thought about in today's world. Here is a thought by an expert today—"The substrata-factor research by Holmes and Singer indicates that vocabulary deserves predominant emphasis, since it contributes 51 percent to reading speed—far more than any other first-order factor." (James I. Brown, "Increasing Reading Rate," p. 159, *New Horizons in Reading*, International Reading Association, 1976.)

Teachers do not disagree on the importance of vocabulary growth, but they often oppose the suggestion that they are responsible for this growth. Using the same studies that show the urgent need for vocabulary work with students, these teachers cite the many approaches which do *not* work as reasons for avoiding the obligation. "The NCTE report shows teaching word lists is ineffective," "Vocabulary taught out of context is useless," and "Vocabulary growth results from wide reading, not from teaching." These statements may be true, but the need to build students' experience with concepts through vocabulary study of some kind remains, as pressing a problem as ever.

What is being done with vocabulary now is good, but not adequate. Teachers in each of the subject areas teach the words and ideas related to and necessary for understanding those content fields. Students are encouraged in most classes to use dictionaries, and to apply appropriate definitions as they read in unfamiliar materials. The skills needed for unlocking meanings through the use of context clues are part of most reading lessons. What is needed is more attention to vocabulary as a way of growing. Students need practice in expressing themselves lucidly, accurately, and coherently.

However, as former NCTE president Stephen Dunning put it, "We English teachers are not trained to teach reading and writing (nor did we

* This issue's "Reading in the Secondary School" column is the beginning of a unique four-part series dealing with practical ideas for teaching vocabulary. Further installments will be published consecutively during the '76-'77 year.

become English teachers in order to do that).” (EQUAL TIME, *The English Journal*, Page 9.) Other teachers of content subjects may feel the same way, and this sense of not knowing how may keep constructive experiences in vocabulary from taking place.

For these reasons, we are undertaking to describe here in a step-by-step fashion, a way to increase student enthusiasm for vocabulary growth. Our specific objective is not to teach words, but to help shape an attitude that is receptive to learning about denotation and connotation, semantics, and etymology. It might be called a readiness series in vocabulary building. We have chosen to use the approach of helping students become aware of the Latin and Greek word elements in our modern language. This is the area in which most teachers feel less than competent, according to surveys in current literature. It is the area in which students react with the greatest excitement of discovery. It is also the area of our modern language which is undergoing the most rapid change.

To make the lessons practical and adaptable, we have put the introductory ideas into four brief cassette tape scripts, quoted in their entirety in this series of articles. In the scripts for the tapes, students are requested to participate as they listen, to keep notes and match elements, so that a high level of involvement is sustained.

ADDING WORDS TO ONE'S VOCABULARY

Cassette 1, Side A

This is the first in a series of brief lectures about building one's vocabulary in reading. Your reading vocabulary should be the largest of your communication vocabularies—it is measured by your ability to think along with the writers of our textbooks and works of literary art. Our objective in this brief lecture is to show the important part that word power plays in our ability to think, reason, and communicate. You may say you agree, vocabulary is important, so this lecture is not necessary; but please think again. Listen and apply the facts to your own personal lives and careers.

Some years ago Johnson O'Connor reported on a ten-year study he made in New York. Over a thousand young employees in businesses were interviewed and given vocabulary tests. Vocabulary background scores were correlated with each person's level or status within the business. Ten years later, O'Connor interviewed and gave similar tests to most of the same thousand persons, and the results are most persuasive. Those who had the highest 10% vocabulary results had made the most promotions and earning in the highest income levels of the entire thousand. Without exception, none of those in the lowest 10% in vocabulary scores at the beginning had made significant promotions or earning gains. And still more convincing of the power of vocabulary is the record that the few who improved their vocabulary during the ten-year study also showed improvement in their positions in the business.

Why be concerned with vocabulary? Nationwide tests are showing a decline in vocabulary scores—a decline that has been going in that trend for two decades. This fact should bring a question to your mind—what can I do

about my situation? In other words, make the larger picture a matter of your individual concern, and take a positive attitude.

What should *not* happen is that you feel threatened or resentful that your own scores in vocabulary are low. The good news is that a vocabulary test is only a measure of your opportunity to experience those words, not a measure of your intelligence. It is very important that you comprehend that idea fully. When you measure your own vocabulary on a standardized test, you should think in these terms—my score reflects my opportunity to see and live those words. It is not too late. This is my chance to build a reading vocabulary that is timely, effective, and rewarding.

Two small pieces of information which you should understand and make a part of your thinking, must precede your actual work in the area of vocabulary. One is how we learn. We attach what we want to learn to something we already know . . . The principle is that we learn by comparison and contrast. Thus, when one meets a new word, he should see it as resembling something already familiar. A word in print needs to be changed into an idea, then into an image, in order to be stored in the mind. Here's an example: the word *fervor* is defined as impassioned, earnestness, or zeal; however, you need to remember it as a picture of one who is in a fever, hot, sweating—something like that, so that a meaning will be aroused from the image when the word is seen again.

The other bit of information is how to work at remembering. Repeating a word or idea is never worth much unless you are conscious of what you are saying or writing. Thus definitions are not as effective as practical use of words. After hearing some words, try to make sentences *in writing*—make use of the words. Look for the words in your reading—see them in other contexts, and try to realize that you are growing with every word you learn.

Now, in this series of lectures, you will be given a number of words to learn, take tests on, and study. You cannot be expected to know everything. But, if you accept the idea that vocabulary growth is a matter of years—not weeks, you will accept the idea that these words are meant to grow on you through the coming months and years. Nobody wants a crash course in vocabulary. It would not accomplish much.

The plan for this vocabulary improvement unit is set up on the basis of three approaches. One is our Latin and Greek word element system, which has not been given enough attention. The second is a set of observations on the way the English language changes, accelerating as the century goes on. And the third is some study of connotation in the many short words we have in the language, little words we often neglect, and their value.

In order to derive the most out of this set of lessons, be sure to keep regular notes; reserve a section of your notebook for vocabulary study alone. Explanations on why some words are spelled oddly, how certain prefixes have different meanings in different setting places—all will become more valuable over the period of time.

This is the end of the cassette on Adding words to One's Vocabulary, Lecture One. To use number two next, press Fast Forward to reach the end of this side, and reverse the cassette in the tape recorder.

Cassette Tape II

ADDING WORDS TO ONE'S VOCABULARY

The purpose of this tape is to convince you the listener of two things. First, that it is worth your time and attention to work at vocabulary building, second, that everyone can increase the scope and breadth of his reading vocabulary by a sizable percentage.

My objective right now is to have you see the English language as the richest in the world, and the best way to accomplish this is to conduct a demonstration. You will get much more out of a demonstration if you participate in it yourself—so, please take out a sheet of paper and prepare to help me verify the statement I just made. Take this sheet of paper and draw a straight line across it, about two inches from the top. This is a time line, representing about fifteen hundred years.

A small vertical line should be put on the far left, at the left edge, which can be labeled THE YEAR ZERO. If this line represents fifteen hundred years of English language, a small vertical line about two thirds of the way across the page to the right will be labeled THE YEAR 1000. And at the far right edge, YEAR 1500. Now the next vertical line should be placed at the year 350; and while the position need not be exact, we'd locate it one-third of the way from the year zero to the year 1000. This is an important date, and you should keep notes on the following facts in the history of the language:

Around the year 350, two groups of northern European people moved from the continent to settle in England (at least they were the most important of the several different migrating tribes), and they were called Angles and Saxons. They spoke languages which became one single predominant language in England, resembling a form of German, and called Anglo-Saxon. Words are still referred to in dictionaries as A.S. or Old English. In the centuries, then, between 350 on your timeline, and 1000, the Anglo-Saxon language, basis for American English, was created, and flourished.

The next very important date we need to observe is the year 1066, the year of the Norman invasion. The invaders were successful, and conquered and occupied the land. We needn't go into the politics and other history, since we are only interested in the facts which influence the modern American English.

The conquerors spoke French, which is based almost entirely on old Latin for its root words. This is an important fact, because Anglo-Saxon was a language which was made up of simple brief words having to do with home, farm, family, and work. However, the official language of the conquerors in the church, the military, legal documents, and the king's court was French based on Latin.

So we see, beginning in the year 1000, two different languages existing side-by-side. On your note sheet, you might head one column A.S., for Anglo-Saxon, the language of the conquered people, and head another column Fr., based on Latin. Now we can see by comparison, how this

duality shows up today. Under Anglo-Saxon, write cow, the animals which were tended and raised by the farmers or peasants. In the opposite space under Latin, note that cow-meat, when it arrived in the conquerors' dining rooms, was called beef. Under Anglo Saxon, write sheep, the name of the animal according to the farmers. That meat, when it arrived in the kitchen, was — mutton. Write mutton on the line under Fr.-Latin. In the same way, pig, was the Anglo-Saxon name. That meat became pork when delivered dressed, to the Fr. masters.

Now let's notice how we have two words in our language for practically every concept. Take parts of the human body. The word *hand* is from the Anglo-Saxon. On the opposite side, under the Latin heading, spell *man-o*, or *man-i*, or *man-a*. Any final vowel will do—the root is the Latin equivalent, used with other letters, to give the same idea. Look at all the double words—handwork and manual labor; a handbook, and a manual; hand made, manufactured; hand care, manicure; handle as with a machine, manipulate; and hand steer as a boat, and maneuver.

Another dramatic example of our two languages between the years 1000 and 1500 is the word *heart*, which is Anglo-Saxon in origin. Under the French, or Latin column, you would write cord, cour, card. A hearty greeting is Anglo-Saxon, but we say *cordial*, too, right? When someone is brave, we can say one has a lot of heart, or is *courageous*. You and I say someone has heart trouble, the medical term is cardiac condition. To lose heart and to become discouraged are the same. We say the heart of a melon, but the what of an apple? A core.

How about the word foot? It has limited use as an Anglo-Saxon word of old times; the equivalent, however, ped pod. The Latin form is quite widely used in our everyday language. Where do you put your foot on a bicycle? The *pedal*. The base of a statue—is—a pedestal! Where do you put your feet when you give a speech—on the podium. Foot care—pedicure. A foot specialist—podiatry. And a person who is on foot in traffic. What is he? A pedestrian . . . right.

You may have run out of room for examples on your note sheet right now, but you should have a fairly convincing set of examples to show you that your command of English at present is made up of one of northern European origin, and another of Latin based origin. The two languages existed side-by-side, for almost five hundred years, until a certain writer by the name of Chaucer, wrote famous poems and essays and stories, using both languages in a combination that was accepted by most literate people of the day. You might put Geoffrey Chaucer's name up there, next to the fifteen hundred year marker, and explain in your notes that he helped to weld the two languages into one.