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READING IN THE SECONDARY SCHOOL

Kenneth VanderMeulen

A few years ago a reading consultant in a large high school was given a problem to solve. Students in the school averaged two years above the national norms in reading performance, as shown by an all-school Nelson-Denny Reading Comprehension Test. Yet, social studies teachers and English teachers told the administration and the reading consultant that these students were not able to read their textbooks effectively, were in serious trouble on examinations, and did not seem to show clear understanding of the ideas presented for class discussion. Teachers who felt they had to maintain a certain minimum level of academic proficiency graded over a quarter of their students failures, thereby raising a rather sizeable amount of adverse reaction in students and parents alike.

The reading consultant had no magic solution, but spent several weeks at what might be called unscientific research. He checked readability of textbooks. He went over student reading-expectancy figures, and studied the stanines of student reading performance. All of the old well-known factors came to light; textbooks are frequently written above the level of the grade for which they are adopted, each classroom of students represents a five to seven grade spread in reading ability, teachers often make assignments without giving students an inkling of what to look for, and other such phenomena which have become truisms over the years. The reading consultant knew the teachers were well prepared in their fields, and he would not risk their resentment by implying that they were leaving part of their work undone.

He visited classes and read over student papers to learn something more about the missing ingredient. Insight into the problem came during an English class discussion of a certain piece of literature. Students read brief quotations to illustrate a specific sought-after point. But these students were avoiding some words as they read. It was obvious that the teacher knew the words and their connotations, doubtless thinking that her students knew them too. Through the hour, the lack of familiarity with many common English words became more and more noticeable. Students in a college preparatory English literature class were assiduously slurring over or sidling past words, as they

made their effort to guess the right quote—the line the teacher wanted, to show *foreshadowing* in the story.

Without a specific hypothesis, the reading consultant “borrowed” groups of students from teachers and tested them with homemade vocabulary tests from a variety of sources. He used standardized lists, typical technical words from the texts in content fields, archaic and exotic words used by poets and other literary artists, and words from newspapers and magazines. With one small group of students, he demonstrated that it is even possible to have insufficient experience with three-letter words. The students were exasperated with their poor scores, and stayed to exonerate themselves by working in the reading lab. The list: rue, apt, err, ire, wry, asp, cud, wan, lax, and lea.

Toying with vocabulary lists and musing over various test results gave rise to a number of questions and very few answers. One of the questions—why would students who score in the *upper* third percentiles on standardized vocabulary tests land in the *lower* one-third comprehension of such groups of words as those that follow? As a teacher in high school, you might try the list on your students; merely ask them to indicate how many they could supply synonyms for.

deem	lore	aura	dote	glut
fray	bier	mien	sham	ruse
curt	tier	lien	rite	wane
doff	dank	dupe	cull	awry
abet	dire	cyst	glib	moot
cant	dell	tiff	ante	curd

It may be true that some of the words on the above list are considered out-of-date and obsolete by Webster and others. One who thinks this disqualifies a list should look closely at a few of the reading selections currently required in high school literature courses. A list of fifty words, taken from pages 155 to 175 of *The Scarlet Letter*, was given as a survey test to a group of one hundred upper classmen in the same high school. Students showed almost no familiarity with the words and terms, although all of them had “covered” the book as required reading. (Four of the words were: embowered, cuirass, gorget, and greaves.) Our reading consultant, realizing that the students had little or no experiential background with this group of words, carried his study no further, and made only some general observations in his report. The reader might realize how much resistance and resentment could be engendered by a very specific report which inveighed against the traditional and orthodox teaching practices.

We may draw some conclusions here, however, and we may turn

our reflections into positive action for vocabulary growth in all students in the future. Let all secondary teachers realize, growth in vocabulary is not proceeding as it should, on the seventh through twelfth grade levels. And, since colleges and universities have relaxed entrance requirements to a certain extent, some college freshmen show less scope of vocabulary background than is necessary to cope with textbooks which are packed with new concepts.

In an effort to learn something about the amount of experience or mental content college freshmen are able to bring to the printed page, the writer recently conducted a brief study in vocabulary attainment. A list containing twenty words, all taken from one page of *Newsweek* magazine of October 23, 1972, was duplicated and handed to freshmen in college. The direction was simply to check those words for which they could honestly supply a synonym or give the definition. The median number of words checked was ten, with the tops being thirteen and the lowest number, six. Here are the words:

wistful	analogy	accelerate
array	wafted	equivocate
fervor	quixotic	laissez-faire
ponder	exotic	jettison
fiscal	eclectic	unprecedented
devout	stave (off)	racy
filibuster	scuttle	

Since the list was only used in relation to a point made in the course of a class discussion, no inferences were made. Yet, as we look at the list, we may note that almost half of those words should have been known to students since beginning high school.

The summaries of studies and test results published in the country in the last ten years indicate that student reading and writing growth seems to slow down in relation to mental growth at about grade seven. Interest and motivation in academic things (according to psychologists of adolescents) also seem to plateau at about this point. Note further that formal instruction in reading has also been halted in most schools at about sixth or seventh grade. Finally, the practice of using texts with controlled numbers of new concepts being introduced per given chapter or unit has stopped by grade six or seven.

Anyone can add these facts and factors and recognize some elements of total futility for teachers of both junior and senior high school students. It is the position of this writer that an adequate foundation in vocabulary must *precede* the teaching of principles in history, biology, literature—that an adequate vocabulary background

must *precede* many of the upper steps on the reading skills ladders described for us by reading experts. The teacher will have to help the students build mental content in any field of endeavor; why not help students appreciate the untold richness of language in the process?

A salutary change would result almost immediately if each teacher in every content course area would take his students with him on a tour of the words pertaining to that subject *with every assignment*. We have learned that this type of teaching cannot be left to chance, we have learned that merely reading does not automatically bring growth in word power, and we have learned that we cannot assume that our students will look up words. With each lesson, we need to stimulate curiosity about “how it came to be that way,” we need to force attention to detail through every kind of device and ruse (except malicious, of course) we can imagine, and we need to provoke that kind of gaunt wariness and alertness that characterizes wolves on the trail of prey.

As we set about to read a paragraph together—a piece of writing by an author well qualified to interpret the experience of living—we should challenge students to question every word choice, as well as every phrase.

The missing ingredient in the search for more effective vocabulary growth is the matter of concerted effort. The automotive mechanics teacher, the home economics teacher, the business education teacher—all are earnestly enlisted in this campaign to raise our students’ communications skills above the level of patois and jargon. The auto mechanic could, in studying the self-starter, find something about the life of Charles F. Kettering, its inventor, learn that *ignition* has a root used in the study of geology also. The home economics teacher could teach precision of meaning in terms and directions, from recipes to dressmaking. (For example: what Middle English word for the piece of armor to cover the joints in a suit of armor is now used in dressmaking—the triangular bit of cloth under the sleeve?) In business, words and precise meanings are vitally important, but merely telling students this crucial truth will make no impression; we must demonstrate the reality of it, and let the students live it.

We have come to a time in our societal living when, though it is frustrating to misunderstand another individual, it is dangerous for a group to be ignorant of the meaning of another group, and it is calamitous for whole nations to misread the goals of other nations. As we live in an ever larger circle of interdependence, we have an increasingly

urgent need for care and total understanding in our communications. As our society becomes more complex, we need to teach our students how to choose and employ words and terms to express ideas with ever greater accuracy and exactness. Every effort we undertake as a group must be jointly planned, and each word used in such plans should have a meaning each member comprehends as well as a contractor understands the terms on a blueprint.