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Kenneth VanderMeulen
Western Michigan University

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READING IN THE SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Kenneth VanderMeulen

In a great many high schools, teachers are finding that their students' inability to comprehend the textbook at grade level is becoming an increasingly serious problem. Frequently, these teachers state, reading the text with adequate understanding is "out of the question" for many of their students. High school administrators are looking for ways to set up special classes or institute remedial reading programs in order to solve what appears to be a growing reading problem. Upon closer examination, teachers and administrators may find that, for a large proportion of these reading problems, insufficient vocabulary plays a large causal role. They may concur with Luella Cole, who said, "In all probability, an inadequate vocabulary is the greatest single cause for failure to read with comprehension in either general or technical fields." (*Elementary School Subjects*, Rineholt, 1946, page 40)

It is the conviction of the writer that realistic hope for dramatic improvement in this matter lies in some re-thinking and new approaches to teaching vocabulary. In fairness to teachers, it must be said that the importance of vocabulary is widely recognized, and almost all classroom activities include at least some study of words and derivations or meanings. However, the real and valuable outcomes will not result from a redoubling of assignments or longer word lists. For an authentic change toward more effective reading comprehension, we need to take time to scrutinize the whole matter of vocabulary in high school, and plan some strategies which will incorporate what we have learned about this field. We might begin by looking at the ideas and attitudes we have about measuring our students' vocabularies.

In the past, we have tried to assess our students' vocabulary backgrounds with a standardized test, such as the Nelson-Denny, the Iowa Silent Reading Test, or the Diagnostic Reading Test, Survey Section. The fact that a number of students may score in the upper quartile in vocabulary and then fail in reading their history or science texts should make us reconsider. What the standardized test is measuring is one's acquaintance with the synonyms of one hundred words chosen from general vocabulary. Teachers very frequently regard the percentile results as an indication of how well equipped the student is to read the textbook in an academic area.

Let us look further. How large a reading vocabulary does the typical high school student possess? Judging by what the experts say, one person's opinion is as good as any other's. Robert Karlin, speaking at the IRA Conference in May of 1967, quoted Thorndike and Lorge as estimating a twelfth grader's vocabulary as 15,000 words. That is a low estimate, it would seem. However, Karlin reported Seashore as putting the number at 80,000 words! Whichever is more nearly correct, such numbers shake one's faith in a one-hundred word, one occasion vocabulary measurement. Therefore, to assess a student's ability to read in a given text, one should use terms and concepts in the text to be used in the course, and in the author's context and structure.

The use of *concepts* instead of word meanings requires some discussion. We must remind ourselves occasionally that reading is a process involving the individual's whole being—his mental content, composed of all impressions and experiences of his entire life up to the present moment. Thus, even though the student is highly motivated and his teacher well prepared and very stimulating, lack of experience with the words that form new concepts will preclude adequate comprehension. What results is verbalism—parroted words.

One suggestion which might be useful in this respect is to assure yourself of a practical measurement through the use of your own textbook. Find out what the relative level of reading capability (or vocabulary background) is by using sentences and brief paragraphs you have picked carefully from all parts of the text. Have students read and then point out sentence meanings, read and paraphrase paragraph parts, and perhaps restate lines you regard as having implied ideas. Such a session need not be thought of as a test in the sense of establishing norms or determining percentiles. In becoming acquainted with your students' "learning styles," you may recognize certain students who are capable of reading from the text independently, you may see the middle group as needing some instructional help with each assignment, and you may also identify those who will certainly be frustrated in their attempts to read the text at all unless much help is provided.

As we think about means and methods of affording students vocabulary building opportunities, we need to take note of some pertinent informational material. According to a definitive report filed with the Office of Education in 1967, there are relatively few new ideas for vocabulary building that have been widely accepted or put into use by teachers in the field. In fact, the report concludes,

it seems that “the teaching profession seems to know little of substance about the teaching of vocabulary.” (page 84, *The State of Knowledge About the Teaching of Vocabulary*, Petty, Herold, & Stoll, NCTE, March, 1967) Interest and concern among high school teachers have grown considerably in the past decade, however, and literally thousands of studies on the subject of vocabulary are in existence. Another reality is that none of the major studies published showed any certain methods or particular approaches as being conclusively superior to the others. It seems fair to say that one reason for the above rather dismal observation is that most of the studies compared traditional methods, when what is needed now is some fresh thinking about the whole area.

The answer then does not appear to lie in the workbooks on vocabulary building. Nor does it lie in the graded word lists and lengthy glossaries advertised as “opening doors to meanings.” And word games, however cleverly contrived, do not themselves produce effective readers. We may look through dozens of studies and reports before we come to some expression of the inevitable conclusion:— Each teacher is the example of interest and curiosity about words. Every day’s reading, however brief, should yield some terms for consideration and examination. The students very frequently will take the initiative, bringing words from their text and other reading, *after* the class climate has been established to include a habitual interest in our language.

The writer does not attempt to recommend methods or materials, since teachers oftentimes find themselves unable to make choices in this respect. Obviously, the more approaches the teacher is able to employ, the more beneficial will be the results. For one example, we might find the class’ attention being drawn to certain terms in tomorrow’s reading for social science. The teacher suggests everyone look at the term *gross national product*. One student offers to look it up and brings the dictionary definition: “The total value of all goods and services produced in a nation during a given year.”

“National production and business—all right. How does ‘gross’ add to the meaning?”

“It means total?”

“Everyone satisfied? It means total?”

“It can mean twelve dozen, too.”

“How about when it’s used as slang, to describe something bad? Like a joke—and you say ‘that’s gross’. Is that the same word?”

“Care to look into the big dictionary and give us a rundown on

meanings and uses?" Delegating the duty, the teacher may go on, secure in the knowledge that his students will soon have enough experience with a word to make it usable to them in a few different senses.

However, learning a few words in the course of assignment previews can do very little to close the great gap between vocabulary experience and the effective reading of technical texts. As Harold Herber put it, "It is not possible for a classroom teacher to teach every technical word that his students will encounter during their studies of his subject." (*Teaching Reading in Content Areas*, Prentice Hall, 1970, page 151) What is needed is a concerted effort by all teachers at every grade level in every curricular area, to help instill a kind of word consciousness and a realization that vocabulary is the fundamental tool of effective communication. Merely teaching the words would not be sufficient, even if all teachers agreed to begin such activities today, since the language is dynamic and technology introduces new terms and concepts almost every day. What is probably more certain to produce a word awareness is an enthusiasm for "verbal speliology" on the part of all adults who work with young people.

If there is a single educational philosophy which is accepted as effective and generally thought of as above the charge of faddishness, it is the idea of discovery. Students who are helped to find out for themselves are learning how to learn, and soon become able to apply and utilize what they learn. This philosophy may be called by a variety of names (learning centers, school of inquiry, "let's explore"), and may be implemented in an infinite number of methods. The basic idea as applied to words is to set conditions to encourage curiosity about certain language phenomena, and then stimulate and guide the students to a satisfaction of that curiosity. The process can lead to more adequate text reading, resulting in information, knowledge, insight.

To demonstrate this on a very small scale, we might use a few roots and prefixes from one of the many lists available. (I recommend Carter and McGinnis, *Effective Reading for College Students*, Dryden Press, 1957, Chapter V) If the context of a sentence does not readily tell a student what the word *obsequious* means, for example, he might follow the prefix to a definition—"in the way," and the root *sequ* as meaning "follow." He may then find that *secu* is related to *sequ*, and gives us *consecutive*, *executive*, *as well as consequent* and *sequence*. If the student chases down the uses of *ob-* in *obstacle*, *obtuse*, and a few other modern applications, he is well on his way

to becoming a kind of specialist in the classroom. There is no better form of reinforcement for learning than the accolades of one's peers.

Every class group may have its own peculiar penchant in the field of word meanings-and-uses. A class may read an issue of a news magazine together in this election year and turn up some interesting word uses. (*Sandbagging* in politics, for example.) Students who have mechanical interests could report to the class on the etymology of certain parts of an automobile or radio. Someone in the writer's class went to sea for some terms (focsle, bosun, scuttlebutt, etc.) and excited more curiosity than he satisfied.

The science and social science areas probably bear the greatest burden of concept and vocabulary introduction. Students who have a general vocabulary far above average, may find themselves lost and frustrated in the welter of new terms which must be mastered on almost every page of the texts in these two curricular fields. A special recommendation to the teachers of these two content course offerings is made in many of the reports on our secondary vocabulary situation. In essence, these studies favor the adoption of textbooks which contain glossaries, pronunciation keys, footnotes, parenthetical explanation, and added notations. In addition, if the teacher will instruct the student in how to use these vocabulary aids, future growth in word background building and concept formation will be assured.