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READING IN THE SECONDARY SCHOOL Teaching Vocabulary— The Affective Domain

Kenneth VanderMeulen

If a high school should do anything, it should help students to think clearly, communicate effectively, and understand themselves with some degree of maturity. Language is that “yellow brick road” to those goals. It is the means of understanding one another, it is the single basic tool of thought. Obviously, students who are not able to understand more than basic English will have to think and communicate under a severe handicap, which in turn must have adverse effects on self-concept. Students coming out of high schools are proving less and less capable of reading the materials they must understand in order to maintain contributing positions in society.

Perhaps the new priority in high schools should be to help all students learn how to add words to their vocabulary. A lot of writers and experts have said that. It is, however, this writer’s recommendation that vocabulary work in high school be approached with greater emphasis on the *affective domain*, and less dependence on the *cognitive* approach.

The *cognitive domain*, we might say by way of explanation, is the mental, intellectual, or typical learning and remembering approach. The *affective domain* is the world of feeling, of sensation and emotion. In other words, we have been teaching our students to *know* the words, and it is not enough. The knowledge is lost. We must teach them to *live* the words.

Why must we change? How do we know there is a problem? Studies done by educational institutions show a narrowing of vocabulary scope. Public and private agencies are making efforts to point up the needs by forceful and dramatic means; for instance, Johnson O’Connor’s well-known study of executives and their vocabulary backgrounds has been publicized by *Reader’s Digest* in many ways. Yet, the trend, sad to say, seems to be irreversible. College instructors and professors respond to questionnaires with such observations as “students apparently have not learned how to add words to their vocabulary.” And, according to Shana Alexander, it is an indisputable fact

that “high school SAT scores have declined steadily for the past ten years.” (*Newsweek*, Ap. 15, '74) Since these achievement tests are to a great extent measures of verbal powers of students across the entire country, we have some fairly conclusive evidence on which to base these general statements.

Nor is the problem confined to individuals' inability to understand all the words they see in print. The implications are considerably broader. Norman Cousins, Editor of *Saturday Review/World*, feels that the current failures in communications and lack of understanding among the groups and parties of our nation are directly traceable to the protest efforts during the past decade to replace standard English with what youthful protestors called “straight talk.” He also feels that the trend toward the enervated expression is endangering and undermining our strength as individual democratic people, that lazy and weak language is likely to weaken us as constituents in a representative form of government. (“The Stammering Society,” page 4, March 23, 1974).

As if to point up the fears expressed by Norman Cousins, an article in *The New Republic*, April 13, 1974, gives innumerable examples of how certain government officials are keeping Americans from knowing the true significance of events by using obscure, inaccurate, and imprecise language. The article is entitled “Zieglerata,” written by Israel Shenker, and informs us that the National Council of Teachers of English is attempting to bring bureaucratic doubletalk into the open so that officials can no longer use trickery with the English language to be dishonest.

There is no more important aspect of high school education than the concepts students gain from each field of study and carry with them into further academic pursuits or to the world of work. These concepts, taught by specialists in various areas of the curriculum, are part of what makes some courses especially complex—the technical and almost esoteric terms pertaining to social studies, mathematics, science, literature, and others.

The recommended new emphasis on words and growth of language power should and can be based on the affective approach, since it is really the manner in which words become part of every child's communication system since infancy. In secondary teaching, we often tend to rely too heavily on the cognitive, having students study and retain terms and data and ideas which remain essentially untouched by the feelings of the class members. We are accustomed to working with these terms and ideas, we feel them and live them; thus, we can't

tolerate much variation in the way they are presented and used. In U.S. History, for example, the unit on "Sectionalism: Origin and Causes" must be preceded by explanation of what sectionalism means. In an early part of his notebook, the student has the definition—"sectionalism—personal prejudice, favoring one's own section of the country." If the student retains the definition sufficiently, so that the word arouses the correct response on a quiz, he has learned the term. Perhaps he has even seen a film or two on the subject of sectionalism. But his feelings, the affective domain, may not have been involved, and this is where we may be missing great and important opportunities.

Students are infrequently made aware of the communication situation they will meet, and they have no idea of the seriousness of the matter. They must be reminded that the obligation to communicate accurately is as much the reader's as it is the writer's. High school students must be led to see the whole problem, and further led to realize that it is within their power to solve the problem—by learning to read critically, by widening their vocabulary, and by practicing reading skills in every subject. The teacher's part here is to help all young people know their own strengths and weaknesses in reading.

Teachers say that informing students about low vocabulary percentile results of standardized tests makes no impression. One teacher said she told a student he would go into the world with a ten percentile verbal ability, and he shrugged his shoulders and said "So?" The deplorable fact is that teachers who face very many students with low vocabulary scores *and* the attitude of "SO?" tend to direct their best teaching efforts toward the better students, to the neglect of those who most need help. Sometimes we teachers even fall into the bad habit of using a label instead of instruction where it is needed. "Slow learner," "short attention span," "refuses to learn," and "plain dumb" are all popular appellations.

The secondary teachers who have fallen into the above-described pattern of putting some students into boxes marked IMPOSSIBLE know as much about their subjects as others. They have received the same high quality of training in the area of their subject specialization. However, they have found the going too rough where the need for instruction is greatest—that of helping adolescents build their powers of communication, gain satisfaction of accomplishment and delight in exploring the world of print. In short, add words to their vocabulary.

Why have many teachers stopped teaching vocabulary? A number of reasons are given, most of them based on stereotyped and over-

simplified thinking. "Words by themselves have no meaning; there's no sense in teaching words." "Wide and extensive reading is the only way to build vocabulary." "I tell my kids to look up words they don't know; what else is there?" "Teaching the words required in the course is all that anybody can expect of a teacher."

This, then, is a special suggestion—made to every high school teacher who works with youngsters in classes where reading is done. Try the affective approach. To teach in the affective domain, the teacher should have a feeling for the concept; this article attempts to start that flow of feeling as well as establish a rationale. If one appreciates the situation described, he will also see that words must become an object of great enthusiasm for a number of months. A recommended goal might be a dozen new words every week in every class. If teachers talk it over with students about the project, those sights might be raised a bit.

Taking the class members into one's confidence, and discussing the seriousness of this vocabulary project with them, is an integral part of the affective approach. Talking things over with students is always good, but here it is necessary. Young people with a mission may impress the most disenchanted of all teachers. And, while the fervor of the whole idea is still present, collecting words to work on can be a first stage in the program. Under the teacher's guidance, words in each sector of the subject matter and related reading can be categorized and put on targets for future word-weeks.

Advice from the teacher should include the thought that affective study of words puts looking them up and writing definitions at the end of the whole procedure rather than at the beginning. This is important. The first step should be the building of concern, curiosity, and interest in the word. Therefore, words should be found in their sentence settings, and studied there. If a group is attempting to learn the words together, sharing "guesses" as to the meaning of each word may be time consuming, but would involve all.

When the context clue step has been passed, and members have written their ideas of the meaning, the next step is to analyze the word from the standpoint of structure. Some mental content in the area of prefixes and root words is needed, but a little experience with word elements tends to build enthusiasm rapidly. Try to give students free opportunity to brainstorm as to the meaning of the parts of the word—each member gains the feeling of a search, a solving of a puzzle, that affective approach.

The third step is actually a reinforcement in learning. The defini-

tion is found, all the meanings the dictionary offers are discussed, and the correct definition is applied. Students check their guesses, their thoughts about the parts of the word, and even the derivations. This is the reflection step which means so very much to learning—that we learn from experience, but only from experience which we have thought about and reflected upon.

Of course, many other methods and approaches exist. Games to play with words abound in publisher's catalogs. But the method that is least expensive and most effective is the one that includes a participating teacher and a non-threatening process. In other words, discussions about words should not lead directly to a test and a grade in the book. The teacher's objective is to pique the curiosity of the student, and to teach him to satisfy his own curiosity about words. It is most rewarding. The writer's students always delighted in asking word questions they had learned the answers to on their own. A question asked about derivation of automobile brand names led to an astonishing bit of information, which the reader must find for himself. The question: Where does the name Corvette come from? The original word was *Corf*, and referred to a woven basket. Can *you* trace it through the steps to the name of respect for a piece of mechanical ingenuity?