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# ENHANCING INDEPENDENT VOCABULARY GROWTH

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Most educators would agree that the expansion of students' reading, writing, listening, and speaking vocabularies is an important goal of schooling at all levels. Many teachers have well structured vocabulary development programs as part of their regular curricula, utilizing a variety of methods to provide direct instruction in word meanings. Recent research by Gipe (1978-1979) has shown that some of these methods (specifically those stressing context and the application of new words to personal experiences) are more effective than others (i.e., the dictionary method—writing the definition of the new word and using it in a sentence).

Research such as Gipe's which explores the effectiveness of various methods of direct instruction in the meanings of words is very important to those planning vocabulary development programs. Direct instruction in word meanings cannot, however, be the sole basis for such programs. Educators cannot ever teach directly each word they hope their students will eventually know. Rather, such direct instruction needs to be combined with a more transcendent and far-reaching goal, that of developing students who have the interest and ability to expand their own vocabularies, independently. Educators need to assist students in acquiring skills, understandings, and attitudes that will allow their students (even propel them) toward independent expansion of their own vocabularies.

In this paper the skills of independent vocabulary expansion—use of context clues, structural analysis, and the dictionary—will not be discussed. Rather, in this paper, the focus will be on understandings and attitudes needed for successful vocabulary development. These understandings and attitudes can be grouped into three categories of concerns: intellectual, practical, and affective.

## Intellectual Concerns

In order to embark upon a lifetime of independent, individual vocabulary development, a learner must have an understanding of what words are and how they function; in other words, s/he must understand the nature of words. The student must realize that words are tools that can be used in many different ways—to communicate information, to arouse emotions, to manipulate and persuade. However, unlike Humpty Dumpty in Alice in Wonderland who exclaims, "When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less", the student must understand that there are limitations on ways individual words may be put into use. If a word

is used so inappropriately that communication is not established, then those limited have been exceeded.

The student must also understand that word meanings change, across time, across place, and among individuals. A "fair" date in Jane Austin's era would rate a "9" or a "10," whereas a contemporary "fair" date would plummet to a "3" or a "4" on the Bo Derek scale. A "toboggan" is something you put on your head in the South, which sounds just plain silly to someone from Wisconsin or Minnesota. Words have special nuances of meaning among individuals, too, and learners need to be more aware of the effect of connotations in communication. "Cute" is a complimentary term to many persons and a lot of people wouldn't mind in the least being called "cute." But to some "cute" has connotations of empty-headed fluff, and to be called "cute" is an insult.

Several activities can be used to help students develop the prerequisite intellectual understandings necessary for vocabulary growth.

1. To emphasize the power of words to communicate, divide the class into groups of 3-4. Give each group a copy of a dialogue in which said is underlined each time it occurs.

Figure 1  
Word Replacement Activity

Monica slithered into the room. "Hello, Jordan," she said. "How do you like my new dress?"  
Jordan said, "I think it's lovely, Monica."  
 "Do you really?" she said.  
 "Oh, yes!" he said. "It makes you look so--so young!"  
 "Well," said Monica, "I'm not so sure I like how you put that."  
Jordan said, "Merciful heavens! I didn't mean to insult you!"  
 "All right," she said. "I'll overlook it this time."

Then give each group the task of developing a specific relationship between Monica and Jordan just by replacing said with more communicative words. For example, if Monica were to be an aggressive domineering individual and Jordan a thoroughly henpecked nonentity, words like barked, demand, and growled might be used for Monica's lines, whereas Jordan might whine, whisper, or mumble. After each group has completed its revision, the new dialogues can be shared and students can discuss which words had the most influence on their emerging pictures of Monica and Jordan.

2. In order to alert students to the power of words to manipulate and persuade, have them compare two newspaper versions of the same incident. Sports events provide many opportunities for this as a 45-24 football score is described as a drubbing by the winning team's hometown paper and a mere loss in the losers' paper. Editorials are also easily accessible sources of alternate points of view. Ask the students to identify exactly which words are used in a manipulative or persuasive manner.

3. Have students create their own examples of manipulative or persuasive writing. Short passages in which specific words

## Practical Concerns

A second major area of concern in vocabulary development is that of practical application. Understanding about words and knowing meanings of words are rather sterile accomplishments if an individual is unable to use words effectively, both receptively and productively. In order to do this students need many opportunities to practice applying new words to their own experiences (Gipe, 1980). Furthermore, they need practice in clarifying how related words are both similar to and different from each other. Students also need to learn to differentiate among potentially confusing contexts; that is, they have to be able to choose the right word for the right time and place. Many of the words listed by Roget under good would be inappropriate in "That is a very good pie."

The following activities will assist students in becoming adept at using words, both as writers and speakers and as readers and listeners. The goals of having students apply words to their own experiences and of helping them learn to apply these words to appropriate contexts should be combined and the activities described below follow this principle.

1. Before one can differentiate among potentially confused words, one has to have a stock of related words, i.e., a thesaurus, in one's head. One activity that can give students practice in clustering related words (from which to choose the one precisely needed) is based on an old 1950's TV show entitled Two for the Money. Pairs of students are given a category, such as "things you can cut with" or "words meaning big," and are given three minutes to name as many words as they can which fit the category. The players alternate giving words and if one player cannot think of a word, the other simply has to wait. After three minutes, the answers are reviewed by the class. The team receives one point for each appropriate word minus two point for each inappropriate word (to discourage just saying a word in order to give your partner another chance).

2. To help students understand that one word can label many concepts, have them dictate about ten sentences that contain an overused word, such as good. Then have the class or small groups substitute more precise words, such as "The pie is delicious," "The obedient child pleased his mother," or "A Ferrari is a classy, powerful car."

This activity can be varied by having an antonym be the substitution, resulting in sentences such as "The pie was tasteless (or too sweet or stale)."

3. Asking students to describe similar or even identical objects leads to excellent practice in precise use of words. Give each student a book or a mug, or even let them use their own shoes. Each student is to write as precise a description as possible of his or her object. Then all the objects are displayed on a table, the students switch descriptions (to avoid recognition of John's shoe simply because John is reading the description) and students try to match the description with the object. When

students become skilled at describing objects that are fairly dissimilar, switch to extremely similar objects. Give each student a lemon (Hennis, 1979) or a wooden pencil and see if they can write truly unique descriptions that allow others to identify their lemon or pencil.

Another variation is to have the students write a description of the same object and then have these descriptions compared.

4. To help students explore which contexts are appropriate for certain words, have them discuss situations in which they might feel resentful and in which they wouldn't feel resentful or occurrences that could or could not be considered fortuitous. At the end of the discussion, have the students review the positive and negative examples of the word's use and then lead them to a summarizing statement about appropriate contexts for that word. For example, the students might come to the conclusion that resentful is appropriate only when you think your rights have been trampled on.

5. Forced choice exercises can be quick application activities for the spur of the moment when only a few minutes are available. Ask the students to choose between two somewhat similar words for a context and then have them justify their answer. Two examples might be: to open a letter, would you use a stiletto or a machete? Why? If you got the highest grade on the math quiz and the teacher announced that fact, would you stalk or strut when going up to get your paper? Why?

#### Affective Concerns

Probably the most crucial area of concern in vocabulary development is the affective area. Students who understand the nature of words can use them effectively still will not be independent vocabulary developers unless they learn to like words. They must enjoy words and have a sense of pride in using the right "tool" when writing or speaking. They must be sensitive to new words when they meet them and must be intrigued by them.

An enthusiastic teacher is the core of any vocabulary development program and is essential for imbuing students with a voracious appetite for words. Such a teacher will surround students with words, making vocabulary development part of almost every aspect of their classroom lives, celebrating with them the discovery and use of new words, and giving them a myriad of opportunities to explore and interact with words.

To get students "hooked" on words, the following activities may be useful:

1. A way to bring fascination into word study is to read to students from works by authors who use words well. For example, one can open Annie Dillard's Pilgrim at Tinker Creek almost at random and find language like this:

Look again at the horsehair worm, a yard long and thin as a thread, whipping through the duck pond, or tangled with others of its kind in a slithering Gordian knot. Look at an overwintering ball of buzzing bees...

(Dillard, 1974, p. 137)

A bonus benefit from such a practice, of course, is that students may decide to read the whole book on their own.

2. Word histories may intrigue students. (How gratifying it would be if the Oxford English Dictionary or the Morris Dictionary of Word and Phrase Origins were available in every high school to provide immediate answers to questions.) Teachers should share interesting histories regularly with their classes. Students will be fascinated at the derivation of such a word as sabotage (from the practice of dissatisfied European factory workers of damaging machinery with their sabots, their wooden shoes) (Morris & Morris).

3. Bulletin boards may be used to give students opportunities to explore, enjoy, and interact with words. Questions such as "How is a flume like a gorge?" and "How would you use a kirtle?" could be posted. Students could write their answers on strips of paper and post them under the questions. Students should be accurate but try to avoid giving away the meaning of the word. A good response to the kirtle question might be "I would give it to a fashion museum" or "I'd wear it on the beach at the end of a sunny day."

As a variation, a "word of the week" could be displayed and students could post sentences that they had written using the word, such as "I could tell from her diffident answer that she was embarrassed but pleased" or "His diffident response didn't fool me. I knew that he really wanted to go to the game with us."

4. Many students will be surprised and then fascinated by words with a great many meanings. Occasional team competitions can be held in which small groups of students have 3-5 minutes to write as many different uses of a word as possible. Limiting contexts instead of giving dictionary definitions would be the idea. Example a right hook, right the sailboat, equal rights with others, the political right, and so on. The students will no doubt be amazed to learn that the Random House Dictionary of the English Language (1967) gives 62 definitions for right and 113 for reak. Even such "concrete" words as battery will contain surprises for many students.

5. An exploration of the power of words to evoke images can lead to heightened interest in words. Short discussions of permissible and nonpermissible images can sensitize students to this. Returning to Monica & Jordan (fig. 1), the students might be asked to describe Monica's dress. What kind of material is it...what makes the word slithered appropriate?

6. Surrounding the students with words means sneaking vocabulary practice in wherever possible. One opportunity for this occurs when students are to be divided into small groups for a classroom activity. If arbitrary grouping is desired, let every student draw a word from a hat. Then the students are to group themselves by discovering what the different categories are and which words make up those categories. Multiple meaning words are special fun here: ace and deuce go with let and love; kite goes with towhee and petrel. Naturally a dictionary must be available and class-wide cooperation is a must. This takes longer than counting off by fives, but it is worth the extra 5 - 10 minutes to expose the students, once again, to enjoyable experiences with words.

## Summary

Direct teaching of vocabulary is important, but it is not enough. The most important goal of any vocabulary development program is not learning the meanings of a large number of words. Rather, the main thrust should be providing students with the interest and ability to expand their meaning vocabularies on their own. Attention to the three areas of concerns described in this paper—intellectual, practical, and affective— will help teachers plan effective and long lasting vocabulary development programs.

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