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Involving Students Actively in Vocabulary Acquisition

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“Involving Students Actively in Vocabulary Acquisition”

Edward J. Dwyer

Getting students actively involved in acquiring new vocabulary creates more interest and better learning than presenting words from external sources.

Active involvement of students in learning and determining learning needs is a critical component of motivation. Active student participation in vocabulary study is particularly important. When students perceive a need for learning particular words, they are far more likely to learn those words presented by an instructor or other external source, such as a published list. Intrinsic desire based on a determined need for vocabulary growth coupled with competence in learning target words can lead students to significantly increase their vocabularies. Approaches to learning that originate within the individual learner are generative. That is, the impetus comes from the learners themselves. Extensive analysis of empirical research and theory related to vocabulary instruction led Simpson and Dwyer (1984) to conclude that generative approaches appear to be substantially superior to approaches where words are selected for students.

Readers frequently encounter words not readily known in a full concept dimension. That is, the reader is familiar with a word in question and recognizes it, but does not use that word in speaking or writing. Such partially known words were described by Pauk (1984) as words in the “frontier zone” (p. 293). Pauk suggested that learners study frontier words to eventually

known words. The latter zone contains words available for full concept usage in reading, listening, speaking, and writing. For example, a student might encounter the word “anaphora” and its derivatives in English class and determine that this term is likely to be used many times and, consequently, would be a valuable word to learn.

Student Generated Vocabulary Study

Haggard (1982) suggested that teachers encourage students to learn self-selected words by actively involving them in vocabulary study. For example, students can develop vocabulary notebooks of self-selected words coupled with additional words provided by the instructor and other class members. In this approach, each class member selects one or more words to present to the class at each class meeting or at alternative meetings, or even at one class per week depending on the format determined by the instructor and the time available. In addition, each student selects one or two words from those presented by others, thus adding to the vocabulary notebook. A model notebook entry is presented in figure 1. The definition was composed based on the two entries for “venerable” in the **Random House College Dictionary** (Urdang, 1973).

September 24, 1986 ven . er . a . ble
(ven' er e bel) Commanding respect
because of great age, high office,
and/or noble character.

The venerable statesman from
Kentucky, Henry Clay, headed the
forces of conciliation.

**Figure 1. Model entry in
vocabulary notebook.**

At the outset of the program students can put words selected on the chalkboard at the beginning of class and introduce the new word(s) by providing a definition and sentence using the word(s). Undoubtedly, some students would have difficulty with words other than the target word, "venerable." For example, the word "conciliation" in the sentence above might provoke further discussion of word use and meaning. Admittedly, this procedure is time consuming, but it yields substantial benefits in terms of learning, class morale, and interest. In larger classes it might be advisable to have students present words at every other class meeting in which direct vocabulary study is undertaken. Thus, half the class would present words on any given day. The instructor is advised, however, to always present his or her word(s) at each vocabulary study session. Inviting students to present words to the class on the chalkboard works well. The board work should consist of everything in the notebook entry except the sentence where the word was found. The context sentence can be read aloud. Class discussion is then encouraged concerning the words. The author does not advise or require students to report where words were found or to reference quotations in the vocabulary notebook. Such inclusions are time consuming, tedious, and irrelevant to the purpose of the

advised to include the root word if a derivative is the target word.

Actively Involving Students in Word Selection

Pauk (1984) suggested that students make vocabulary cards using target words selected from the frontier zone. Thus, they would have easy access to words for study during spare moments during the day. Word cards could be made for particularly important words in the vocabulary notebook. The author of this paper, however, suggests that word cards not be used in lieu of a vocabulary notebook but as a useful supplementary study aid.

Sometimes students select terms containing two or more words (i.e., political climate, private enterprise). Use of such phrases adds immeasurably to vocabularies and, indeed, should be encouraged. Notebook entries can be adjusted in format to facilitate such entries. Generative strategies work well. Students often find words related to academic or technical study, but they also choose words from recreational reading, their social environment, newspapers, and a variety of other sources. They usually become competent with little effort in using a dictionary pronunciation guide and soon realize that they can pronounce virtually all the words encountered in their own vocabulary study. The instructor is advised, however, to have comprehensive dictionaries available in class and in the school library. Several publishing companies offer excellent dictionaries for younger children and more able students, which provide excellent pronunciation keys and comprehensive definitions, frequently with context phrases and/or sentences

Reinforcement strategies might include writing paragraphs, using notebook words in context, writing letters, or presenting oral reports using target words. The author, however, cautions against using what might appear to be contrived vocabulary activities. On the other hand, activities which demonstrate the "real life" importance of target words are strongly encouraged. For example, encountering target words in textbooks or other natural involvement situations provides opportunities for realistic reinforcement.

The above suggestions for vocabulary study can be readily adapted to various learning environments. This author is convinced that the procedures described are effective and encourage intrinsic learning. In situations where grades are required, an overall evaluation of the vocabulary notebook can be used effectively as can examinations over words selected by students. The latter involves controlling words added from the board by requiring that students vote to add the same words from those proposed. For example, students might agree that "metaphor" and "euphemism" are the best words on a given day. In the unlikely event that students decide to select a preponderance of easy words, the instructor could reserve the right to include his or her words

on examinations and even require that those words be added during each vocabulary study session. Again, such an occurrence is very unlikely.

Vocabulary study can gain new impetus for students and teachers alike using generative approaches. The active involvement of students can lead to substantial vocabulary growth and lively and enjoyable classroom experiences. Further, and perhaps more important, students learn skills and develop attitudes essential for independent vocabulary growth. Such competencies can serve them well in future learning situations, particularly when there is difficult subject matter and little or no vocabulary assistance provided.

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