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Some Suggestions for the College Course in Vocabulary

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THE conviction that a systematic and intensive study of vocabulary is necessary at the college level is growing rapidly among college teachers. Teachers of English and the classics have long recognized the importance of English word study, particularly at the secondary level, and, in recent years, have given increasing attention to vocabulary problems at the college level.² Frequent are the complaints from teachers who find that students have difficulty with subject matter because the range of their vocabulary is extremely narrow. In the light of an increasing anxiety concerning the grave lack of vocabulary knowledge

among college students, there can no longer be any doubt that the college must introduce courses which will have as the object of first importance the development of a knowledge of word-formation needed by the undergraduate body as a whole. The purpose of this paper is to suggest certain principles that should be considered by those planning courses in vocabulary at the college level.

In the first place, certain educational practices and recommendations that affect vocabulary growth among college students must be critically examined. Teachers of the liberal arts have too long ignored the concomitant evils of certain proposals made by educators on matters pertaining to the liberal arts. More books like Jacques Barzun's recent *Teacher in America*³ must analyze and

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² Cf. W. K. Wynn, "Words, Words, Words," *College English*, IX (1940), 259; J. L. Keegan, "Words, Words, Words," *Education*, LXIV (1944), 307-8; F. M. Snowden, Jr., "The Role of the Classicist in Vocabulary Building," *Classical Journal*, XXXVII (1942), 307-10.

³ Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1945.

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expose, whenever necessary, prevailing educational practice. Certain educators, for example, strongly recommend the elimination of the "difficult" words appearing in college textbooks. A widely read book on educational psychology⁴ contains this astonishing statement:

All investigations of the vocabulary load (which of course signifies meaning or concept load) of elementary and secondary school subjects show that the student has an excessive learning burden. *This is equally true of college courses.* [Italics mine.]

The authors of this book, furthermore, regard the "excessive vocabulary demand" in certain science textbooks as futile.⁵ The estimate of the capacities of students expressed by these professors greatly underrates the abilities of the student body and is an insult to the intelligence of many students, both in high school and in college. Elmo N. Stevenson,⁶ who studied the vocabulary of college biology textbooks, recommends the elimination of certain "difficult" words, to be replaced by phrases and descriptions. Fisher⁷ approves a similar simplification for the "difficult" words used in educational psychology. Suggestions of this type do not ameliorate the condition but rather impair and damage the student's ability to develop sound vocabulary habits. A vocabulary, even of "difficult" words (*pace* Stevenson, Fisher, *et al.*) can be acquired by students of normal intelligence.

Our present evidence suggests that

⁴ A. I. Gates, *et al.*, *Educational Psychology* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1942), p. 431.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 432.

⁶ "An Investigation of the Vocabulary Problem in College Biology," *Journal of Educational Psychology*, XXVIII (1937), 663-72.

⁷ M. L. Fisher, "Vocabulary Difficulties of Students in Educational Psychology," *Educational Research Record*, I (1928), 19-23, 27-30.

separate courses devoted solely to vocabulary should be productive of favorable results.⁸ However, some will be chary of admitting the validity of such a course on the ground that it may be artificial and "nonfunctional." Such need not be the case. Further, as Johnson O'Connor⁹ points out:

There may be some subtle distinction between a natural vocabulary picked up at home, at meals, and in reading, and one gained by a study of the dictionary. The latter may not be as valuable as the former. But there is nothing to show that it is harmful and the balance of evidence at the moment suggests that such a consciously, even laboriously, achieved vocabulary is an active asset.

In order for the college course in vocabulary to be of maximum benefit to the general student in all his courses, study of basic roots¹⁰ and affixes must be given a place of importance. Edward D. Myers¹¹ estimates that from the three hundred and fifty roots appearing in his book about twelve thousand common English words and more than fifty thousand additional technical and semitechnical words are derived. The significance of a knowledge of these roots is obvious. If adequate attention is given to them, students will be able in other courses to attack unfamiliar words, even the "difficult" words which, in the opinion of some educators, ought to be excised.

⁸ A detailed bibliography of recent literature on vocabulary is included on pp. 441-44 of my article, "The Classicist and Vocabulary at the College Level," *Classical Journal*, XL (1945), 437-44.

⁹ "Vocabulary and Success," *Atlantic Monthly*, CLIII (1934), 166.

¹⁰ Several recent textbooks include sections devoted to a study of roots. Cf. E. E. Burriss and L. Casson, *Latin and Greek in Current Use* (New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1942); W. P. Jones, *Practical Word Study* (New York: Oxford, 1943). F. L. Bumpass and W. W. Lott, *Building a Vocabulary* (Atlanta: Allen, James & Co., 1943).

¹¹ *The Foundations of English* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1940).

Words such as the following, which occurred in a student's dictionary¹² of psychological terms, would present little difficulty to a student possessing even an elementary knowledge of roots: "cognition," "gregarious," "tactual," "innate," "homogeneous," etc. A failure to direct attention to the roots common to many English words probably accounts for Walter B. Johns's conclusion¹³ that growth in vocabulary resulting from the stimulation of a special method in a special subject does not carry over largely into the acquisition of a general vocabulary.

The college course in vocabulary, in addition to presenting a study of basic roots and principles of word-formation found in the textbooks on the subject, must also include a study of the words which the student meets in his other courses. No textbook is an adequate substitute for the words drawn from the student's daily experience. One way to approach the study of these words is to require the student to bring to class each week a list of new words encountered in his other classes or in his outside reading. These lists of words, together with the dictionary meaning and the sentences in which they occur, should be brought to the attention of all the students in the class so that a record may be kept in a vocabulary notebook. The classroom discussions should examine the words in accordance with principles of word-formation previously studied. The entire class should be held responsible for a knowledge of all words which the instructor considers indispensable.

If the college course in vocabulary is to be effective, daily testing is essential.

¹² Fisher, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

¹³ "The Growth of Vocabulary among University Students with Some Considerations of Fostering It," *Journal of Experimental Education*, VIII (1939), 101.

Johns¹⁴ discovered that college students acquire about one-half the vocabulary of their subjects under ordinary class procedures but that they may acquire three-fourths if tests are used to motivate the learning of vocabulary. A short, daily test, as well as a longer, weekly test, is the best means of requiring the student to review frequently. Also, in order to inculcate correct spelling habits, along with other desiderata, the daily test should be dictated.

The type of test is important. The testing used in many college courses is another factor that has debilitated the student's vocabulary powers. In many courses, it is possible to "check," "circle," or "match" one's way out of a course without having ever written a complete sentence, to say nothing of a complete paragraph. The findings of Paul A. Witty and Mabel Fry¹⁵ are a warning to the teacher of vocabulary against using a type of test which would not require the student to give the exact meanings of words and to use the words studied in sentences of his own choice. If the words are to become a part of the student's active vocabulary, he must use them frequently, without the aid of dictionaries and the like, not only in class but also on tests.

Among the fundamental considerations, therefore, to be observed by planners of courses in vocabulary at the college level are the following: (1) basic roots common to thousands of English words; (2) words appearing in courses and in the student's readings; (3) frequent opportunities for the use of the words in sentences of the student's making; (4) daily tests necessitating repeated

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

¹⁵ "The Vocabulary Content of Compositions Written by College Students," *Journal of Educational Research*, XIX (1929), 135-38.

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reviews of material. The observance of these considerations will result in a course that will be of great value to the undergraduate body as a whole. The student will be equipped with certain general principles of word-formation which may be applicable to many situations. The repeated study, together with the frequent use, of words actually met by the student in his daily experience overcomes the objections of educators that courses of this type are not "functional." Finally, the student will possess a knowledge of the power of words and will command an intelligent approach to the acquisition of a vocabulary.