

## CONCERNING THIS ISSUE

In the first half of this century, many studies of vocabulary size and its relationship to reading were conducted. Then from about 1950 to 1975, vocabulary research waned, due perhaps to the influence of Chomskyan psycholinguistics with its emphasis on syntax. But recent years have seen a resurgence of interest in an exciting array of vocabulary-related topics, such as the number of words in printed school English, assessment of word knowledge, vocabulary and the education of non-mainstream children, and especially, word learning and vocabulary instruction.

The upswing of interest in vocabulary has been motivated by both theoretical developments and applied concerns. On the theoretical side, schema theory has become increasingly popular among reading researchers. Its central tenet is that reading comprehension is influenced by prior or background knowledge represented in abstract structures (schemata) in the reader's mind. However, since these schemata are accessed or activated by words, vocabulary instruction is given a boost. On the applied side, many educators have worried that commercial reading programs and basal reading lessons typically are not providing adequate opportunities for vocabulary development. Also, Wesley C. Becker, writing in a 1977 issue of the *Harvard Educational Review*, and others, have argued that insufficient vocabulary instruction is the major cause of school failure among lower-class children.

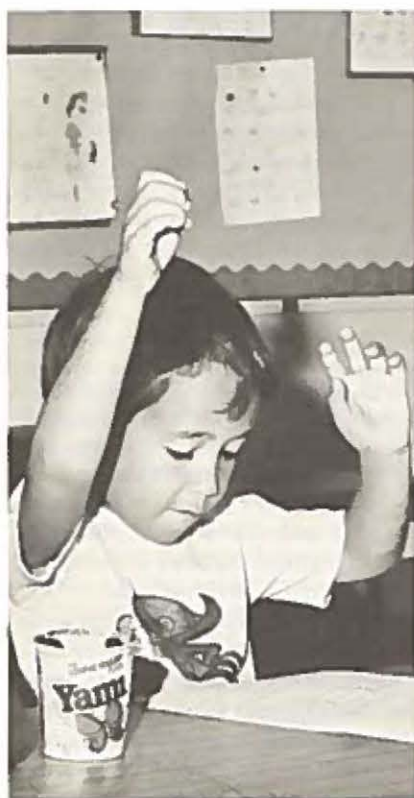
In working on this issue of *Educational Perspectives*, I purposely solicited articles that would represent differing theoretical viewpoints, speak to practitioners as well as scholars, and consider both of the broad goals of vocabulary instruction: improving text comprehension and developing writing and speaking skills. I asked each of the contributors to address three questions: (1) What form of vocabulary instruction do you favor and why? (2) What are its actual or potential benefits and limitations? (3) For which group of students are these benefits or limitations apt to be most pronounced or most significant?

The first article in the issue takes aim at writing and speaking. Michael Graves and Ann Duin discuss the goals and benefits of building expressive vocabulary, and they offer a dozen concrete suggestions for promoting it. This is a lively article that will appeal to practitioners in particular. The many useful ideas in it are vividly presented and just the right "size" for dissemination.

The second article, by Isabel Beck and Margaret McKeown, describes their program of research on what they call "fertile" vocabulary instruction. Such instruction seeks to improve reading comprehension by enhancing three aspects of word knowledge: accuracy, fluency of access to meanings in semantic memory, and rich semantic network connections among related words. It is, according to the results of their studies, quite successful and promising. After reading the Beck and McKeown article one might contemplate a long-term program of direct vocabulary instruction for children who are deficient in word knowledge.

Yet, in the next article, William Nagy and Patricia Herman present the antithesis of Beck and McKeown's thesis. They forcefully argue that "explicit" vocabulary instruction is ineffective for producing substantial gains in vocabulary size or reading comprehension. Instead, they suggest, children should be encouraged to read more so that "incidental" learning of word meanings can take place. While this recommendation is not a new one it is given new impetus by the findings of studies they have conducted and review in their article.

The tension between the Beck-McKeown and Nagy-Herman articles is invigorating. At the same time, however, as Editor of the issue I am concerned that many of our readers who are teachers, consultants, or researchers with expertise in areas other than vocabulary will feel a need for further discussion and perhaps resolution of some of the issues raised in the two papers. It is primarily with this group of readers in mind that I wrote the fourth article. In it I lay bare some of the underlying theoretical issues and try to show that, at present, there is plenty of room for disparate opinions



about how vocabulary learning or instruction should proceed.

In the final article Gisela Speidel considers the nature of word meanings and word learning from a developmental perspective. She draws implications for vocabulary instruction and insightfully applies them to the other articles in the issue.

Partly as a result of reading the articles in this issue, I have come to believe that vocabulary instruction should be both deliberate and comprehensive. It should not be undertaken lightly, without careful weighing against other possible uses of valuable classroom time. It ought to be intentional, begun with clear purposes in mind beyond mere "word learning." Instruction in the uses and meanings of words must be sustained and steady, not short-term or sporadic. And, finally, no single method of promoting vocabulary development is sufficient by itself, since the goals of instruction, the kinds of words to be learned, and the learners themselves will vary widely.

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