

BUILDING STUDENTS' EXPRESSIVE VOCABULARIES

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In a recent radio interview John Molloy, author of the best-seller *Dress for Success*,¹ remarked that if we were to learn a fairly infrequent word a day for a period of a year and actively use those 350 or so words in our conversations, we would be perceived as better educated, more intelligent, taller, and (our favorite!) morally superior. As those of you who have read *Dress* know, Molloy is a fervent empiricist whose information on what constitutes effective clothing comes from a variety of mini-experiments he has performed. Whether or not he has data to support his remark about the effects of learning and using a few hundred words is something we don't know, but it seems very likely that his assertion is on-target. That is, it seems very likely that the active use of a small number of less-frequent words in our speech will make a positive impression on many listeners, and, in fact, studies by J.J. Bradac and his associates² have shown that the vocabulary used in speaking influences listeners' perceptions of both the speakers and of what they have to say.

Much the same point can be made about writing: The vocabulary used in writing markedly influences readers' responses to the writing. This fact is readily recognized by professional writers. For example, in describing the revisions they made to a history text to make it more interesting and memorable to high-school students, *TIME* magazine editors Martin Mann and Teresa Redd-Boyd³ said that their revisions included the insertion of "action verbs, contrasts, metaphors, colloquial expressions, familiar tone, word play, alliteration, participial phrases, and a few big words." Obviously, Mann and Redd-Boyd see vocabulary as crucially important in written prose. Moreover, there is solid empirical evidence for the effectiveness of their revisions. Students who read the revised version of the text with the "action verbs" and "big words" recalled over 40 percent more of the text than did students who read the original version. There is also a good deal of other empirical evidence testifying to the importance of vocabulary in writing. Studies by Grobe,⁴ Neilsen and Piche,⁵ and Stewart and Leaman⁶

have shown that writing which employs more mature vocabulary is judged superior to that with less-mature vocabulary and that the vocabulary used in the writing was a stronger factor influencing judgments than were other factors studied.

To sum up what we have said thus far, both the testimony of experts and empirical evidence indicate that the words we use in speech and in writing have a powerful effect on perceptions of what we say and write. Common sense yields a similar conclusion; most of us can readily call to mind speakers and writers who have impressed us with their facility with the English lexicon. It seems reasonable, then, to ask what schools are doing to foster students' use of mature and precise words in their speaking and writing — to ask what schools are doing to build students' expressive vocabularies. Although we know of no recent studies that deal exclusively with the question of teaching expressive vocabulary, there have been three recent studies dealing with the extent to which vocabulary is taught in conjunction with reading instruction.⁷ All three studies conclude that very little vocabulary is taught as part of reading instruction. For example, Durkin⁸ reported that out of the 4,469 minutes of reading instruction she observed, only 19 minutes were spent on vocabulary instruction. Our observations have been that similarly little vocabulary instruction takes place during those parts of the day devoted to teaching speech and writing.

In the remainder of this article, we consider the goals of instruction designed to promote students' expressive vocabularies and the sorts of expressive vocabulary instruction that might take place at various points in children's schooling.

Goals of the Instruction

We believe that there are at least three distinct goals of expressive vocabulary instruction. One goal is to teach a body of words over the 12 or so years of schooling that students can and will actively use in their speech and writing. It seems quite likely that such a body of words

could be sufficiently large that it would have a noticeable and widespread effect on children's speech and writing. This, however, would be only one goal, and it may well not be the most important one.

A second goal of expressive vocabulary instruction is to instill in children an understanding of what it means to know a word, an appreciation of the power of words, and, indeed, a real love for words. Calfee and Drum⁹ have put the matter this way:

(To know) what it means to know a word is partly to know how it is related to experiences and to other words. But a word may be known in varying degrees, and may be associated with a range of experiences. Depth of meaning; precise usage; ready access to words (think of Scrabble and crossword-puzzle experts); the ability to articulate one's understanding; flexibility in the application of the knowledge of a word; the appreciation of metaphor, analogy, word play; the ability to recognize a synonym, to define, to use a word expressively. . . . Beyond that . . . the goal of vocabulary instruction is to ingrain a respect for words, and to instill a self-awareness of the adequacy of one's knowledge of a word's meaning in a particular context.

A third goal of expressive vocabulary instruction is to promote the learning of additional words beyond those children would have learned without such training. Such additional learning would stem from both of the other goals. The fact that achieving the second goal — gaining an understanding of what it means to know a word — would promote growth in word knowledge is obvious. The effect of achieving the first goal — learning a number of words well — on students' learning additional words is, perhaps, not as clear. Briefly, the more words students know, the more words they will learn informally through meeting new words in context.¹⁰

Promoting Expressive Vocabulary

Having discussed the importance of children building their active vocabularies and some goals of expressive vocabulary instruction, we turn now to approaches for promoting expressive vocabulary. This section describes a dozen, rather general, approaches for promoting students' active use of words, along with some examples of activities illustrating each approach. Before we begin these descriptions, several caveats seem in order. The activities that would be introduced earliest are generally listed first and those that would be introduced later, listed later. However, we want to emphasize that the grade levels at which the various activities are appropriate are by no means fixed. Somewhat similarly, we want to emphasize that many of the approaches are appropriate at various grade levels, and some of them are appropriate at every grade level from grade one through

grade 12. We also want to note that we are deliberately considering activities appropriate at various points in the 12 years of public schooling to emphasize that the sort of program we are advocating is definitely intended to be a 12-year program; we believe that a program which will effectively lead children toward increasing the store of words they actively use in their speech and writing, as well as increase their appreciation of words, must be deliberately planned and sequenced across the entire span of public schooling.

Teacher Modeling

If students are going to expand their expressive vocabularies and become increasingly precise in their use of words, they need to believe that developing precise and varied vocabularies is an appropriate and worthwhile goal. One of the earliest steps that we can take toward their developing such attitudes — and a step that we should continue to employ through high school — is to deliberately model the use of appropriate, precise, and colorful words in speaking to children and in writing materials they will use. Thus, for example, a primary-grade teacher might tell his students that he has some *notions* about what they might do for the Hallowe'en party, but that he hasn't decided on anything definite yet. Similarly, a middle-school teacher might tell a student who has forgotten his book that he is in quite a *predicament*, or a high-school teacher might tell his class that he wants only *succinct* answers to the essay questions. Sometimes, of course, the novel words should be glossed; but at other times they should simply be used — set out there as examples, perhaps a bit of a challenge in the upper grades.

Recognizing Adept Diction in Others' Work

Calling attention to adept word usage in the language students read and hear is another method of leading students to an appreciation of words. This method could initially be used in the second or third grade. A third-grade teacher, for example, might point to a sentence such as — "Then she noticed a huge apple tree in the next yard" — from a short story by Carol Switzer¹¹ and note that the author probably used *huge* because *huge* means "really big" and she wanted to emphasize that the apple tree was an extremely large one. In the same vein, a senior-high-school teacher might point to the sentence — "Mr. Radoff, a 43-year-old social studies teacher at the Bronx High School of Science, loves to play gadfly to the Koch administration on what he considers its 'brownout' policy of 'neglect and abandonment' of trees" — from a recent *New York Times* article¹² and note how well *gadfly*

conjures up an image of a pesky fly repeatedly and persistently annoying the mayor's office.

Recognizing Adept Diction in Students' Own Work

Recognizing adept diction on the part of students themselves is certainly as important as recognizing it in others' work, and efforts to compliment students when they use particularly appropriate words in their speech or writing might begin at about the same time or slightly later than recognition of others' diction. A fourth-grade teacher, for example, might well comment on the apt word choice made by a girl who complained that the boy in back of her was definitely being "malicious" when he knocked her tablet off her desk. Similarly, praise would certainly be in order for a 9th-grader who described the Allies' attitude before World War Two as "falsely optimistic."

Letting Students in on the Secret

After students have experienced teachers as models of adept word usage and heard compliments for words they and others have used, it seems appropriate for teachers to begin directly discussing the importance of words. We could let them know, for example, that the words we use in speech and writing strongly influence listeners' and readers' perceptions of us and what we say or write. The fourth grade is probably about the right time to begin sending such messages; but, of course, that shouldn't be the only time they are delivered. The importance of vocabulary on college entrance exams ought to be something students learn about in junior-high school, and the importance of words in the business world ought to be passed on to senior-high-school students. Letting students know *why* we are encouraging them to learn and actively use new words is, of course, very much in keeping with the current emphasis on letting students know why they are doing what we are asking them to do.¹³

Intensive Vocabulary Instruction

In the following article, Beck and McKeown describe an approach that they have used several times to teach a set of 104 words to groups of fourth-grade students over a period of some months. In this approach, words are grouped into semantically related subsets of about 10 words each, and these subsets are intensively taught over a period of a week with up to 30 minutes a day devoted to teaching the words. We won't describe the instruction further because it is described in detail in their article. However, we do want to point out that such rich and varied instruction would seem to be very much the sort of thing that is needed to get students to actively use the words they are taught.

Teaching Vocabulary as a Writing Prompt

In an effort to investigate the effects of intensive vocabulary instruction on students' writing, we developed a program¹⁴ in which we pretaught a specific set of words chosen to be useful for fourth- and sixth-graders writing a narrative about an adventure, and then had children write a narrative employing as much of the taught vocabulary as seemed appropriate. The words we taught were *fidgety*, *petrified*, *astonished*, *shudder*, *investigate*, *genial*, *perilous*, *divert*, and *coax*.

These words were taught over three, 40-minute periods. The adventure theme was introduced by asking students how they felt when they explored something new or mysterious. Their responses that could be used in defining the new words were put on the board and then used in definitions of the words. Once the words were defined, students used them in a variety of activities. They completed word-association exercises in which they responded to the situation created by pairing the new words with well-known ones; for example, *fidgety doctor*. They wrote mini-stories keeping tallies of how many new words they used. And they played games such as pantomiming the meanings of the new words.

On the day following instruction, students wrote their narratives. Here is one fourth-grader's story:

I went to a planet called Monchew. When the spaceship landed, a little striped man met me at the spaceship. He said *Welcome-beep-to-beep-Monchew-beep*. He wore a little funny hat he said was from Pluto. He was never hostile. He was always genial. I slept at his house that night and I heard a noise. I was petrified! I could hardly move! I went to the door to see what it was. It was huge. It had purple lines, green dots, and only one eye. I was so astonished when I saw him that I started to shudder and then scream. It was a very hostile creature. It grabbed me by the shoulders and took me to a dungeon. It fed me leftovers.

To be sure, this is not a great piece of writing; the use of the words is forced and obvious. However, it is a lively piece of writing for a fourth-grader, and it clearly demonstrates the student's reaching toward more sophisticated diction. We believe that this student and others like him will refine their use of these words over time and that they are likely to have come away from the instruction with a better sense of what it means to actively incorporate new words into their vocabularies. Moreover, ratings of the students' narratives indicated that in addition to using the new words, students' writing improved. As compared to their writing done prior to the unit, their final narratives were judged to be more structured, have more substance, and be more interesting.

We believe that intensive instruction such as Beck and

McKeown's and ours should periodically be given in the intermediate grades and — with modifications such as using groups of words targeted toward expository writing — in the junior-high grades. We think that such instruction would stimulate students to learn and actively use new words, that it would build what Beck and McKeown call "word awareness."

Informally Encouraging Students' Active Use of Words

Programs such as Beck and McKeown's or ours can serve as sendoffs for long-term, but less formal and less time-consuming, attempts to get students to be active word-users. Simply reminding students to carefully choose the words they use is one such step. Bringing in new and interesting words from time to time and telling students why you like them is another possibility. Such words should be on the edge of students' active vocabularies, words that they have heard but don't use and don't quite know the meanings of. Words like *divest*, *docile*, and *doldrums* would be about right for many senior high school students.

Instruction Emphasizing Precise Word Usage

In addition to generally encouraging students to carefully select words, specific attention to precise usage is likely to pay dividends. We have three suggestions, all of which might first be followed in the middle-grades. The first is a specific procedure called the "synonymy routine."¹⁵ This procedure compares a particularly colorful word with a less-colorful one and then requires students to choose the more appropriate of the two words to be placed in each of two sentence pairs. Here is a sample item using the words *giggle* and *laugh*:

When Kerry got her lines in the play mixed up, the class *giggled*. A *giggle* is different from a *laugh*. A *giggle* is a short and uneasy laugh. The class probably *giggled* because they were in school.

- A. John was new in school and a little afraid of the teacher.
When the teacher told a joke, he _____ quietly.
- B. The movie was the funniest one Ted had ever seen.
He _____ loudly from start to finish.

Such items are designed to be presented by the teacher as class activities so that there are opportunities for students to discuss why they chose the words they did and, more specifically, what aspects of the situation described in each sentence-pair make one of the words more appropriate.

Several activities focusing on precise meanings have been suggested by Johnson and Pearson.¹⁶ Here are two of them:

Have students pick the more negative word in each of the following pairs:

- _____ stubborn _____ blemish _____ thrifty
_____ bull-headed _____ zit _____ stingy

Have students choose the most appropriate word for a sentence:

Lavonne _____ down the country road
(walked, skipped, trudged, strolled, ambled, sneaked, strode)

These activities are most effective if they are done — or at least discussed — in teacher-led class sessions.

A final activity, and one particularly appropriate for junior- and senior-high-school students, is to have students search through works by their favorite authors and find more colorful words to replace such standard ones as *said*, *looked*, and *walked*.

Images, Figurative Language, and Word Play

Some attention to figurative language is a part of all school programs. However, we would like to make some specific recommendations that are likely to go beyond what is done in most schools. First, we think that the full range of images, figurative language, and word play ought to be dealt with. This would include simile, metaphor, personification, allusion, synecdoche, meiosis, hyperbole, riddles, and puns. For those who wince at our inclusion of puns, we would like to quote author Robert Greenman,¹⁷ who notes that "puns have traditionally been called the lowest form of humor, but the tradition is carried on only by people without the talent for making puns." Second, these devices need to be introduced and worked with in formal instruction, pointed out in the work of others, and encouraged in the speech and writing of students. It needs to be made very clear that such devices are not solely the province of poets and other literateurs. Third, and in keeping with this last thought, it needs to be made clear that the responsibility for pointing out and encouraging the use of such devices extends well beyond English teachers. Metaphor and allusion, for example, are vital parts of much good social science writing, and good journalistic writing is often filled with images, figures, and word play.

Word Games

Language being what it is, the number of possible word games is virtually endless, and a number of books offer a variety of examples. Two sources we have found particularly useful are Hovanac's *Bafflers: More Than 300 Original Puzzles*,¹⁸ written for intermediate students, and Kohl's *A Book of Puzzlements: Fun and Invention with Language*,¹⁹ written for adults but useful in selecting games for all ages. A few games we enjoy are listed below:

Anagrams: Words containing letters that can be rearranged to form other words.

"riot" = a threesome = "trio"

"drain" = the lowest point = "nadir"

Word Alchemy: Changing one word into another by changing only one letter at a time and using a specified number of steps.

Change LEAD to GOLD in two steps.

Change HATE to LOVE in three steps.

Hink-Pinks, Hinky-Pinkies, and Hinkety-Pinketies: Pairs of one, two, or three-syllable words in which each syllable rhymes.

What would you call a huge, flat boat? (Hink-Pink)
A large barge.

What would you call a demented flower? (Hinky-Pinky)
A crazy daisy.

What would you call the more frightening of two dogs? (Hinkety-Pinkety)
The scarier terrier.

Dictionary: A parlor game played with a half-dozen or so players in which one player uses a dictionary to choose and announce a word nobody knows (you have to say so if you know it) and write its definition down on a slip of paper while the other players write down made-up definitions on individual slips. The player who chose the word then reads all the players' definitions, and the other players attempt to identify the real one. Each player who guesses the real definition receives two points, and each player who receives a vote for his or her phony definition receives one point. Here's an example:

lux-ate (luk'sāt) vt. -at-ed, -at-ing. (Lat. luxare, luxet -luxes).
to lather into soapsuds.

lux-ate (luk'sāt) n. -ates. (Lat. luxere, lueus).
a pleasurable experience.

lux-ate (luk'sāt) vt. -at-ed, -ates. (Lat. luxare, luxat, -luxus).
to put out of joint.

lux-ate (luk'sāt) vt. -at-ed, -at-ing, -ates. (Lat. lueat, lueus, -lueure).
to immerse oneself in pleasure.

"What's the point?" seems a very reasonable question, and we have what we think is a very reasonable answer: "Getting kids interested in playing with words."

Tools of the Trade

Any good craftsperson learns what the tools of the trade are and how to use them skillfully:

Dictionary. Regarding the dictionary, we make the point that teaching students to competently and efficiently use the dictionary involves a lot more than

teaching alphabetizing and use of the pronunciation key and guide words. It involves teaching students about — and making available to them — various dictionaries ranging from the *Thorndike-Barnhard Beginning Dictionary*, which contains 26,000 words, to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which contains 414,825 definitions and 16,569 pages weighing 105 pounds! It also involves letting them know what different dictionaries contain, and letting them know something about the history of the dictionary.

Thesaurus. A second tool, Devlin's *A Dictionary of Synonyms and Antonyms*²⁰ is sufficient for high-school students. Even more than with the dictionary, students need to be taught how to use a thesaurus. They also need to be shown that it is, in many ways, more appropriate for improving the vocabulary used in their writing than the dictionary.

Spelling Books. A third tool is spelling books such as Leslie's *20,000 Words*,²¹ which contains the spelling, subdivision, and accenting of some 20,000 words. Students need to learn that such books exist and that they are radically easier to use for looking up the spelling of a word than is the dictionary, and they need to get in the habit of having such books available when they are writing.

Vocabulary-Building Books. Examples include series-books such as *Wordly Wise*,²² which is intended for grades four through 12, and individual books such as *Words in Action*,²³ for college-bound, senior-high students.

Books About Words. A fifth tool is books about words and these range from such children's books as Kraske's *The Story of the Dictionary*,²⁴ a fascinating account of the evolution of the dictionary appropriate for middle-grade students, to such adult books as Newman's *Strictly Speaking*,²⁵ or Safire's *On Language*,²⁶ poignant books on usage that would be appropriate for some senior-high students.

Finally, for those students working on word processors, various spelling programs, many of which contain a good deal other than spelling, can be valuable vocabulary-building tools. One of us, for example, just learned that with *The Sensible Speller*,²⁷ you can identify a prefix, suffix, or root and get various sorts of lists containing that prefix, suffix, or root. One could, for example, get a list of all the words that begin with *re-* and end in *-ment*.

Vocabulary Classes

This is the final activity we will discuss here, and we have left it for last for a particular reason. It allows us to use an extended quotation that we think displays an attitude toward words that is vital to promoting students' active use of words. The quotation is from a class

handout distributed at the beginning of each semester by Garrard Beck, a former teacher at Washburn High School in Minneapolis. For 18 years, from 1962 when he began the course until 1980 when he retired, he taught a one-semester course titled, Word Study. Originating as a substitute for Senior English, a required course for seniors who were not taking any other English courses, Word Study became an elective and grew from a single section to five sections. It also grew into both a major part of Beck's life and an institution at the school. The statement, we believe, well illustrates the commitment, the skills, and the care that together can lead students toward more adroit use of their language, specifically its lexicon:

To begin with, I have no magic or patented formula by which to increase your vocabulary. When the course — which might better be called an experience — is over, you will know far more words and expressions than you do now; and that, I would suppose, is why you will have made the effort. My role in this experience will be that of a commentator and director within the scope of your interest in expressing yourself "into existence." As a firm believer in the credo that one lives in his head or not at all, I view a knowledge of words as a means to this and as a *sine qua non* of life. Every word you know is a window upon the world, and the desideratum of the struggle is to emerge from one's cellular self into a mansion of many rooms and many windows. Words are labels for the things we see and the things we feel. Without such labels we are lost, or at least confused. A certain, that is, an assured knowledge of words gives us at least a fighting chance to bring some semblance of order to the ineluctable insinuation of chaos. It might be perversely stated that man's claim to fame is his extensive and complex utilization of his thumb and his tongue, by which he has removed himself by an uncomfortable and questionable distance from his Darwinian cousins. How many of us have stood in front of the cages of chimps and gorillas, and felt uneasy about the chasm and kinship that lay between us. And how often has the same feeling arisen when there are no bars between us, when the superficial appearances are identical or nearly so. Words make the difference: which words we use, how we understand them, and how we intend them to be understood. This — and only this rationale and device — will, in time, obtain for us the elusive genius which we insistently call humanity. A multitude of animals are more beautiful than we are, stronger, shrewder, kinder, longer-lived, less-troubled. Our unique distinction has yet to be claimed, but, when it is, it will be essentially verbal. That is to say, the way out of the jungle is via a reasonable harmony between the word and the reality it identifies.

Concluding Remarks

Leading students to both value and achieve "a reasonable harmony between the word and the reality it identifies" has been one of our central concerns here. More specifically, and more prosaically, we have had three purposes, and we will briefly summarize them.

Our first purpose has been to convince you that the words used in speech and writing are important and strongly influence audiences' perceptions of the speakers and writers as well as of the messages themselves. We think that this fact is unassailable.

Our second purpose has been to outline at least some of the goals of expressive vocabulary instruction — learning and actively using a set of words, learning what it means to know a word and developing a life-long appreciation for words, and facilitating the learning and use of words beyond those being taught. This is not a long list, and it certainly isn't an exhaustive one, but we are hopeful that you will find the goals we have listed reasonable and that we have prompted you to begin adding some goals of your own.

Our third purpose has been to present a brief outline of some of the instructional approaches that could constitute part of a 12-year program devoted to fostering students' expressive vocabularies. Given that this was a very modest attempt, we are hopeful that we have been successful, but there is obviously a great deal to be done. We believe that the vocabulary curriculum is currently weak and poorly defined and that a strong program in vocabulary must, like a strong program in math or science, have some integrity, some progression, some sequence, and some rather definite goals.

Thus, although the major plea here is for a program in expressive vocabulary, that plea is coupled with a deep-seated belief that a successful program to develop students' expressive vocabularies must be part of a long-term and more general vocabulary program,²⁸ which itself must be integrated into the total language program of the school. We believe, along with Boyer,²⁹ that "the advent of the information age raises to new levels of urgency the need for all students to be effective in their use of the written and spoken word." We further believe, again in keeping with Boyer, that "the mastery of English (which includes but is by no means limited to active and precise use of the English lexicon) is the first and most essential goal of education."

Footnotes

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¹⁴Duin, A.L. and M.F. Graves. "Effects of Vocabulary Instruction Used as a Prewriting Technique," manuscript submitted for publication, 1984.

¹⁵Aulls and Graves, *op. cit.*, see Footnote 11.

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¹⁷Greenman, *op. cit.*, see Footnote 12.

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