NOTES AND STRATEGIES

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RECOGNIZING THE BASIC WRITER'S VOCABULARY ACQUISITION SEQUENCE

Basic writing students are handicapped by several deficiencies: their academic background is poor, their range of experience is usually limited, and their verbal skills are nearly always either weak or completely inadequate. Both resulting from and adding to all of these deficiencies is their poor vocabulary. Perhaps no single other deficiency is more debilitating to college students than is their lack of semantic resources. Directly affecting their ability to read and to write, impoverished vocabulary also limits their ability to think abstractly. Thus the basic writing student comes to the composition class lacking the single most important tool for acquiring an education—an adequate grasp of the academic vocabulary.

Obtaining a college education is contingent on the acquisition of an academic vocabulary. The basic writing student, however, faces not only this task, but often also that of acquiring an adequate *basic* vocabulary—words with which to read and write, to describe experiences and feelings, to communicate even the simplest ideas. Obviously, the remediation of this lack must take precedence over all other tasks. A student who has a limited basic vocabulary cannot hope to master the academic vocabulary, for, as we shall see below, an adequate basic vocabulary is required for competent reading, and the academic vocabulary is acquired principally through reading.

As teachers of basic writing we had long recognized this problem that hindered our students' writing. As teachers of developmental reading, however, we were forced to come to terms with it. Having begun our professional lives as composition teachers, we were rather insecure when we were given several developmental reading courses to teach. Because we were learning as we taught, initially we followed closely the approaches suggested in the reading texts. We were particularly eager to

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improve our students' vocabularies and launched enthusiastically not only into structural and contextual analysis, but also into the use of vocabulary cards (explained below), cheerfully evaluating the endless trail of cards that shuffled across our desks each week.

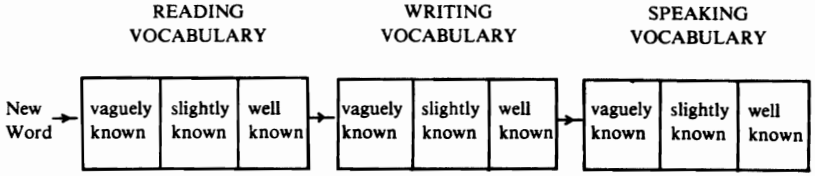
In spite of our optimistic expectations, however, we were soon forced to admit that very little vocabulary development was taking place. Most of our students did their required vocabulary cards each week, each card presenting a word first in a context sentence, then defined, analyzed, and used in a new sentence. Unfortunately, though, the cards were riddled with errors: the definition frequently did not correspond to the meaning of the word as it was used in the context sentence; the stated function (part of speech) bore no relation to the way in which the word was used; and the student's own sentence using the new word was all too often a complete disaster. We would get sentences such as, "The movie was very populace," or "I counted the myriad heifers," which indicated little real understanding of the function and/or connotations of the new word.

Gaining some confidence as the semester wore on, we began to question whether these traditional vocabulary approaches were either appropriate or effective for our developmental students. As we worked with students in our classes and individually in the Reading Center, we tried to determine just how and where our approach was failing these students. In addition to the errors that were appearing on the vocabulary cards, we noticed that when our students tried to use words in their writing that they were unfamiliar with in print, expressions such as "tooth faced" and "pacific" were used in place of "two faced" and "specific." And in working with our least well-prepared students—those whose reading skills were so inadequate as to be almost non-existent—we realized that their speaking/listening vocabularies, poor as they were, were much more extensive than were their reading/writing vocabularies. Alerted by these observations, we began to think through the entire process of vocabulary acquisition in order to determine how the process might differ in the case of basic writing students.

The average college student, like the average high school and junior high student, acquires new words primarily through reading. While new words enter this student's vocabulary in other ways (most notably through personal experiences), it is most common for him to learn new words gradually, particularly the words of the academic vocabulary, by seeing them used repeatedly in print. Thus this student's reading vocabulary is usually significantly larger than his writing or speaking or listening vocabulary. Within each of these different vocabularies—reading, speaking, writing and listening—are various levels of usage. In

other words, in a person's reading vocabulary are words that are well known, are known only slightly, or are just vaguely familiar.[1] And within a person's total, composite vocabulary are similar levels of usage. One word may exist in all vocabularies, so that a person not only recognizes it in print but uses it in writing and speaking. Another word may exist in the reading and writing vocabularies, but because of a difficult or unusual pronunciation may not yet be a part of the person's speaking vocabulary.

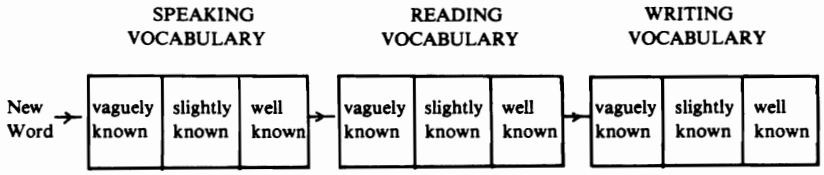
Thus when we speak of vocabulary, we mean a person's total word resources in all these various stages and levels of usage. And when we speak of vocabulary development, we mean both the process of moving a word into one of a person's multiple vocabularies and also, and perhaps more importantly, the process of moving a word from one vocabulary to another. With the average or superior student, this process usually involves the following sequence:



In the case of the basic writing student, however, this process differs significantly. For many of these students, who are products of our media-oriented society, reading is at best a chore to be avoided. Their reading skills are so inadequate as to be almost useless in terms of academic vocabulary development, for the material they are capable of reading offers few opportunities for learning new words. Much of the reading they are required to do as college students is too difficult for them to read effectively. When they attempt to read most of their textbooks, for example, they can comprehend so little of the content that there is little possibility of their learning new words through context clues as do average or good readers. So unfamiliar are they with words in written form that they cannot even recognize in their reading many words

1. For a more complete discussion of the various levels of vocabulary development, see Edgar Dale and Joseph O'Rourke, *Techniques of Teaching Vocabulary* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Field Educational Publications, 1971). The listening vocabulary, most relevant to our concerns, is not included in our schema.

that they use when speaking. Their writing vocabularies tend to be even more severely restricted because spelling is a complicating factor. Thus the speaking vocabularies of these students, unlike those of average and superior students, are nearly always more extensive than either their reading or writing vocabularies. Therefore, vocabulary acquisition for these students, like that for young children, still involves the following sequence:



But based upon the abilities and learning patterns of average and superior students, traditional methods of vocabulary development nearly always rely on the assumption that students acquire new words primarily through reading. Since this assumption is not valid in the case of basic writing students, new approaches must be found in the developmental classroom. Because these students can best supplement their writing and reading vocabularies by transferring words from their speaking vocabularies, instruction should be based on oral as well as on written expression. If the sequence of spoken-to-written is used as the model for instruction, the inventive teacher can find various activities and instructional procedures which effectively increase the basic writing student's vocabulary.

Seeking to help our students make this essential association between the oral and written forms of words, we modified our former approaches to vocabulary instruction by concentrating our instruction first on oral expression and exercises and only later on written expression. We have found that vocabulary instruction in the basic writing class can be as simple as reading aloud to students as they follow a written text that allows them to see the words while they hear them spoken, or as complicated as preparing taped cassettes to correspond to written texts to be used by students in a lab. Our most successful approach with severely deficient students has been to use the language experience method whereby a student dictates a personal experience to us (or a recorder). We then transcribe the experience into a written text for the student to read.

The student is familiar with the content and vocabulary and can therefore usually recognize all of the words, some of which may have been previously unfamiliar in print. Another simple exercise that we have effectively used in class situations is to select a topic such as personality traits, the weather, music, or food and ask students to suggest vocabulary words that are appropriate to that topic. Working as a group, students are usually able to supply a rather lengthy and impressive list of words. As the words are suggested, we write them on the board, discussing each one briefly. After the students have heard and seen each word, they are asked to write a paragraph or theme on some narrowed aspect of the topic, using as many of the words as possible.

Even traditional approaches can be modified to accommodate the basic writing student's sequence of acquisition. Stories and articles containing words that students may not know, especially in written form, can be given to the class, the words discussed, and then the students asked to read the selection in which the words appear. Later students might be asked to write a paper reacting to the reading selection, using as many of the new words as possible. The important point is that students make the association between the spoken word, with which they may already be familiar, and its written form. Instruction can reinforce this association if students are encouraged to use the words in their own writing during the same lesson.

But a transition must eventually be made from the oral techniques by which a basic vocabulary is acquired to the reading technique by which an academic vocabulary is principally required. Perhaps the single most important insight which we gained as a result of our experience as teachers of developmental reading is that basic writing and developmental reading students must be taught to read well enough to make the necessary transition from a primarily oral semantic orientation to an adequate written orientation. For only as they make this transition, so that they can read well enough to acquire new words through their reading, will they ever significantly improve their vocabularies. A student cannot write better than he can read. Basic writing students must, therefore, be also considered basic reading students—counseled into developmental reading courses and referred to reading labs, or, if such facilities are not available, given reading as well as writing instruction in their composition classes. The ideal is perhaps an integrated reading and writing course in which students benefit from the reciprocal effects of dual instruction.

In working to improve the basic writing student's vocabulary, the instructor should be realistic in expectations. Acquiring an adequate vocabulary is not impossible for these students, but it is an arduous, time-consuming task for which they are poorly prepared and toward which they are not favorably disposed. If a beginning is made, there is hope that improvement will continue, especially if the student can be assisted over that important threshold into the realm of competent readers where vocabulary development occurs as a natural by-product of reading. The composition teacher, who is of necessity also a reading teacher, can contribute significantly to this goal.