

INTRODUCTION

The problem of vocabulary has all too often been relegated to teachers of reading. It is perhaps time for teachers of writing who have not already done so to begin our homework. But already attempting to teach as we are to our basic writing students not only sentence structure and verb forms, but also a sense of paragraph, the complex forms of standard academic discourse, and improved processes of thought, what, if anything at all, can we do about vocabulary? Vocabulary, like information and experience, is for many of us something the student brings along to class, for better or for worse, a *given*.

We may assume that vocabulary will grow only as information and experience grow, and in this assumption we are right. Almost all the authors of the essays in this issue of the *Journal* tell us, in one way or another, that we do not learn words until we need them for encoding our own information, for expressing our own experience. But if this insight is the signal for dropping one kind of vocabulary lesson, it can also be the signal for beginning another kind. This it is our responsibility to attempt. For if we do not learn words until, for some reason, we need them, the converse is also true: we cannot extend our information or experience, or achieve control over that information and experience, without acquiring new words.

New vocabulary is learned, most experts now agree, not by memorizing a strange word from the dictionary, but through repeated exposure to a word, by meeting it in different contexts, by experiencing all its range of connotation, by becoming familiar with its idiomatic companions (the prepositions) and contextual companions (other words belonging to the same decorum, at the same level of formality, or in the

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same body of knowledge), by learning the places in which it is properly met with, and (more difficult yet), the places in which it is *not* properly met with. Apparently we learn about words in the same way that we learn about processes and people—through cumulative experiences. No one can learn enough about people, through acquaintance with their names, their features, and their genealogies, to be able to work with them, and no one can learn to play tennis by reading a manual of tennis rules and instructions.

The necessity of a fuller experience with words is the point explored by Eisenberg in an essay that questions or rejects outright the more traditional methods of vocabulary development. If we are aiming at true mastery of new words by our students, and if words are learned as we now think they are learned, then a study of their etymological history, of their morphological components and affixes, is not enough. Dictionary drills are useful, but not enough. Work on sentential context (deducing the meaning of an unknown word from the context of the sentence) is an introduction, but not enough.

For most of our contributors, finding a context rich enough for the adequate study of new words has been a major concern. Their recommendations are not all the same; there is no *one* way to teach vocabulary. But various methods succeed depending on the richness of the context (the fullness of the experience of the word) provided.

What is a rich context? It is a context that provides a repeated and varied experience of the word, an experience that includes, if possible, the speaking and hearing, the reading and writing of the word; that allow the student to examine the word in as many different situations as possible; and that occurs within circumstances which cause the student to *need* the word, for the interpretation of experience, or the encoding of information, or both.

Towards this end, our contributors name or devise many methods which might be used alone or incorporated into a wider approach. Stotsky suggests reading passages, dictating passages, précis writing, affix study, finally, the study of Latin. For ESL students, Len Fox advises continued reading and writing about the reading. Boorstein explores the often-recommended study of suffixes, which can yield three or four words for one, and which provides a context that can be broadened through repeated oral/written exercise. Hoover stresses the necessity of repeated exposure in varied contexts over time for the effective acquisition of new words, and has provided exercises for incorporating vocabulary study into the writing class; she brings good

news as well about the payoffs in terms of the improvement of writing. The major strength of Dash's method is that it provides a total environment for the learning of new words, which are chosen from a context by the student for their unfamiliarity, identified and studied, then taken and exercised; they are also talked about, shared, and even savored. Her approach, like Hoover's, could profitably be applied to the strange words and decorums of new disciplines. In Kamin's course, the word is the basic unit from which all the other units, taught simultaneously, grow. Her only text is the dictionary, and she never ceases, while teaching the sentence, the paragraph, and the essay, to explore the word. Most of our writers insist, either tacitly or explicitly, on both the continuation of experience with words and the importance of working with both reading and writing, some stressing the importance of oral work as well.

Gallagher's essay on writing for business is important not only because he focuses on an academic stepchild, vital nevertheless to basic writing students, the study of writing for the jobs they want in the business establishment, but also because he focuses on that vocabulary problem so long neglected, the *decorum* of language. As I said at the outset, it is not enough to know the words; the student must know in what situations and with what other words to use the words. What Gallagher says of the decorum of business writing, important in itself, is equally important in its implication (absolutely true) that the student must learn not only the vocabulary but also the decorum for each kind of writing attempted, for each discipline written about.

Decorum demands different *kinds* of vocabulary. It is convenient to divide the vocabularies our students must master into two general kinds: the basic vocabulary used principally in listening/speaking that is essential for success in life, and the academic vocabulary used principally in reading/writing that is essential for success in college. Basic writing students have mastered some of the first, but scarcely any of the second. Harris and Brannon, in their useful essay on the acquisition sequence of words, note that if the basic vocabulary is acquired primarily through listening and speaking, and if one's students have not yet mastered the ability to read and write that vocabulary, perhaps the best means of instruction are first oral, moving in a carefully programmed way to the reading and writing of the basic vocabulary, but not omitting then to move onward to the acquisition of the academic vocabulary.

Len Fox's concern for ESL students may be viewed from the same perspective: are we helping ESL students to acquire a basic English

vocabulary, leaving them at that crucial point to move onward and master the academic vocabulary alone? But then (another concern addressed by both Stotsky and Fox), if one is to attempt to teach, so hurriedly and so belatedly, the academic vocabulary our students need for survival, what is the precise list of words that one should teach?

Finally, most of our authors recognize that the control of a new word is not achieved in an instantaneous epiphany, but by a slow developmental process, which we now understand at least in part. That process involves a mastery of the word first for receptive purposes (listening, reading), and only later for productive purposes (speaking, writing). Any method of teaching vocabulary should accommodate this principle.

The task, expressed in this way, is formidable. We need to provide our students with a rich, properly repetitive and properly sequenced experience of all the words of the academic vocabulary, and to teach the decorums of their use, in one, two, or at most three semesters. But perhaps the remedy is at hand. If instead of *isolating* the study of vocabulary, we can *incorporate* it into our writing courses, following the lead of some of our authors, we may find that not only the control of words, but the writing techniques of our students, will improve.

With this issue we begin a new feature of the *Journal*, "Notes and Strategies," a section of shorter papers which concentrate on one classroom technique, or which present short reports on insights and researches. We invite for future issues of the *Journal* either articles or notes on the subjects of Reinforcement and Revision.

Erratum: The Editors regret that the following note failed to appear in Andrea A. Lunsford and Sara Garnes, "Anatomy of a Basic Writing Program," Spring/Summer, 1979:

The authors are indebted to Dean Arthur Adams, Professors Edward P.J. Corbett, John Gabel, Julian Markels, and especially Susan Miller, our Director of Freshman English, as well as to the staffs of both pilot project and writing workshop for their generous support and judicious criticism.