

Regina M. Hoover

IN THE BEGINNING: THE WORD

In college a student who can't read can't succeed. And if he or she doesn't know what the words mean, reading efficiently is impossible. This is so near a truism it seems unnecessary to say, yet over and over when a student fails to follow written instructions which other students follow easily, or claims to have read a chapter but doesn't know what's in it, the tendency is to conclude that the student is lazy or is faking or has poor study habits. Or perhaps just isn't very bright. It seldom seems to occur to most college professors that students can't follow instructions because they can't read efficiently, and that they can't read efficiently because they don't know the words.

This truth didn't really dawn on me until after I began teaching a developmental class in the fall of 1977. At that time my university, previously more or less impervious to the "literacy crisis," initiated a small developmental program, largely as the result of a survey I had made which showed that approximately one-third of our entering freshmen were scoring below alleged national norms in verbal skills. Our program is not remedial in the sense of being a preliminary, non-credit course required before the student can enroll in English 101: it provides an optional 101 for students requiring more attention. Each of us who teaches a developmental section also teaches a section of regular English 101 using approximately the same syllabus for both sections. Students who satisfactorily complete the work of the developmental section receive English 101 credit. The difference is in method: smaller classes and a highly successful tutorial system allow us to give more individualized attention in the developmental sections.¹ Our first year results were gratifying; our subjective feeling, supported by the grades earned in our classes, was that many of our developmental students

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1. Students who score below 16 on the Social Science and Verbal sections of the ACT are placed in the developmental sections, where enrollment is limited to 15, and students spend an extra hour a week at the Writing Center.

emerged stronger writers than some of those who initially scored more highly and were placed in regular sections.

As a primary initiator of this program, I am now in my fourth semester of teaching developmental sections, and the longer I work with low-scoring students, the more convinced I am that a lack of vocabulary is a key element in their problem, affecting not only their writing abilities but also their motivation, because, having come thus far groping their way through a maze of half-understood reading material, and having been told over and over that they can't read and can't write, they are either too discouraged or too afraid to try again.

At first, I was not aware of the really dreadful gaps in the vocabularies of our developmental students. Like most of my associates, I assumed that students entering college had at least most of the common words under control. The first term of our developmental program, working under the gun because our administrators delayed approval until about ten days before we were to begin, we used a workbook containing a vocabulary section, which, well into the quarter, I rather routinely assigned. The results were appalling; I wondered how my students had survived even five weeks of college with such minimal comprehension of the words they were looking at. (I cannot say "were reading"; that would be too strong a verb.) It was too late that term to do much, but by the next term I had evolved the following assignment, which I distributed the second week of class.

VOCABULARY ASSIGNMENT

1. Find ten (10) words per week in your reading whose meaning you are not sure of.
2. Copy the entire sentence in which the word occurs. (Be sure to copy with absolute accuracy.)
3. Underline the word in question.
4. *Before looking up the word*, write down what you think it might mean. Put this possible meaning in parenthesis ().
5. Write *DEF.*, and follow it with the dictionary definition that seems to clarify the sentence best. Avoid circular definitions or those that use words you don't understand. Put definitions in a form so they could fit into the sentence, if at all possible.
6. Follow the definition with a brief explanation of what you now understand the original sentence to mean or recast the sentence into your own words. *This is the crucial part of the exercise*, as it does no

good to look up the word unless, by doing so, you understand better what you are reading. *Use complete sentences.*

EXAMPLE #1

The first psychiatrist who studied this *anomaly* of schizophrenia was Howard Jones. (pattern) DEF: *anomaly*: deviation from the common rule, irregularity. The first psychiatrist who studied this particular way that schizophrenia differed from regular behavior was Howard Jones.

EXAMPLE #2

Undeterred, the army pressed forward. (not held back) DEF: (*Undeterred* is not in the dictionary.) *deter*: to turn aside or discourage. *undeterred*: not turned aside or discouraged. The army went ahead; they weren't discouraged.

This assignment was given on an open-end basis to be turned in every week, over and above other assignments. To reinforce it, I prepared class work on vocabulary building: families of words, prefixes, suffixes, roots, denotation and connotation, problems of defining (such as circularity). The day I hand out the assignment, we do a reading comprehension session during which we list and discuss difficult words; these can become part of the students' first list, giving them a boost toward an initial completion of the assignment. After it has been done once, it doesn't seem so forbidding.

Students should be asked not to use fiction, which generally is less challenging, and therefore less helpful, than non-fiction. (One must be sure, of course, in making this distinction, that students know the difference between fiction and non-fiction; many don't.) Another kind of writing to be avoided is anything highly scientific or technical. Usually the text itself is engaged in defining the troublesome terms; there is no way the original sentence can be easily recast for more clarity. In addition, scientific and technical terms do not have enough general application to other reading. The best reading material is the student's own texts in non-science areas, though subjects such as psychology, sociology, and economics often are troublesome because they are heavily laden with jargon and, in addition, are often abominably written. Nevertheless, these are exactly the texts over which the students are desperately struggling, so they are the ones to use, even though the going may be tough. Other possible reading sources, of course, are magazines and newspapers, again avoiding fiction and highly technical material.

Accurate copying has beneficial side-effects I didn't originally count on. Students who are sloppy copiers usually have not learned the value of

careful attention; they simply don't look at what is on the page. At the lowest level, careless copying works against the student, who is judged to be careless in every way—and unfortunately often is. But careless copying also results in spelling errors, punctuation errors, and omission of words. Students forced to copy ten sentences a week accurately begin to notice words they consistently misspell, types of punctuation they never understood before, even sentence patterns of which they were previously unaware. For these reasons, it is important to be insistent on careful copywork. Copying may seem a small thing, hardly worth bothering about, but the habit of precise attention, begun in even so small a way, can spread outward in surprising directions.

The reason for asking the student to guess at the meaning before looking up the word should be clear; most of us know a good deal of our vocabulary by context. We may have a hard time stating a precise definition for certain words, but when we see them in context we know what they mean. At first students make wild guesses—and it is here they partially reveal their woeful lack of knowledge; some guesses are diametrically opposite to the true meaning. Usually after a few weeks, however, they are beginning to guess rather well. As they recognize their increasing ability to guess accurately, they become more confident readers, having acquired a skill most of us take for granted.

Finding accurate definitions is by no means easy. We've all had experiences of looking up a word, then having to go to another word, and perhaps finally reading all the so-called synonyms in order to get the real "hang" of the original word. For low-achieving students such a hunt is almost beyond imagination. And even if there is a clear definition given with the word, often there are more than one, and the correct definition is hard to pick out. Parts of speech also present obstacles. Let's face it; many of our students don't know their parts of speech any more, so they can't match them up—a noun for a noun or a verb for a verb.

Neither you nor your students will love this assignment, especially at first (though so far no student has recommended discontinuation of the exercise on term-end evaluations). It may seem easy to run through a list of ten words and check which are correct, but the detours and wrong turns are impossible to predict or sometimes to follow. I find myself constantly flipping through the dictionary in total disbelief, wondering, "Where under the sun did she find that definition?" or "Am I wrong about what that word means?" (Sometimes I am.) Most frustrating is the persistence with which students try to find synonyms, *one* word to

substitute for the word in question. It may take weeks to persuade some of them that few words have synonyms and that if they are really to clarify their sentences, they must recast them in their own words. Low achieving students are so afraid, so used to being told exactly what to do, so paralyzed by any suggestion that they ought to think for themselves!

But gradually they learn, and the benefits become apparent. The crucial and culminating achievement is to put the meaning of the original sentence into clear and simple words. It isn't easy, and students will struggle for weeks, particularly those who have little confidence in themselves and their own minds. But translating written material into our own words is exactly the process by which we all understand what we are reading. Experienced readers perform this process automatically. Low-achieving students have to learn the skill, and until they do, they will continue to grope along, not understanding or only partially understanding their texts and instructions, spending unnecessary hours going back over the material, making mistakes based on their lack of comprehension, becoming confirmed in their suspicions that they are dumb and stupid and should drop out of college sooner rather than later.

And here is the clincher for those of us who are primarily interested in writing skills; this is a superb writing exercise—something I did not foresee. After students have spent weeks trying to recast difficult sentences into clear, understandable language, their own writing begins to improve dramatically. The vocabulary assignment demands that they say precisely what they mean; it allows no room for hiding behind vague language. Students always think they know what they mean, but of course they don't know unless they can express it clearly. Expressing oneself clearly is what this exercise is all about. When students begin to realize that they really can be understood through simple, clear language, writing problems become much easier to understand and handle.

The first lists will be almost uniformly poor. This is, after all, a very difficult assignment. In addition, some students, being poor readers to begin with, can't read the instructions; this past semester, for instance, one student turned in four lists before one was finally acceptable. He just couldn't seem to follow the instructions step by step, and always produced something almost unrecognizable. Fortunately he persisted; once he began producing good vocabulary assignments, every aspect of his work improved. At the end of the term he wrote me a little note and signed it "Love." It was a very nice "Love" to receive.

Some students will try to use the new word in sentences of their own rather than to clarify the original sentence. Perhaps this is a holdover

from high school vocabulary work. Stop this practice at all costs! We do not learn new vocabulary by *using* a word; we learn by seeing it in various contexts, by looking it up repeatedly, by gradually internalizing both its denotative and connotative meanings, and *finally*—maybe weeks, months, or even years later—beginning to use it. We have all had experiences where we just can't seem to "learn" a word—two I can remember having difficulty with are *viable* and *ontology*—but finally we come to "know" it and can use it intelligently. Our students, trying to use a "bigger" or "more impressive" word, often write nonsense, yet it seems common practice to encourage young people to make fools of themselves by using words they've only just noticed for the first time. Or worse, students are sent to the thesaurus for a "synonym." Those of us who value precision in language know there are mighty few true synonyms. I wish the thesaurus could be banished from every high school library and that every teacher who ever urged finding a bigger or more impressive word would be condemned to an eternity of reading the resulting papers!

Students must begin where they are. They must use the words they have; all have plenty of words if they will just make the effort to express their ideas clearly and simply—in "plain English," as some say. Learning new words will come from reading, not from writing. As students learn new words, their writing will, indeed, become more sophisticated but not necessarily more understandable. It may seem unconscionable that we must teach vocabulary in college, but if we are teachers who care about our students, we must teach them what they need to know. Words are the building blocks of education; not to provide our students access to them is to raise an obstacle they might never overcome.