

VOCABULARY GROWTH

By Winifred Koole

Miss Winifred Koole is a veteran teacher of the fourth grade in the Hope Protestant Reformed Christian School. The following article appeared originally in A Writing Program for the Covenant Child. (See inside of back cover.)

Our language is made up of symbols called words — spoken words, written words. They are the building blocks by which we formulate our ideas into language patterns. In the beginning everything was a word of God. The Bible speaks often about the importance of words. Two examples are:

A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver.
Proverbs 25:11

Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.
Psalm 19:14

A word can make all the difference. To illustrate its importance Nila Banton Smith presents this paraphrased poem:

For want of a word,
the phrase is lost.
For want of the phrase,
the sentence is lost.
For want of the sentence,
the paragraph is lost.
For want of the paragraph,
the selection is lost.
All meaning is lost for
want of a word.

Understanding and misunderstanding alike stem from the words we speak or write as we try to express ourselves, and there are times when an entire selection can be misinterpreted because a wrong meaning is given to one or two words.

Words are an integral part of any subject taught. Therefore it is essential in teaching listening, speaking, reading, and writing to children

to help them enlarge their vocabulary. Before a child comes to school, he has had wide and varied language experiences. His listening, and speaking vocabulary is considerable; he knows the power of words; and usually he has a keen interest in words. Very early a child realizes that words represent an idea, and his developing maturity will be measured by the increasing skill with which he uses words to communicate more and more complex ideas. Factual and accurate communication demands words that are exact and precise. The reading and writing vocabularies of a child are as important as his speaking and listening ones but are much harder to acquire at first. Later the reading vocabulary will outdistance the speaking and writing vocabularies. Effort should be made to transfer a child's speaking and reading vocabularies to his writing vocabulary. A teacher, who has found words to be fascinating, who enjoys learning and using new and intriguing words, will be more effective in stimulating the pupil to do the same.

A dictionary will prove to be the most helpful tool for vocabulary growth. Children should learn early to use the dictionary, and such training should continue throughout the school years. Word mastery is a lifetime task, but for the student in school it is crucial. A student who reads widely and thoughtfully has found the greatest single source of words to add to his own vocabulary, and will also gain an understanding of allusions — those words that have their roots in literary, historical, or Biblical references. Other factors that determine the character and size of a child's vocabulary are his environment, his capacity to learn, his interests, and the instruction and guidance he receives in home and in school in the use of words. An important method for promoting growth in a child's vocabulary is the enrichment of experience, both actual and vicarious. Because incidental teaching of new words is not as effective as direct teaching, an alert teacher finds and uses many helpful activities to insure vocabulary growth.

Nina W. Walter in *Let Them Write Poetry* says that "our first task with respect to vocabulary building is to explore the everyday vocabulary of our students, asking ourselves such questions as these:

1. Are they making use of as many words as they should for their age and grade?
2. What sort of words are they adding to their lists?
3. Are they exposed to good writing in their textbooks?
4. Are they encouraged to read books that use picturesque, imaginative, significant language?
5. Are they making consistent attempts to increase their vocabularies?
6. Have we awakened their interest in words?"

Dawson and Zollinger suggest the following ways in which a teacher can direct attention to new words:

1. Take time to discuss unfamiliar words.
2. Phrase questions in such a way that new words are called for in the child's answer.
3. List key vocabulary on the chalkboard in summarizing main ideas in a situation.
4. Display pictures that will clarify and enrich the meaning of critical terms.
5. Provide activities that will require the use of new words as children plan, carry through, report on, and evaluate them.
6. Generally impress upon pupils the meaning and usefulness of new terms.

In a child's present working vocabulary (as well as in that of adults) are many words and terms of which he has a faulty or partial understanding. Edgar Dale believes that we could probably increase our vocabulary ten percent by bringing into sharp focus those words we only partially understand. He suggests this as one of the five ways to increase vocabulary in the teacher's edition of *My Weekly Reader*. These five ways he sums up as follows:

First, we must realize that words are the names we attach to experience; we therefore provide the children with experiences.

A second way is to differentiate further those words we already know, to make more precise distinctions. This involves using synonyms and antonyms, and perhaps homonyms.

A third way to improve vocabulary is to discriminate the parts of words and learn to put them together in new combinations; to master the use of roots, prefixes, and suffixes.

Fourth, school programs should concentrate on shifting the almost-known words into the well-known group.

The fifth and chief method for increasing vocabulary will be through reading and writing, speaking and listening, visualizing and observing. A person must become word-conscious.

Another valuable aspect of word study is the origin or history of words. This can be a life-time interest for a person who is intrigued by words. Many books have been written on the subject, and students, teachers, or any amateur philologist, whose love for words includes their etymology, will find them enjoyable and rewarding.

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