

LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AT NIAGARA UNIVERSITY

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The Problem

The vocabulary of a number of our students is below college level. Limited vocabulary is most often a result of experience, not ability. The reasons for limited vocabulary include a decrease in pleasure reading from elementary to high school; low expectations in high school for independent reading outside of school; little direct vocabulary instruction in high school; language-poor home or social environment; emphasis on memorization for high-stakes testing at the expense of independent reading; and a dearth of high school Latin courses.

Our students come from many different high schools so their pre-college experiences with language acquisition and reading differ considerably. However, no matter what the reasons for limited vocabulary, Michele L. Simpson urges us to be concerned about the “enormous amount of words that struggling readers do not understand” (111). Because some of these students are in our classes, it is important to consider how their experiences before college may have limited their word knowledge and how that limitation can impact their performance in our classes.

The challenge of helping students, especially first-year students, overcome what I call “vocabulary neglect” and become more competent in language is not unique to our institution. In 2007, Turner and Williams recognized that in general “...college students are not doing well in their vocabulary development” (p. 65). Further, Kuehn’s extensive research with high school and college students in California found that limited knowledge of vocabulary was “by far the most important barrier” to comprehending course readings and lectures (p. 9). We all need to be concerned about our students’ limited vocabulary because, as Turner and Williams point out, vocabulary knowledge is a “substantial predictor” of students’ academic performance (p. 65). As Michele L. Simpson succinctly stated at a 2003 conference I attended, “Vocabulary is the glue for comprehension.” Without this glue, students will not fully understand the readings we assign, the lectures we give, the exam questions we write, and even feedback we write on their assignments.

From 1999-2011, Niagara University’s Office of Academic Support addressed the very limited vocabulary of about 10-15% of our incoming freshman class by offering the non-credit course “Vocabulary Enrichment.” However, this course ended in 2012. This paper is an invitation to faculty to consider ways in which limited language skills may affect some of their students as well as ways we can work together to intentionally encourage greater language acquisition.

From 2006-2014, an average of 33.8% of our first-year students entered with SAT verbal scores below 480; 3.5% entered with SAT verbal scores below 400. For fourteen years, I analyzed scores on the vocabulary sub-test of the Nelson-Denny Reading Test, which we administered to all incoming first-year

students until 2012. In addition, from 1999 – 2011 approximately 645 students were placed in LSK 045 (“Vocabulary Development”). These facts strongly indicate that students with low SAT verbal scores tend to be unfamiliar with many words that faculty members would consider rather basic, words that are essential to understanding college-level material.

The problem of language acquisition is compounded when we consider students whose first language is not English. Until recently, we have not enrolled enough ELL (English language learners) students to offer an ESL (English as a Second Language) program, so the work of assisting these students has fallen largely on the Office of Academic Support. Just one of these students can require an inordinate amount of time. In one example, my weekly appointments with an ELL student were typically 90-120 minutes. As our international student population increases, we also need to consider ways to help these students become more proficient in English. Since 2013, our office has received funding for a graduate ESL tutor and we have re-introduce ESL 193, “English as a Second Language, a three-credit course. Both have helped considerably. And this year, ESL 201/501 and ESL 202/502 debut. However, none can fully address the vocabulary needs of ESL students in just one semester.

Obviously, when students understand all the words in your assigned readings and your lectures, their chance of success in your course increases. Here are just a few examples of how limited language can disadvantage students:

- During his final exam in Spring 2013, a HIS 199 (“America and the Contemporary World”) professor was “stunned” when one student asked him to define “**advent**” and another student asked the meaning of “**stagnate**.” This professor wondered if these words were “beyond the scope of undergraduates.”
- In Spring 2012, a first-year student in TRM 258 (“Contemporary Leisure and Recreation Concepts”) was unable to answer a test question about the increase in travelers taking cruises. After the test, I helped him locate this information in the textbook and we found this sentence: “The major cruise companies...are catering to younger and less **affluent** individuals by offering relatively inexpensive short-term trips.” I asked the student if he knew what “affluent” meant but he had no idea (and admitted he hadn’t looked it up). Because he missed the point that cruises no longer attract only the wealthy, couldn’t answer the corresponding test question. He was also unable to answer this short-answer question, “Identify three conclusions that reflect on **pervasive** realities regarding women’s leisure,” because he didn’t know the word “pervasive.”
- During a recent exam in CIS 232 (“Microcomputer Applications for Business 1”), a student asked the professor what “**implement**” meant. He didn’t understand directions containing this word.
- Several students were unable to answer this multiple-choice question on HIS 199 (“American and the Contemporary World”) exam: “The clearest example of **arbitrary** behavior by Truman was....” All the information they had studied about President Truman couldn’t help them because they didn’t know the word “**arbitrary**.”
- In Spring 2012, a student taking ENG 100 (“Introduction to Literature”) earned a low grade on a paper about the 1916 poem “Patterns” by Amy Lowell. The professor wrote that the student

should have commented on the “frustration of being restricted by the **conventions** of society.” Because the student didn’t know the word “conventions,” she didn’t understand the professor’s comment and didn’t know what she could have done differently to earn a stronger grade.

- In Spring 2014, this question appeared on a BIO 103 test: “Briefly describe what a limiting factor for population growth is. Give one **plausible** example for dandelions.” I met with a student who was unable to answer this question because she had no idea what “plausible” meant.
- Questions on a Spring 2007 PSY 101 (“Introduction to Psychology”) exam included these words that some students did not know:
 - Sixteen-year-old Brenda questions her parents’ values but does not fully accept her friends’ standards either. Her confusion about what she really wants and values in life suggests that Brenda is struggling with the problem of

a) autonomy	c) initiative
b) identity	d) integrity
 - “Those who are **skeptical** about claims that apes share human capacity for language ...”
 - “Rannilt was **euphoric** after learning of her acceptance into the medical school of her choice. After a few weeks, however, ...”
- The Spring 2008 department syllabus for HIS 199 contained words unfamiliar to some students:
 - “Catalog description [of HIS 199]: Interpretive overview of developments affecting America and Americans during the **turbulent** years since World War II.”
 - “**Tumultuous** changes in the past two decades...”
 - “The 1991 **demise** of the Soviet Union...”
 - “...we envisioned the world as engaged in a ‘Cold War’ between two rival **blocs**, each led by a superpower that **epitomized** its underlying values.”
 - “Even economic recovery and **unprecedented** prosperity...”
- During a CRJ 202 (“Juvenile Justice”) class, a student was writing notes on the disadvantages and advantages of incarcerating teen offenders. One item on his list was a single word: **disparity**. However, he didn’t know its meaning and had written nothing in his notes to provide context about what the professor said about “disparity” with regard to incarcerating teen offenders. Since he didn’t know what “disparity” meant, he was unable to determine what notes to write or how important this part of the lecture was.
- Dr. Brian Bennett (Religious Studies) observes that many students are unfamiliar with abbreviations such as “e.g.” and “a.k.a.” Students who seldom read may have never encountered these abbreviations in print.
- Here are just a few examples of basic words in their readings for other courses that students who took LSK 045 before it ended identified as unfamiliar: pertinent, enact, speculate, merit, merely, subsequent, interval, adequate, equipped, interpretation, integrate, prosperous, attribute, pause, transaction, confront, adequate, decisive, chronic, plausible, incomprehensible, competence, massacre, prosperous, coherent, omission, depict, meager, simultaneous, integrity, surplus, fundamental, and artificial.

If such basic words are unfamiliar to some of our students, imagine how much more meaning eludes students when they encounter college-level words such as mundane, aberration, pessimism, allusion, indigenous, conversely, ambivalent, bolster, impediment, heinous, exacerbate, redundant, egalitarian, deferential, gamut, tangible, malicious, nuance, usurp, reprehensible, and peripheral. It is very likely that some students in your classes – especially first-year students – do not know these words.

Keep in mind that in almost all cases, language deficits like these examples do not reflect students' ability. Rather, they indicate a lack of experience before college.

Research

It is no surprise that “word knowledge correlates with comprehension” (Anderson and Freebody, 1981, p. 77). Obviously, the greater facility students have with language, the better they can comprehend your course readings, the more they will understand the meaning and nuances of your lectures, and the better they will be able to interpret your exam questions.

In a 2002 article, I wrote that “...professors and authors of college textbooks assume that students have command of a much wider vocabulary than they actually possess” (Green, p. 6). In their comprehensive 2009 article “Vocabulary Development,” Michele L. Simpson and Michelle Andersen Francis assert that “...if college students are to succeed, they need an extensive vocabulary and a variety of strategies for understanding words and the language of an academic discipline” (p. 97).

We certainly recognize that limited vocabulary is a concern for some of our students, particularly first-year students, and we recognize how it can affect their performance in courses – sometimes significantly. In fact, some faculty members have expressed concern because they have observed rather serious deficiencies in vocabulary.

Research indicates that language acquisition is most effective when it occurs in context. Simpson and Francis support the “knowledge hypothesis of vocabulary learning” described by Anderson and Freebody, which recommends teaching vocabulary “... within the context of learning new concepts so that words can be related to one another and to prior knowledge” (p. 106). A 2006 study done by Turner and Williams in twelve sections of an entry-level human development course showed that “...pre-course mastery of academic terms embedded in some exam items proved to be the strongest predictor of exam performance throughout the course” (p. 74). In their study, words that students had previously raised their hands to ask about during exams, such as “veracity,” “phenomenon,” and “plethora,” were introduced early in the semester. Students who took the time to learn these words (with an incentive of bonus credit) performed better on exams because they knew more of the words and did not have to stop to ask what words meant (or be distracted when others asked). Turner and Williams note that embedding vocabulary growth in any course “...required little extra work on the part of the teachers” (p. 76) and they recommend providing an incentive for students to learn words that will enable them to better understand course materials.

According to Ken Bain, Director of the Center for Teaching Excellence at New York University and author of *What the Best College Teachers Do*, the “best college and university teachers create...a natural critical learning environment in which they embed the skills and information they wish to teach in assignments [that] students will find fascinating – authentic tasks ...” (p. 47). The key word here is “embed.” Without realizing it, you may use words in your speech that may be unfamiliar to your students. The readings you assign may include words – perhaps many words – that are unfamiliar to some of your students. Sadly, many students report that they simply skip over unfamiliar words while reading, but this compromises their understanding. I am not suggesting that you alter your language or select easier readings, because exposure to rich language is vital. Instead, I propose embedding intentional strategies to help students more fully comprehend what we say and what we ask them to read so they can gradually acquire a broader vocabulary.

Here is an example. If we teach the word “demographic” in isolation, students may soon forget its meaning. But if the word “demographic” is repeated in the context of a history, sociology, business, or economics course and if the professor periodically uses the word in class (perhaps pausing the first time to quickly add what it means, and the next time to ask if students remember what it means), the word will have much greater meaning and thus more likely become part of students’ permanent vocabulary. Further, if the professor briefly mentions that “demo-” comes from the Greek word for “people” and appears in the familiar word “democracy” and that “-graph” is the Greek for “write or record” and appears in familiar words such as “autograph” and “biography,” students are more likely to remember what “demographic” means.

Teaching developmental reading courses for 29 years has convinced me that the most effective way for students to increase vocabulary is to be exposed to words in context, as opposed to learning words in isolation; to have “multiple exposures” to words (Marzano, 2004, p. 111); and to have opportunities to use new words in their own speech and writing. Although LSK 045, “Vocabulary Enrichment,” was a very beneficial course, its non-credit status limited student motivation and engagement. Since this course ended in 2011, I believe all of us should encourage students to increase their facility with the English language, especially college-level words that are part of the discourse of academia. I would like to suggest ways that faculty can do this and ways I can support you in this effort.

Simple but Effective Classroom Strategies

These strategies can be useful for all students but are recommended especially for classes with many first- and second-year students:

- **I would be happy to review your assigned readings to assess the vocabulary level and help you identify words that may be unfamiliar to some of your students.** Readings in your discipline many include unfamiliar words that are not defined in the text. Examples in **Philosophy** might include “agnostic,” “altruistic,” “connotation,” “cynical,” “devoid,” “empirical,” “fallacy,” “implicit,” “objective/subjective,” “pessimism,” “paradox” and “pragmatic.” Examples in **Women’s Studies** might include “autonomy,” “connotation,” “correlation,” “egalitarian,” “exploitation,” “hegemony,” “hierarchy,” “marginalize,” “objectify,” “patriarchal,”

“stratification,” “subservient,” and “suffragist.” Examples from **Religious Studies** might include “deity,” “heathen,” “laity,” “heretic,” “orthodox,” “piety,” “Sabbath,” “hierarchy,” “theology,” “venerate,” “secular” and “zealous.” I would be happy to help you generate course-specific or reading-specific word lists to distribute at the beginning of the semester. Then in, say, two weeks, you might test students on the words. This conveys the message that understanding words is fundamental to learning and can contribute to success in your course. This approach also avoids singling out students who are weak in vocabulary. If you can’t spare class time for a test, offer an optional take-home test.

- **Give students a list of Latin and Greek word parts that appear in words common to your discipline**, such as “hemo-,” “derma-“, and “hypo-“ in biology; “-gamy,” “exo-“ and “endo-“ in sociology and anthropology; or “-crazy,” “arch-“ and “demo-“ in political science and history. Again, I would be happy to work with you to develop such a list.
- Because we acquire language through exposure, students who complete the assigned reading encounter more words. In fact, “word ownership” (Simpson and Francis, 2009, p. 113) is reinforced through multiple exposures (Marzano, 2004, pp. 110, 111). The more our students read, the greater chance they’ll encounter words multiple times. Sadly, some students don’t complete the assigned reading; some even brag about how they were able to pass a course without reading. We could help students by **holding them accountable for completing the reading**, starting early in the semester. As Vandesburger and Duncan-Daston emphasize, “...when students are held accountable, they read” (p. 10). Here are some simple ways to hold students accountable for assigned reading:
 - Require an “admit slip” based on the reading. For every class, assign a question based on the reading, and write questions that can’t be answered without completing the reading. Students respond on an index card which they deposit in a container as they enter class, or they answer online in your course management system before class. Make these responses a significant portion of the grade. If you use index cards, reduce your workload by only grading admit-slip responses periodically; don’t tell students in advance which ones you’ll grade.
 - Give questions about the assigned reading that students must answer orally in class. Be sure the questions require more than a cursory reading.
 - If you assign a book, write discussion and test questions that can’t be answered by consulting Spark Notes.
 - Give a short quiz based on the reading very early in the semester. This encourages students to purchase the book and begin reading right away.
 - Early in the semester. model your reading behaviors by reading aloud a brief excerpt from your textbook (it could be as little as a paragraph or two). Stop frequently to share thoughts, responses, and questions that float through your mind as you read. Too often, students read quickly just to finish. Remember that some students did little independent reading in high school; some may not have been allowed to take their

textbooks home. So some students have not had an opportunity to practice the thoughtful and analytical reading you expect them to do.

- On your syllabus, **include a list of terms that students should know** – not just discipline-specific terminology, but also key nouns, verbs, and adjectives that appear in your course readings. For example, **Criminal Justice** students are likely to encounter these words: “pervasive,” “conversely,” “exacerbate,” “elite,” “affluent,” “empirical,” “explicit,” “arbitrary,” “innocuous,” “deleterious,” “alleviate,” “punitive,” “abhorrent,” “transgression,” “elicit,” “flagrant,” “potent,” “unequivocal,” “circumvent,” “exonerate,” “deter,” “pragmatic,” “utilitarian,” “incongruous,” “crux,” “hierarchy,” “adversarial,” “disparity,” and “covertly.” Yet these words will be unfamiliar to some students.

I have developed working lists of nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs that students are likely to encounter in these disciplines: Religious Studies, History, Philosophy, Ethics, Food Service, Hospitality & Tourism, Literature, Biology, Criminal Justice, Political Science, Sociology, Economics, Psychology, Education, Women’s Studies, Theatre Studies, Social Work, Marketing, Business Law, Communication Studies, Business, and Accounting. I would be happy to share the a list with you, and I invite your input to expand it. If your discipline is not listed here, I would be happy to work with you to develop one by reviewing your readings to identify words that students may not know.

- Encourage your students to read more. If appropriate to your course, **assign at least one high-interest fiction or nonfiction book**. Then hold students accountable for reading the entire book with an assignment that counts for a substantial part of the grade. Assign the book early in the semester so students are not rushing to read when they are busy with other assignments.
- Some students report that they seldom read a newspaper. If possible, **include newspaper reading in your course**, especially from the *New York Times* or *Wall Street Journal*. These newspapers include many college-level words, provide useful context, and give students the multiple exposures mentioned above.
- **Share with students what you read for pleasure**. This can encourage students to read, which is essential because reading “widely and frequently” (Simpson) is one of the most effective ways to increase vocabulary. As a student in LSK 045, “Vocabulary Enrichment,” wrote at the end of Fall 2009, “This class has helped me tremendously. I was actually upset when I found out I was in the class and wanted to try to test out the first day, but I’m so glad I decided to stay. Learning over 200 vocabulary words and reading two interesting books was exactly what I needed to realize that reading wasn’t so bad after all. Whenever I had time, I found myself picking up *Lucky* [by Alice Sebold] to read and I was always finding words to look up on www.m-w.com.”
- **Share your own interest in and curiosity about the English language**. When appropriate, pause to define words in your speech that might be unfamiliar to some students. As Manzo and Stark

pointed out in 1972, “the single most significant factor in improving vocabulary is the excitement about words which teachers can generate” (p. 78).

- Students may mistakenly assume that you know every word when you read. **Tell your students what you do when you encounter an unfamiliar word** while reading. Show them how you mark your books and articles.
- **Urge your students to consult a dictionary**, on-line or in book form, when they encounter unfamiliar words. Remind students who use e-readers to use the dictionary feature.
- **Ask students to pick up their first graded exam during your office hours, rather than returning the exam in class.** Students who earned a grade over a certain threshold (say, 80%) could simply pick up the test, which wouldn’t take much of your time. However, students with lower grades would have an opportunity to determine the cause of their errors. When students take the time to analyze a graded exam, some discover errors that resulted from not reading the assigned materials, not reading them thoroughly, not fully understanding them, or not understanding words in the directions or questions. Students with low grades may not discover this on their own because they feel so discouraged that they never bother to review the test.

Conclusion

The more strategies we employ to help our students acquire a broader vocabulary, the better they can do as undergraduates, increasing the likelihood that we retain them. Greater proficiency in language can also help students in graduate school, in the professions, and as representatives of Niagara University after they graduate. Remember: our students are capable. Some simply lack rich language experiences that we may take for granted. Because they come from a wide range of homes, high schools, and communities, we have no control over their language experiences prior to college. We can, however, significantly influence their language acquisition once they are here by intentionally transitioning them to our higher expectations.

Our university’s Vincentian tradition is one of helping those who have less than we do. As highly educated academics who read often and read widely, we might assume that everyone understands the same level of language that we do. But this is not the case for some of our students, especially first-year students. In the spirit of St. Vincent de Paul, let’s work together to help our students become more proficient in college-level language.

Finally, please remember that I am always available to work with you to consider ways to help students acquire a broader vocabulary.

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