

# Romancing Our Readers

## Overcoming the Adolescent Vocabulary Slump

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Up until 4<sup>th</sup> grade a student's central literacy job is to memorize; she must read a relatively large number of words by 'sight' and then be able to reproduce the spelling of those words in her writing. While this is certainly a daunting task (for student and teacher alike), it is made easier by the fact that most of the tricky *spelling* is supported by not-so-tricky *meaning*. The opaque spellings of *laugh* and *whisper* are easier to swallow because sentences like, "What are they laughing and whispering about?" simply roll off a 4<sup>th</sup> grader's tongue.

As students head toward middle school, however, the texts start getting more complicated: they have longer sentences, the words have more syllables, and word meanings are more abstract. This set of changes alone is challenging to the 10-year-old brain that spends much of its time simplifying and solidifying language through Twitter feeds, Facebook posts, and text entries like "c u l8r". But at about this same time, many of the new words being introduced are actually *in a new language*.

Let me explain what I mean by this: the vast majority of monosyllabic (one-syllable) English words and quite a few disyllabic (two-syllable) English words are from the *Germanic* language family (via the Anglo-Saxons). These are words that describe our everyday, concrete activities, words that show up in elementary school readers: *baby*, *loving*, *mother*, *go*, *horse*. Meanwhile, the majority of multisyllabic (many-syllable) English words are from the *Romance* language family (mainly via French, Italian, Spanish and Latin). These are the fancier words that show up in the fancier texts. Just look at the upgrade that an elementary school reader gets when Germanic words 'go Romance':

baby → *infant*

mother → *maternal*

horse → *equine*

loving → *amorous*

go → *depart*

It is no small wonder that adolescence is the time when our children start to fall behind. If they do not receive intensive support and instruction through the adolescent years, they end up lost amid Romance vocabulary, eventually losing the confidence and motivation their early elementary school teachers worked so hard to build.

Fortunately the characteristic that makes Romance vocabulary so different from Germanic vocabulary also makes it teachable: its root structure. All of these multisyllabic Romance words can be broken down into parts; they can be *analyzed*. And this is what Word Voyage teaches students to do: to analyze words into their constituent parts. The Word Voyage student, like any other student, may not know what *benevolent* means, but she has the tools to take that word apart. She has seen *bene* in the word *benefit* and knows that it has something to do with *good* or *well*. Additionally, she remembers *-vol-* from the word *volunteer* and knows that it means *free*

*will, free choice*. She puts that all together with the context and she has an extremely educated guess that serves her well as she faces whatever reading assessment may be heading her way.

Even more importantly, the Word Voyage student has the confidence, the curiosity, and the comfort to forge through these newly complex texts. Unlike the student wading through Romance vocabulary with only Germanic tools to light her way, the Word Voyage student has had *repeated* rounds of practice *at her level* to ready her for the task at hand. Starting with syllables and working through prefixes, roots, and suffixes, she has critically analyzed hundreds of words. Meanwhile, her teacher and the structure of the Word Voyage program conspired to help her see the similarities among all these word parts so that she could use them in novel reading and writing situations. As she became more advanced, her teacher also had her investigate the etymologies of words, so that she could understand the stories *behind* the words, developing a lasting connection to the subject. Finally, she not only wrote sentences using the words she learned, she wrote them *at her level*. Her teacher started her out with short, simple sentences and progressed finally to complex sentences with a minimum of 12 words and the use of specified subordinating conjunctions.

The Word Voyage student encounters the same increase in textual complexity during adolescence that other students do. Like them, she notices the change from good, old-fashioned Germanic roots to high-falutin' Romance roots. Like them, she fights with her mother about texting during dinner and oversimplifying family arguments. But the consistent and careful root-word analysis, etymological storytelling, and challenging sentence-writing her teacher designs for her make all the difference. They give her that *taste of success* that is so critical for literacy motivation. Her romance with language is just beginning.

### **About the Author**

Abigail Konopasky received her Ph.D. in Linguistics and Slavic Linguistics from Princeton University in 2001. After completing a Mellon Postdoctoral Fellowship at Duke University, she went on to a tenure-track position in the English Department at the University of New Orleans. Throughout her career she has been interested in literacy and access to literacy resources, teaching writing, ESL, and Women's Studies in addition to Linguistics and Discourse Theory. She is currently the curriculum consultant for Word Voyage and the Presidential Scholar at the George Mason University College of Education and Human Development.