



Romancing Our Readers: Overcoming the Adolescent Vocabulary Slump

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Up until 4th 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, 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 3rd grader's tongue.

In upper elementary 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 12-year-old brain that spends much of its time simplifying and solidifying language through 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*, *kind*, *big*, *stars*, *friendly*. Meanwhile, the majority of multisyllabic English words are from the *Romance* language family (mainly via French, Italian, Spanish and Latin). Just look at the upgrade that an elementary school reader gets when Germanic words 'go Romance':

baby → *infant*

loving → *affectionate*

kind → *benevolent*

big → *immense*

stars → *constellation*

friendly → *gregarious*

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. For example, a student reading Charlotte's Web, by E.B. White, must navigate *perspiration, commotion, endure, approximate, salutations, gullible, exertion*, and other highly descriptive root words. A student reading Number the Stars, by Lois Lowry, commonly taught in grade 5, must make sense of *exasperated, imperious, belligerent, impassive, residential, intricate, designate*, and many others. The root words have arrived!

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 it apart. She has seen *bene* in *benefit* and knows that it has something to do with being *good*. Additionally, she remembers *vol* from *volunteer* and knows that it means *free choice, something you choose to do*. Putting together the idea of *someone choosing to be good* with the context around the word delivers a whole new level of comprehension.

Even more importantly, the Word Voyage student takes on the habit of analyzing unfamiliar words, rather than skipping over them. 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. Also, she knows that many words can share the same root. From playing games like Meet the Cousins and Family Reunion, she is always ready to call on a *close relative* to help out with a strange new word.

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 words to high-falutin' Romance words. Like them, she fights with her mother about texting during dinner and oversimplifying family arguments. But the consistent and careful root-word analysis, the building of root families, and the regular practice using her new words in original sentences 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 doctorate in Educational Psychology and Research Methods from George Mason University in 2016 and a doctorate in 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. Across her research activities, she is committed to developing research approaches to understand how learning is situated in diverse contexts and to develop and refine tools to use in these contexts. She is currently an Assistant Professor of Medicine at Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences in Bethesda, MD. There, she is bringing her linguistic skills to bear on a 3-year study of clinical reasoning.