

ECONOMICS, LABOR & BUSINESS

Because the results of the Claimant Experiment were “unequivocal and strong,” the authors propose conducting further trials to make cash bonuses more effective. Such trials, they conclude, may result in new schemes “that may effectively reduce unemployment at low or even negligible cost to unemployed workers and to society.”

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Learning by the Book

“How Children Learn Words” by George A. Miller and Patricia M. Gildea, in *Scientific American* (Sept. 1987), 415 Madison Ave., New York, N.Y. 10017.

By the age of 12, the average child learns 5,000 new words each year, or about 13 every day—yet no more than 200 words are taught in a school year. How do children manage to learn so many words on their own? Miller, a psychologist at Princeton, and Gildea, professor of psychology at Rutgers University, believe students learn many new words by reading.

Mastering a word occurs in two distinct stages: first, a student assigns the new word to a category, such as “color” or “food”; later, he starts to recognize distinctions (e.g., the difference between red and pink) among words in a given category.

Indeed, to fully comprehend a new word, the student must find it used



Computers can enhance children's ability to build vocabulary by letting them see an unfamiliar word used in a definition, a picture, and a sentence. Here, a student learns new words in a lesson drawn from Raiders of the Lost Ark.

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in many different contexts. The easiest way to understand an unfamiliar word is to ask another person (such as a teacher). However, few teachers can devote such personal attention to students, and most resort to dictionary exercises.

But "learning from a dictionary," the authors argue, "requires considerable sophistication"—interrupting the story to find a word alphabetically listed, holding the original context in mind while sifting through the various senses of a dictionary definition—and children, through age 12, are "not good at it." After studying several thousand practice sentences written by fifth and sixth graders in which new words were consistently misinterpreted, the authors concluded that tasks relying on the dictionary are "a waste of time."

Arbitrary vocabulary lists, the authors argue, isolate words from any context. Reading proves to be the most effective vehicle for vocabulary-building because it makes the reader *want* to understand new words. The authors found that only through "reading several million words per year"—at least one and a half hours each school day—can children acquire even *average* word skills.

The ideal way to build vocabulary, the authors believe, would be lengthy reading supplemented by immediate explanations of new words. They have developed interactive video programs that students scan like books, permitting them to request an explanatory definition, a sentence, or a picture for an unknown word. By providing accessible definitions for new words when the student wants them, computers can significantly enhance language acquisition.

When I'm 64

"Inside the Empty Nest" by Brad Edmondson,
in *American Demographics* (Nov. 1987), 108
N. Cayuga St., Ithaca, N.Y. 14850.

The 33,000,000 Americans currently aged 50 to 64, argues Edmondson, an *American Demographics* senior editor, are "wealthier, better educated, and more active" than their parents or grandparents. But they still must make hard decisions—about savings, whether or not to move, and how to spend discretionary income.

People between the ages of 55 and 64 have the "highest net worth" and highest income of any group of Americans. According to the Census Bureau, two out of three households in this group are married couples, and 43 percent of these married couples have annual incomes of \$40,000 or more. Because many of the children of 50- to 64-year-old Americans are no longer living with their parents, the "empty nester" parents have more disposable income. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that households headed by a person aged 55 to 64 spent 11 percent more on furnishings than other groups, and gave 24 percent more to charity.

The current generation of "empty nesters" is retiring earlier than their parents. The percentage of men between the ages of 55 and 59 who work has dropped from 89 percent in 1970 to 79 percent in 1986. A 1984 survey from the American Council of Life Insurance (ACLI) reports that only 14 percent of Americans aged 50 to 64 plan to move when they