



## Developing Verbal Talent

By Michael Clay Thompson

Verbal talent is developed by new verbal experience. It will not develop on its own, and it will not develop if the only experiences a child has are within the child's existing range of verbal experience. More of the same experience will not develop anything. Verbal talent will develop when a child is thrown into verbal situations that he or she can't

do, doesn't understand, hasn't seen before, forcing the child to stop, think, listen, pay attention, reread, study, change. When new verbal experience lies beyond the known range, the child must learn new things in order to understand. It is then the child develops his or her own verbal talent in order to accommodate an encounter with verbal phenomena that are new and challenging. Only verbal experience that changes a child develops a child.

If this seems too obvious, we must recall that it flies in the mass face of an educational culture that avoids the shock of difficulty in the name of self-esteem; giving students things they can do, the theory is, builds their self-esteem. Developing verbal talent in gifted children doesn't work that way, but provides a model in which self-esteem is the accomplishment the student feels after successfully struggling for intellectual growth. In order to develop verbal talent, we don't give kids things they can do; we give them things they cannot do, yet.

### Classics: Mentors on Paper

Perhaps the clearest example of what will not develop verbal talent is the age-graded basal reader. Barbara Clark wrote that:

By keeping [gifted] children in the regular basal series, insisting that they adhere to the regular reading program, follow-up, and skill-builder activities, we often frustrate them. This can destroy their belief in school as an interesting, exciting place and in learning and books as the wonderful experiences they thought they were. (Clark, 1988, p. 338)

Reis and Renzulli also noted "widespread dissatisfaction expressed by so many school personnel about the use of basal readers for high ability students" (p. 95) and described basal readers for gifted students as "boring and sterile" (p. 95). VanTassel-Baska wrote that "The use of a basal reading series typically focuses too much time and attention on mastering the reading process, particularly phonics, rather than allowing gifted students the opportunity for holistic reading of good literature" (p. 156). If gifted students should not be reading age-graded, vocabulary-controlled, dumbed-down basal readers, what should they be reading?

In addition to a variety of outstanding contemporary literature, and various kinds of non-fiction including history, biography, and books about science, students should be reading classics. As W. H. Auden wrote: "Some books are undeservedly forgotten; none are undeservedly remembered." It is true. The classics remain classic. They are at many levels the standards of excellence and the enduring works that must form one strong component in the education of high ability students. By virtue of their multileveled excellence, and through the influence of these forms of excellence on students' minds, the classics stretch, challenge, and mold students, changing their tastes and giving them a sense of what the possibilities are for human expression in language (Thompson, "Mentors," p. 58). In addition to having properties that will develop students' verbal talent, classics are educational in a sense that other books are not. Classics are part of the thoughtful commerce of the world, connecting students' minds to the minds of others in every continent. Through classics, students come to know the lovely and wondrous literature of the world. In the classics, they will hear the song of their species, they will encounter their context, they will discover their kin, and they will discover a shimmering mirror of words in which they can see manifold aspects of themselves.

For purposes of developing verbal talent, it is important to note what Harry Passow, a gifted educator, once told me, that classics are *self-differentiating*. A book such as *Treasure Island* can be read by many students, but it contains telescoping levels of depth and complexity. No matter where the reader is in verbal development, the next level of *Treasure Island* is there, waiting, luring the student on to higher forms of language and idea. The fact that

one never really gets to the bottom of a great book is of inestimable value and distinguishes such books from ephemeral literature. It also explains why gifted children are re-readers who go back to books and work their way into a deeper level than they have been before.

Classics are especially appropriate for gifted children because of the recognition factor; they are both the work of gifted writers, and are often about gifted characters. Gifted children will find classic characters who are like themselves, who think as they do, worry as they do, care as they do. Remember Scout Finch who got in trouble at school for teaching herself to read; Odysseus who solved his way home to his wife Penelope; the stubborn Jane Eyre who declined guff from her boss; Holden Caulfield whose world required no catcher in the rye; the clever Tom Sawyer who got his fence painted, or the Time Traveler whose friends lacked the flexibility to understand his accomplishment?

Classics are gifted books, by gifted writers, and are right for gifted kids. Listen to the ethical thinking of one gifted character, the little girl Scout Finch, in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*:

Boo and I walked up the steps to the porch. His fingers found the front doorknob. He gently released my hand, opened the door, went inside, and shut the door behind him. I never saw him again. Neighbors bring food with death, and flowers with sickness, and little things in between. Boo was our neighbor. He gave us two soap dolls, a broken watch and chain, a pair of good-luck pennies, and our lives. But neighbors give in return. We never put back into the tree what we took out of it: we had given him nothing, and it made me sad.

I turned to go home. Street lights winked down the street all the way to town. I had never seen our neighborhood from this angle...Atticus was right. One time he said you never really know a man until you stand in his shoes and walk around in them. Just standing on the Radley porch was enough.

The altruism of this thought would be poignant from any source, but it is more moving here because it comes from a little girl, sad because she never gave in return to her neighbor, and who learned one of life's most heartfelt lessons by standing on her neighbor's porch, having seen him for the last time. It is passages such as this that make books classic, that move people to read them again and give them to others. In such vicarious ethical experiences, the feelings of civilization are passed from the mind of a writer to the mind of a reader, and the valuable memories of our species are protected.

### Classic Words

Another reason to provide gifted children with a rich exposure to the classics is the rich vocabulary that they nearly always contain. Guess, for example, what book these words come from:

*diffidence, placid, adhere, quietus, miscreant, quixotic, reproof, condescend, somber, enigma, phlegmatic, undulate, sublime, resolute, strident, din, amicable, amorous, raconteur, profound, dejection, placid, amiably, tedious, mea culpa, perplex, impede, interpose, incisive, impassive, admonish, aperture, avidly, perfidious, miasma, abject, portal, fain, sanguinary, retort, imperiously, hauteur, patronize, aloof, blithe, boon, cypher, wince, defray, genial, cadaverous, remonstrate, nether, upbraid, solicitous, conveyance, mauve, hitherto, succulent, artifice, proffer, ardent, tremulous, recriminate, assail, virulent, insinuate.*

Could these words come from a book by Thomas Hardy? Nathaniel Hawthorne? The answer may surprise you; these words come from James M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*, the story of Never Never Land, Pirate Smee, Captain Hook, Wendy, and the boys who would never grow up (Thompson, 1990, p. 9). In *Peter Pan*, Peter lost his shadow, and Mrs. Darling picked it up, folded it, and put it in a drawer. Hook told Smee to kill Wendy, and Smee said to Wendy, "I have to kill you, but I'll save you if you'll be my mother." She refused. It is a children's book, but look at the vocabulary. Because such diction is stripped from today's dumbed-down literature anthologies, and because modern publishing houses usually require authors to avoid such words in children's stories, the classics have become an increasingly precious source of good vocabulary in children's literature.

Among the most important classic words for students to know are the following one hundred, many of which are found in most great works of British and American literature: *countenance, profound, manifest, serene, sublime, prodigious, singular, clamor, visage, abate, allude, grotesque, undulate, acute, vivid, venerate, exquisite, melan-*

*choly, incredulous, traverse, repose, lurid, languid, superfluous, sagacity, vulgar, placid, tremulous, odious, pallor, abyss, stolid, condescend, wistful, prostrate, remonstrate, palpable, vex, amiable, perplex, portent, peremptory, somber, importune, audible, expostulate, subtle, tangible, vivacious, despond, doleful, pervade, pensive, apprehension, procure, abject, austere, magnanimous, oppress, oblique, sallow, ignominy, eccentric, resolute, articulate, furtive, fain, genial, mien, affect, billow, confound, wan, indolent, maxim, reproach, morose, latter, conjure, retort, antipathy, alacrity, animated, vestige, verdure, adjacent, rebuke, zenith, inexorable, livid, dilate, fortnight, din, abash, profane, imperious, conjecture, swarthy, impute, and appellation* (Thompson, 1998, 159).

Not every classic is equally rich in vocabulary. Ernest Hemingway's books, for example, are high in humanity but low in syllables. On the basis of vocabulary strength, as recorded in my Classic Words database, among the strong vocabulary books that gifted middle school students should read are:

*Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Harriet Beecher Stowe, 714  
*Ivanhoe*, Sir Walter Scott, 519  
*Gulliver's Travels*, Jonathan Swift, 472  
*The War of the Worlds*, H.G. Wells, 379  
*Dracula*, Bram Stoker, 345  
*Tom Sawyer*, Mark Twain, 293  
*Robinson Crusoe*, Daniel Defoe, 279  
*Treasure Island*, Robert Louis Stevenson, 254  
*Silas Marner*, George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans), 216  
*To Kill a Mockingbird*, Harper Lee, 208  
*Peter Pan*, James M. Barrie, 198  
*The Wind in the Willows*, Kenneth Grahame, 193  
*Kidnapped*, Robert Louis Stevenson, 187  
*Silent Spring*, Rachel Carson, 177  
*The Yearling*, Marjorie Kennan Rawlings, 176  
*The Time Machine*, H.G. Wells, 153  
*The Call of the Wild*, Jack London, 150  
*The Narrative of Frederick Douglass*, Douglass, 139  
*The Double Helix*, James Watson, 122  
*The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*, Washington Irving, 120

### Classic Ideas

If we want students to think, we must give them something substantive to think about. Beyond their sheer strength as language experience, classics confront students with a divergent cacophony of contending ideas, as expressed by history's least restrained thinkers. Classics free students from the insipid slumber of textbooks, and shock them to thought with the meanings of humanity's dissident heroes: Mohandas Gandhi, Henry David Thoreau, Martin Luther King, Thomas Jefferson, Emily Dickinson, Frederick Douglass. Think, these voices say, think. Be free. Be unafraid. Resist tyranny. Protect people. Create. Reject nonsense. Apply your ethics. Pursue happiness. The classics are an intellectual hailstorm of divergent ideas. And once students have read a sufficient number of these books, they come to expect ideas, and to relish the thinking that ideas demand. Here is an example of an idea from the classics. See if you can guess what book this passage comes from:

There is an ecstasy that marks the summit of life, and beyond which life cannot rise. And such is the paradox of living, this ecstasy comes when one is most alive, and it comes as a complete forgetfulness that one is alive. This ecstasy, this forgetfulness of living, comes to the artist, caught up and out of himself in a sheet of flame...

Is this from Aristotle? From the letters of Van Gogh? From Picasso? In fact, these words are found in Jack London's dog book, *The Call of the Wild*. London did not shrink from putting such ideas in a story he knew would be read by children as well as adults.

Among the ideas that classics elevate is altruism, the ability to care, which gifted children are known to possess intensely. For his care, we love Odysseus, who rejected immortality on a lovely island with the beautiful Calypso to return to Ithaca and face mortality with his wife. We love Stephen Crane's youth, Henry Fleming, who trudged off to war, earned a red badge of courage, and learned to value not heroism but peace; the final words of the book are among the most immortal in American literature. Crane wrote:

So it came to pass that as he trudged from the place of blood and wrath his soul changed....The youth smiled, for he saw that the world was a world for him, though many declared it to be made of oaths and walking sticks. He had rid himself of the red sickness of battle....He had been an animal blistered and sweating in the heat and pain of war. He turned now with a lover's thirst to images of tranquil skies, fresh meadows, cool brooks—an existence of soft and eternal peace.

Crane writes that Henry Fleming had become a man, but these words describe not the understanding of manhood but the wisdom of men and women both; this is the recognition where men and women meet, who have seen the pain and suffering of life's wars, and who have come to want an existence of soft and eternal peace. This recognition is but one example of the civilizing and humanizing current of these books, and it is a moving example of why a book becomes a classic.

### **Quality and Quantity**

An ambitious program of classic literature will almost certainly have to be partly accomplished on a home school basis, because few schools will be able to assign the amount of reading that is necessary for gifted kids. How much is necessary? As a comparison, my honors sophomore world literature class in an independent school read, in their entirety, *The Iliad*, *The Aeneid*, *The Theban Plays*, Dante's *Inferno*, *Othello*, *Crime and Punishment*, and *Cry, the Beloved Country*. In addition to these, each student individually read two world classics per term outside of class as homework, and conducted a personal discussion with me about each book. This works out to fifteen major titles per year, with the students typically waiting until the last week or two to do their outside reading.

A second consideration is that many of the books assigned by schools, such as the Hemingway and Steinbeck favorites, are poor in vocabulary, and exert no force against the students' diction limits. For this reason too, it may be necessary to develop a home-based reading program to supplement what is assigned at school. When the exposure to great literature is of high quality and quantity, the result is a significant impact on a student's relationship to books.

### **Ancient Words Within Modern Words - Vocabulary**

In addition to reading broadly in the classics, a thorough study of the ancient foundation of modern English vocabulary is essential to developing verbal talent. This recommendation flies in the face of current dogma that forbids direct instruction in vocabulary and that favors vocabulary development through the study of words as they appear in the context of literature. Although pondering words as you find them is a fine behavior, it is too ponderous to suffice as a complete vocabulary development strategy. Gifted students need something faster, more academic, and more targeted toward the Latin-based language that pervades the realm of high achievement.

I once read a research study showing that if you learned the 100 most common Greek and Latin stems in English—such as *pre*, *sub*, *super*, *poly*, *auto*, or *biblio*—you would gain an understanding of 5,000 words. Learning the Latin foundation, in other words, is the fast track, the power path to a strong vocabulary. This would seem reason enough to acquire a grounding in etymology, but once you become involved in it, many more reasons emerge. Let's look at some of the advantages of studying Greek and Latin stems:

**Power Learning** - Because each stem appears in dozens of words and in combination with other stems that reappear, the learning is more powerful than learning one word at a time. When we learn *pre*, we have learned part

of *premonition*, *prescient*, *prefabricate*, *prenuptial*, and dozens of other words that describe something happening beforehand.

**Spelling** - One of the great benefits of the ancient stems is that thousands of English words are nothing more than two or three stems in a row, so to learn stems is automatically to learn the spelling of thousands of words. Look how perfectly these words break into stems: *circum vent*; *mono mania*; *auto graph*; *omni potent*; *pseudo nym*; *geo logy*; *post script*; *osteo logy*; *xeno phobia*; *ecto derm*, *ortho dox*; and *thermo meter*. Furthermore, when you spell by stems, the spelling units are cognitive units; each stem you spell has meaning. When you know that *omni* means all and *potent* means power, you have a different feeling about omnipotent from someone who doesn't know that.

**Standardized tests** - Like it or not, our children's future depends partly on their performance on standardized tests. If you examine SAT vocabulary pages, you see that the questions are arranged in order of difficulty. On an SAT analogies page, the first few questions are so easy that almost everyone gets them right, but the final few are so difficult that almost no one gets them right. Guess where the stem-based words such as *supercilious* and *vociferous* appear? Right, they appear in the final questions. Kids who have studied the stems will have a chance at an analogy like *sotto voce* is to *vociferous* as...

**Micropoems** - Ordinary dictionary definitions are only the surface of what words offer. When you know the pieces the word is made of, you see that some of humanity's best insights are captured within the words we use. An example is the word *respect*, which is an ordinary word that most elementary students could define. We might say that to respect is to admire, to esteem, to hold in high regard. But when we look at the stems in the word, we see *re*, again, and *spect*, look. Suddenly, we realize the micropoetry of the word; at the moment that we come to respect someone, we find ourselves looking at them again, in a new way. This epiphany is captured in the amber of the etymology, and is only visible to children who have studied the ancient stems.

**A sense of history** - The student of stems knows that language wasn't invented new in our time. Our language is a vast collection of echoes, and we are reviving and continuing the sounds of ancient voices with each sentence.

**Advanced vocabulary** - Many of the stem-based words are big words. Science and technology are filled with these Latinate combinations that seem so difficult to most people, but so easy to students who have learned what they are made of. One of the great advantages to studying the stems is that it converts arcane erudition into child's play. A word like *supercilious*, which means condescending, is easy once you realize that it is made of *super*, over, and *cilia*, hair, and refers to the raised eyebrow of the snob! The beauty of teaching such words to younger students is that it refutes the age-graded vocabulary myth that retards American education. All across America, young children can pronounce and understand *Tyrannosaurus Rex* or *San Francisco Forty-Niner*, but they are considered too young to learn *serene* means calm.

When we are thinking about language development, and vocabulary in particular, it is well to recall Barbara Clark's words about Horace Mann and the age grade system:

Our current educational system is built on solutions to problems that existed in the early 1900s. Its goal was to educate the masses since a strong democracy could exist only if the electorate was an educated one. The very core of our chosen cultural system, even our approach to civilization, rested on how well we could educate our citizens. In the early 1900s, Horace Mann, a New Englander, reacted to the problem of mass education by devising the grade level curriculum, an orderly and progressive approach he believed would assure students basic information and skills. All children age six would cover the first grade curriculum, all seven-year-olds the second grade curriculum, eight-year-olds the third grade and so on through a twelve year progressive sequence. Mann's solution to one simple problem, however, has been allowed to become educational dogma, and for nearly a century educators have attempted to adjust children to this inadequate system. (Clark, 1986, p. 6)

## Stems for Starters

Middle school students who embark on a study of Greek and Latin stems can begin with the following list, which consists of very common and important stems. The key is to learn the stem and definition, not the example words.

#### Stem Definition Examples:

ante (before) antedate, antecedent, antebellum, anterior, ante meridiem, antepenult  
 anti (against) anti-aircraft, antibody, anticlimax, anticline, antitoxin, antithesis  
 bi (two) bilateral, bicycle, binary, bimonthly, biped, bipolar, binocular, bicuspid  
 circum (around) circumnavigate, circumspect, circumvent, circumlocution  
 com (together) combination, comfort, commensurate, common, complete, combo  
 con (together) contract, confidence, confine, confederate, conjunction, contact  
 de (down) deposit, descent, despicable, denounce, deduct, demolish, decrepit, deplete  
 dis (away) distract, distort, dispute, dissonant, disperse, dismiss, dissuade, disprove  
 equi (equal) equitable, equilateral, equivocate, equinox, equation, equilibrium  
 extra (beyond) extraterrestrial, extraordinary, extravagant, extrovert, extramural  
 inter (between) international, interdepartmental, interstellar, interject, interlude  
 intra (within) intracellular, intravenous, intracranial, intrastate, intrauterine  
 intro (into) introduce, introspective, introvert, introject, introrse, intromission  
 mal (bad) malevolent, malcontent, malicious, malign, malady, malapropism, malonym  
 mis (bad) misfit, mistake, misfortune, misfire, misery, miser, misdeed, misguided  
 non (not) nonstop, nonprofit, none, nonconformity, nonplussed, nonchalant  
 post (after) postgraduate, posthumous, postscript, posterity, posterior, postlude  
 pre (before) prelude, preposition, premonition, premature, predict, predecessor  
 semi (half) semitone, semiaquatic, semicircle, semiweekly, semiannual, semiformal  
 sub (under) subterranean, subtract, subordinate, submarine, subterfuge, substantial  
 super (over) supervise, superb, superior, superfluous, supercilious, supernatural  
 syn (together) synthetic, synchronize, syndrome, synonym, synopsis, syntax  
 sym (together) sympathy, symbiosis, symbol, symmetry, symphony, symposium  
 tri (three) tricycle, triangle, triceps, triad, trichotomy, triceratops, trivia, trialogue  
 un (not) unfit, unequal, undone, unequivocal, unearned, unconventional, untenable

### Grammar: A Way of Thinking about Our Own Ideas

In a language program for the gifted, clearly it is necessary to adopt a diagnostic-prescriptive approach to teaching grammar and usage since these students are capable of mastering the language system much more rapidly than other learners and in a shorter time period than is allotted in the regular school curriculum. (VanTassel-Baska, 1988, p. 167)

Among the curricula that American education has neglected, and sometimes discarded, is traditional grammar, which has been tossed aside as unteachable, unlearnable, unlikable, useless, and inappropriate for gifted learners because it is remedial and low. There are school systems in the country where the teaching of grammar is forbidden, and teachers get bad evaluations if they violate the prohibition.

The fact is that grammar is quite teachable, most learnable, fun, valuable, and highly appropriate for gifted kids because it is a high form of critical thinking about language. And language, be it recalled, is the utterance of human thought. Sentences do not occur in nature. Sentences are manifestations of the mind, and sentences are a medium of the mind. When we use grammar to examine sentences, we are undertaking a profound metacognitive exploration. Why is grammar teachable and learnable? It is easy to forget, when looking at a ponderous grammar textbook, what a little topic grammar is. The total number of terms necessary to acquire the useful fundamentals of traditional grammar is about fifty terms. There are only eight parts of speech, about five parts of the sentence, several

kinds of phrases, and a few clauses. By expanding each term into five homework exercises, we can drag the subject on until May of every school year, but it is easy to compact these four little levels of grammar into the first weeks of class, and usefully apply the grammar to all of the other language experiences during the year.

Why is grammar fun and valuable? Grammar reveals to us the beauty and power of our own minds. With only eight kinds of words and two sides (subject and predicate) of each idea, we can make the plays of Shakespeare, or the novels of Toni Morrison, or the poems of Elizabeth Bishop. No system, so gorgeously elegant, could be expected to make such a language. Through grammar we see the simple form of our binary minds; in all of our sentences, however elaborate, we are making a predicate about a subject, and this reveals the meaning of clarity. For each sentence or idea, I must know both of these two things: what you are talking about, and what you are saying about it. For each paragraph of sentences, I must know what the paragraph is about, and what you are saying about it. For each essay of paragraphs, I must know what the essay is about, and what you are saying about it. A sentence, with its two sides, is a model of the mind.

Grammar is fun for many reasons, but the purest fun is that once acquired it becomes a kind of magic lens that reveals amazing things to our sight. A moving example occurs in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, where Cornwall is stabbed as his wife Regan looks on indifferently. Cornwall gasps: "I have received a hurt. Follow me, lady. Turn out that eyeless villain; throw this slave upon the dunghill. Regan, I bleed apace. Untimely comes this hurt; give me your arm." Regan refuses. Absent grammar, we can appreciate the desperation of the scene, and sympathize with the dying Cornwall who suffers the wounds of knife and wife, but with the lens of grammar, we see more. We see the incredible clause structure. Each group of words with its own subject/predicate nucleus is a clause. In these thirty-one words, how many clauses are there? There are seven: seven clauses, four periods, two semicolons, two commas. The grammar of this passage, in other words, is bizarre, unprecedented. For seven clauses in a row, the passage averages four words to a clause! The question is why, and the answer is that the grammar is shifting with the plot. Four words is all that the dying Cornwall can manage, and his sentence structure is a portrait in pain, it is the grammar of death.

Another way to think about why grammar is fun is to ask, what is not fun? The feeling of confusion...is not fun. The off-center feeling of struggling with one's own ignorance to accomplish just an ordinary thing is not fun. The private knowledge that you don't even know which pronoun to use in your own language, this is not fun. The low self-esteem of guessing your way through commas, and spattering words around like a wordy Jackson Pollack, not really controlling where they will land or why, this is not fun. It is not fun to have a peer correct your usage, make your verb plural, shift your wrong pronoun to the object case where it belongs, or gently remind you that your sentence is a fragment. (Thompson, 1998, p. 3)

We begin to understand why grammar is so appropriate for gifted kids. Grammar gives kids a way to think about language, to see what language reveals about their own minds, to think about how language makes clarity, to think about how different authors use language in their own styles, to think about crafting the language of their own sentences.

How does all of this pertain to parents of gifted children? First, parents can become domestic advocates of grammar, helping their kids to believe in it, to know the good of it, and to be willing to do the work of acquiring it. It is difficult, if not impossible, to truly learn something you dislike, and so we must not say bad things about grammar, such as that it is boring but you have to do it. Second, parents can advocate and encourage their school systems and their child's teachers to feature grammar. There are many teachers who want to do more with grammar but who are afraid that opposition will spoil the project. The more support they have, the better.

### **Key Points and Recommendations**

Verbal talent will not develop on its own. It develops in reaction to challenge, which is an encounter with something beyond one's capability. To meet the challenge, a new ability must be generated.

Classic literature presents a complete spectrum of challenge at many levels, including the level of language, the level of idea, and the level of meaning.

It is impossible for most schools to assign the number of books that gifted readers really need. For this reason, parents should prepare for an investment at the book store, which is the best money they will ever spend.

Schools take different approaches to the study of vocabulary. Some use only a whole language approach that prohibits direct instruction of vocabulary in favor of studying words as they are encountered in text. Gifted students need two forms of direct instruction in vocabulary; first, they need a solid grounding in Greek and Latin stems, and second, they need to study the classic words. It is essential that each student have an excellent, college-level dictionary, preferably in hardback, that contains not just definitions but etymologies, and the etymology should be studied every time a student looks up a word.

The negative stereotype of grammar as a tedious waste of time should be rejected. Students must attack grammar with enthusiasm in order to use it as a high form of critical thinking about language. This will produce self-knowledge, appreciation of literature, and an ability to enjoy making good sentences and compositions.

Many of the great intellects of history have been partly or completely self-taught. If your child is fortunate enough to be in a wonderful school, it is a blessing, but if not, then it is not unprecedented to take responsibility for educational accomplishment. At the deepest level, education is an internal act, and students who understand the importance of language can deliberately move forward into areas of challenge in reading, vocabulary, and grammar, with the support of their schools and families.

For gifted children, the development of verbal talent is among the deepest joys and most critical preparations of life, but the talent will not develop on its own. If we support and encourage a child by providing access to books, motivation to read, enlightenment about grammar, and enthusiasm for words, then the child will move forward into exciting experiences in language that will be catalysts for the development of verbal talent, and each new strength will be a springboard to another. In time, the child will become a young adult, who arrives at that moment with a long background in books, and ideas, and carefully chosen words. The talent will be developed, and developing, and it will be time for these experiences to be transformed into accomplishments and creativity that never would have happened if, years ago, the child had not been challenged.

#### References

- Clark, B. (1988). *Growing up gifted*. Columbus, OH: Merrill.
- Clark, B. (1986). *Optimizing learning*. Columbus, OH: Merrill.
- Thompson, Michael. (1990). *Classics in the Classroom*. Monroe, NY: Trillium.
- Thompson, Michael. (1998). *Classic Words*. Unionville, NY: Royal Fireworks.
- Thompson, Michael. "Editor's Reflections: Grammar for Gifted Kids." *Our Gifted Children*, 47 (June, 1998).
- Thompson, Michael. (1996). "Mentors on Paper: How Classics Develop Verbal Ability." In *Developing verbal talent: Ideas and strategies for teachers of elementary and middle school students*. VanTassel-Baska, J., Johnson, D., and Boyce, L., (Eds.). Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- VanTassel-Baska, J., Feldhusen, J., Seeley, K., Wheatley, G., Silverman, L., & Foster, W. (1988). *Comprehensive curriculum for gifted learners*. Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

A consultant and frequent presenter at system, state, and national conferences for gifted education, Michael Thompson is past President of the Indiana Association for the Gifted, the former editor of *Our Gifted Children* magazine (since 1994), the creator of the *Classic Words* vocabulary software, and the author of numerous articles and language arts texts for gifted students. See the Royal Fireworks Press website at <http://www.rfwp.com/> for a complete presentation of Michael Thompson's curricular work.

Royal Fireworks Press

