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Development and Utilization of the Simplified Discussions

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Missionaries entering the Missionary Training Center come from a wide variety of learning backgrounds and experiences. There is a marked difference in their learning capabilities, particularly among those assigned to English-speaking missions. Yet, all of them are expected to memorize the same set of standard discussions. This expectation sometimes becomes an awesome task, especially for young men and women who are unaccustomed to intensive learning situations. It can be particularly frustrating for those who have low reading abilities, low vocabularies, and/or possess some learning disabilities.

Imagine yourself attempting to read a textbook, documentary, or a professional journal that is written well beyond your level of comprehension. You struggle and try to understand the intended message, and yet, the more you try, the more confused you become. In anger and frustration you put the book or the article aside, usually with such heated remarks as, "Why can't they use words I understand?; Why do they have to write so tricky and complex?; I wonder if they write like that on purpose?" You probably do not take the time to identify whether it is the vocabulary or the syntax or a combination of both that is giving you trouble; all you know is that you did not understand what it was that was supposed to be communicated.

Many missionaries feel this same kind of frustration as they begin learning and memorizing the discussions. Some of them have come from special education backgrounds. Many have come from high school resource rooms where they struggled with reading and other related skills. They come wanting their MTC experience to be different, to somehow be easier and more successful than their learning experiences of the past. And yet, it proves to be no different at all. The standard discussions confront them with complex sentence structure and difficult vocabulary that prove to be beyond their ability to comprehend. They, of course, do not know that; all they know is that they are once again not understanding the given material.

Prior to February, 1981, those missionaries who struggled with memorizing were identified through a screening and testing process. At that time, the only course of action available was to teach them to rewrite the discussions in their own words. It was soon recognized, however, that giving them the task of simplifying that which they did not initially understand was overwhelming and unrealistic. It was decided that a new approach to helping these missionaries needed to be developed.
To determine which approach would best meet the needs of the missionaries, it was felt that two general studies should be made: that of determining the average reading and vocabulary grade levels of those tested, and that of identifying the average readability and vocabulary levels of the current discussions.

To accomplish the first study, that of determining the reading levels of those tested, the Durrell Battery of Reading Tests and Slosson Vocabulary Test were used. The results of missionaries tested between November 1980 and May 1981 were carefully examined, and it was discovered that 207 of the 271 (76%) tested during that time were functioning on an overall sixth grade level or below. An examination of the Slosson Vocabulary Test scores also indicated that these same missionaries were found to have an average expressive vocabulary grade level of 6.5.

To accomplish the second study, that of identifying the average grade levels of the current discussions, the Gunning-Fogg Readability Index, the SMOG Grading Formula, and Fry's Readability test were used and compared. These indexes examined the complexity of the sentence structure, the length of the sentence, and the vocabulary difficulty. Results from the tests indicated that the mean reading grade level of the current discussions is 9.5 (with a range of 8.1 to 11.5), that the median reading grade level is 9.4, and that the mode reading grade level is 10.1. The average reading and vocabulary levels of the current discussions, therefore, were found to be on the tenth grade level, a level considerably above the abilities of 76% of the missionaries tested.

It was decided that a complete set of simplified discussions needed to be prepared to help slow-learning missionaries understand and memorize that which they were expected to teach.

Using the Gunning-Fogg Readability Index as the standard by which to base simplifications, the main ideas of each concept in the discussions were analyzed and put into language and syntax that missionaries functioning on a fifth to sixth grade level could understand. By shortening sentences, simplifying the vocabulary words used, and incorporating clear transitions between main ideas, a shorter and simpler set of discussions was developed. Upon completion of the text, the new simplified discussions were approved to be used by those missionaries reading on an average sixth grade level or below.

As the discussions were simplified, a conscientious effort was made to keep the thought content and the sequence identical to the standard discussions, and to avoid any jargon or colloquialisms that might be considered unique to the Mormon culture. A few samples of the simplifications that were made include:

Man's wisdom alone is insufficient since it is subject to the errors and limitations of human judgement and understanding.

Man's wisdom alone is not enough. Because we are human, we often make mistakes.
Moroni told him there was a book written on gold plates hidden not far from Joseph's home. He said the book was written by prophets who lived anciently in the Americas, and contained a history of their people and the revelations they received from the Lord.

Moroni told him about a book written on gold plates. He said this book was hidden in a hill not far from Joseph's home. Moroni told Joseph that the book had been written by prophets who lived in America long ago.

When Joseph was visited by God the Father and his Son Jesus Christ, he learned that God is not merely a spirit, but has a body which is tangible, like man's, though it is glorified and perfected.

Joseph saw that God has a body like ours, only His is glorified and perfected.

This is important to you because it means that members of your family who have already died, parents, grandparents, or others, can receive the gospel in the spirit world. Of course, the real blessing is that someone living here in this life can be baptized in their names so that they can fulfill the requirements and receive the Lord's blessings. These sacred baptisms for the dead are performed only in very sacred buildings called temples.

Members of your family who have died can receive the gospel in the spirit world. People in this world can help their ancestors by being baptized for them. This is called baptism for the dead. These baptisms are done only in very sacred buildings called temples.

Again, not only were difficult vocabulary words eliminated, but complex sentence structure was also analyzed and simplified.

It has been exciting and rewarding to witness the missionaries that have been tested and put on the simplified discussions begin to progress and have success in their memorization. A few examples of such missionaries follow:

Elder Vincent spent much of his high school experience in resource classes. When he came to be tested, he told us that he had always had a hard time remembering things. About half way through the tests, he hesitantly asked us whether his performance would determine if he would be sent home or not. He quickly expressed a sincere desire to teach, but felt that with his discussion memorization going the way it had, maybe the opportunity to teach would never be his. We assured him that our purpose in testing him was not to see about sending him home; rather, that we were interested in identifying his learning strengths. As we identified his strengths, we would couple them with new memorization methodologies which would help him achieve greater success in his learning.

The tests indicated that Elder Vincent's overall reading was on the fourth grade level and that his expressive vocabulary was on a sixth grade level.
He qualified to be given the simplified discussions. When he saw them for the first time, he softly said that maybe there was hope for him after all. A few days before he was to leave, we followed up on him for the last time and he excitedly told us that he had accomplished his goal of memorizing four of the eight discussions. Then he threw back his shoulders, stood extra tall, and with face aglow, proudly added, "And not only that, I memorized one more complete discussion!"

For the first time that he could remember, Elder Vincent had had success in learning. As we talked about what had contributed to his success, he commented that for him, the simplified discussions were what had made all the difference.

Elder Shannon, who passed off six of the eight discussions, commented, "If it hadn't been for these discussions, I probably would still be back on the first one."

Elder Pratt came from a slow-learning background. The tests indicated that he was reading on an average fifth grade level. He was concerned that we might think he was crazy because he could not memorize, or that we might figure that he was just plain stupid. We showed him the simplified discussions, and as he read through them and compared them to the standard discussions, he became very excited. During our final follow-up, he reported that he had memorized all eight discussions! He said, "If I can do it, anybody can. The MTC has been a grand experience!"

In addition to being a great asset in helping the slow-learning English-speaking missionary, the simplified discussions have also been approved to be translated into all 28 languages taught at the MTC, and to be used by the English senior missionaries and older couples. Brother Steven R. Wright, director of language training at the MTC, recently toured two of the Central America Spanish-speaking missions, and while there saw the simplified in action. He commented that it was interesting to watch senior companions who were using the standard discussions spend a great deal of their time restating, repeating and answering many investigator's questions as they taught. This was contrasted sharply with their junior companions who came to the mission field using the simplified Spanish discussions. They taught with brevity and simplicity, and yet with understanding. The difference in the investigator's understanding was obvious.

Our goal in preparing the simplified was to help the slow-learning missionary overcome some of the frustrations of memorization by giving him a set of discussions he could understand. We feel this goal has been met. President Joe J. Christensen, current president of the Missionary Training Center, has said, "This assistance (the simplified discussions) to the slow-learning missionaries is one to the most significant developments in missionary training in decades."