POSSIBLE SENTENCES

Possible Sentences is a teacher-directed prereading activity that prepares students for the technical and general vocabulary they will encounter in a reading assignment (Moore & Moore, 1986). During this activity, students make predictions about content, establish connections between words and concepts, write, discuss, and read their assignments carefully to verify their predictions. Stahl and Kapinus’s (1990) research with fifth graders indicated that the Possible Sentences Activity could improve students’ written recall and long-term understanding of word meanings.

The Possible Sentences Activity requires minimal advance material preparation but a considerable amount of teacher time in thinking and planning. First, the teacher identifies the general or technical vocabulary that is key to the theme of the unit and is adequately defined by the context. For this activity to succeed, at least five to eight words should be taken from a subsection of a chapter rather than three or four words dispersed across an entire chapter. For example, in the Andersonville Prison excerpt, the following words could be used for part of the lesson:

*debilitating, predators, inhumane, expired*

Teachers need to select the targeted words carefully because students must be able to verify their predictions by reading the text during the third step.

During the second step, the teacher asks students to select at least two words from the list and generate one sentence that they think might possibly be in the text. Students can either write their sentence before sharing or dictate their sentences to the teacher spontaneously. As students share their predicted sentences, the teacher writes them on the overhead transparency or chalkboard. Moore and Moore (1986) stress that it is important for the teacher to write the sentences just as they are dictated, even if students provide inaccurate information or use the word incorrectly. With the Andersonville Prison excerpt, students might pair the following words in this manner:

In the Andersonville Prison the *predators expired*.

During the Civil War the *inhumane* generals were *debilitating*.

Note that the second example uses the word *debilitating* in a syntactically incorrect manner, but the teacher recorded it. This sharing of predicted sentences should continue until all the words on the list have been included in at least one sentence.

In step three, the teacher asks the students to read their text to verify the accuracy of the sentences the class created. Once students have finished their reading, during step four they evaluate the predicted sentences. Moore and Moore (1986) recommend that students ask these questions to evaluate the sentences: (1) Which sentences are accurate? (2) Which need further elaboration? (3) Which cannot be validated because the passage did not deal specifically with them? For example, with the first possible sentence cited previously, the teacher would want the students to realize that the predators did die, but not a natural death. The Possible Sentence merely needed more elaboration (i.e., “The predators were caught, tried, and expired as a result of hanging”). With the second Possible Sentence, students will need to discuss the meaning and usage of the word *debilitating*, but the context should provide an adequate model for making their evaluations and revisions.