MODULE 6.3

Implicit Instruction: Building Vocabulary During Reading

As useful as teaching students to understand the depth of word knowledge is, the importance of teaching and reinforcing vocabulary *during reading* cannot be ignored.

In *The Knowledge Deficit,* Hirsch argues that most of our vocabulary acquisition actually occurs indirectly—through reading, listening, and processing text and oral language.[8] Therefore, in addition to explicitly teaching a few words daily with depth and subtlety, teachers also have to address and reinforce **Implicit Vocabulary**, words that appear over the course of reading. Implicit Vocabulary Instruction helps maximize the likelihood that students will recognize and remember a word they encounter during reading—and increasingly take something away from each exposure. Some words students will learn right away when they read them. Some words they may not learn until many, many exposures later. Fostering attentiveness to those words can be a big help.

To ensure that students make sufficient gains in the number of words they learn per year, it is crucial to be intentional about building vocabulary during reading—on top of the roughly ten minutes spent per day in an explicit deep dive into new vocabulary. The goals of Implicit Vocabulary Instruction are threefold: to maximize the absorption rate of new words by cultivating attentiveness to unknown vocabulary words encountered during reading, to harness the Matthew Effect (discussed in chapter 3, "Reading Nonfiction") by increasing background knowledge, and to increase students' comprehension of the text. Reading experts agree that students need to know roughly 90 to 95 percent of a text's vocabulary words in order to truly comprehend a text.[9] As we increasingly expose our students to more complex texts with more complex vocabulary, Implicit Vocabulary Instruction becomes that much more important.

PLANNING AND PRIORITIZING WORDS FOR IMPLICIT VOCABULARY INSTRUCTION

As with most teaching tasks, doing a little bit of planning will help you maximize efficiency when it comes to Implicit Vocabulary Instruction. Mark up the section of text you're planning to read; circle all of the words you anticipate to be challenging for your students. Then prioritize those words. Ask yourself:

- Which words deserve the most attention, either because they're crucial to understanding of the text or related to key ideas in the story?
- Which words are students likely to see again, either in the story or elsewhere?
- Which words are really Tier 3 words—words that students are unlikely to encounter again outside the context of the text?

- Where does the word fall with respect to other questions I'm planning to stop reading to ask?
- How quickly will I be able to implicitly teach this word and then return to the text?

Thinking through your answers to these questions (and others) can help you decide which words to address implicitly, and how you'll respond to those words during reading. Once you have planned and prioritized the words you want to teach, it's time to decide *how* you want to teach them—in a way that makes their meaning stick (in some cases) and also supports comprehension by minimizing the disruption to the narrative (in others).

In response to challenging words in student reading, teachers can take four different approaches—all of which can be implemented in different combinations. We discuss them here in order of least in depth/least time spent to the most in depth/most time spent.

Selectively Neglect

As much as a part of us would love to teach students every word, there are times when it makes sense to simply ignore a word. Perhaps it is too obscure, archaic, or domain-specific to be worth your time. Or perhaps stopping to teach the word would disrupt the narrative at a crucial moment, or there might simply be too many other higher-leverage words to address. After all, if you taught every single word you came across while reading, you might never get to discussing the reason you were reading it in the first place!

Teachers have to selectively neglect a certain percentage of difficult words they encounter, deliberately ignoring them in favor of other words or other teaching goals. For example, when reading *Lord of the Flies* with his students, a teacher might choose to invest in *tirade* and *tumult* via explicit instruction, briefly reinforce *hiatus, tacit,* and *malevolently* via implicit strategies we'll discuss in a moment, and ignore *chorister* and *vicissitudes.* Perhaps *chorister* seems unlikely to appear in other texts, and *vicissitudes* is less useful in talking about the text than *malevolently.* Though these are hard choices, we simply cannot teach every new vocabulary word we encounter, especially when reading complex texts. So a part of reading is choosing when and which words to ignore.

Sometimes fast-forwarding past a word requires a bit more than just ignoring it. For instance, we recently observed Eric Snider of Achievement First Bushwick reading the Ray Bradbury story "Dark They Were, and Golden-Eyed" with his seventh graders. In the midst of a key passage, they came upon a description of a house with "geraniums"

outside. *Geraniums* was a word suitable for neglect in this instance; it was not critical to the story, and stopping would have distracted students from other key discussion points. However, not knowing even what a geranium was might have distracted students as much as pausing to define it, so Eric briefly categorized the word for students: "That's a type of flower; keep going." This categorization in lieu of a definition ("a common garden plant with red or white flowers") can allow students to engage the story without being distracted by too much information or too little. It's another way of selectively neglecting a word — giving enough of a gloss of the word to briefly support comprehension without giving a full definition.

You might do something similar with an allusion, like the one Doug came across reading *My Side of the Mountain* with his seven-year-old daughter. A sentence described the forest as being as crowded with animals "as Coney Island." Although *Coney Island* isn't a vocabulary word necessarily, he decided to channel Eric Snider and used a similar approach: "That's the name of an amusement park that would have been really busy," he said, and they picked up reading. Of course, if the details of the allusion had more significance or symbolic meaning in the text, it would be important to describe it with more accuracy or in more depth. Erica did something similar with her son when they encountered the word *parchment* in reading the Magic Treehouse series. Instead of giving a more involved definition of *parchment* as being made from the skin of an animal, she simply gave it a gloss: "it's paper that they used in the medieval times," and they were back in the text. The idea of a fast categorization can be a useful middle ground between completely ignoring a word and giving the complete definition.

Pronounce

Not all words require a definition during reading. Either it may be obvious from directive context clues, or taking time to define it would be a distraction. In other cases, you might simply want to reinforce decoding; you might think that once students hear the correct pronunciation, they'll recognize the word. In these cases, a quick reinforcement of pronunciation is sufficient. Having individual students (or perhaps the whole class) pronounce a word is useful, especially when you notice students struggling to decode it.

It's important to note, however, that students very frequently mispronounce words, even in copying your model. You might need to say the word multiple times in order to stress accuracy and build fluency. The goal is to make sure that every student practices; they get it right by listening and annunciating carefully, even if that means multiple tries.

Using Context Clues

Good readers frequently use context clues either to (1) learn a word as they encounter it or, at least, (2) discern enough about a word to prevent it from interfering with their comprehension of a passage. Despite the utility of context clues, however, simply instructing students to use them to figure out the meaning of an unknown word can be a useless exercise.

In *Bringing Words to Life*, Isabel Beck and her colleagues remind us that an author's intent when writing is not to provide the meaning of words. Rather, it is to effectively use words to entertain, persuade, or inform their readers. Beck and her coauthors identify four different types of context, only one of which is useful enough to effectively determine the meaning of a word (appropriately labeled "directive context"). The other contexts are either "misdirective," which would cause a reader to infer an inaccurate definition, or "nondirective," in that they don't provide any information to indicate the meaning of a word. The context could also be too general to be useful in determining the appropriate definition.*

Because the context surrounding a given word is often misleading at worst and unhelpful at best, avoid using context clues as the sole way of teaching vocabulary during reading. If you find a new word that is supported by its context, by all means point that out. For the most part, context clues do not reliably determine meaning; that said, we recognize that using context clues is a skill often required of our students.

In order to maximize students' practice using context clues, select words with a specific, directive context surrounded by other words students know. Doing so will help students arrive at the correct definition of the word. Taking advantage of segments of the text with directive context for a Tier 2 word is the best way both to set students up for successful practice and to support their growing vocabulary. Reading from the novel or text you are studying (or have studied) is a more effective and authentic way of practicing to use context clues than using isolated paragraphs or sentences.

In addition, choose your spots wisely. Help students learn to unpack syntax. The structure of the sentence often lets you know whether two ideas in a sentence cooperate or disagree. You might help students unpack syntax by

asking questions like "Does the syntax of the sentence give me a clue?" (For example, "He was typically well behaved, *but* today he was acting mischievously.")

You can also support students in using context clues by using the meaning of the sentence or paragraph that contains the word ("What is the main idea of the paragraph that this word is in?" "Does the meaning of the word you have given me make sense in relation to the main idea?") And, finally, calling attention to the word's etymology by asking questions like "Does the word have a positive or negative connotation?" or "Are there any root words, prefixes, or suffixes that we recognize that can help us determine the definition?" can help students chip away at barriers to understanding.

*Isabel L. Beck, Margaret G. McKeown, and Linda Kucan, *Bringing Words to Life: Robust Vocabulary Instruction* (New York: Guilford Press, 2013).

Drop in a Definition

Some words are crucial for student comprehension of the text, but aren't really worthy of (or you may not have enough time for) further application. Some words are embedded in text with misleading or misdirective context clues, or are related to other Tier 2 vocabulary that you've taught. For these kinds of words, it's often helpful to "drop in" a definition—that is, to plan a short, student-friendly definition (six or seven words or fewer, ideally) to provide when you encounter the word. For example, when encountering the word *partition* for the first time, you might say, "a partition is a divider between two spaces."

Because time in the classroom is finite—and because time away from reading can often distract students from the story at hand—follow-up beyond the definition should be minimal when you are simply defining a word. That said, you can briefly help dropped-in definitions stick with a few useful approaches, which we describe here.

Margin Note

The act of writing down a simple margin note for a word makes it more likely that students will remember both the word and its definition. For words that you think are worthy of more attention than just hearing the definition, have students write ("jot")

down their definitions in the margin of the text at hand. You would say, for example, "A *partition* is a divider between two spaces. Circle *partition* and write 'divider' in the margin." Initially, you may need to model what students' margin notes should look like before simply directing them to write a definition in the margin (circling the word, drawing a small arrow to the word, positioning the definition, and so on).

See It in Action

Watch Tondra Collins in clip 26 at teachlikeachampion.com/yourlibrary. Tondra and her students are reading *Twelve Angry Men* by Reginald Rose. When a student encounters (and struggles to decode) the word *unanimous*, Tondra has students circle it and create a stem to the margin note, and asks them to write the definition ("in complete agreement") in the margin. She then asks a brief practice question: "Who do you think the judge is talking to when he says that 'your decision must be *unanimous*'?" The entire moment takes one minute and eight seconds, yet she artfully supports students' decoding, comprehension, and vocabulary development, all with an expert execution of Implicit Vocabulary Instruction.

It's important to plan a short, kid-friendly definition that students can quickly jot down without interrupting the flow of the story. A margin-note definition can just serve as a "gloss" (a shortened version of the definition, used for margin notes) on the more complete definition you give to students. Students can later access this definition for future in-class or homework assignments.

Call and Response

Another technique you might use to further cement the meaning of a particular word is Call and Response. For example:

Teacher: A partition is a divider between to spaces. I say "partition"; you say "divider." Partition!
Students: Divider!
Teacher: Divider!
Students: Partition!

See It in Action

Watch Nikki Frame (reading *A Single Shard* by Linda Sue Park) and Patrick Pastore (reading *Number the Stars* by Lois Lowry) in clip 27 at teachlikeachampion.com/yourlibrary. In both quick clips, Nikki and Patrick briefly drop in a definition to better support students' understanding of the text, and then they quickly return to reading. You'll notice in both of these clips, as we saw in Tondra's clip, that teachers often drop in definitions in response to students' making decoding errors. Although these decoding errors can be a signal that students don't know the word, it's also possible that as soon as they hear the word spoken aloud, it becomes immediately recognizable to them; both of these possibilities are addressed by strong Implicit Vocabulary Instruction.

Drop in a Picture

For certain words (especially nouns), the best approach might be to show the definition using a picture. When seeing an example of the word is helpful (and perhaps necessary) for understanding its definition, you might introduce the picture, provide a simple definition, and post the picture in your classroom for future reference. This can be far more efficient than trying to give a definition/description of something students may never have seen before (*cistern*, *paddock*, *wharf*, *spectacles*, and so on), especially when a description would not carry much meaning.

See It in Action

Watch as Jamie Davidson reads *Boy* by Roald Dahl with her students in clip 28 at teachlikeachampion.com/yourlibrary. She implicitly addresses three words in the short selection of text. She has students circle the words *reigned* and *immense* and jot definitions in the margin. She has planned to use a picture for the word *scalpel* by projecting a photograph of a scalpel on the overhead—a beautiful and extremely efficient way to describe the word, given the complexity of trying to do so verbally.

Define and Practice

For the most important three or four words in a passage, plan short sequences of applications to allow students to practice after you've provided a definition. Prepare in advance a quick vocabulary script to use when you encounter the word, including a brief review of the definition and follow-up questions for practice and application. One of the most important parts of application is that students encounter the word multiple times through questioning. Here's an example:

Teacher: What did we say a partition does to two spaces, Carlos?
Carlos: It divides it.
Teacher: Good, but can you use the word *partition* in your sentence?
Carlos: A *partition* divides two spaces.
Teacher: Good. What's the partition dividing here, Sarah?
Sarah: The partition divides the cabin where Edmund and Caspian sleep from the rest of the ship.
Teacher: Good. Who can tell me what this partition probably looked like, Jasmine?
Jasmine: The partition was probably made of wood.
Teacher: OK—based on the details in the text, how did this partition probably look, Jerome?
Jerome: The partition was probably old and moldy because the author says the cabin behind it wasn't very nice.
Teacher: Good. Let's get back to reading.

Although this might sound like the ideal action for all unknown words encountered in a text, there's rarely time to do this for more than the most important three or four words each day (depending on the length of the reading and instructional block).

See It in Action

Watch Maura Faulkner's fifth-grade classroom in clip 29 at teachlikeachampion.com/yourlibrary. While reading *Number the Stars* by Lois Lowry, Maura has her students circle the word *lanky* and briefly describes it as "tall and thin." She immediately asks students to repeat the definition back to her. Then she asks an application question within the context of the novel: "Tell me who is tall and thin? Who is lanky in the text?" and "Find me one more piece of evidence that shows that Annemarie is lanky. When you share out, I want you to say 'I know Annemarie is lanky because . . .'"

The key to using each approach is to make sure that it's efficient, so that you can return to reading the text as quickly as possible. When you drive, you don't stop at *every* scenic vista or *every* rest stop. If you did, you'd never get anywhere. By a similar token, you don't want vocabulary instruction to interfere with the road miles students are getting each day. Once you've decided how you'll reinforce each word, it's important to carefully plan your student-friendly definitions (in much the same way you do for Explicit Vocabulary Instruction, though more succinctly) for all of the words that you have decided to define, and create application scripts for all the words that are worthy of some practice.

See It in Action

Watch clip 30 at teachlikeachampion.com/yourlibrary, as Erica Lim and her students encounter the word *sovereignty* in their reading of an excerpt on the city of Constantinople from *The Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela* by Benjamin of Tudela. She has students "box" the word and pronounce it. Then she defines it and gives an example: "The empire was a *sovereign* nation because they had their own independence from other empires during the time." She then asks several practice questions in which students have to apply the meaning of the word. When students share out, she pushes them to use the word *sovereign* in their answers. She pushes it a bit further, asking students to identify nonexamples of the word *sovereign*. All of this practice takes about three minutes, yet students have several opportunities to use, hear, and apply the word and its meaning.

CHOOSING WHETHER TO TEACH EXPLICITLY OR IMPLICITLY

When choosing words to teach, you can think about words that will be most applicable in a variety of contexts. Patrick Pastore, a sixth-grade teacher at Rochester Prep, explicitly taught the word *undulating* because the passage his class was reading included the phrase "the hills were undulating." During his lesson, he asked students to describe things other than hills that undulated. After several unsuccessful student attempts, he realized that the word *undulated* is not widely applicable; it probably didn't deserve or require the entire ten minutes of a vocabulary lesson.

The following year, Patrick decided that it would be a far better use of his instructional time to "drop it in" by simply saying "that means that the hills were rolling" during

reading. Instead of derailing on *undulating,* it was a better use of time to focus on a word more likely to appear in multiple contexts. This common dilemma that teachers face illustrates the variety of factors we need to consider when determining whether to teach words explicitly or implicitly.

Given the complexity of vocabulary development and reading comprehension, there is no one-size-fits-all approach that can be universally applied to help prioritize which words to teach and how. David Coleman and Susan Pimentel suggest that "when selecting words and phrases for analysis, students and teachers should follow the lead of the text to attend to the most consequential among them."[10] Careful consideration and planning of which words to teach implicitly might cause you to consider teaching a word explicitly in advance instead.

Perhaps in planning and prioritizing words encountered during reading, you come across a word that you feel warrants explicit instruction because it is "high value"—it may shape text discussions or come up in other texts. For these words, you might preteach them in depth, using the explicit framework.

Implicit Vocabulary and Intellectual Autonomy

At a certain point, the legwork of defining difficult terms needs to shift from the teacher to the student. When college rolls around, nobody will be sitting with your students, making sure they've understood all the new words they encounter in the text they've been assigned to read. For this reason, implicit instruction—whereby students take on much of the work of learning new words—is especially important.

As much as possible, but especially in the older grades, students should begin to take responsibility for tracking the vocabulary words they come across during the course of reading. To best prepare students for independent word study, teach strategies that they can use beyond the classroom. Here's one possible plan. Each night for homework, students

1. Copy words from their in-class reading into their word journal. Perhaps you assign two or three of the most important words covered that day in class.
2. Copy the student-friendly definition (provided by you in class) that they have written down as part of their Interactive Reading notes.

3. Write a quick description of the context in which they encountered the word.
4. Write a new example sentence that includes and demonstrates the meaning of the word.

As we've discussed, Implicit Vocabulary Instruction is the breadth half of the quest to boost student vocabulary, and it helps students tackle complex texts. Implicit Vocabulary Instruction can increase student vocabulary through the course of everyday reading. Although it requires thorough preparation in deciding which words to teach and how, it goes a long way in terms of preparing students for the kind of independent study that will be expected of them in classrooms of higher learning.

Of course, no good instruction—implicit or explicit—is complete without continued practice. In the final module of this chapter, let's take a look at vocabulary maintenance and extension.