Choosing Words to Teach

The teacher's edition for a fourth-grade anthology suggests teaching the following words before inviting students to read an excerpt from *Charlotte's Web* (White, 1952): *comfort*, *cunning*, *endure*, *friendless*, *frolic*, *lonely*, *soaked*, and *stealthily*. Why do you think these words were selected? One obvious reason for selecting words to teach is that students do not know the words. Although *cunning*, *endure*, *frolic*, and *stealthily* are probably unfamiliar to most fourth graders, *comfort*, *friendless*, *lonely*, and *soaked* are probably not. Familiarity does not seem to be the principle used to make the selection. What about importance or usefulness? Are the selected words useful for writing or talking? Would the words be important to know because they appear in other texts with a high degree of frequency? Some—but not all—of the words might be considered useful or important. Thus, the question remains: Why were the words selected? The purpose of this chapter is to consider what principles might be used for selecting words to teach.

USEFUL WORDS

As a way to begin thinking about which words to teach, consider that words in the language have different levels of utility. In this regard, we have found our notion of tiers, as discussed in Chapter 1, to be one helpful lens through which to consider words for instructional attention. Recall that Tier One consists of the most basic words—*clock*,

baby, *happy*—rarely requiring instruction in school. Tier Three includes words whose frequency of use is quite low, often being limited to specific domains—*isotope*, *lathe*, *peninsula*—and probably best learned when needed in a content area. Tier Two words are high-frequency words for mature language users—*coincidence*, *absurd*, *industrious*—and thus instruction in these words can add productively to an individual's language ability.

IDENTIFYING TIER TWO WORDS IN TEXTS

To get an idea of the process of identifying Tier Two words, consider an example. Below is the opening paragraph of a retelling of an old tale (Kohnke, 2001, p. 12) about a donkey who is under a magical spell that forces him to do the chores for a group of lazy servants. The story would likely be of interest to third and fourth graders.

> *Johnny Harrington was a kind master who treated his servants fairly. He was also a successful wool <u>merchant</u>, and his business <u>required</u> that he travel often. In his absence, his servants would <u>tend</u> to the fields and cattle and <u>maintain</u> the upkeep of his mansion. They <u>performed</u> their duties happily, for they felt <u>fortunate</u> to have such a <u>benevolent</u> and trusting master.*

The underlined words are those we identified as consistent with the notion of Tier Two words. That is, most of the words are likely to appear frequently in a wide variety of texts and in the written and oral language of mature language users. (Note: We chose this paragraph because there were so many candidate Tier Two words; however, most grade-level material would not have so many words in only one paragraph.)

One "test" of whether a word meets the Tier Two criterion of being a useful addition to students' repertoires is to think about whether the students already have ways to express the concepts represented by the words. Would students be able to explain these words using words that are already well known to them? If that is the case, it suggests that the new words offer students more precise or mature ways of referring to ideas they already know about. One way to answer the question is to think about how average third and fourth graders would talk about the

concepts represented by the Tier Two words. We think that students would be likely to offer the explanations shown in the accompanying list.

Tier Two words	Students' likely expressions
merchant	salesperson or clerk
required	have to
tend	take care of
maintain	keep going
performed	did
fortunate	lucky
benevolent	kind

Adding the seven target words to young students' vocabulary repertoires would seem to be quite productive, because learning the words would allow students to describe with greater specificity people and situations with which they already have some familiarity. Note that these words are not simple synonyms of the familiar ones, however, instead representing more precise or more complex forms of the familiar words. *Maintain* means not only "keep going," for example, but also "to continue something in its present condition or at its present level." *Benevolent* has the dimension of tolerance as well as kindness.

SELECTING FROM A POOL OF WORDS

The decision about which words to teach must also take into account how many words to teach in conjunction with any given text or lesson. Given that students are learning vocabulary in social studies and science as well as reading or language arts, there needs to be some basis for limiting the number of words so that students will have the opportunity to learn some words well.

Now consider which of the words will be most useful in helping students understand the above paragraph. For the seven words noted there, our thinking is that *fortunate* is particularly important because the fact that the servants thought they were lucky is an important condition of the story. Similarly, *benevolent* plays an important role in setting up the story, as the servants appreciate their master's kindness and do not want

to upset their pleasant living situation. If one other word were to be selected, a good choice would be *merchant. Merchant* is a word that comes up in fourth- and fifth-grade social studies textbooks in discussions of colonization of the Americas (e.g., "European *merchants* were eager to locate new resources like tobacco and indigo which could be found in the colonies"; or "Colonial *merchants* were dismayed by the taxes on English goods which meant higher prices for their customers but no more profit for themselves").

The other candidate words, *tend*, *required*, *performed*, and *maintain,* are also words of strong general utility, and the choice of whether to include any more words is based solely on considering how many words one thinks students can usefully handle.

▪ *You Try It* ▪

Below is another excerpt from the tale about the donkey under the magical spell described above (Kohnke, 2001, p. 12). You might find it useful to try your hand at identifying Tier Two words. You will get to see our choices below the excerpt, so that you can compare your selections with ours.

The servants would never comment on this strange occurrence [finding the kitchen clean even though none of them were seen doing the cleaning], each servant hoping the other had tended to the chores. Never would they mention the loud noises they'd hear emerging from the kitchen in the in middle of the night. Nor would they admit to pulling the covers under their chins as they listened to the sound of haunting laughter that drifted down the halls to their bedrooms each night. In reality, they knew there was a more sinister reason behind their good fortune.

Which words did you select? Trying to be all-inclusive, selecting any words that might fit Tier Two, we chose *comment*, *occurrence*, *tended*, *mention*, *emerging*, *admit*, *haunting*, *reality*, *sinister*, and *fortune*. We considered them Tier Two words as we viewed them as fairly "general but sophisticated words." That is, they are not the most basic or common ways of expressing ideas, but they are familiar to mature language users as ordinary as opposed to specialized language. The con-

cepts embodied in each word are ones that students already have some understanding of, as shown in the accompanying list.

Tier Two words	Students' likely expressions
comment	something someone has to say
occurrence	something happening
tended	took care of
mention	tell
emerging	coming out
admit	to say you did something
haunting	scary
reality	being read
sinister	scary
fortune	luck

Now, the notion of tiers of words is not a precise one, and the lines between tiers are not clear-cut, so your selection may not match ours. Thinking in terms of tiers is just a starting point—a way of framing the task of choosing candidate words for instruction (see the accompanying box). Even within Tier Two, some words will be more easily familiar and some will be more useful than others. For example, our hunch is that *admit*, *reality*, and *fortune* are likely known to most fourth or fifth graders; that *tended* is not often used in a way that is key to understanding; and that fifth graders may already associate *haunting* with scary things—a Halloween context—

Some Criteria for Identifying Tier Two Words

- *Importance and utility*: Words that are characteristic of mature language users and appear frequently across a variety of domains.
- *Instructional potential*: Words that can be worked with in a variety of ways so that students can build rich representations of them and of their connections to other words and concepts.
- *Conceptual understanding*: Words for which students understand the general concept but provide precision and specificity in describing the concept.

which is fitting for this story. Thus we ended up with *comment*, *occurrence*, *mention*, *emerging,* and *sinister*. We judged the first four of these to be most useful across a range of contexts, and we chose *sinister* because it is a strong word with emotional impact that is used in literature to describe fictional characters as well as in nonfiction, such as when describing a group's *sinister* plans to invade another's territory.

CONSIDERATIONS BEYOND TIER TWO

There is nothing scientific about the way words are identified for attention in school materials. Some words are obvious candidates, such as selecting the word *representation* for a social studies unit on the American Revolutionary War era. But beyond the words that play major roles, choices about what specific set of words to teach are quite arbitrary. Teachers should feel free to use their best judgment, based on an understanding of their students' needs, in selecting words to teach. They should also feel free to treat words in different ways. As Chapters 3, 4, and 5 will show, Tier Two words are not only words that are important for students to know, they are also words that can be worked with in a variety of ways so that students have opportunities to build rich representations of them and of their connections to other words and concepts.

In many texts, however, there may be several unfamiliar words that do not meet the criteria for Tier Two words but which nevertheless require some attention if students are to understand a selection. Consider the following excerpt from the short story "My Father, the Entomologist" (Edwards, 2001, p. 5):

> *"Oh, Bea, you look as lovely as a <u>longhorn beetle</u> lifting off for flight. And I must admit your <u>antennae</u> are adorable. Yes, you've <u>metamorphosed</u> into a <u>splendid</u> young lady."*
>
> *Bea rolled her eyes and <u>muttered,</u> "My father, the <u>entomologist</u>."*
>
> *"I heard that, Bea. It's not nice to <u>mumble.</u> Unless you want to be called a . . . Mumble Bea!" Bea's father slapped his knee and hooted. Bea rolled her eyes a second time.*
>
> *The first day of fifth grade, and my father tells me I look like a longhorn beetle. Bea <u>shuddered</u> at the thought. She absolutely <u>detested</u> bugs.*

Why does Dad have to be <u>obsessed</u> with insects? She wondered. Why not football or golf like most fathers? The answer was simple. Bea's dad was weird. His weirdness made the whole family weird. And he had made Bea the weirdest of all when he named her Bea Ursula Gentry . . . B.U.G.

Suddenly, Bea felt angry. She flew into the kitchen where her father sat reading Insectology. *She <u>hurled</u> her backpack onto the table.*

"You know what, Dad?" she asked, tugging on one of her pigtails. "these are not antennae! Your bumper sticker, 'Have you hugged a bug today?' is not cool! And I <u>despise</u> eating in the dining room with all those dead bugs pinned to the walls!"

With fourth- and fifth-grade students in mind, we have divided the 12 underlined words from the story into the following three categories:

longhorn beetle	*obsessed*	*splendid*
antennae	*detest*	*shuddered*
metamorphosed	*despise*	*mumble*
entomologist	*muttered*	
	hurl	

The first column contains words that are important to the story but that can be dealt with very quickly. *Longhorn beetle* does not call for attention—students will understand it as a type of insect, and more knowledge is not needed to understand the story.

Antennae and *entomologist* are needed to understand the situation the author uses to set up the story, but the two words can be quickly described as "those things that stick out from an insect's head" and "a scientist who studies insects." More precise information is not required for this selection.

Metamorphosed can be explained as simply changed or grown, but to get the humor intended here, the information needs to be given that it is the type of change that certain insects go through, such as when a caterpillar changes into a butterfly. But, again, no more precision is required, and this is not the place to go through the elaborate explanation about the process or how it occurs. That should occur in a science unit about insects.

The words in the next two columns have more general applications

and are consistent with Tier Two words. The words in the second column—*obsessed*, *detest*, and *despise*—are most substantively related to the plot of the story, which is about a father who is obsessed with bugs and his daughter who detests and despises them. *Detest* and *despise* create a kind of "two-fer" situation, in that they are very close synonyms that could be introduced together and used interchangeably.

The rest of the words do not play key roles in the story, nor is their unfamiliarity likely to interfere with comprehension. So, which other words are attended to, if any, is simply a matter of choice and convenience. That is, a decision as to the number of words taught might be made on the basis of how many a teacher wants to make room for at the moment. Factors in this decision may include, for example, how large the current vocabulary load is in the classroom, the time of year, and the number and difficulty of other concepts presently being dealt with in the curriculum.

Assume that there is room for several more words from this story. It might be convenient to teach *splendid* and *shuddered,* because they could take advantage of concepts already established for the story. *Shuddered* fits well, since something that is detested might well make one shudder. *Splendid* is also a good fit, as in: "Bea's dad thinks bugs are splendid, but Bea detests them." Or "If you're obsessed about something, you might think it's splendid." These two words would also be favored because they have a bit more dimension to them than *mumble*, *muttered*, or *hurl*. This is not to say that *mumble*, *muttered*, or *hurl* should not be taught, but simply that, presented with the choice of words to work with, *splendid* and *shuddered* seem to lend themselves to a wider diversity of possible uses.

WHAT IF THERE ARE NOT ENOUGH WORDS?

Now let us consider a text that does not seem to offer much for vocabulary development because all of the words in the text are familiar to students. An approach in such a case could be selecting words whose concepts fit in with the story even though the words do not appear. For example, if the story features a character who is a loner, introduce the words *hermit*, *isolated*, or *solitary*; if a problem is dealt with, present it as a *dilemma* or *conflict*; if a character is hardworking, consider if

he or she is *diligent* and *conscientious*. Think in terms of words that coordinate with, expand, or play off of words, situations, or characters in a text.

Bringing in words whose concepts fit with a story is especially salient when young children are just learning to read and there are only the simplest words in their text. Consider a story in which two children (Pam and Matt) try on a number silly hats, some of which are very big and two of which are exactly alike. A number of words came to mind, and we chose *absurd*, *enormous*, and *identical*. Next we suggest how those words might be introduced to young children:

- In the story, Pam and Matt had very, very silly hats. Another way to say that something is very, very silly is to say that it is *absurd*. When something is *absurd*, it is so silly it's hard to believe.
- Some of the hats that Pam and Matt wore were so big that all you could see were their feet. Another way to say that something is very, very big is to say that it is *enormous*. *Enormous* means "very big—very, very big."
- Pam and Matt put on red hats that were almost exactly alike. A way to say that two things are exactly alike is to say that they are *identical*. *Identical* means "exactly alike."

Words don't need to be completely unfamiliar to students in order to be good candidates for instructional attention. Words might be selected for attention that may be familiar to students but which illustrate the power of an author's choice of words to reveal information about a character or situation. For example, notice the underlined words in the following excerpt, which is taken from a sixth-grade unit on Egypt (Banks et al., 1997, p. 87). The topic is Hatshepsut, a female pharaoh.

Hatshepsut

Hatshepsut was a princess and the wife of a pharaoh. She <u>seized</u> the chance to become pharaoh herself when her husband died. Her young stepson was supposed to become the new pharaoh of Egypt. Hatshepsut proclaimed, however, that the ten-year-old boy was too young to rule on his own. In this way she succeeded in being named co-ruler.

Hatshepsut's Trading Journey

In the eighth year of her reign, Hatshepsut organized the biggest trading expedition of her career. An expedition is a group of people who go on a trip for a set reason. The goal of Hatshepsut's expedition was to trade with Egypt's neighbors to the south in Punt. Historians think Punt may have been in what is today Ethiopia or Somalia. . . .

The huge caravan of scribes, soldiers, artists, and attendants set off along a dusty road that led east to the Red Sea. There they loaded their cargo onto five <u>sleek</u> ships for the long journey south.

The only word identified for attention by the publisher in this segment is *expedition*, which is explained within the text. The two underlined words—*seized* and *sleek*—offer possibilities for drawing students' attention to the effect of an author's choice of words and help the topic come alive.

That Hatshepsut "seized" the chance to become pharaoh reveals something about her character that would make for an interesting discussion. For example: "It says that Hatshepsut seized the chance to become pharaoh. *Seize* means 'to grab something or take control of it firmly.' So, what does that tell us about Hatshepsut? Was she afraid of being pharaoh? Do you think she was eager to become a ruler?"

Similarly, that the expedition sailed off in "sleek" ships communicates the prosperity and style of the Egyptian civilization. Discussion could prompt thinking in that direction: "*Sleek* is a word used to describe something graceful and stylish, that marks its owner as well-to-do. 'They sailed off in sleek ships.' What picture does that give us of Egypt?" Additionally, words like *ambitious* and *calculating* could be introduced to characterize Hatshepsut.

AN EXAMPLE FOR OLDER STUDENTS

The examples provided thus far were drawn from texts for readers in the intermediate grades. Although the same principles apply to selecting words from texts for students in the upper grades, they may play out a bit differently. Thus, we present a discussion of the words that might be selected for Agatha Christie's "In a Glass Darkly" (1934), a story that is

likely to be of interest to students in eighth or ninth grade. It is a rather brooding tale that moves from a murderous premonition to unrequited love, jealousy, and near tragedy before resolving happily. The story begins as the narrator, while staying with a friend, sees a vision of a man strangling a woman. The woman turns out to be his friend's sister, Sylvia, with whom he falls in love. But Sylvia is engaged—to the man he saw in his vision. He tells her of the vision, and she breaks her engagement. For years, the narrator is unable to tell her of his feelings for her. Finally, love is revealed and they marry. But he is deeply jealous, a feeling that results in his nearly strangling his wife—until he notices in the mirror that he is playing out the scene of his premonition.

The language of the story is sophisticated but not particularly difficult. Most words will likely be at least passingly familiar to many readers in eighth or ninth grade. However, many of the words are probably not of high frequency in the students' vocabularies, and thus an opportunity presents itself for students to work with these words and gain fluency with them. Here are the 30 words from the story that we identified as Tier Two words:

essential	*appreciated*	*altered*
intervened	*decent*	*well-off*
attractive	*rambling*	*prospect*
valet	*throttling*	*complication*
gravely	*upshot*	*leisure*
disinterested	*scornfully*	*devotedly*
absurdly	*endangering*	*inevitable*
entrenched	*gloomy*	*sullen*
savage	*unwarranted*	*abuse*
endurance	*revelation*	*sobering*

Of the 30 words, we decided to focus on 10 of them: *essential*, *altered*, *well-off*, *devoted*, *entrenched*, *inevitable*, *sobering*, *revelation*, *upshot*, and *disinterested*.

Ten words may be a lot to develop effectively for one story, but we see it as a workable number because many of them will already be familiar. Also, two of the words could be introduced rather briefly with little or no follow-up work. These are *altered*, which could be defined simply as "permanently changed," and *well-off*, which could simply be given

the synonym *wealthy*. The reason for attention to these two words is that they could cause confusion at the local level in the story if not understood.

Two other words were also chosen because they could cause confusion in a part of the story. These are *upshot* and *disinterested.* The narrator talks of the *upshot* of his decision to tell Sylvia that he saw a vision of her fiancé choking her. Because of the context and feel of the story, we thought *upshot* might be interpreted as some sort of physical violence, instead of simply "the result of." The word *disinterested* meaning "not being involved in a particular situation" is often confused with *uninterested*, meaning "not interested," and the story provides a good opportunity to introduce that distinction.

Five words seem to convey the mood and emotional impact of story developments: *devoted*, *entrenched*, *inevitable*, *sobering*, and *revelation*. And the word *essential* was chosen because "one essential detail" turns out to be a key plot device—that is, in his premonition, the narrator notices a scar on the left side of the choker's face. The essential detail he fails to account for is that he is seeing this in a mirror, so the scar is actually on the right. The five words can be used to describe the plot as follows: The narrator is *devoted* to Sylvia, although *entrenched* in a jealousy that causes *inevitable* problems. Only a *sobering revelation* (that *essential* detail) saves him, his marriage, and his wife.

A couple of points should be emphasized here. The words were selected not so much because they are essential to comprehension of the story but because they seem most closely integral to the mood and plot. In this way, the vocabulary work provides both for learning new words and for enriching understanding of literature. This decision was made possible because there was a large pool of words from which to choose. Sometimes choices are more limited, and sometimes the best words are not so tied to the story. In such cases, a decision might be made to select words that seem most productive for vocabulary development despite their role in the story.

For the six words we consider to be most important to teach, some characteristics of the words themselves also drove our selections. *Sobering* was selected because its strongest sense for students might be as the opposite of drunk. So, the context of the story provides a good opportunity to overcome that and introduce its more general sense. The others, *essential*, *devoted*, *entrenched*, *inevitable*, and *revelation,* have wide

potential for use and are not limited to specific situations or stereotypical contexts. Yet, they seem to be strongly expressive words that can bring emotional impact to contexts in which they are used.

AN EXAMPLE FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

We turn now to selecting words to enhance the vocabulary repertoires of young children—those who are just learning to read. We make two immediate distinctions between vocabulary work with intermediate and older students and work with students in the earliest grades, typically kindergarten though early second grade. The first is that we consider the best sources for new vocabulary to be trade books that teachers read aloud to children rather than the books children read on their own. In Chapter 4 we will make our case for that position. The second distinction is that in contrast to introducing words before a story, in our work with young children we have found it most appropriate to engage in vocabulary activities after a story has been read.

There are two reasons we decided that vocabulary activities for young children should occur after a story. First, if a word is needed for comprehension, since the teacher is reading the story she is available to briefly explain the word at the point in the story where it is needed (e.g., "A *ukulele* is a kind of guitar"; or "When ducks *molt*, they lose their feathers and can't fly until new ones grow"). Second, since the words that will be singled out for vocabulary attention are words that are very likely unfamiliar to young children, the context from the story provides a rich example of the word's use and thus strong support for the children's initial learning of the word.

The basis for selecting words from trade books for young children is that they are Tier Two words and words that are not too difficult to explain to young children. Here, we present our thinking for selecting three words for instructional attention from *The Popcorn Dragon* (Thayer, 1953), a story targeted to kindergartners.

In our review of *The Popcorn Dragon* for Tier Two candidate words, we first identified the following seven: *accidentally*, *drowsy*, *pranced*, *scorched*, *envious*, *delighted*, and *forlorn.* From the pool of seven, we decided to provide instruction for three: *envious, delighted,* an*d forlorn*. We considered three issues in making our choices. First, we determined

that the concept represented by each word was understandable to kindergartners; that is, 5-year-olds understand the concepts of wanting something someone else has *(envious)*, being very happy *(delighted)*, and being very sad *(forlorn)*. Second, it is not too difficult to explain the meanings of those words in very simple language, as illustrated in the previous sentence! And, third, each word has extensive possibilities for use. In particular, the words are found in numerous fairy tales; that is, there is often some character who is envious of another, and there are characters who are delighted or forlorn about the turn of events. The words, however, are not restricted to make-believe; they can all be used in describing people in common situations.

We found the other candidate words—*pranced*, *accidentally*, *scorched*, and *drowsy*—interesting and potentially useful, but we saw *scorched* and *pranced* as narrower than the ones we chose, and *drowsy* and *accidentally* as not quite so interesting. We hasten to make the point that this is all a matter of judgment. The final decisions about which words to teach may not be as important as thoughtful consideration about why to teach certain words and not others.

WHAT ABOUT WORDS BEING ON GRADE LEVEL?

A concern that surfaces in deciding which words to teach is whether words are appropriate for students at certain grade levels. Key to this concern is to understand that no formula exists for selecting age-appropriate vocabulary words despite lists that identify "fifth-grade words" or "seventh-grade words." There is simply no basis for determining which words students should be learning at different grade levels. For example, that *coincidence* is an "eighth-grade word" according to a frequency index means only that most students do not know the word until eighth grade. It does not mean that students in seventh or even third grade cannot learn the word or should not be taught it.

There are only two things that make a word inappropriate for a certain level. One is not being able to explain the meaning of a word in known terms. If the words used to explain a target word are likely unknown to the students, then the word is too hard. The other consideration for word selection is that the words be useful and interesting—ones that students will be able to find uses for in their everyday lives. Of

course, this is a matter of judgment, best decided by those who know the individual students. Work we have done with kindergarten and first-grade children shows that sophisticated words can be successfully taught to young children. For example, kindergartners readily applied *nuisance* to disruptive classmates, and understood what was happening when a *commotion* occurred in the hall; first graders could easily discern *argumentative* peers from those who acted *dignified*!

IN SUMMARY

In evaluating words as possible candidates for instruction, here are three things to keep in mind:

1. How generally useful is the word? Is it a word that students are likely to meet often in other texts? Will it be of use to students in describing their own experiences?

For example, students are likely to find more situations in which to apply *typical* and *dread* than *portage* and *brackish*.

2. How does the word relate to other words, to ideas that students know or have been learning? Does it directly relate to some topic of study in the classroom? Or might it add a dimension to ideas that have been developed?

For example, what might knowing the word *hubris* bring to a middle school student's understanding of the battles at Lexington and Concord, which set the Revolutionary War in motion?

3. What does the word bring to a text or situation? What role does the word play in communicating the meaning of the context in which it is used?

A word's meaning might be necessary for understanding a text. Or understanding its meaning might allow an enriched insight about the situation being presented, such as in the case of Hatshepsut's seizing power and her expedition traveling in sleek ships.

Keep in mind that there is no formula for selecting age-appropriate vocabulary words despite lists that identify "fifth-grade words" or "seventh-grade words." As long as the word can be explained in known words and can apply to what students might talk or write about, it is an appropriate word to teach.

▪ *Your Turn* ▪

We invite you to use what you have learned in this chapter to make some decisions about which words you will teach.

1. Select a text that your students will be reading. It can be a story, or an excerpt from a chapter book or novel, or a social studies textbook.
2. List all the words that are likely to be unfamiliar to students.
3. Analyze the word list:
   - Which words can be categorized as Tier Two words?
   - Which of the Tier Two words are most necessary for comprehension?
   - Are there other words needed for comprehension? Which ones?
4. On the basis of your analysis, which words will you teach?
   - Which will need only brief attention?
   - Which will you give more elaborate attention to?