

and gaps in vocabulary knowledge are a factor for low reading achievement (Harmon, Hedrick, & Wood, 2006; Kelley, Lesaux, Kieffer, & Faller, 2010; Lesaux, Kieffer, Faller, & Kelley, 2010). In order to make sense of increasingly dense academic texts, middle-level students must possess strategies to understand and use words, which will, with other types of text-based support, increase comprehension. For these reasons, academic vocabulary has received a great deal of attention in both the research and practitioner literature (see Baumann & Graves, 2010, for an overview). However, for our purposes, it is the definition provided by Flynt and Brozo (2008) that is most applicable to the classroom; academic vocabulary is “word knowledge that makes it possible for students to engage with, produce, and talk about texts that are valued in school” (p. 500).

What Is Effective Academic Vocabulary Instruction?

As part of an action research project, we examined and supplemented our practice for helping our students build academic vocabulary knowledge. Our research question for the project was based on Blachowicz and Fisher’s (2000) assertion that students should be responsible for taking an active role in learning new vocabulary words. Active engagement means “learning the meaning of specific words (where it is important to make connections between and among words and concepts), and learning strategies to become independent word learners” (p. 505). Therefore, our purpose for this project was to answer the question: How can we enhance young adolescents’ active engagement with academic vocabulary while engaging with texts in our social studies classes?

To start, we built a common understanding of academic vocabulary words, considering both general academic words and content-specific words. For general academic word knowledge, we relied on Coxhead’s (2000) work. She created a list of 560 academic vocabulary word families consisting of thousands of terms students would

most likely see across content areas. However, this list was never intended as a prescriptive list of words to teach, and we did not use it that way. Rather, we used the list as a guide for the type of word we wanted to attend to as we encountered them in the texts we were reading. For example, *proceed*, a word from the list, can mean to move forward, and *proceeds* can indicate the money received from an economic venture. Different forms of this word can be found in many other content areas, often with varying meanings.

In science, students must follow lab *procedures*, and in math, solving equations requires a specific *process*. In social studies, students can read about a funeral *procession*. The discussion of words at this basic but interconnected level is important to the deeper learning of words and supports the principle of active engagement. As we encountered general academic words in our instructional texts with our students, we would stop to run short pair-shares or whole-class discussions on how these words are used in various contexts.

Active Academic Vocabulary Practice in Social Studies Classrooms

The following are strategies from our action research project that we found to be the most effective in engaging middle-level students in building academic vocabulary knowledge and increasing access to academic texts.

Word Walls

Word walls provide visual support for all learners in their acquisition of academic vocabulary. Corson (1997) tells us that “words are only fully learned when they are available for active use” (p. 699). We learned that it is important when creating a word wall that the words are terms students

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have created and manipulated, not simply words up for display (Fisher & Frey, 2008). The organization of word walls varies; some walls arrange terms in alphabetical order, some use common themes or units of study (Fisher & Frey, 2008; Yates, Cuthrell, & Rose, 2011).

In creating our word walls, we engaged students in decisions about the placement of the

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words according to Beck, McKeown, and Kucan's (2002) tiers (see Fig. 2). Our students were already comfortable with these categories from our previous work together. Tier 1 words are basic, everyday vocabulary; Tier 2 words are similar to general academic words; and Tier 3 words equate with content-specific words. The discussions about where words belonged provided students with the opportunity to deepen their ownership of the words. We also found that simple prompts for entry and exit slips were time-efficient ways to help students pay attention to and use word wall words. Examples of

- Write down the words _____, _____, and _____ from our word wall and, with a partner, write down everything you think you know about them.
- Here are two questions we'll be answering today: Which word wall words do you think will be most important in today's lesson? Why?

Examples of exit slip prompts are:

- Write down one new thing you learned today and use at least two of our word wall words in your response.
- Look around at our word walls. Which words were the most important from today's lesson? What makes those words important today?

Morphology Practice with Matching Activities

Morphology, the study of word structure, including roots, bases, and affixes, is an extremely powerful tool for building academic language proficiency. The majority of the words on Coxhead's (2000) list are complex in nature, as are many social studies content area words. Consider, for example, the terms *civil disobedience*,

jurisdiction, *communism*, and *revolution*. The activity illustrated at the beginning of our article is one way we engaged our young adolescent learners in building word structure knowledge (see Fig. 1). Another activity we found particularly engaging for students is a matching activity (Townsend, 2009).

Each student received a slip of paper that had something in common, morphologically, with two other stu-

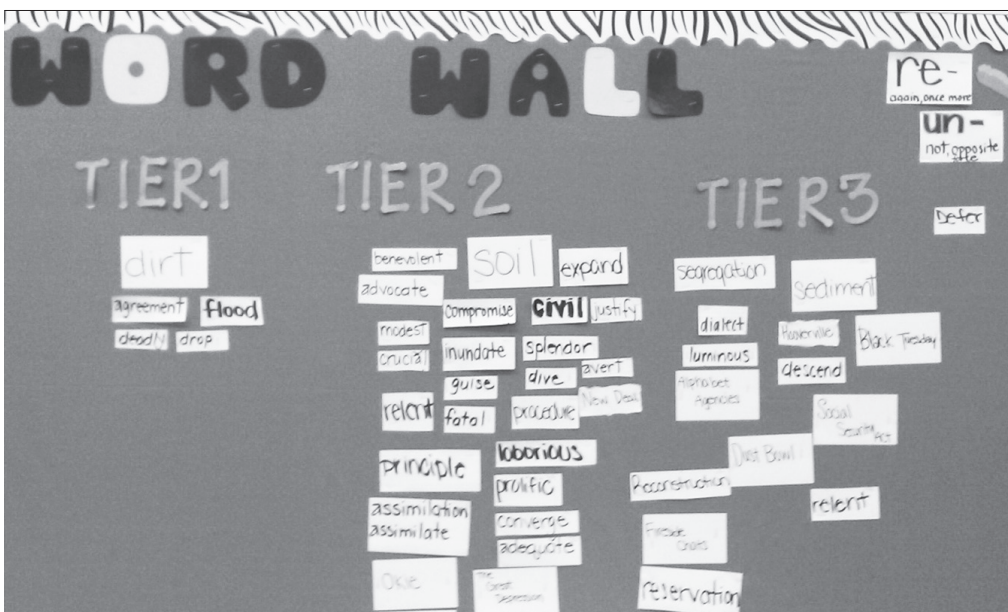


Figure 2. Example of a student-designed word wall in a social studies classroom

dents' slips of paper. For example, the words may have had the same Latin root or the same prefix. Students circulated around the room, with a time limit, to find their group members. Once groups were assembled, each group used textbooks and dictionaries to determine the meanings of their common word parts. Each group then generated additional words using their word parts and taught another group about the new terms. Building students' word awareness in this manner broadened their vocabulary knowledge without explicit instruction of each individual word. Such awareness-building plays "an important role in vocabulary growth which in turn impacts reading comprehension" (Nagy, Berninger, & Abbott, 2006, p. 134). And, as with all activities, the target words and word parts for the morphological activities were instructionally meaningful for the texts we were engaging with at the time.

Word Sorts

Word sorts can engage middle-level students in finding similarities and differences in word structures and word meanings (Templeton, Bear, Invernizzi, & Johnston, 2010). One example of a word sort involved students receiving (or mak-

ing!) a set of slips of paper, each with a term related to the Civil War. Students then sorted their terms into "people," "places," "events" or other self-selected categories. This particular sort included the category "military words." We were then able to assess a student's understanding of an individual word, such as *Copperheads* (see Fig. 3), by asking him to justify his category choices, thus uncovering misconceptions to be explored. Word sorts can also be used to further awareness of morphology (Templeton, et al., 2010). For example, in the same unit, *emancipation* was analyzed for its root "man," and students made connections to words like *manacle* and *mandate*. Students then practiced with word sorts comprised of Civil War terms that shared common roots or affixes.

Vocabulary Journals

Vocabulary journals in content areas allow adolescent students to work with vocabulary terms using an "introduce, define, discuss, and apply" sequence (Fisher & Frey, 2008, p. 67). The variations in the set-up of the journal reflect the needs of individual content areas. Interactive notebooks in a social studies classroom may include a vocabulary section for each unit. Students record word sorts, vocabulary, student-friendly definitions, and visual representations for each term. In our classes, students reviewed, referenced, and revised their vocabulary records as they

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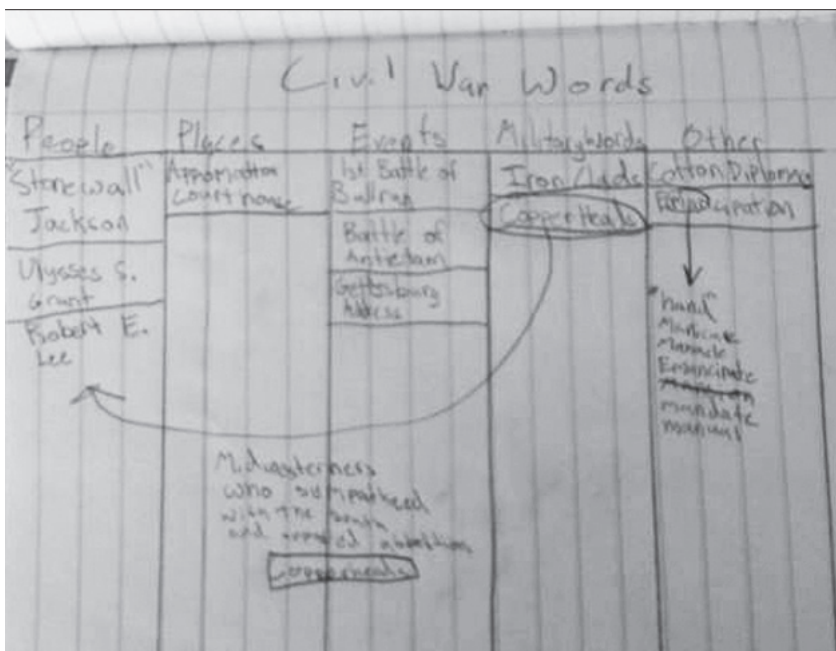


Figure 3. Example of a student's word sort

Focused vocabulary instruction is not about cutting curriculum or extending teachers' instructional day; rather, we learned from this action research project that it is about embedding a strategic, focused vocabulary curriculum, centered on meaningful words and word parts from our texts, into our lessons.

continued to construct more knowledge (see Fig. 4). Word learning is incremental in nature, and depth of word knowledge is built as students encounter words across various texts and contexts. Therein lays the power of vocabulary journals; students can revisit words, adding information about those words as they learn new nuances of and contexts for those words. Every page or section of a vocabulary journal then authentically grows as students' word knowledge grows.

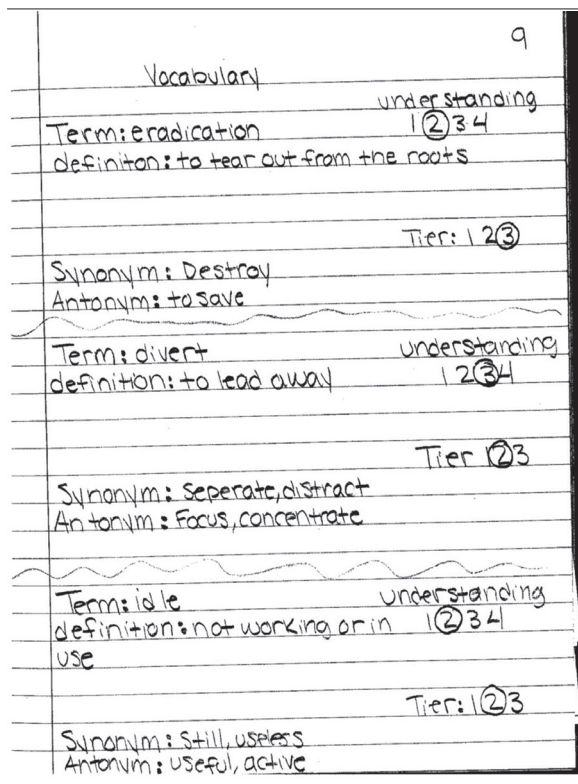


Figure 4. Example of a student's vocabulary journal

Conclusion

Active academic vocabulary practice helps middle-level students actively engage with and use the challenging academic language of the content areas. The strategies we have included are only a few of the ones used successfully in word study. Other successful strategies may include student discussions, role plays, jeopardy-esque games, flash cards, comic strips, acrostic poems, and a plethora of other writing assignments.

After working with the prefix *re-*, the social studies class mentioned above studied Reconstruction. Drawing the students' attention to the word *reconstruction* was built into the introduction to this unit. Based on the students' prior understanding of the prefix *re-*, they were able to infer what we would learn while studying America's reconstruction of the South. This was not a separate vocabulary lesson, but rather a quick review and application check for understanding that we slipped right into our daily instruction. Focused vocabulary instruction is not about cutting curriculum or extending teachers' instructional day; rather, we learned from this action research project that it is about embedding a strategic, focused vocabulary curriculum, centered on meaningful words and word parts from our texts, into our lessons.

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CONNECTIONS FROM READWRITETHINK

Word Matrix Student Interactive Tool

The Word Matrix is a tool from ReadWriteThink.org designed to assist teachers in vocabulary instruction, but it has flexible applications in literary analysis and writing instruction as well. The interactive tool can be used to teach students the concepts of connotation and register, to help clarify differences between seemingly similar words, to explore the concept of diction in literary analysis, or to encourage more precision in word choice in student writing.

<http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/student-interactives/word-matrix-30071.html>

Lisa Fink
www.readwritethink.org

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Lisa Larson and **Temoca Dixon** are middle school teachers in rural and urban middle schools, respectively. **Dianna Townsend** is an assistant professor of Literacy Studies at the University of Nevada, Reno.