STRATEGY: Vocabulary Predictions

FOCUS: Building Academic Vocabulary

WHEN TO USE: Before Reading  During Reading  After Reading

DESCRIPTION:
The teacher selects a set of eight to fifteen key words from the piece to be read. Working in small groups, students try their best to place the terms in a set of categories the teacher has established. Each group then creates a “gist statement,” which they predict will summarize the reading. Finally, they list things they hope to discover as a result of words they didn’t understand or questions that were inspired by the process.

Why Use It?

This activity takes some time, but addresses a number of important mental strategies for good reading. It leads students to use their prior knowledge, focuses on important academic vocabulary, and uses prediction to build active thinking about a topic before reading. Predicting helps readers become aware of their expectations and how the reading either fulfills or surprises them—an important aspect of learning. The activity gets students talking in small groups in a carefully organized way. It helps them become conscious of the structure of a story, argument, or explanation. Talking over the words in their groups helps students not only to notice these key words as they read but to go into the reading with their minds focused on the ideas expressed through them. Finally, the “to discover” step sets purposes for students’ reading. Students can be observing, as they read, to see which of their own questions get answered in the text. As we discuss later in Chapter 11, even struggling readers become more engaged when they are thinking about their own questions rather than those supplied by a teacher or a question section at the end of a textbook chapter.

How Does It Work?

1. Choose eight to fifteen key words from the upcoming passage, words that invoke main elements or ideas in the reading. To give kids a fair chance at speculating, the mix should include some words kids already know; some technical (Tier 3) words (please see p. 179 for a definition of these three-tier models) that will be a stretch (kids can use knowledge of word roots, affixes, or suffixes
to make informed guesses); and some important Tier 2 academic terms that will not only help kids understand this particular text, but also serve them in the future, across the curriculum.

Similarly, the categories for labeling these words depend on the subject and kind of material to be studied. Typical categories for a fictional story or a biographical piece might be Characters, Setting, Problem, Outcomes, Unknown Words. For a nonfiction news article on the spread of flu strains, for example, the word list might include: virus, mutation, interspecies transmission, respiratory, epidemic, genetic shift, travelers, virulence, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, quarantine, death rate, co-evolution. (See the great Tier 2 words in there?) Some categories for sorting these words might be Problem, Setting, Causes, People, Solutions, Unknown Words. At first, you may want to provide the categories for sorting the words, but as students get accustomed to the activity, you can also ask the groups to determine their own categories (which makes this activity more like the List-Group-Label strategy (see pages 153–154).

2 Model the strategy first with a group of words on a topic in your subject, thinking aloud so the students will understand what is involved. Along with the groups of words that you arrange (on a whiteboard or projected slide), be sure to also list a few questions the words have engendered, which you hope to get answered in the reading selection.

3 Provide a few key directions: The “unknown words” category is only for terms the group does not have any inkling about. Tell students whether you want them to use all the words in their gist statement, or only a certain proportion. Explain that if their gist statement doesn’t completely match the reading, there’s nothing wrong—but it does show their expectations and the reading differed, and that’s important to realize. The differences can help students realize that they’ve learned something new, or that the information or story was more complex or surprising than it first appeared to be. And remind students to list the “to discover” questions that the words led them to ask—not just about the word’s meaning but anything else that could go with it. Students might wonder not just what the Federalist Papers were, for example, but also why they were important or how they influenced the people who read them at the time they were written.

4 Group representatives briefly share with the class how they grouped their words and especially what their “to discover” questions are.

5 When the reading is completed, groups revisit the “to discover” lists to see which questions got answered and which did not. They can report these to the class, which can discuss when and how their unanswered questions might get clarified later in the unit or by some future online research.
**VARIATION:** If your students will be reading a narrative text like a short story, biography, or historical novel, you can do a very similar predicting activity by selecting a set of eight to fifteen sentences instead of single words (of course, you will pick sentences with great Tier 2 words in them as well as technical vocabulary). Each student gets one sentence on a piece of paper, and then students walk around the room, reading their different sentences to each other and predicting what the text will be about. When they go on to read the complete passage, students will implicitly be comparing the actual text to their hypotheses. Kids seem to find it fun when the sentences they worked with earlier suddenly pop up in the text. We call this activity a Quotation Mingle and Harvey and Nancy Steineke have written about it in another of our family of books (Daniels and Steineke, 2013).

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