Reading for Understanding

Teaching students to become effective word learners begins with teaching them to be "word detectives" and make judgments about the words they need to learn. Not all unfamiliar words can or should be the focus of deliberate attention, but because many students have a tendency to read past unfamiliar words, the first step is supporting students to monitor their comprehension. For example, when a group of three girls in Will Brown’s Introduction to Chemistry class claim they had no problems with the text they just read, all the same, Will asks them to pick out a few words they may have “read past.” The girls stall, so Will suggests the term “substantially” from the text. Because they cannot explain its use, Will advises them of the importance of being aware of choosing to read past unfamiliar words:

Sometimes you might let words like that go, but I want you to bring that to a conscious level. I want you to make to a conscious decision whether to skip a word or not.

Once students are deliberately noticing unfamiliar words, they must decide whether a particular word seems important to understand, whether there are any morphological or textual clues they can use to figure it out, and whether, if they must resort to the dictionary, the given meaning makes sense. Box 8.12 lists the questions students can ask themselves about how or whether to persist in defining an unfamiliar word.

As word detectives, students often decide they are able to move on without arriving at a precise definition of an unfamiliar word. However, if they (or the