

Which Words Do I Teach and How?

Excerpted from "The Significance of Vocabulary in the Common Core State Standards for ELA/Literacy"

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Teaching words in context and developing students' ability to learn word meaning from context is a rich, essential part of vocabulary instruction. However, choosing the words to spend time on in the context of a complex text—how to sift and winnow those words judiciously and effectively—can be a struggle for teachers. Hiebert (2009) describes three general criteria for determining which words to choose for intensive teaching:

1. Words needed to fully comprehend the text
2. Words likely to appear in future texts from any discipline
3. Words that are part of a word family or semantic network.

These criteria serve as useful guideposts, but truly knowing when to stop and teach in context, when to prepare students in advance, and when to teach words more intensively is challenging for even the most seasoned educators. In preparing a text for instruction, teachers frequently find themselves asking, "Which words do I teach, and how much time do I give to this?"

Words that can be quickly explained should be explained in the moment of encounter. This often includes concrete words, words with single meanings, and words reflecting meaning or shades of meaning that are part of the students' experiences. The explanation will enhance and not impede comprehension because it was swift and unobtrusive (Biemiller 2010). Words that need more explanation will ideally be taught in context, and then reinforced after, as these explanations will be more elaborate and time-consuming (Beck McKeown and Kucan 2007, Biemiller 2007). This includes words that are abstract, words with multiple related meanings, and words reflecting meanings or shades of meaning that are likely not part of the students' experience.

Understanding how words are classified into tiers can help educators plan effective vocabulary instruction. All text can be broken down into three tiers of words (Beck and McKeown 2002), each with its own implications for instruction:

Tier one words are the words of everyday speech usually learned in the early grades, though not at the same rate by all children (Biemiller 2007). These words are extremely important to early learning, but because they are learned largely through conversational language, they are not often considered challenging beyond the early grades. (Biemiller's work shows us that though many students learn these words in the elementary years, lower income students learn them later, thus slowing their vocabulary growth and making catching up to their more affluent peers extremely difficult. This is not, however, the focus of this paper, but will be addressed in another work.)

Tier two words are “words that characterize written and especially academic text—but are not so common in everyday conversation” (Beck, McKeown, and Kucan 2008).

Tier two words appear in all sorts of texts: academic texts (relative, vary, formulate, specificity, accumulate), technical writing (calibrate, itemize, structure), and literary texts (misfortune, dignified, saunter, faltered, unabashedly). Tier two words are far more likely to appear in written texts than in speech. The Standards refer to tier two words as academic vocabulary.

These words require particular instructional attention as they are often vital to comprehension, reappear in many texts, and frequently are part of a word family or semantic network. The challenge to teachers is to be alert to the presence of tier two words, determine which ones need to be taught, and which words deserve more time and effort for richer understanding. Tier two words can carry disproportionate weight in conveying the meaning of a text, and a reader who doesn't understand even a single such weighty word might have his or her comprehension thrown off track. This is equally true of informational and literary text. For these reasons, the CCSS demand significant instructional attention to these words.

Instruction of tier two words might begin with carefully looking at the key role these words play in the text (followed by examining the variety and shades of meaning for each of these words). This in turn would be followed by careful attention to the spelling, pronunciation, and morphology of the words so they can become a firm part of the students' vocabulary. This focus on precise meanings in varied contexts, combined with morphology, will also provide necessary repetitions. Encounters with a word spread out over time will further increase the likelihood of retention.

Tier three words are far more common in informational passages than in literature. They are specific to a domain or field of study (lava, fuel injection, legislature, circumference, aorta) and key to understanding a new concept within the text.

Because of their specificity, tier three words are often explicitly defined by the text and repeatedly used. Thus, the author of the text takes care to have the text itself provide much support in the learning of tier three words. In addition, as they are the words that contain the ideas necessary to a new topic, teachers often define and reinforce tier three words prior to and after students encounter them in a text. Therefore, students' acquisition of tier three words is generally encouraged by teachers as they know that the student has likely not encountered these terms before.