

Vocabulary

Isabel L. Beck, Margaret G. McKeown, and Linda Kucan (2002, 2008) have outlined a useful model for conceptualizing categories of words readers encounter in texts and for understanding the instructional and learning challenges that words in each category present. They describe three levels, or tiers, of words in terms of the words' commonality (more to less frequently occurring) and applicability (broader to narrower). While the term tier may connote a hierarchy, a ranking of words from least to most important, the reality is that all three tiers of words are vital to comprehension and vocabulary development, although learning tier two and three words typically requires more deliberate effort (at least for students whose first language is English) than does learning tier one words.

Tier 1	Tier 2	Tier 3
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Words used in everyday speech• Students with a limited vocabulary will need support	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• General academic words• Words found more often in written texts across disciplines	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Domain-specific words• Words found more often in written texts within a specific discipline

- Tier one words are the words of everyday speech usually learned in the early grades, albeit not at the same rate by all children. They are not considered a challenge to the average native speaker, though English language learners of any age will have to attend carefully to them. While Tier One words are important, they are not the focus of this discussion.
- Tier two words (what the Standards refer to as general academic words) are far more likely to appear in written texts than in speech. They appear in all sorts of texts: informational texts (words such as relative, vary, formulate, specificity, and accumulate), technical texts (calibrate, itemize, periphery), and literary texts (misfortune, dignified, faltered, unabashedly). Tier Two words often represent subtle or precise ways to say relatively simple things—saunter instead of walk, for example. Because Tier Two words are found across many types of texts, they are highly generalizable.
- Tier three words (what the Standards refer to as domain-specific words) are specific to a domain or field of study (lava, carburetor, legislature, circumference, aorta) and key to understanding a new concept within a text. Because of their specificity and close ties to content knowledge, Tier Three words are far more common in informational texts than in literature. Recognized as new and “hard” words for most readers (particularly student readers), they are often explicitly defined by the author of a text, repeatedly used, and otherwise heavily scaffolded (e.g., made a part of a glossary).

Tier Two Words and Access to Complex Texts

Because Tier Three words are obviously unfamiliar to most students, contain the ideas necessary to a new topic, and are recognized as both important and specific to the subject area in which they are instructing students, teachers often define Tier Three words prior to students encountering them in a text and then reinforce their acquisition throughout a lesson. Unfortunately, this is not typically the case with Tier Two words, which by definition are not unique to a particular discipline and as a result are not the clear responsibility of a particular content area teacher. What is more, many Tier Two words are far less well defined by contextual clues in the texts in which they appear and are far less likely to be defined explicitly within a text than are Tier Three words. Yet Tier Two words are frequently encountered in complex written texts and are particularly powerful because of their wide applicability to many sorts of reading. Teachers thus need to be alert to the presence of Tier Two words and determine which ones need careful attention.

Tier Three Words and Content Learning

This normal process of word acquisition occurs up to four times faster for Tier Three words when students have become familiar with the domain of the discourse and encounter the word in different contexts (Landauer & Dumais, 1997). Hence, vocabulary development for these words occurs most effectively through a coherent course of study in which subject matters are integrated and coordinated across the curriculum and domains become familiar to the student over several days or weeks.

Wisconsin Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts. (2010). Department of Public Instruction, 160.

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