

Vocabulary

Over the past several decades, vocabulary knowledge has been repeatedly identified as a critical and powerful factor underlying language and literacy proficiency, including disciplinary literacy (e.g., Graves 1986; Chall, Jacobs, and Baldwin 1990; Beck and McKeown 1991; Carlisle 2010).

Research points to the effectiveness of a comprehensive and multifaceted approach to vocabulary instruction (Graves 2000, 2006, 2009; Stahl and Nagy 2006) involving a combination of several critical components:

- Providing rich and varied language experiences, including wide reading, frequent exposure to rich oral and written language, teacher read alouds, talking about words, and classroom discussions
- Teaching individual words (both general academic and domain specific) actively to develop deep knowledge of them over time, including new words for known concepts, new words for new concepts, and new meanings for known words.
- Teaching independent word-learning strategies, including using context clues, word parts (morphology), cognates, and resources such as dictionaries to determine a word's meaning
- Fostering word consciousness and language play

Deciding which words to teach is important. Figure 2.13 displays a model for conceptualizing categories of words (Beck, McKeown, and Kucan 2013). The levels, or tiers, range in terms of commonality and applicability of words. Conversational, or Tier One, words are the most frequently occurring words with the broadest applicability. Domain-specific, or Tier Three, words are the least frequently occurring with the narrowest applicability.

Most children acquire conversational vocabulary without much teacher support, although explicit instruction in this corpus of words may need to be provided to some ELs, depending on their experience using and exposure to conversational English. Domain-specific, or Tier Three, words—crucial for knowledge acquisition in content areas—are typically taught in the context of the discipline; definitions are often provided both by texts and teachers. Target words are used repeatedly, and additional support for understanding, such as diagrams or glossary entries, is offered. General academic, or Tier Two, words are considered by some to be the words most in need of attention (Beck, McKeown, and Kucan 2013; NGA/CCSSO 2010a: Appendix A, 33). Tier Two words impact meaning, yet they are not likely to be defined in a text. They appear in many types of texts and contexts, sometimes changing meaning in different disciplines. Teachers make vital decisions about which words to teach.

Figure 2.13. Categories of Vocabulary

Vocabulary	Definition	Examples
Conversational (Tier One)	Words of everyday use	<i>happy, dog, run, family, boy, play, water</i>
General Academic (Tier Two)	Words that are far more likely to appear in text than in everyday use, are highly generalizable because they appear in many types of texts, and often represent precise or nuanced meanings of relatively common things	<i>develop, technique, disrupt, fortunate, frightening, enormous, startling, strolled, essential</i>
Domain-Specific (Tier Three)	Words that are specific to a domain or field of study and key to understanding a new concept	<i>equation, place value, germ, improvisation, tempo, percussion, landform, thermometer</i>