

## Tiers of vocabulary

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A rich vocabulary not only allows a pupil to communicate effectively, it broadens the reading material they can access and allows them to develop their written work. A concept popular in education is the use of tiered vocabulary, which is the theory from Beck, McKeon and Kucan.

The three tiers are all important but how they are taught and built and when they become a focus in the classroom differ.

Tier 1 are basic high frequency words. Words like clock, baby, big and small. Most of these words are learnt through speech in key stage one. However, some of these words may continue to challenge a learner, if they are trying to spell them. Therefore, tier 1 words are great taught through little and often one to one spelling activities, where appropriate.

Tier 2 words are words which add richness to communication whether that is verbal or written. Tier 2 words are the ones which we build over years of reading a variety of text, of talking to different people with different experiences. They should be taught directly in the classroom, explored from both reading and a writing perspective. Tier 2 words cross subjects - they are applicable to many contexts and can be used in both speech and text

An example of the difference between tier 1 and 2 words would be 'nice' to 'wonderful' or 'silly' to 'absurd'.

If you are working on a piece of text, it's the Tier 2 words that should be drawn out of that text before you teach it or read it as a class. This can be done by looking at meanings, finding synonyms of that word, putting into a context that the learners are familiar with, before giving examples of when that word has been used in a sentence. During reading, highlight the words which have been pre-taught to draw pupil's attention to them in context. You should limit the new vocabulary you teach to 5 words or so a week and revisit them throughout the term to strengthen pupils' long term memory of them.

Tier 2 words can also be instruction or command words and these for older children are useful to be taught explicitly and identify the differences between those. For example, you should teach pupils what it means to write analytically as opposed to writing a discussion.

Finally, tier 3 words are subject specific. They have a narrow reach when it comes to applying to other subjects. It is important for pupils to understand their meaning and application to the subject. What is less important, is being accurate in their spelling because they can be complex words. For those with literacy difficulties, to understand that word and to apply it in the right context is much more important than spelling it correctly. Tier 3 words are often introduced at the start of a topic, but teachers need to remember to refer back to them throughout the topic in order for them to become embedded in the memory of pupils.

Let's summarise how to address each tier in it in schools. Tier 1 words, if pupils are still finding these a challenge after key stage 1, teach them discreetly and targeted to that particular pupil. Tier 2 words should be a whole class activity to explore new vocabulary on a weekly basis. They are great for word walls because they apply to lots of different subjects. If they are used in a word wall,

they should be supported by strategies of how to break those words down and how to write them and finally, tier 3 words, are subject specific so should change when the topic changes. They should be highlighted in text and if they are part of a worksheet these words should be given as a scaffold to learners with literacy difficulties to remind them to use them and reduce the anxiety of having to spell them.