No Tears for Tiers: Common Core Tiered Vocabulary Made Simple

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The Common Core State Standards place an importance on academic vocabulary. In addition to developing an advanced vocabulary, the CCSS calls for increasing the amount of nonfiction and informational text in classrooms. We know that vocabulary knowledge influences fluency, comprehension, and student achievement. And, vocabulary plays an even more important role in understanding nonfiction and informational text. It has been estimated that 80% of comprehension in nonfiction is dependent upon understanding the vocabulary.

In Appendix A of the Standards, the Tiered Vocabulary framework by Isabel Beck is summarized. To many educators, the idea of tiered vocabulary is rather new. In this post, I’ll define Tiered Vocabulary and lay out a simple framework for thinking about the tiers, including examples for each tier, and provide implications for instruction.

Tiered Vocabulary: Definitions and Examples

**Definition:** Tiered Vocabulary is an organizational framework for categorizing words and suggests implications for instruction. (The three-tier framework was developed by Isabel Beck and Margaret McKeown.)

**Tier 1: Common, Known Words**

**Examples:** **big, small, house, table, family**

Tier I words are basic, everyday words that are a part of most children’s vocabulary. These are words used every day in conversation, and most of them are learned by hearing family, peers, and teachers use them when speaking. These words are especially important for English language learners who may not be familiar with them.

**Tier 2: High-Frequency Words (aka Cross-Curricular Vocabulary)**

**Examples:** **justify, explain, expand, predict, summarize, maintain**

Tier 2 words include frequently occurring words that appear in various contexts and topics and play an important role in verbal functioning across a variety of content areas. These are general academic words and have high utility across a wide range of topics and contexts.

Another way to think of Tier 2 vocabulary is as cross-curricular terms. For example, the term “justify” and “predict” frequently appear in Science, Social Studies, and English texts.
Tier 3: Low-Frequency, Domain-Specific words

Examples: isotope, tectonic plates, carcinogens, mitosis, lithosphere

Tier 3 words are domain specific vocabulary. Words in this category are low frequency, specialized words that appear in specific fields or content areas. We anticipate that students will be unfamiliar with Tier 3 words. Beck suggests teaching these words as the need arises for comprehension in specific content areas.

Instructional Implications

Understanding tiered vocabulary has practical applications for the Common Core and classroom instruction.

Listed below are several instructional implications.

1. Content Vocabulary Lists

First, as teachers work through content units to create key vocabulary lists, understanding the three tiers can help separate the “should-know words (Tier 3)” from the “must-knows (Tier 2)” and the “already-known words (Tier 1).” Too frequently, vocabulary lists are unnecessarily long. That leads to just-in-time cramming and promptly forgetting the words following the quiz or test.

2. Focus for Instruction

There isn’t enough time in the day for teachers to teach all words with the same amount of emphasis. Multiple exposures and practice are key characteristics of effective vocabulary instruction.

Tier 2 words are important for students to master and understand deeply. Why? Because academic words such as justify, expand, maximum, and barren are found in many content area texts such as social studies, Science, Mathematics, English, and History texts. Understanding these terms greatly increases comprehension of academic texts.

Put simply, creating tiered vocabulary lists and effective vocabulary instruction support student learning, achievement, and the Common Core State Standards.

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Kimberly is an educational consultant who works with district leaders to improve instructional effectiveness and student learning. No Tears for Tiers, a book about Common Core Vocabulary that she is writing, will be published by Solution Tree in 2014. In her other life, you’ll find her in her gardens, biking, reading, or hanging out with her two teenagers (when they let her, that is).