No Tears for Tiers: Common Core Tiered Vocabulary Made Simple

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 1 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 words are general academic words and have utility across a wide range of topics. 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 2 words are learned primarily through reading and explicit instruction. This is in contrast to Tier 1 words which are learned primarily through oral language. Tier 2 words are very important in that they build a strong academic vocabulary which is key to comprehending nonfiction and informational text. Here is a quick test to determine if a word is a Tier 2 term. First, think about whether students already have ways to express the concepts represented by the Tier 2 words. In other words, would students be able to explain a Tier 2 word such as “summarize” or “predict” using words that are already well known to them? If so, the term is a Tier 2 word.
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.

Reference