Three Tiers of Vocabulary and Education

by Thaashida L. Hutton, M.S., CCC-SLP

Vocabulary consists of the words we understand when we hear or read them (*receptive vocabulary*) and words we speak or write (*expressive vocabulary*). We build vocabulary by picking up words that we read or hear and through direct instruction from teachers or other professionals. Knowing a variety of words is important for language development and reading comprehension. A limited vocabulary is usually a "red flag," indicating a possible language learning disability and reduced literacy skills.

Most children begin first grade with about 6,000 words of spoken vocabulary. They will learn 3,000 more words per year through third grade. However, not all words have equal importance in language instruction. So, how do we know which words we need to teach? We consider three types of vocabulary words—three tiers of vocabulary—for teaching and assessing word knowledge. A word's frequency of use, complexity, and meaning determines into which tier it will fall. Those with mature vocabularies and age-appropriate literacy skills understand and use words from all three tiers. This handout discusses the three tiers of vocabulary, Tier 1—Basic Vocabulary, Tier 2—High Frequency/Multiple Meaning, and Tier 3—Subject Related.

Tier 1—Basic Vocabulary

Tier one consists of the most basic words. These words rarely require direct instruction and typically do not have multiple meanings. Sight words, nouns, verbs, adjectives, and early reading words occur at this level. Examples of tier one words are: *book, girl, sad, run, dog,* and *orange*. There about 8,000 word families in English included in tier one.

Tier 2—High Frequency/Multiple Meaning Vocabulary

Tier two consists of high frequency words that occur across a variety of domains. That is, these words occur often in mature language situations such as adult conversations and literature, and therefore strongly influence speaking and reading. Following is a list of standards for tier two words:

- Important for reading comprehension
- Contain multiple meanings
- Used across a variety of environments (generalization)
- Characteristic of mature language users
- Increased descriptive vocabulary (words that allow students to describe concepts in a detailed manner)

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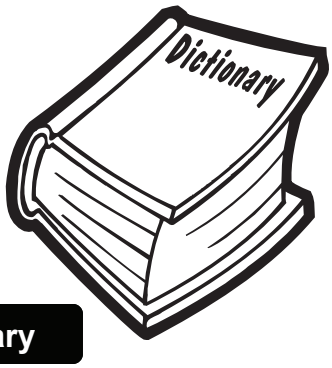
Tier two words are the most important words for direct instruction because they are good indicators of a student's progress through school. Examples of tier two words are: *masterpiece, fortunate, industrious, measure,* and *benevolent*. There are about 7,000 word families in English (or 700 per year) in tier two.



Tier 3—Low-Frequency, Context-Specific Vocabulary

Tier three consists of low-frequency words that occur in specific domains. Domains include subjects in school, hobbies, occupations, geographic regions, technology, weather, etc. We usually learn these words when a specific need arises, such as learning *amino acid* during a chemistry lesson. Examples of tier three words are: *economics, isotope, asphalt, Revolutionary War,* and, *crepe.* The remaining 400,000 words in English fall in this tier.

It important to remember that tier two and three words are not all clear-cut in their tier classification. There is more than one way to select the words. Word knowledge is subject to personal experience.

Students with Limited Vocabulary

Students may struggle to increase vocabulary because of poor memory skills, difficulty using word learning strategies, or lack of instruction. This may be a result of a language and/or learning disability, or poor instruction. Under these situations, schools can administer a response to intervention program (RtI). RtI will then determine if the student requires additional instruction or special education services. Contact your school district to find out its current response to intervention program.

Resources

Beck, Isabel L., McKeown, Margaret G., and Kucan, Linda. (2002). *Bringing words to life.* New York, NY: The Guilford Press

Montgomery, Judy K. (2008). *MAVA-Montgomery assessment of vocabulary acquisition.* Greenville, South Carolina: Super Duper Publications, Inc.

Montgomery, Judy K. (2007). Vocabulary Intervention for RTI: Tiers 1, 2, 3 Retrieved October 28, 2008, http://74.125.45.104/search?q=cache:VjfiwE6PJYEJ:convention.asha.org/2007/handouts/1137_1757Montgomery_Judy_106716_Nov05_2007_Time_122121AM.ppt+three+tiers+of+vocabulary&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=6&gl=us

3 Tier vocabulary words. Retrieved October 28, 2008 http://t4.jordan.k12.ut.us/cbl/images/CBL_Documents/3tiervocab.pdf

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Helpful Products

The list of Super Duper® products below may be helpful when practicing or doing activities related to Vocabulary Development. Visit www.superduperinc.com or call 1-800-277-8737. Click the links below to see the product description.

Core Curriculum Vocabulary Cards Level One
Ask for Item #CRD44 http://www.superduperinc.com/products/view.aspx?pid=CRD44

First 100 Sight Words Plus Sentence Building Super Fun Deck®
Ask for Item #FD74 http://www.superduperinc.com/products/view.aspx?pid=FD74

Grannies Candies® The Delicious Game of Word Meanings
Ask for Item #GB154 http://www.superduperinc.com/products/view.aspx?pid=GB154

MAVA Montgomery Assessment of Vocabulary Acquisition™
Ask for Item #MAVA22 http://www.superduperinc.com/products/view.aspx?pid=MAVA22

Say and Do® Vocab Bingo Laminated Games
Ask for Item #BGO22 http://www.superduperinc.com/products/view.aspx?pid=BGO22

START-IN™ A Response to Intervention (RtI) Program for Reading
Ask for Item #START11 http://www.superduperinc.com/products/view.aspx?pid=START22

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