

Fully Grasping Tier Two Words

Step 1: Select words for vocabulary building by considering three levels of utility. Tier 1 words are basic words that commonly appear in spoken language. Because they are heard frequently, in numerous contexts, and in concert with a great deal of nonverbal communication, tier 1 words rarely require explicit instruction in school.

Tier 2 words represent the more sophisticated vocabulary of written texts. Mature language users use such words with regularity, but students encounter them less frequently as listeners. As a result, these words are unknown to many of our learners. Because of their lack of redundancy in oral language, tier 2 words present challenges to students who primarily meet them in print.

Tier 3 words appear in only isolated situations. These words tend to be limited to use in specific domains. Medical terms, legal terms, biology terms, and mathematics terms are all examples of tier 3 words. *Tier 3 words are central to building knowledge and conceptual understanding within the various academic domains and should be integral to instruction of content.* (Yet these words surface relatively rarely in general vocabulary usage.)

Beck, McKeown, and Kucan advocate a focus on tier 2 words for explicit vocabulary instruction. Because these words are increasingly prominent in the written texts that students read as they move through school, adding them to one's vocabulary will have a high impact on reading comprehension. (Prominent, sophisticated, domain, and explicit, which are used in this article, are examples of tier 2 words.)

Step 2: Model for students how to “explain” a word rather than seeking a definition. A “student-friendly explanation” should include the following components:

- The word is described in everyday language, rather than “dictionary-speak.”
- The word is explained in connected language, not with isolated single word or short phrase definitions.
- The explanation exemplifies multiple contexts that feature the word in action.
- The explanation includes “you,” “something,” and “someone” to help students to “ground” the new word in familiar situations.

For example, a teacher modeling an explanation of the word belligerent might say: “If you are belligerent with someone, you are showing a lot of hostility to that person. Someone who is belligerent with you is threatening to you, and you feel like you are being attacked.”

Step 3: Solicit students to provide their own examples of the word in action. Students need guided opportunities to playfully experiment with contexts that might feature the new word.

“My cat is very belligerent to other cats; it always snarls and hisses at them.” As students explore appropriate usages of the word, encourage them to continue to refine their understanding by venturing into possible uses that do not exactly parallel your examples. This experimentation phase can also clear up misunderstandings or misconceptions about a word’s usage. For example, the student who offers “The approaching thunderstorm was very belligerent to me” has over-generalized the connection between belligerent and threatening.

Step 4: A further activity prompts students to consider “Who would use this word?” Ask students to imagine the kinds of people who would likely be regular users of the new word and to create sentences that reflect what these people might say:

A police officer: “The violence in the community was caused by a belligerent confrontation between two gangs.”

A school principal: “If you don’t stop being belligerent to those boys, you will be suspended!” In addition, as a teacher, be conscious of regular modeling of tier 2 words in your oral language. Students will incrementally gain a grasp of a new word as a result of these ongoing repetitions in a variety of appropriate contexts.

[**Article: Fully Grasping 'Tier 2' Words By Doug Buehl**](#)