

Vocabulary Word Tiers for ELLs

Word Level	<i>General Descriptors</i> (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002)	<i>Considerations for ELLs</i> (Calderón et al., 2005)
Tier I words	<p>Basic words that do not often require instructional attention, for students who have basic proficiency in the language.</p> <p>Examples: sad, run, table, food, eat; basic color words (e.g., blue, red, green, yellow), butterfly, dog, etc.</p>	<p>--Basic words and high-frequency cognates, for which students have understanding in their first language (e.g., <i>family-familia</i>).</p> <p>--Also includes high-frequency false cognates (such as the Spanish word <i>pan</i>, which means "bread," not "pan" in English), and simple idiomatic expressions or common phrases (such as "let's move on," "hop in the car," "it's a piece of cake.")</p> <p>--Can be taught easily through visuals, demonstrations, or simple explanations.</p>
Tier II words	<p>Words that are more academic in nature, more precise descriptors of Tier 1 words</p> <p>(e.g., gloomy, scamper, groceries, devour, gold)</p>	<p>*High-frequency words in student texts, words that have high utility, and provide more specific descriptions of concepts.</p> <p>*Includes multiple-meaning words that require explicit instruction (e.g., ring, play, time) or demonstration.</p> <p>*Also includes cognates that are high-frequency in Spanish but not English (e.g., <i>demonstración-demonstration, frecuencia-frequent, oportunidad-opportunity</i>).</p>
Tier III words	<p>Words that are highly technical and specific, usually relegated to specific fields, content areas, or processes.</p> <p>Very low frequency use across contexts (e.g., photosynthesis, proton, everglades).</p>	<p>^Words that are more academic in nature, are more advanced descriptors of Calderón et al.'s Tier 2 words (e.g., gloomy, scamper, desk).</p> <p>^Also included are cognates with nonsimilar spellings: <i>tend/atender, maintain/mantener</i>.</p> <p>^Includes words that are domain specific, highly technical, and do not occur frequently in texts. ELLs will need explicit instruction in these words, especially given they are often context-bound (contexts with which monolingual English speakers may be familiar, but ELLs may not)</p>

Examples of Vocabulary Selections from Particular Texts

<p><i>A House for Hermit Crab</i> (Carle, 1991: Reprinted with Permission)</p> <p><u>250 word passage, with possible vocabulary choices in bold</u></p>	<p>Type of vocabulary word</p> <p>Reason for selection (this of course will vary depending on student needs)</p>
<p>“Time to move,” said Hermit Crab one day in January. “I’ve grown too big for this little shell.” He had felt safe and snug in his shell. But now it was too snug. Hermit Crab stepped out of the shell and onto the floor of the ocean.</p> <p>But it was frightening out in the open sea without a shell to hide in. “What if a big fish comes along and attacks me?” he thought. “I must find a new house soon.”</p> <p>Early in February, Hermit Crab found just the house he was looking for. It was a big shell, and strong. He moved right in wiggling and wagging about inside it to see how it felt. It felt just right. “But it looks so—well, so plain,” thought Hermit Crab.</p> <p>In March, Hermit Crab met some sea anemones. They swayed gently back and forth in the water. “How beautiful you are!” said Hermit Crab. “Would one of you be willing to come and live on my house? It is so plain, it needs you.” “I’ll come,” whispered a small sea anemone. Gently, Hermit Crab picked it up with his claw and put it on his shell.</p>	<p>move: Verb. A good Tier I word for students with lower proficiency. Could be considered higher-level because of its dual meaning—to move homes, rather than to move one’s body...(Spanish: moverse versus mudarse). snug: Adjective. Tier II word for “tight” or “a close fit.” This is easily visualized, and high-utility.</p> <p>But: Signal/function word: hard to visualize, high frequency, high utility. Has a Spanish equivalent (pero...) frightening: Adverb. Tier II word for “scary.” Easily visualized, high utility. attacks: Verb. Tier II word for “fight.” Easily visualized, high utility. Cognate for Spanish “atacar.”</p> <p>wiggling: Verb. Tier II word for “moving side to side.” Easily visualized, high utility. plain: Adjective. Tier II for “simple.” High frequency, high utility. Used multiple times in the book and across texts and content areas.</p> <p>swayed: Verb. Tier II for “moving back and forth”, meaning given in text. Easily visualized, high utility. beautiful: Adjective. Tier II for “pretty.” High utility, multiple occurrences across contexts and texts. plain: see above.</p>

<p>In April, Hermit Crab passed a flock of starfish moving slowly along the sea floor. “How handsome you are!” said Hermit Crab. “Would one of you be willing to decorate my house?” “I would,” signaled a little sea star.</p>	<p>flock: Noun. Tier II for a group of creatures or animals. Easily visualized. Multiple uses across content areas. slowly: Adverb. A terrific Tier I word for students at lower levels of English proficiency. handsome: Adjective. High utility. decorate: Verb. Tier II: “to cover with things you like.” Easily visualized, high utility. Cognate to Spanish “decorar.” signal (signaled): Verb. Tier II for “to wave, to show you want something.” High utility, multiple uses across contexts.</p>
<p>Carefully, Hermit Crab picked it up with his claw and put it on his house. (250 words)</p>	

Theme/Book	Sample Words
<p>Theme: Families Book: <i>A Chair For My Mother</i> (Vera B. Williams)</p>	<p>silverware (<i>n</i>), forks, spoons and knives speech (<i>n</i>), a talk someone gives about something boost (<i>v</i>), lift or push up wrapped (<i>v</i>), covered or put something (cloth, paper, plastic) all around something else delivered (<i>v</i>), brought</p>
<p>Theme: Pets Book: <i>Dogs</i> (Gail Gibbons)</p>	<p>bares (<i>v</i>), shows restless (<i>adj</i>), moving around a lot social (<i>adj</i>), friendly, knowing how to get along with others confined (<i>adj</i>), covered or closed in, not open secure (<i>adj</i>), safe unattended (<i>adj</i>), alone, no one else nearby or watching guard (<i>v</i>), protect miniature (<i>adj</i>), a very small thing</p>
<p>Theme: Insects Book: <i>Ant Cities</i> (Arthur Dorros)</p>	<p>grooming (<i>v</i>), cleaning capture (<i>v</i>), grab or take to keep devour (<i>v</i>), eat up quickly and completely hollowed-out [hollow] (<i>adj</i>), open on the inside pavement (<i>n</i>), sidewalk or roadway</p>

Table 6.1 Special Considerations When Interpreting Linguistic Features in the Comprehension of ELLs

Feature	Description	Special Considerations
<i>Word frequency/familiarity</i>	Words most frequently used in reading /spoken language	Words high on a general frequency list for English are likely to be familiar to most readers because they are encountered often. Readers who encounter familiar words are more likely to interpret them quickly and correctly, having a positive impact on comprehension and test results
<i>Word length</i>	Use of single syllable to multisyllable words	Words tend to be longer as their frequency of use decreases. In one study, language minority students performed better on math test items with shorter word lengths than items with longer word lengths.
<i>Sentence length</i>	Use of two–three word sentences through lengthy multi-word sentences	The length of a sentence serves as an index for its complexity and can be used to predict comprehension difficulty.
<i>Passive/Active voice</i>	Use of passive vs. active structure (e.g., Active-“Juan hit the ball”; Passive-“The ball was hit by Juan.”)	Passive constructions can be especially challenging to nonnative English speakers.
<i>Long noun phrases</i>	Sentences that contain several interconnected phrases requiring learners to comprehend more complex sentences	Noun phrases with several modifiers provide a potential source of difficulty in test items. Romance languages (e.g., Spanish, French, Italian, Portuguese) make less use of compounding than English.
<i>Long question phrases</i>	Questions that contain longer phrases and numerous words	Longer question phrases occur less frequently than short question phrases. Low-frequency expressions (long question phrases) are often harder to read/understand.
<i>Comparative structures</i>	Comparing/Contrasting ideas	Comparative constructions often represent potential sources of difficulty for nonnative speakers as well as for speakers of nonmainstream dialects.

<i>Prepositional phrases</i>	Phrases within a sentence that begin with a preposition	Students may experience difficulty with prepositions. English and Spanish may differ in their use of prepositions.
<i>Sentence and discourse structure</i>	Complexities of words/phrases used in a sentence or group of sentences	Although sentences may have a similar number of words, one may be more difficult to understand due to syntax complexities or discourse relationships among sentences.
<i>Subordinate clause</i>	Clauses in sentences; designed to show relationships and connect ideas that do not stand alone	For many students, subordinate clauses may increase the complexity of the sentence generating confusion or lack of understanding.
<i>Relative clauses</i>	Clauses that characterize (e.g., "The dog, who loves bones, barked for a treat.")	Relative clauses are less frequent in spoken English than in written English and some students may have limited exposure to them and their usage in writing/reading.
<i>Concrete vs. abstract presentations</i>	Use of concrete examples or statements, avoiding the use of vague abstractions	Students tend to perform better when content is presented in concrete rather than abstract terms.
<i>Negation</i>	Use of negatives such as no, not none, never in sentences	Sentences that contain negations are more difficult to understand than affirmative sentences. In Spanish, double negative constructions retain a negative meaning, rather an affirmative meaning as in English.

Source: Adapted from Abedi (2004b); Abedi et al. (1997); Adams (1990); Calce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman (1983); Cummins, Kintsch, Reusser, & Spanos et al., (1998); Freeman (1978); Hunt (1965); Mestre (1988); Orr (1987); Slobin (1968).