

Choosing Words Worth Teaching

The three tiers sort the dictionary into teaching decisions. Tier 2 is where deliberate teaching pays most: high-value words that cross subjects.

TIER 1

Tier 1: leave them be

Everyday words most learners arrive with. Teach only where EAL or language gaps demand it.

In class: happy, house, run, before. No flashcards needed.

TIER 2

Tier 2: teach these hard

High-frequency academic words used across several subjects, increasingly so from upper primary onwards. The biggest return on teaching time.

In class: analyse, consequence, significant, contrast, estimate, justify.

TIER 3

Tier 3: teach in the moment

Subject-specific technical terms. Teach them inside the topic, anchored to the concept, then revisit.

In class: photosynthesis, oxbow, denominator, allegro.

CHOOSE

The selection test

Pick five or fewer per text: useful beyond this lesson, connected to known ideas, needed to understand the passage.

In class: Would this word help them in three other subjects? If yes, it is probably Tier 2: teach it.

The Frayer Model, Ready to Print

Four boxes that force active processing: definition, characteristics, examples and non-examples. Copy this layout onto A4 with the word in the centre.

Definition, in our words

Learner-friendly explanation built together, not copied from a glossary.

In class: Erosion: when natural forces wear away rock or soil and move it somewhere else.

Characteristics

What is always, sometimes and never true of it.

In class: Always gradual? No, storms erode fast. Always involves movement? Yes, that is the difference from weathering.

Examples

Cases from the topic, other subjects and life.

In class: Cliff collapse, river banks, footpath wear on the school field.

Non-examples

The near-misses that sharpen the boundary, the box that does the real teaching.

In class: Weathering without movement; a wall knocked down by a digger: destruction, not erosion.

Word-Part Attack Cards

Morphology turns one taught word into a word family. Effects are strongest for younger learners, EAL and those who find literacy hard.

Prefix check

Front of the word first: does a known prefix reveal the direction of meaning?

Say: "un-, re-, dis-, pre-, mis-, anti-: what does it do to the base word?"

Root hunt

Find the family the word belongs to; meaning travels through roots.

Say: "spect = look. Inspect, spectator, respect, spectacle: what is the looking in each?"

Suffix signal

The ending tells you the word's job in the sentence.

Say: "-tion makes it a thing, -ify makes it an action, -ous makes it a description."

Build three relatives

Every new Tier 2 word earns a family tree before we move on.

Say: "Analyse: analysis, analyst, analytical. Use each in half a sentence."

Weekly Vocabulary Routine

Words stick through repeated meaningful encounters, not single exposures. A sustainable weekly cycle.

Monday: introduce

- Five or fewer words chosen against the Tier 2 selection test.
- Each gets a friendly definition, an example from life, and a first learner use.
- Words displayed with morphological relatives where they exist.

Midweek: process

- One Frayer model completed on the highest-value word.
- Learners meet the words in new contexts (different text, different subject angle).
- Quick oral practice: use two target words to answer a content question.

Friday and beyond

- Retrieval: words tested from memory, including last week's set.
- Tier 3 terms re-anchored to the concept, not just the spelling.
- Display tally marks each time a taught word resurfaces in class talk.

Vocabulary Teaching: A 5-Minute Evidence Briefing

What the research supports about tiered vocabulary work, and where the claims need care.

■ Active processing beats copying

Across a systematic review, teaching word meanings supported comprehension of texts containing those words; choosing, sorting, generating and contrasting beat definition-copying in nearly every comparison.

■ Morphology multiplies the investment

Word-part instruction shows moderate effects on vocabulary, decoding and spelling, with the biggest gains for younger learners, EAL learners and those with literacy difficulties.

■ Selection is where the gains live

The tier framework's real power is rationing: five well-chosen Tier 2 words taught deeply beat twenty words listed on a slide. The selection test is the discipline.

■ The honest caveat

Direct word teaching reliably improves knowledge of taught words, but evidence it lifts generalised comprehension is limited, and morphology effects on comprehension were non-significant in the broader meta-analysis. Pair taught words with wide reading; promise word knowledge, not reading-age miracles.

Evidence base

Wright, T.S. and Cervetti, G.N. (2017). A systematic review of the research on vocabulary instruction that impacts text comprehension. *Reading Research Quarterly*.

Goodwin, A.P. and Ahn, S. (2013). A meta-analysis of morphological interventions in English: effects on literacy outcomes for school-age children. *Scientific Studies of Reading*.

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Beck, I.L., McKeown, M.G. and Kucan, L. (2013). *Bringing Words to Life: Robust Vocabulary Instruction*. Guilford Press.