

Tiers of Vocabulary

Vocabulary can be usefully divided into 3 tiers:

- **Tier 1** – high frequency in spoken language (table, slowly, write, horrible)

Pupils tend to be familiar with Tier 1 words. They usually arrive knowing the basics and if not, they will quickly pick them up in conversation with their peers.

- **Tier 3** – subject specific, academic language (osmosis, trigonometry, onomatopoeia)

As subject specialists, teachers are good at recognising pupils Tier 3 words that pupils will not recognise – these are our subject-specific key words.

- **Tier 2** – high frequency in written texts (gregarious, beneficial, required, maintain)

This vocabulary presents a problem. Teachers read and there are words that are so familiar to them, that they don't notice pupils won't know them. However, these are usually words that pupils will already have a conceptual understanding of, even though they're unfamiliar with the vocabulary.

Consider this text:

*Johnny Harrington was a kind master who treated his servants fairly. He was also a successful wool **merchant**, and his business **required** that he travel often. In his absence, his servants would **tend** to the fields and cattle and **maintain** the upkeep of his mansion. They **performed** their duties happily, for they felt **fortunate** to have such a **benevolent** and trusting master.*

The words in red might well be unfamiliar to non-readers but they will certainly know the underlying concepts:

- **merchant** – shop keeper
- **required** – have to
- **tend** – look after
- **maintain** – keep going
- **performed** – did
- **fortunate** – lucky
- **benevolent** – kind

This makes Tier 2 words relatively straightforward to teach: by providing a synonym. If you explain that benevolent means kind, few children will struggle to understand kindness as a concept.