Vocabulary
What to Teach

VOCABULARY
ALPHABETICS
COMPREHENSION
FLUENCY

MEANINGS OF WHOLE WORDS AND PHRASES

Vocabulary comprises multiple levels of understanding such as a whole word's:

- association to a concrete object or abstract concept (e.g., *table, love*);
- part of speech (e.g., *table or love* as a noun or a verb); or
- signaling to the reader how information or ideas in a text are related (e.g., *also, however*).

WORD TIERS

Researchers of reading instruction have developed a categorization of words based on frequency of use that is helpful for reading instructors to determine which words are most important to teach. These categories are called *tiers*.

TIER 1 (HIGH FREQUENCY IN SPEECH)

Tier 1 words are those used in everyday speech and are learned by native English speakers as children. These are the first words native English speaking adult learners encounter at the beginning level of learning to read. Because Tier 1 words are guaranteed to be familiar, the reading focus can be on decoding these words. However, English learners at the lowest proficiency levels may need to learn the meanings of Tier 1 words. Examples of Tier 1 words are: *clock, homework, understand, jump, ready, tall*.

TIER 2 (HIGH FREQUENCY IN WRITING)

Tier 2 words are sometimes called "general academic words." While they may be used by sophisticated language users in speech, they appear more frequently in written texts. Tier 2 words tend to be more abstract than Tier 1 words and tend to be used in more formal, technical, or academic contexts, though they are not specific to any field. Adult learners at the high beginning and intermediate levels—native English speakers and English learners alike—benefit from direct instruction in Tier 2 words. Intermediate readers can also expand their comprehension of Tier 2 words as they encounter them during reading of literary and informational texts. Examples of Tier 2 words are: *benefit, expectation, compatibility, incongruous, generalize, pacify, sympathetic*.

Teaching Adults to READ

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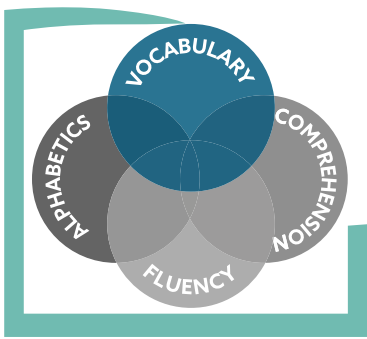
TIER 3 (LOW FREQUENCY AND TECHNICAL)

Tier 3 words, sometimes called "domain-specific words," are specific to academic and technical domains, they represent technical terminology that is applicable to a specific field of study and is often used by specialists in that field. When Tier 3 words appear in writing, especially for non-specialist audiences, they tend to be defined in the text or in glossaries. Tier 3 vocabulary is typically taught through separate lessons, such as a science class. Therefore, it is less important to spend time teaching and learning Tier 3 words in the context of general adult education reading instruction.

Since building background knowledge is key to building comprehension, content area knowledge and its associated vocabulary become a focus of instruction at the intermediate levels. Examples of Tier 3 words and phrases are: *allogenic, catalytic converter, interbellum, melamine, onomatopoeia, sine, ultraviolet*.

SIGNAL WORDS

Signal words and phrases signal logical relationships of ideas in the text. They help readers to understand how ideas in the text are connected and to make predictions about what is going to come next. Examples of signal words and the relationships they signal are:

- sequence *(first, next)*
- cause and effect *(as a result, therefore)*
- opposition *(nevertheless, on the other hand)*

SYNONYMS AND ANTONYMS

Synonyms (from prefix *syn-* 'with' + *nym* 'name') are words that have the same meaning as a given word. Synonyms can be helpful both for defining a new word and for building vocabulary, especially with a focus on nuances of meaning. Examples are:

- saunter = walk, amble, stroll, meander
- persistent = stubborn, determined, unwavering

Antonyms (from prefix *ant-* 'opposite of' + *nym* 'name') are words that have the opposite meaning of a word. Antonyms clarify the meaning of new words by giving examples of what the word does not
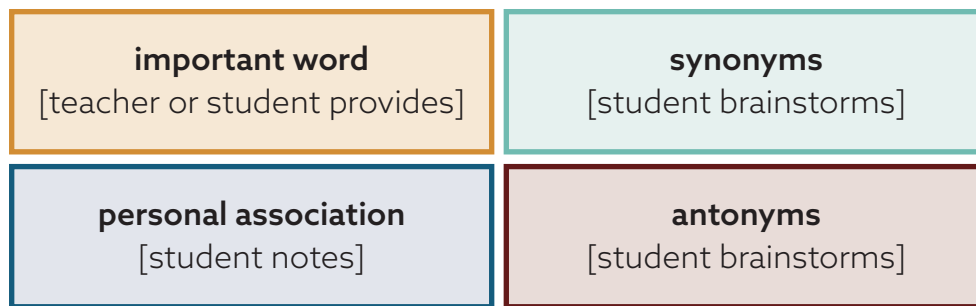
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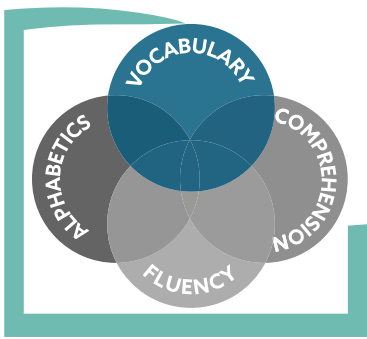
mean. It is usually easier to determine clear antonyms of adjectives and adverbs than of nouns or verbs. Examples are:

- miserable ≠ happy, wealthy, good
- hastily ≠ slowly, deliberately

Learners can learn and remember word meanings, along with synonyms and antonyms by creating a quadrant chart (e.g., on 5x7 cards) for each new word learned, and keeping a collection of the charts:

| **important word** [teacher or student provides]	**synonyms** [student brainstorms]
personal association [student notes]	**antonyms** [student brainstorms]

HOMONYMS, HOMOPHONES, AND HOMOGRAPHS

Homonyms (from roots *homo* 'same' + *nym* 'name') are words that are spelled and pronounced the same, but have different meanings. These are also called multiple-meaning words. Often, context can help to distinguish the intended meaning, though sometimes use of these words can cause ambiguity in a text. Examples are:

- **bear**—a noun as in the animal, or a verb as in *carry*
- **interest**—a noun with meanings related to feelings and attention or to finance

Homophones (from roots *homo* 'same' + *phon* 'sound') are words that are pronounced the same but spelled differently and have different meanings. Again, context can help to distinguish the intended meaning. Confusion among these words in writing can lead to spelling errors. Examples are:

- **bear/bare**
- **to/too/two**

Homographs (from roots *homo* 'same' + *graph* 'write') are words that are spelled the same but pronounced differently and have different meanings. As with homonyms, context can help to
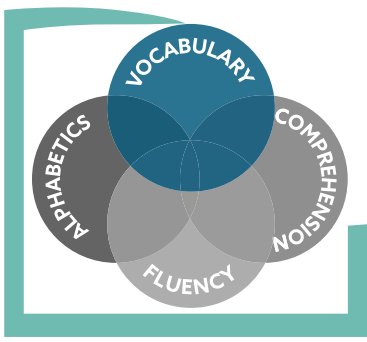
distinguish the intended meaning, though sometimes use of these words can cause ambiguity in a text. Examples are:

- **tear**—pronounced /tair/ (as in *rip*) or /teer/ (as in *teardrop*)
- **dove**—pronounced /duv/ (as in the bird) or /dov/ (as in the past tense of *dive*)

COGNATES (FOR ENGLISH LEARNERS)

For English learners whose native language is related to the early language families influencing the development of English (e.g., Romance languages such as Spanish or French, and Germanic languages such as Dutch or German), many words may be cognates. Cognates are words that are related to each other, have the same or similar spelling, and have the same or similar meaning. Some examples are:

- conclusion ~ *conclusión* (Spanish)
- incredible ~ *increíble* (Spanish)

English learners may be able to use cognates to quickly recognize the meaning of related English words. One caveat is that some words are false cognates: they are related, but today's meaning is different in each language. Examples:

- *asistir* in Spanish means 'attend' not 'assist'
- *embarazada* in Spanish means 'pregnant' not 'embarrassed'

WORD PARTS/MORPHOLOGY

Many words can be broken down into meaningful parts. The parts may express meaning of:

- a concrete object or abstract concept (e.g., *aqua, geo*);
- verb inflection (e.g., *-ing, -ed*);
- quality or activity (e.g., *un-, re-*); or
- part of speech (e.g., *-ness, -ly*).

As introduced in the Alphabetics module, a word that can be broken down may be made up of the following parts:

- **Base word:** stands alone as a word, without other added morphemes
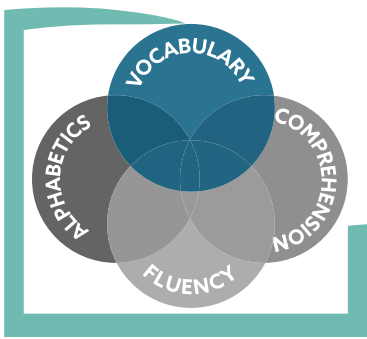
- **Root:** a morpheme of usually Latin or Greek origins. Roots cannot stand on their own as words but are combined with affixes or other roots to create an English word.
- **Affix:** a prefix or suffix
  - **Prefix:** morpheme that attaches at the beginning of a word
  - **Suffix:** morpheme that attaches at the end of a word

Some ways morphemes can combine are:

- Two base words combine to make a compound word (e.g., *bird* + *house* ➡ *birdhouse*).
- Two or more roots combine to make a word (e.g., *geo* + *logy* ➡ *geology*).
- One or more affixes are added to a base word or a root to make a word (e.g., *mis-* + *understand* + *-ing* ➡ *misunderstanding*).

Affixes can be further classified by their function, or by how they affect the meaning of the whole word.

- Inflectional suffixes do not change the core meaning or part of speech of the base word, but rather give information about its grammatical function (these affixes "inflect" the word), e.g.:
  - walk + *-ed* ➡ walked (verb is in past tense)
  - boat + *-s* ➡ boats (noun is plural)
- Derivational affixes change the meaning or part of speech of the base word (these affixes "derive" a new word), e.g.:
  - *un-* + happy ➡ unhappy (adjective changes meaning)
  - *un-* + tie ➡ untie (verb changes meaning)
  - happy + *-ness* ➡ happiness (adjective changes to noun)
  - break + *-able* ➡ breakable (verb changes to adjective)
  - item + *-ize* ➡ itemize (noun changes to verb)