

VOCABULARY INSTRUCTION WITH COMMON LITTLE WORDS

Little words occur frequently in spoken and written English. We use them to define nouns and to create more complex sentences. Every English language learner needs to learn little words, even if they don't appear to have meaning, because we use them every day to speak or write grammatically correct sentences.

Many of the students we work with don't use little words in their communication – and/or don't use them in their writing. If they are an individual who uses AAC they may have had limited opportunities to use them – or to see others using them.

For this reason we often need to teach little words, starting with high frequency little words. A list of high frequency little words is below.

High frequency little words are:

Articles						
the		a		an		
Conjunctions						
and	but	or	for	so	because	
Prepositions						
to	at	by	of	from	in	on

For any students who are learning to use little words in writing and/or communication, we can do some strategic vocabulary instruction to support them.

VOCABULARY INSTRUCTION WITH COMMON LITTLE WORDS CONTINUED

Beck, McKeown and Kucan (2013) have written the most widely referenced text around vocabulary instruction, [Bringing Words to Life: Second Edition: Robust Vocabulary Instruction.](#)

In this text they talk about three tiers of words.

Tier 1 words are used all day, every day and may have multiple meanings. It is believed that most children learn them through exposure to daily speech and have learned them before they get to school.

Tier 2 words are used less frequently in speech, and are often used more in print, and, again, they can have multiple meanings. They are understood by a wide range of people.

Tier 3 words are more specialised, and are often learned at school or work in particular subject areas.



VOCABULARY INSTRUCTION WITH COMMON LITTLE WORDS CONTINUED

In terms of teaching vocabulary, there is quite a lot of information online about providing vocabulary instruction with Tier 2 words. However, we work with a number of students who still need to learn Tier 1 words.

The research into word frequency is also heavily used by people designing Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) systems to decide which words make it into their AAC system. AAC systems are always constrained by a number of things – but one of them is how to give people enough words to communicate throughout the day without making the system unwieldy. Since the common little words are all high frequency Tier 1 words, they should be present in a well designed AAC system.

Most of the words in well-designed AAC systems are tier 1 words, with some Tier 2 words as well. The common little words from the list on the previous page are all Tier 1 words, and they should be present in well designed AAC systems. Some of them don't carry much meaning when we speak (e.g. the) and so they might not have been modelled much – but they are still present in the AAC system and this gives us a great opportunity to model using them.

TEACHING VOCABULARY

The usual recommendation for vocabulary instruction is to target 3 words per week. If your students need to learn common little words, they may also benefit from some other Tier 1 word instruction – so you could target a mix of little words and other Tier 1 words e.g. run, house, big. Alternatively, you could combine instruction of Tier 1 little words with Tier 2 words e.g. lovely, calm, rhyme, discover. To access a list of Tier 2 words divided into Grade Levels, [click here](#).

To teach a word at any tier, it is recommended that you write your own simple definition of the word, followed by using the word in a sentence. You then use the word as much as you can through the week, along with your other two words of the week.

VOCABULARY INSTRUCTION WITH COMMON LITTLE WORDS CONTINUED

TEACHING COMMON LITTLE WORDS

To support you in teaching the Tier 1 common little words, I've included some cards which target each of the words. Some of the words, as mentioned previously, have multiple definitions and therefore multiple cards, since we use them in so many ways.

Each of the cards contains a student friendly definition. The recommendation is that student friendly definitions contain the words: someone, something and/or describes. For example, if you were working on the Tier 2 word "rule" you might say "a rule describes something that we need to follow". For example, "We have a rule in our class that we ask before we go to the toilet". You might then say "can you think of a rule you have at home? For example, a rule in my house is that you have to make your bed before you leave for school".

And their tips of things to avoid are: asking a student to define a word before you have talked about it (that's testing, not teaching) and using dictionary definitions, which often don't help students very much.

You can teach the common little words in any other way you like - and I suggest that you cover two other words each week that have more content around them, since some of the common little words are abstract.

Once you have taught all the common little words, you can check to see if students are using them in speech and/or writing and then review again as needed. We are finding we often need to cycle through them about 3 times before students feel more confident with them.