Tier One words are the words of everyday speech usually learned in the early grades, albeit not at the same rate by all children. They are not considered a challenge to the average native speaker, though English language learners of any age will have to attend carefully to them. While Tier One words are important, they are not the focus of this discussion.

Tier Two words (what the Standards refer to as general academic words) are far more likely to appear in written texts than in speech. They appear in all sorts of texts: informational texts (words such as relative, vary, formulate, specificity, and accumulate), technical texts (calibrate, itemize, periphery), and literary texts (misfortune, dignified, faltered, unabashedly). Tier Two words often represent subtle or precise ways to say relatively simple things—saunter instead of walk, for example. Because Tier Two words are found across many types of texts, they are highly generalizable.

Tier Three words (what the Standards refer to as domain-specific words) are specific to a domain or field of study (lava, carburetor, legislature, circumference, aorta) and key to understanding a new concept within a text. Because of their specificity and close ties to content knowledge, Tier Three words are far more common in informational texts than in literature. Recognized as new and “hard” words for most readers (particularly student readers), they are often explicitly defined by the author of a text, repeatedly used, and otherwise heavily scaffolded (e.g., made a part of a glossary).

***- Common Core State Standards. Corestandards.org p.33***

We teach too many Tier I words, not enough Tier 2 words, and we’re just about right-on with our teaching of Tier 3 words.

--Doug Fisher, “Secondary Literacy Conference Spring 2007”, Anaheim CA