

Book Reading and Vocabulary Development: A Systematic Review

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This paper presents a review of high-quality empirical studies on book-reading practices in early childhood that have resulted in an increase in child vocabulary. Findings reveal that six strategies are consistently implemented throughout the studies, as follows: reading and re-reading texts, explicitly defining words, encouraging dialogue about book-related vocabulary through questions and discussion, re-telling, using props, and engaging children in post-reading activities.

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This paper presents a review of high-quality empirical studies on book-reading practices in early childhood that have resulted in an increase in child vocabulary. Various aspects of effective book reading are examined. Findings reveal that six strategies are consistently implemented throughout the studies. These are reading and re-reading texts, explicitly

defining words, encouraging dialogue about book-related vocabulary through questions and discussion, re-telling, using props, and engaging children in post-reading activities. This review identifies critical remaining questions about how to optimise vocabulary learning through book reading that require systematic investigation to inform effective practice.

- Book reading is widely recognised as an important activity in the development of children's oral language and vocabulary skills.
- Although many early skills support later reading success, supporting early vocabulary knowledge improves reading in several ways: supporting comprehension of words that children decode, helping children more rapidly recognise words they are decoding, fostering phonological awareness skills that also support reading, and increasing children's understanding of teachers' instruction in reading and other areas.
- Improving early vocabulary is important for all children, but especially those in poverty.
- Active processing (defined as deliberate, attentive mental manipulation of ideas) is necessary if the learner is to understand, remember, and later use and apply new information.

Strategies for word learning

- A clear definition, explanation, or example that helps children understand word meanings should be provided.
- Teachers should provide appropriate opportunities to process words, with multiple exposures to words often being needed to build flexible, enduring mental representations.
- Opportunities should be provided for children to use words as they are processing and encoding them.

Benefits of book reading

- Book-reading represents a particularly potent context for learning words.
- Exposure to new words through book-reading can be accompanied by parent or teacher explanations, as well as props and materials that further clarify word meanings.
- Books can be re-read and referred to over time.
- Words are generally introduced as part of a story providing a meaningful and motivating context.



The study

In this study, literature about book-reading and vocabulary development is reviewed. Five critical dimensions of the studies were identified: contexts in which the book reading was conducted, selection and nature of the words taught, measurement of word exposure, interventions strategies, and outcome measures and findings.

Research questions:

1. What is the methodological quality and comprehensiveness of the studies?
2. In what contexts are effective book reading studies implemented?
3. What is known about the words taught during these effective studies?
4. What instructional strategies are implemented during reading or extension activities to build vocabulary?
5. What is known about how interventions are applied?
6. What measures are used to assess vocabulary learning and how many words do children learn?

Methods

The review included 31 articles covering 36 studies.

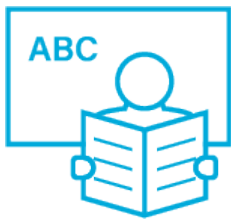


Findings

- The studies were conducted in various settings, including the home, school, and combinations of both.
- In relation to the study context, group size and who read the story varied from being a one-to-one reading to a group reading with parents, teachers, or researchers being involved as readers.
- The number of words targeted during a single reading ranged from 2 to 29 words.
- The total number of words presented during an entire study ranged from 6 to 120.
- The number of times children were exposed to individual target words ranged from 2 to 15.
- Particular target words were selected mainly because they were thought to be unfamiliar to children.
- The length of the treatments varied from 2 sessions over 2 days to 108 sessions over either 7 or 9 months.
- The length of a book-reading session varied from 10 min to 30 min.
- Word learning strategies implemented in the studies varied, as follows: dialogic reading, defining words, questioning as a means of promoting discussion on vocabulary and comprehension of the book, re-telling, re-reading, using props to illustrate word meanings, and providing extension activities that promote exploration and discussion of vocabulary.
- Studies used different types of measures to assess

learned vocabulary, such as naming a picture or defining a target word.

- The number of words assessed at post-test ranged from 9 to 55.
- Children in treatment groups learned between 4 and 12 words. Whilst this was not much, it was more than children in the control groups.



Implications

- Adult-child interaction during book-reading is critical for vocabulary learning to occur; word learning was enhanced when adults asked questions and engaged children in discussion about target vocabulary words.
- It is important to note that children still did not learn all the words they were taught; in many instances, they learned less than 25% of the words, regardless of the strategies used by adults, the number of books to which children were exposed, and the duration of the intervention.
- Those children in the intervention groups learned more words than those in the control groups, and when words were learned, knowledge was maintained over several weeks or months.
- The fact that well-conceived approaches to book reading only had modest effects suggests that something is clearly missing in the current understanding of how and why children learn words presented to them in meaningful and repeated contexts.