TEACHING VOCABULARY: MORE THAN JUST DEFINITIONS

ARTICLE

Brooks, R., Warmington, M., & Thomson, J. (2025). Evaluating the impact of vocabulary instruction on oral vocabulary, phonemic awareness and nonword reading. *Reading and Writing, 38*, 1607–1633.

WHAT DID THEY DO?

Researchers conducted a 24-week quasi-experimental intervention study involving 273 children ages 5–6 in the United Kingdom to investigate whether different types of vocabulary instruction could improve oral vocabulary, phonemic awareness, and word reading skills. Prior to the intervention, teachers received professional training in two vocabulary instructional approaches: a semantic-based approach and a combined sound-meaning approach-including syllables, rhyme, phonemes, and pronunciation. During the intervention, teachers delivered a daily 10-minute vocabulary lesson using 12 storybooks and 108 target vocabulary words. Students were placed into one of three groups. The first group received semantic vocabulary instruction focused only on teaching word meanings. The second group received combined sound-meaning vocabulary instruction, which incorporated both word meanings and the sound structure of words, including syllables, rhymes, phonemes, and articulation. The third group served as the business as usual (BAU) group.Students were assessed three times over an 18 month period to collect and monitor data on their progress over time.

WHAT DID THEY FIND?

Researchers found that all groups made gains in vocabulary knowledge, but the intervention groups demonstrated greater growth than the control group. Students who participated in either instructional condition learned significantly more targeted vocabulary words, outperformed students receiving typical classroom instruction, and maintained their gains during the delayed follow-up assessment.

The combined sound-meaning instruction group demonstrated the strongest phonological outcomes. Students who received vocabulary instruction paired with attention to the sound structure of words showed additional improvements in phonemic awareness and decoding unfamiliar words. These gains also lasted longer, with students scoring well on a delayed posttest.

WHAT COULD THIS MEAN?

Overall, the findings show that systematic daily vocabulary instruction, even in small amounts, can lead to meaningful gains in both vocabulary development and early literacy skills. Vocabulary instruction can support more than just word knowledge. When lessons include attention to the sounds within words, students may also strengthen early reading skills such as phonemic awareness and decoding. Rather than simply exposing students to new words, teachers should intentionally and explicitly teach vocabulary through interactive read-alouds, class discussions, and repeated practice with target words. Teachers should connect vocabulary instruction to phonological awareness activities, allowing students to clap syllables, identify beginning sounds, or notice rhymes while learning new vocabulary, and integrate oral language and foundational reading instruction instead of teaching them separately.

The study also highlights the value of instructional supports such as vocabulary cards, word walls, cue cards, and language games, which can help teachers create consistent routines and provide students with multiple opportunities to hear, discuss, and use new vocabulary.

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