

Vocabulary Instruction is More than Defining Words

ARTICLE

August, D., Uccelli, P., Artzi, L., Barr, C., & Francis, D. J. (2020). English learners' acquisition of academic vocabulary: Instruction matters, but so do word characteristics. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 56(3), 559–582.

WHAT DID THEY DO?

How does an intervention impact word learning among Spanish speaking second graders? What types of words do the students learn best?

To answer these questions, researchers created a curriculum that included read aloud lessons, interactive activities for teaching words, songs and games to reinforce the words, and resources for families. They compared the results to a control group that read the same texts, but did not use the rest of the teaching methods. The study lasted eighteen weeks, with four fifty minute lessons a week.

WHAT DID THEY FIND?

The treatment group learned more words, and had stronger overall vocabularies as a result of the intervention. These effects were still there 10 months later. The gap between the two groups was largest for non-cognate words and smallest for connecting words such as “however.”

WHAT COULD THIS MEAN FOR TEACHERS?

This study provides guidance on how we should teach vocabulary, and which words we should teach. Students need to be explicitly taught words, we cannot just rely on exposure. The study reminds us that vocabulary instruction will go best if it is multifaceted, rather than limited to a single lesson. We should absolutely teach students to look for Spanish cognates, but should know that those words are likely easier to learn than non-cognates. Connecting words require some extra thought, since they carry no meaning on their own. To teach connecting words, we should use sentence combining and sentence creation activities, but should keep our eyes out for future research on teaching these critical words.

