

National Reading Panel Findings on Vocabulary

Vocabulary refers to words we must know to communicate effectively. Researchers often refer to four types of vocabulary.

- **Listening vocabulary**—words we need to know to understand what we hear
- **Speaking vocabulary**—words we use when we speak
- **Reading vocabulary**—words we need to know to understand what we read
- **Writing vocabulary**—words we use in writing

Vocabulary plays an important part in learning to read. As beginning readers, children use words they have heard to make sense of words they see in print. Consider, for example, what happens when a beginning reader comes to the word **dig** in a book. As she begins to figure out the sounds represented by the letters **d, i, g**, the reader recognizes that the sounds make up a familiar word she has heard and said many times. Beginning readers have a much more difficult time reading words that are not already part of their oral vocabulary.

Vocabulary also is important to reading comprehension. Readers cannot understand what they read without knowing what most of the words mean. As children learn to read more advanced texts, they must learn the meaning of new words that are not part of their oral vocabulary.

What does scientifically-based research tell us about vocabulary instruction?

The scientific research on vocabulary instruction reveals that (1) most vocabulary is learned **indirectly** and (2) some vocabulary must be taught **directly**.

- ⇒ **Children learn the meanings of most words indirectly, through everyday experiences with oral and written language. Children learn word meanings indirectly in three ways.**
- **They engage daily in oral language.** Young children learn word meanings through conversations with other people, especially adults. As they engage in these conversations, children often hear adults repeat words several times. They also may hear adults use new and interesting words. The more oral language experiences children have, the more word meanings they learn.
 - **They listen to adults read to them.** Children learn word meanings from listening to adults read to them. Reading aloud is particularly helpful when the reader pauses during reading to define an unfamiliar word and, after reading, engages the child in a conversation about the book. Conversations about books help children learn new words and concepts and relate them to their prior knowledge and experience.
 - **They read extensively on their own.** Children learn many new words by reading extensively on their own. The more children read on their own, the more words they encounter and the more word meanings they learn.

⇒ **Although a great deal of vocabulary is learned indirectly, some vocabulary should be taught directly.**

Direct instruction helps students learn difficult words, such as words that represent complex concepts that are not part of students' everyday experiences. Direct instruction of vocabulary relevant to a given text leads to a better reading comprehension.

Direct instruction includes:

- Providing students with specific word instruction; and
- Teaching students word-learning strategies.

Specific Word Instruction

Specific word instruction, or teaching individual words, can deepen students' knowledge of word meanings. In-depth knowledge of word meanings can help students understand what they hear or read and help them use words accurately in speaking and writing.

- **Teaching specific words before reading helps both vocabulary learning and reading comprehension.** Teaching important vocabulary before reading can help students both learn new words and comprehend the text.
- **Extended instruction that promotes active engagement with vocabulary improves word learning.** The more students use new words and the more they use them in different contexts, the more likely they are to learn the words.
- **Repeated exposure to vocabulary in many contexts aids word learning.** Students learn new words better when they encounter them often and in various contexts.

Only a few words may be taught thoroughly each week (perhaps 8-10), so choose words carefully. Three types of words should be emphasized: important words, useful words, and difficult words.

Word-Learning Strategies

Students also need to determine the meaning of words that are new to them but not taught directly to them. They need to develop effective word-learning strategies, including how to use:

- Dictionaries and other reference aids to learn word meanings and deepen knowledge of word meanings;
- Information about word parts to figure out the meanings of words in text; and
- Context clues to determine word meanings.