



## Review

## Book reading and vocabulary development: A systematic review



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## ABSTRACT

This paper reviews high-quality empirical studies on book reading practices in early childhood that have resulted in increases in child vocabulary. The overarching purpose of this work is twofold: first, to tease apart the myriad ways in which effective book readings can be delivered; and second, to identify questions that remain about book reading and vocabulary learning. We examine various aspects of effective book readings, including the contexts in which the book reading was conducted, the words that were taught through the book reading, the dosage of reading that children received, and the outcome measures used. Findings reveal that six strategies—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—are consistently implemented across the studies; however, they are used in widely varying combinations. There is great variability across studies in the number of words taught, the criteria for word selection, and the measures used to assess word learning. Moreover, in many studies, children learn only a small proportion of the number of words taught. Finally, this review identifies critical remaining questions about how to optimize vocabulary learning through book reading that require systematic investigation in order to inform effective practice.

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## 1. Introduction

Book reading is widely identified as an important activity in the development of children's oral language and vocabulary skills (Marulis & Neuman, 2010; Mol, Bus, & deJong, 2009; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Books provide opportunities for exposure to vocabulary that is not often found in everyday conversations (Mol, Bus, deJong, & Smeets, 2008), and book reading is a common practice in early childhood settings as a means of introducing and teaching vocabulary words. With the increased emphasis on developing language and vocabulary in young children, especially children in poverty, it is important to examine what we know from the research on book reading and vocabulary development in order to inform practices in classrooms and households. This review attempts to complement recent meta-analyses by unpacking main effect sizes; we attempt to identify what is known about optimum book reading conditions to teach words to young children. We also describe the remaining gaps in the research that must be filled in order to develop more effective, practical strategies to support vocabulary development in young children's homes and classrooms.

### 1.1. Vocabulary development and reading

Although many early skills support later reading success, shoring up early vocabulary knowledge improves reading in several ways, including (a) supporting comprehension of words that children decode, (b) helping children more rapidly recognize words they are decoding, (c) fostering phonological awareness skills that also support reading, and (d) increasing children's understanding of teachers' instruction in reading and other areas (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008). Rigorous, longitudinal studies clearly indicate that stronger vocabulary skills in preschool are linked to better reading outcomes over time (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001; Hart & Risley, 1995). A related finding from these and other studies is that children from low-income households often enter kindergarten 12–18 months behind middle-class children in vocabulary learning (Farkas & Beron, 2004; Layzer & Price, 2008), undermining their later reading and school success (Beck & McKeown, 2007; Biemiller, 2006; Duncan et al., 2007; National Early Literacy Panel, 2008). Indeed, about half of children in poverty cannot meet basic reading proficiency criteria in grade 4 (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Thus, improving early vocabulary is important for all children, but especially those in poverty.

### 1.2. Theoretical and empirical approach

Although no single, widely accepted, comprehensive theory of word learning describes the mechanisms that underlie this process, a cognitive processing approach to learning guides this review.

The cognitive processing approach to learning (Brown, Bransford, Ferrara, & Campione, 1983; McKeown & Beck, 2014; Miller, 2003; Sternberg, 1979, 1982) asserts that 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. In the case of word learning, children need to actively process the association between a word (i.e., the lexical label) and its referent (i.e., the conceptual idea that the word represents), ultimately forging a strong and refined link in their memories (Akhtar, Jipson, & Callanan, 2001).

This broad, theoretical framework describing how word learning occurs is complemented by empirical evidence regarding the strategies or factors that best help children to successfully undertake this cognitive processing of word labels and meanings (and, thus, learn words). One essential strategy that supports the formation of mental representations of words is a clear definition, explanation, or example that helps children understand word meanings (Beck & McKeown, 2007). These are most often provided implicitly (i.e., in passing, casually) but could certainly be explicit. Connections to content that children are already familiar with may be especially beneficial (Pashler et al., 2007). Also, empirical evidence from language research suggests that some parts of speech, particularly nouns, might be somewhat easier for young children to learn, but this finding may depend on the language in question (Xuan & Dollaghan, 2013).

A second factor that likely matters for word learning is the dosage of opportunities to process words, with multiple exposures to words often needed in order to build flexible, enduring mental representations (Clay, Gill, Glynn, McNaughton, & Salmon, 2007; Goldin-Meadow et al., 2014). With the exception of instances of fast mapping (Carey, 1978), repeated interactions with a word are critical for word learning; estimates regarding the necessary dosage of exposures range from 40 exposures (McGregor, Sheng, & Ball, 2007) to 200 exposures (Clay et al., 2007), depending on the learning context, child, and word type.

A third factor involves opportunities for children to use words as they are processing and encoding them. Indeed, research indicates that, beyond simply hearing words several times in meaningful contexts, children need to use the words to communicate ideas and get feedback from adults on their use of the words (Tamis-LeMonda, Kuchirko, & Song, 2014). Taken together, this foundational theory and the empirical evidence suggest that optimally effective vocabulary interventions will offer children systematic exposures to words, as well as opportunities for a range of active-processing tasks.

### 1.3. Book reading as a context for vocabulary development

Interactions that foster this essential processing are many and varied; however, book reading represents a particularly potent con-

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