

Study shows greater focus on vocabulary can help make students better readers

January 10 2013

(Phys.org)—There's an old saying in education that first you learn to read, then you read to learn. A University of Kansas professor has authored a study highlighting the importance of focusing instruction early in a child's life on vocabulary and understanding what is read, not only on aspects of word recognition, which are the hallmarks of "learning to read." Attention to vocabulary and understanding text early in students' school careers can help them develop the ability to comprehend text better.

Diane Nielsen, associate professor of curriculum and teaching, conducted a study with 28 [kindergartners](#) at a high-poverty, urban school who were all behind their [classmates](#) in aspects of [language development](#). [Students](#) took part in a 12-week storybook-based intervention in which they focused on [vocabulary](#) and narrative (story) understanding. At the end of the intervention, they made significantly greater gains in vocabulary and narrative skill—two key elements of reading comprehension success—than students with similar needs who did not participate.

"As important as [word recognition](#) is, and it's super important, vocabulary needs to be given as much emphasis," Nielsen said. "It is essential that children learn to quickly decode words, but if they don't understand the meaning of the words, then their ability to understand the overall meaning of a story or other text will be compromised. And comprehension should always be the ultimate goal of reading."

Research has long shown that many kindergartners enter school with limited vocabulary knowledge and other [language skills](#) behind those of their peers, and a large portion of those who do come from [poor backgrounds](#). This not only puts them behind their peers in [reading achievement](#), it often leads to children being designated for [special education](#) when they should not be.

Nielsen, whose study was published in the journal, *Reading Psychology*, took place over the course of 12 weeks with students who were behind their peers on standardized measures of language development and narrative. Three times a week the students spent 30 minutes in a small group, storybook-based lesson, preplanned by Nielsen. A graduate student, who provided the instruction, taught selected words then read a story stopping to emphasize those words and asking the children their meaning. Elements of stories, such as character and story events, were also focused on before and during the book reading. In ensuing sessions, the students discussed or demonstrated the meaning of words and engaged in activities to emphasize story elements, such as by retelling and acting out the stories.

The students and their peers in a control group were tested before and after the intervention. As expected, the students in the intervention made significant gains in vocabulary scores, as they were explicitly taught as a part of the lessons. However, the intervention students also made larger gains on narrative understanding measures, including their ability to retell stories, a way to demonstrate story comprehension. Nielsen reported that narrative is also a much more difficult concept to teach than vocabulary words, which can be explicitly taught, illustrating the value of the intervention.

Nielsen suggested that the findings are important because students can often appear to be good readers in the primary grades, but when text becomes more demanding they can quickly fall behind. Such students

may be able to identify and pronounce the words they are reading, but limited vocabulary knowledge and a general lack of understanding of how stories and other types of text work affects their comprehension. Even though the intervention students showed greater improvement than their peers, not all teachers will have time in their busy day to provide additional instruction as was the case in this study.

"It's all well and good that the students in these intervention groups did well, but most teachers don't have an extra hand to provide additional and separate instruction for the students who need it," Nielsen said. "I like to think about ways we can support teachers to provide good solid instruction in vocabulary and narrative to all their students. Also, I think it really helps if we can all get kids to be 'word conscious' – get them excited about learning new words, show them that words can be 'cool' and get them thinking about words in many different contexts."

Nielsen expanded this research to see if the success with a small group could be duplicated when the strategy to focus on vocabulary and narrative is delivered by the classroom teacher to an entire class. Her recently completed study, with a kindergarten teacher providing the instruction in a high-poverty urban school, demonstrated it was possible for many kindergarteners to make great gains with such focused instruction, even when delivered in a whole-group setting. Some children will still need additional help even after quality classroom instruction. For that reason, Nielsen suggested, it is important for schools to find ways to support the delivery of research-based interventions focused not only on aspects of word recognition but also on vocabulary and narrative, so that all children have the best possible chance of reaching their potential as readers in the long term.

Provided by University of Kansas

Citation: Study shows greater focus on vocabulary can help make students better readers (2013, January 10) retrieved 17 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2013-01-greater-focus-vocabulary-students-readers.html>

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