

Study Guide for Reading Storybooks to Kindergartners Helps Them Learn New Vocabulary Words (Robbins & Ehri, 1994)

Follow these directions as you read this article; then, post a reflection on your blog, responding to the questions at the end of this study guide.

This is a research article, and it is very technical in parts. Follow the directions below to read the article—there will be sections to read carefully and there will be parts you can skim through.

Print the article and then number the paragraphs. If you do this correctly, you will have a total of 53 paragraphs (1-12 in the Literature Review section, 13-16 Subjects, 17-21 Materials, 22 Procedure, 23-36 Results, 37-53 Discussion).

The Literature Review and the Discussion sections are the most important. So we will concentrate on those sections, but also highlight some information in the Methods and Results sections.

Read the abstract carefully. The abstract gives us the condensed summary of the article. What is the study about and what was learned from the study?

Read the Literature Review section carefully. This gives us the reason why the study was conducted and gives us information about the importance of the study.

In paragraph 1 what do we learn about the vocabulary growth of children?

In paragraph 2 we learn about how children learn vocabulary: What are the two conditions? Which of these two conditions does reading aloud to children fall under?

In paragraph 3 we learn about two very important factors that contribute to children learning vocabulary (last sentence): What is meant by the factor “individual abilities”?

In paragraph 4 we learn that kindergarten students can learn words incidentally.

In paragraphs 5 and 6 we learn that children must learn most of their vocabulary words incidentally because it would be impossible to teach directly all the words that children need to learn and indeed do learn (estimates are that children learn between 1000 to 5000 new vocabulary words in a school year). Studies have shown that reading can increase vocabulary growth.

In paragraph 7 we learn that before third grade, it is unlikely that children learn NEW vocabulary by their own reading. Why is this so? What is the argument for this claim?

In paragraph 8 another possibility for young children learning new vocabulary is presented: What is it?

In paragraphs 9, 10, & 11 we learn that there were flaws in previous research studies that may cause researchers to question the conclusion that young children can learn

new vocabulary by simply listening to stories being read to them. These problems will be addressed in this study.

In paragraph 12 we are told the purpose of the study: What is it in your own words? (A ceiling effect means that there was no room for growth because the test was too easy for some of the children tested.) How is the idea of children's individual abilities defined for purposes of this study?

Skim through the Subjects section, but let's make sure we know what the researchers did and for what purpose.

In paragraph 13 we learn who the subjects were: Who were they (two things that are important)?

In paragraphs 14, 15, & 16 we learn how the researchers were very careful about selecting children who could not read and who did not know the vocabulary words being introduced in the stories. The final number of children studies was 33: What were the 3 groups they were divided into?

Skim through the Materials and Procedure sections.

In paragraphs 17, 18, & 19 we learn that 2 stories were read to the children (half got one story read twice and the other half got the other story read twice.) and that the researchers made sure that the level of the stories were appropriate for the students and that the target words being studied were also appropriate and that enough context was provided for children to have a chance to pick up the meaning of the target words from the story that was read to them.

In paragraphs 20 & 21 we learn that a posttest was given to the children to see if they learned the target words from the story that was read to them. The multiple-choice vocabulary test included 11 words from the story they heard and 11 words from the story that they did not hear—remember that half the students heard one story and half the other. The researchers were very careful to avoid any kind of bias that was noted in previous research.

In paragraph 22 we learn that the children were tested one at a time and heard one of the two stories two times (2 to 4 days between the first and second reading) and that 11 words on the posttest were contained in the story they heard, some of the words occurring 2 times and others 4 times. At the end of the second reading of the story, each child was given the posttest.

Skim through the Results section, but let's focus on a few parts that are important.

In paragraphs 23 & 24 we learn that correlations conducted on the data indicate that children with better vocabularies knew more of the target words—not surprising.

In paragraphs 25, 26, 27, 28, & 29 we learn that the statistical procedure selected for analyzing the data was regression, and we are told how the analyses were conducted. The main outcome in these analyses is that there is evidence that listening to stories can increase vocabulary knowledge in young children (paragraph 28 and 29).

In paragraphs 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, & 36 the researchers discuss ways that they were careful with the data and how different analyses were conducted to verify the results that they found. The main point in these analyses worth looking at is that

there were differences between the groups of high, mid, and low vocabulary knowledge. Look at Figure 1 (page 58) and in your own words describe what it shows.

Read carefully the Discussion section.

In paragraph 37 we get the main finding of the study: What is it?

In paragraph 39 we get another important finding from the study: What is it?

In paragraphs 40 through 50 the researchers discuss limitations of their study and address connections to previous findings. The most interesting point in these paragraphs is that words that were heard 4 times were more likely to be learned than words that were heard only 2 times (paragraph 50).

In paragraph 51 the researchers offer instructional implications to their findings: What are they?

In paragraphs 52 & 53, the researchers offer caution to the implications stated in paragraph 51. What I think is important to consider here is what they say about students with weaker vocabulary: What is the point they make? (I agree with this idea to a point, but I want to stress to you that more reading aloud might be what the weaker vocabulary students need more.)

General questions to respond to on your blog:

How do children increase their vocabularies?

What evidence is there that reading aloud to children can increase their vocabularies?

Does it matter what teachers read to students? In other words, if you are reading aloud to students in your kindergarten class, should you care about the richness in the language that a book does or does not have? What kinds of books are best to read aloud to students if we want to build their vocabularies?

Why do you think you should focus on emphasizing vocabulary in your lessons with students? Does this apply to read aloud activities?

What role will reading to students play in your teaching?