

What Is the Relationship Between Vocabulary and Comprehension?

Michael F. Graves
University of Minnesota, Emeritus
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A great deal of evidence testifies to a strong relationship between vocabulary and comprehension. As Baumann (2005) points out, the evidence for this relationship includes:

- (a) the close relationship between vocabulary and IQ,
- (b) early descriptive studies,
- (c) a number of correlational and factor analytic studies,
- (d) the close relationship between vocabulary and achievement tests, and
- (e) the centrality of vocabulary to readability.

But the question remains: Is this relationship merely correlational? Is it simply the fact that people with larger vocabularies have good comprehension skills? Or is the relationship causal? Does increasing students' vocabularies make them better comprehenders? As the reports of both National Reading Panel and the RAND Reading Study Group make clear, we do not have an absolute answer to that question understood.

As Anderson and Freebody (1981) noted and as Baumann (2005) has emphasized, the repeatedly verified relationships between vocabulary and comprehension can be accounted for by three hypotheses. The first and strongest position, the instrumentalist hypothesis, posits that vocabulary is causally related to vocabulary, that teaching vocabulary will increase comprehension. The second position, the knowledge hypothesis, posits that a large vocabulary reflects a large knowledge base and that it is world knowledge rather than word knowledge that accounts for the relationship between vocabulary and comprehension. Based on this hypothesis, teaching vocabulary would not necessarily increase comprehension. The third position, the

aptitude hypothesis, posits that a large vocabulary results from having high intelligence or verbal aptitude. Based on this hypothesis, teaching vocabulary would be unlikely to increase comprehension. After presenting these three hypotheses, Anderson and Freebody note that all three of them contain some truth. Moreover, some studies have shown that teaching vocabulary improves comprehension. Still, the argument for teaching vocabulary would be stronger if there were more evidence supporting the instrumentalist hypothesis. Even without this stronger evidence, however, what evidence there is and common sense argue for teaching vocabulary, both for the intrinsic value of students knowing the words taught and for the likelihood that knowing additional words will improve their comprehension.

References for Further Study:

- Anderson, R. C., & Freebody, P. (1981). Vocabulary knowledge. In J. Guthrie (ed.), *Comprehension and Teaching: Research Reviews* (pp. 77-117). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Baumann, J. F. (2005). Vocabulary-comprehension relationships. In B. Maloch, J. V. Hoffman, D. L. Schallert, C. M. Fairbanks, & J. Worthy (Eds.), *Fifty-fourth yearbook of the National Reading Conference* (pp. 117-131). Oak Creek, WI: National Reading Conference.