

Weizman, Z.O., & Snow, C.E. (2001). Lexical input as related to children's vocabulary acquisition: Effects of sophisticated exposure and support for meaning. *Developmental Psychology, 37*, 265-279.

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Summary: This study examines 263 mother-child conversations from 53 low-income mothers across multiple settings (e.g., play, mealtime, and book reading). Kindergarten and 2nd grade vocabulary performance correlated with the use of sophisticated words in the conversations (words outside the 3,000 most common English words) more so than the quantity of lexical input. The amount of sophisticated word use and their embodiment within instructive or helpful interaction at age 5 at home, predicted over 1/3 of the variance in children's vocabulary at kindergarten and 2nd grade. Moreover, after controlling for the mother's education level, child non-verbal IQ, and amount of child talk sophisticated word use contributed to 50% of the variance in children's 2nd grade vocabulary.

Assumptions:

- Exposure to richer vocabulary can predict the vocabulary outcome for children.
- Children acquire more vocabularies dependent on their exposure to sophisticated vocabulary at home.
- The effect, due to early exposure of sophisticated vocabulary at home, is greater than the effect of large lexical input.
- Exposure to sophisticated vocabulary within the context of linguistic interaction is more significant than lexical input.

Results:

- There is a strong linkage between early exposure to sophisticated words, even at a 1% level of maternal input and students' vocabulary knowledge at the kindergarten and 2nd grade levels.
- Maternal speech was denser during book reading time than during playtime or mealtime.
- There was great variation in the quantity and quality of vocabulary exposure among the low-income participants in the study.
- Only 1% of word produced during maternal interactions could be labeled as sophisticated words.
- Sophisticated word use was more common during playtime and mealtime than book reading time.
- Scaffolding usually occurred when a sophisticated word was introduced to the child.

Conclusion:

- Lexically rich, naturally occurring conversations in a child's early life can have a significant impact on the child's vocabulary knowledge.

- Mealtime and playtime saw more sophisticated word use than during book reading time.
- Despite only 1% of the mothers' word use being labeled as sophisticated, it still contributed to later effects in vocabulary knowledge.
- Scaffolding expedites the learning process for the child's acquisition of sophisticated words.

Suggestions for Teachers:

- Lexical quantity is important in a student's vocabulary development; however, early exposure to sophisticated words shows greater gains for word development.
- Scaffolding needs to be utilized when introducing new, sophisticated words.
- Exposure to adult language can predict the size of the child's eventual vocabulary.

Suggestions for Literacy Leaders:

- Research is unclear of the relationship between the amount of language heard and the quality of that language.
- It may be possible for a child to hear a low quantity of language, but still gain significant vocabulary knowledge due to a higher density of sophisticated word use.
- Instructional policies for pre-school students should address the need for sophisticated word use.