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Does Vocabulary Influence Word Recognition and Reading Comprehension Through Set for Variability?

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Education
at Massey University, Manawatū, New Zealand

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Abstract

Vocabulary is recognised as a key contributor to literacy development and comprehension. Children cannot make meaning from text if they lack the vocabulary to support what is being read. This study investigated the independent contribution of vocabulary to word recognition, and whether the contribution was direct or indirect through set for variability. A second aim of the study was to determine if a direct relation exists between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension.

Unpublished data from the longitudinal study (Chapman, Arrow, Tunmer, & Braid, 2016) were analysed to find predictive links between vocabulary and later reading outcomes, for a cohort of 374 5-year-old children in New Zealand primary schools. The results identified that word recognition and vocabulary both directly contributed to reading comprehension for these children in the middle of their second year at school. Word recognition explained a greater amount of the shared variance of reading comprehension in the middle of Year 2 as the children were at the stage of still trying to read a range of unfamiliar words. Set for variability was found not to directly contribute to reading comprehension when word recognition was added to the model. This finding suggests that set for variability mediates the relationship between vocabulary and word recognition but not for overall reading comprehension. In terms of practical teaching, it is suggested that language comprehension abilities should be acquired alongside the development of word recognition skills.

Keywords: alphabetic principle, decoding, language comprehension, lexicon, morphology, oral vocabulary, orthography, orthographic representation, phonological awareness, phonological recoding, phonological representation, phonology, reading

comprehension, semantics, set for variability, sight words, Simple View of Reading, syntax, word recognition.

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Contents

Abstract.....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	v
Contents.....	vi
List of Tables.....	vii
Chapter One.....	1
Introduction.....	1
Rationale.....	3
The Present Study.....	4
Key Terms and Definitions.....	4
Thesis Overview.....	8
Chapter Two.....	10
Literature Review.....	10
Introduction.....	10
Theories of Early Reading Development and Acquisition.....	11
Decoding.....	13
Language Comprehension.....	18
Vocabulary.....	19
Reading Comprehension.....	20
Set for Variability.....	26
Aotearoa, New Zealand Research: Tunmer and Chapman (2012).....	26
The Present Study.....	28
Chapter Three.....	30
Methodology.....	30
Research Design.....	30
Sampling.....	31
Setting and Participants.....	33
Data Collection Procedures.....	34
Measures.....	35
Ethics.....	38
Summary.....	38
Chapter Four.....	40
Results.....	40
Descriptive Results.....	40
Contributions to Word Recognition.....	43
Contributions to Reading Comprehension.....	45
Summary.....	48
Chapter Five.....	49
Discussion.....	49
The Direct and Indirect Influence of Vocabulary on Word Recognition.....	50
The Direct Influence of Vocabulary on Reading Comprehension.....	52
Limitations.....	55
Future Research.....	56
Implications for Practical Applications.....	59
Conclusion.....	62
References.....	65

List of Tables

Table 1 <i>Gender and Ethnicity</i>	33
Table 2 <i>Correlations, Means and Standard Deviations for all Measures</i>	41
Table 3 <i>Model Summary and Coefficients</i>	44
Table 4 <i>Model Summary and Coefficients</i>	46