

The Words That Carry the Meaning

Why academic vocabulary and word depth drive comprehension

The words that do the heaviest lifting in a text are rarely the everyday ones. They are the academic words, the precise, cross subject words that carry the ideas. A student who owns these words can read to learn, and a student who does not gets stuck, which is why teaching vocabulary deliberately is one of the surest investments a program can make.

Teaching vocabulary works

A meta analysis of sixty seven studies found that teaching vocabulary produced large gains in young students' word learning, on average close to a full standard deviation **(Marulis & Neuman, 2010)**. Words are not simply absorbed by chance, they are learned faster and deeper when they are taught on purpose.

Which words, and how deep

Not all words deserve the same attention. The most valuable to teach are the high use academic words that appear across many texts and subjects, and the goal is deep word knowledge, not just a quick definition, so that a student can use the word, not only recognize it **(Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2013)**. Depth of vocabulary is closely tied to reading comprehension **(Wright & Cervetti, 2017)**.

Knowing a word deeply, its meaning, its relatives, and how to use it, is what turns vocabulary into comprehension.

What this means for Teach BIG

This is why our program teaches academic vocabulary directly and returns to it, and why our word study, including the Big Word Detective morphology work, builds the

parts of words so students can unlock new ones on their own. We aim for words students own and use, because those are the words that carry the meaning.

References

- Beck, I. L., McKeown, M. G., & Kucan, L. (2013). *Bringing words to life: Robust vocabulary instruction* (2nd ed.). Guilford Press.
- Marulis, L. M., & Neuman, S. B. (2010). The effects of vocabulary intervention on young children's word learning: A meta analysis. *Review of Educational Research*, 80(3), 300 to 335.
- Wright, T. S., & Cervetti, G. N. (2017). A systematic review of the research on vocabulary instruction that impacts text comprehension. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 52(2), 203 to 226.