Text Talk:

A Summary of Research

Scholastic
Research &
Results

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Promoting Vocabulary and Comprehension
Development in the Primary Grades

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Introduction

Learning to read and write represents the most crucial goal in the education of young children today. Children must develop strong literacy skills to achieve the academic competencies necessary to navigate successfully through school and beyond. One consistent finding in the research on early literacy is that vocabulary represents a critical component to developing reading proficiency, since knowing the meaning of words links directly to reading comprehension (e.g., Anderson & Freebody, 1981; Beck, Perfetti, McKeown, 1982).

Research on the importance of vocabulary has long revealed what Louisa Moats refers to as "word poverty"—the persistent gap in word knowledge between advantaged and disadvantaged children (Moats, 2001). This gap is created before children enter school and continues through the primary grades. For example, by the beginning of grade three, average children have acquired approximately 6,000 root-word meanings. However, at present, many disadvantaged children arrive in third grade with vocabularies of only 4,000 or fewer root words. After grade two, average children acquire another 1,000 root-word meanings per year. Thus, children from the lowest vocabulary quartile at the end of second grade are already two or more grade levels behind average children in vocabulary (Biemiller & Slonim, 2001), at risk of never catching up to their peers. Biemiller contends that if children with small vocabularies are to succeed, educators must increase the rate of vocabulary acquisition in the primary grades and help vocabulary-deficient children to catch up during the elementary school years (Biemiller, In Press).

Text Talk is one solution to this widening vocabulary gap. Text Talk is a supplemental curriculum of robust vocabulary instruction developed by Dr. Isabel Beck and Dr. Margaret McKeown to address the significant "word poverty" occurring in our nation's classrooms today. This vocabulary gap is anticipated to widen and transfer into the ultimate goal of reading—comprehending the meaning of text. Research has revealed that Text Talk promotes the development of vocabulary and reading comprehension in primary-grade students and may contribute to a closing of the gap.

This summary of research provides evidence that Text Talk is an effective vocabulary program. The following review highlights how Text Talk incorporates the best approaches for building vocabulary in the primary grades *and* summarizes the scientifically based research proving its effectiveness.

The Significance of Vocabulary

Young students who do not have sufficient vocabularies or effective word–learning strategies will struggle to achieve comprehension.

BRIDGE TO COMPREHENSION

Developing an extensive vocabulary has been positively linked to greater academic success (as cited in Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002) and higher reading achievement (Graves, 1986; Stahl, 1998), as well as being an essential prerequisite to learning to read with fewer difficulties (National Reading Panel, 2000). Evidence suggests that knowing a word involves more than superficial understanding, such as being able to recite a word's definition from the dictionary. Instead, deep word knowledge, or the understanding of the multiple meanings of words and the different contexts in which to use particular words, is most critical for readers. Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (2002) write that deep word knowledge entails "rich, decontextualized knowledge of a word's meaning, its relationship to other words, and its extension to metaphorical uses" (p. 10). Deep word knowledge allows for greater language development and better comprehension of words in texts (Beck, Perfetti, & McKeown, 1982; Miller & Gildea, 1987).

One of the most persistent findings in reading research is the direct link between the depth of students' vocabulary knowledge and their reading comprehension (Baumann, Kame'enui, et al., 2003; McKeown, Beck, Omanson, & Perfetti, 1983). Correlations between standardized measures of vocabulary and reading comprehension are routinely extremely high—in the .90s. These correlations have been found to be robust regardless of the measures used or the populations tested (Stahl, 2003). This relationship is also logical—to read for meaning, students need both a significant amount of words in their vocabularies and the ability to use various strategies to establish the meanings of new words when they encounter them.

Young students who do not have sufficient vocabularies or effective word-learning strategies will struggle to achieve comprehension. These discouraging early experiences with reading will result in a cycle of frustration and failure that continues throughout their schooling (Hart & Risley, 2003; Snow, Barnes, Chandler, Goodman, & Hemphill, 2000; White, Graves, & Slater, 1990).
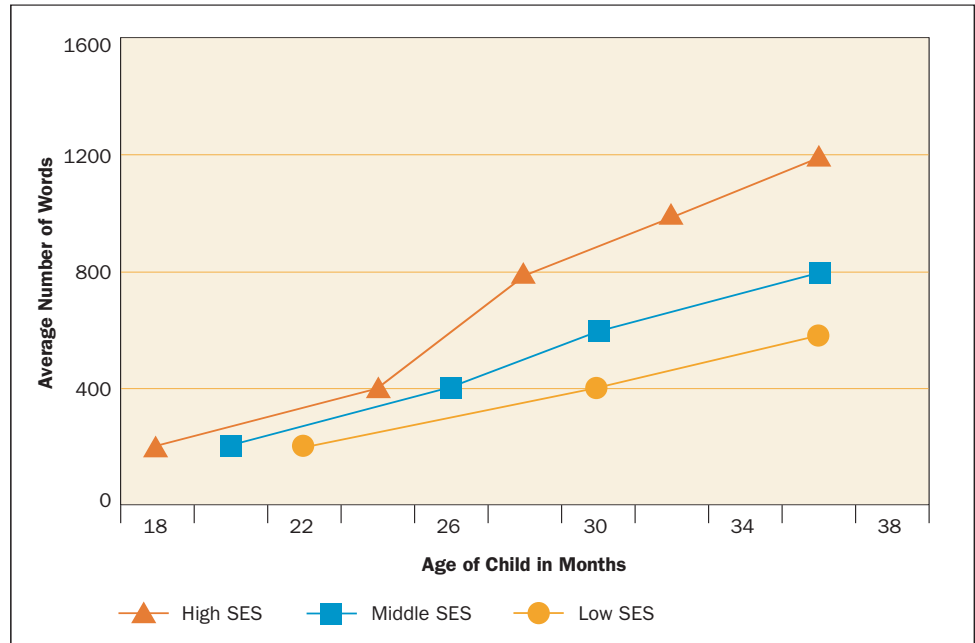
However, research indicates that the intentional, explicit teaching of specific words and word-learning strategies can both add words to students' vocabularies and improve their reading comprehension of texts containing those words (McKeown et al., 1985; Stahl & Fairbanks, 1986). Increased vocabulary knowledge will help beginning readers to accurately and rapidly decode, also an essential prerequisite for comprehension (Kamil & Hiebert, In Press). If children have printed words in their oral vocabulary, they can more easily and quickly map sounds to letters, read words fluently, and understand them—thus comprehending what they are reading. If these words are not in children's oral vocabulary, they will have difficulty reading the words and their comprehension is hindered (National Reading Panel, 2000). Kamil and Hiebert argue that an extensive vocabulary is the bridge between the word-level processes of phonics and the cognitive processes of comprehension. Finally, when children learn more words, they learn to think about the world in more sophisticated ways. Steven Stahl (2003) argues that it is this language sophistication, which leads directly to increased comprehension.

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THE VOCABULARY GAP

Numerous studies have long revealed the vocabulary gaps that exist between different groups of children (e.g., Graves, Brunetti, & Slater, 1982). Hart and Risley's 1995 groundbreaking research on the "meaningful differences" between groups of young children revealed that preschoolers are entering school with significant vocabulary differences—a knowledge gap is already in evidence—which can be largely attributed to their socioeconomic status. (See Graph 1 on page 4.)

GRAPH 1: Hart and Risley's (1995) Analysis: The Average Number of Words Children Know by Age and SES

Graph showing Average Number of Words (y-axis, 0 to 1600) vs Age of Child in Months (x-axis, 18 to 38) for High SES, Middle SES, and Low SES.

Students are typically provided with merely a surface-level understanding of words, which fails to engage them with deeper and multiple meanings.

Research reveals that the amount and quality of parents' conversations with their children is strongly correlated with socioeconomic status (SES), producing a long-term impact on vocabulary growth and other aspects of language development (Hart & Risley, 1995). Therefore, children's socioeconomic status is the most significant factor influencing these vocabulary gaps. Graves, Brunetti, and Slater (1982) examined knowledge of the 5,044 most frequent words by children in first through third grade with a focus on economic status. These researchers determined that children coming from disadvantaged backgrounds knew 1,800 of the most frequent words, whereas children from middle-class backgrounds knew 2,700 words from the tested vocabulary list. Follow-up research by Graves and Slater (as cited in Graves, 1986) investigated students' knowledge of 19,050 most frequent words. Once again they found significant differences according to economic background with students from disadvantaged backgrounds at a rural school scoring lower (2,900 of the words correct) in comparison to those from middle-class backgrounds at a suburban school scoring higher (5,800 of the targeted words correct).

Perhaps most significantly, research has also revealed the longitudinal effect of these knowledge gaps. White, Graves, and Slater (1990) highlight how these differences only increase with time, producing a persistent and widening achievement gap. The growth in reading-vocabulary knowledge for children in low SES urban schools was 3,300 words from first to third grade. Similarly, students in low SES, semi-rural schools increased their vocabulary by 3,500 words. In contrast, students in middle SES schools achieved a vocabulary growth of 5,200 words from first to third grade. Therefore, by the end of third grade, these differences in vocabulary had increased to approximately 5,000 (or twice as many words) known by the middle SES students as compared to the low SES students.

It may seem that vocabulary is predetermined and not receptive to change, owing to children's varying ability levels or demographic characteristics (e.g., socioeconomic status). However, this notion does not represent what we know from research on vocabulary instruction: teachers can influence the course of vocabulary acquisition for the better (Baumann, Kame'enui, & Ask, 2003; Blachowicz & Fisher, 2000; National Reading Panel, 2000). While language and achievement gaps between different groups of children are cause for concern, research reveals that quality school instruction can provide one avenue for closing these gaps.

THE STATUS OF VOCABULARY INSTRUCTION

The question remains whether effective vocabulary instruction typically occurs in our nation's schools. Researchers suggest that the answer to this question is frequently no; too often vocabulary instruction in early elementary-school settings does not embody the research-based components that have been found to significantly impact vocabulary development and reading comprehension (e.g., Biemiller, 2001; Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002). Students are typically provided with merely a surface-level understanding of words, which fails to engage them with deeper and multiple meanings. In addition, students often find such activities uninteresting, which may hamper their motivation to truly learn new words (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002).

Perhaps typical vocabulary instruction is lacking due to certain assumptions often associated with vocabulary acquisition—assumptions that do not always find support in the research. Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (2002) explore three assumptions that they view as part of the conventional wisdom about learning new words, including the following:

- Words are learned from context
- School-aged children, themselves, add words to their vocabularies
- Learning words in context is the best way to teach vocabulary (p. 3)

These researchers challenge each of the above assumptions and explain that, in fact, direct instruction of vocabulary allows teachers to help *all* children—whether they begin with large or small vocabularies or struggle with reading or do not—learn many new words meaningfully and in engaging ways. This contradicts the assumption that children can learn the words they need to know merely from any contexts in which they encounter words.

DIRECT VOCABULARY INSTRUCTION—THE BEST APPROACH

When vocabulary instruction is direct and interactive, children's word knowledge (of the target words) and reading-comprehension abilities (of texts containing target words) significantly increase (e.g., Beck, Perfetti, & McKeown, 1982; McKeown, Beck, Omanson, & Perfetti, 1983). Research has revealed a number of components critical to effective vocabulary instruction in the primary grades (Biemiller, 2004; Elley, 1989; Penno et al, 2002; Beck, Perfetti, & McKeown, 1982; Kame'enui, Carnine, & Freschi, 1982; McKeown, Beck, Omanson, & Perfetti, 1983). These include the following:

- A concentration on important words
- Inclusion of a sufficient number of words
- Multiple encounters with each word in various contexts
- Direct instruction after students encounter words in read-alouds
- Discussion and elaboration about word meanings
- Opportunities to use words outside classroom walls

It is through such robust and explicit vocabulary instruction that teachers can shape children's development of deep word knowledge. One important technique for incorporating this instructional approach to vocabulary is through classroom read-alouds.

READ-ALOUDS—A TECHNIQUE FOR LEARNING NEW WORDS

Even before children know how to read, they can learn new words through the course of conversations, as well as by listening to new words in texts being read to them. Read-alouds have become common practice in early elementary classrooms and have also been heralded by research as one of the most important ways to promote language development (Dickinson & Tabors, 1991; Morrow, 1992; Snow et al., 1995), and more specifically vocabulary (e.g., Elley, 1989; Whitehurst, Arnold, Epstein, et al., 1994), as well as reading achievement (Morrow, 1992; Teale, 2003). Effective read-alouds provide an ideal situation to embed rich, direct vocabulary instruction as well as enhance reading comprehension. Research has demonstrated that the time during which teachers and children interact during effective read-alouds helps children:

- Gain exposure to decontextualized language (language which is beyond the here and now, e.g., Snow et al., 1995);

- Concentrate on ideas in texts;

- Reflect and consider the meaning of stories (Dickinson & Smith, 1994; Teale & Martinez, 1996).

Effective read-alouds entail interactive and quality conversation between teachers and students (Whitehurst et al., 1994). Through effective read-alouds, children can make significant gains in their understanding and critical thinking about words and stories (e.g., McKeown & Beck, 2003).

However, research has revealed that in typical early elementary classrooms effective read-alouds are few and far between (Dickinson, McCabe, & Anastasopoulos, 2003; Teale, 2003). The read-alouds examined in these studies did not focus children's

attention on the main ideas in texts, failed to include discussion of these main ideas, and lacked the potential to assess whether children developed a deep understanding of the texts. Classrooms lacking in effective read-alouds also miss critical opportunities to promote vocabulary acquisition through engaging children with new words and developing their rich word-knowledge base.

Another major concern that has emerged from McKeown and Beck's read-aloud research (e.g., 2003) involves teacher questioning and student responses. Too often, children's responses entail simple yes or no answers because of the nature of the questions asked. In these cases, children may not have the opportunity to use new words and to develop a deeper understanding of the words they encounter in read-alouds. When Beck and McKeown began to note the ways in which read-alouds generally occur in primary-grade classrooms, they found something surprising: "Often there was no interaction when the story was read, and when there was it revolved around simple questions asking children to retrieve a text idea that had just been presented" (p. 5). Therefore, typical read-alouds tended not to include the type of teacher-student interaction that research regards as effective for children's vocabulary growth and reading comprehension.

Text Talk: Robust Vocabulary Instruction Through Read-Alouds

The research reviewed earlier highlights a number of concerns, particularly the gaps in word knowledge and comprehension skills between different groups of children, the quality of vocabulary instruction in elementary schools, and the lack of effective read-alouds in primary-grade classrooms. This foundational research provided the motivation for Beck and McKeown to create a rich and robust vocabulary program using effective read-alouds as a method to help teachers and students make the most

GRAPH 2: Children's Verbal Responses Before and After Text Talk

Chart — Mean Number of Words:
- Pretest: 2.1
- Posttest: 7.65
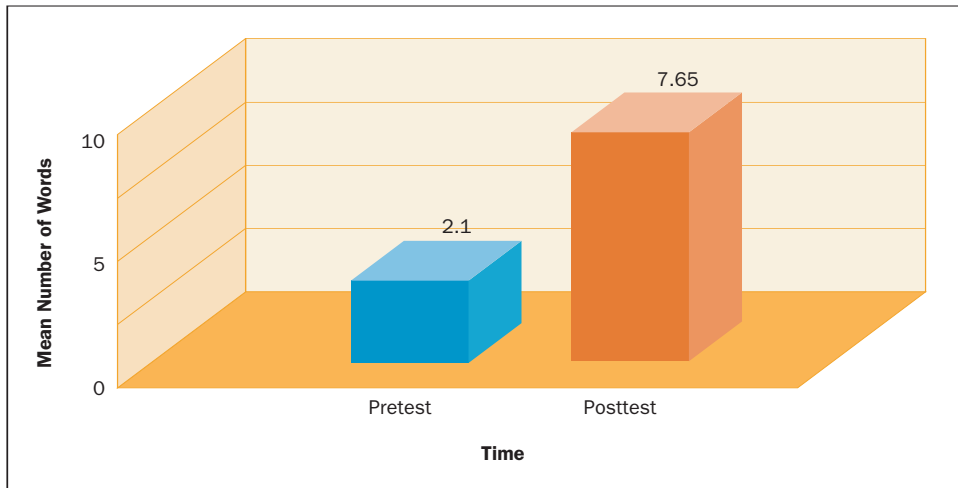
of their interactions when reading books, while promoting children's vocabulary and comprehension development (e.g., McKeown & Beck, 2003). The following sections detail how Text Talk addresses each problem revealed by the research while demonstrating its vocabulary approach and proven effectiveness.

TEXT TALK—EFFECTIVE READ-ALOUD APPROACH

Research examining the effects of Text Talk has revealed positive results for student outcomes, including children's responses during read-alouds and language growth (McKeown & Beck, 2003). In their studies of Text Talk implementations, Beck and McKeown found a number of important classroom and child outcome changes, owing to this approach:

- On average, children's verbal responses to questions increased from 2.1 words, prior to Text Talk's introduction, to 7.65 words after Text Talk's implementation (Handbook of Early Literacy, Vol. 2). (See Graph 2.)

- Children had more opportunities to develop their understanding of events in stories and practice conveying their thoughts (Handbook of Early Literacy, Vol. 2).

- Children had greater chances to engage with and improve on decontextualized language (Handbook of Early Literacy, Vol. 2).

While promoting vocabulary growth, Text Talk also provides an approach for teachers to develop children's thinking processes and comprehension skills (McKeown & Beck, 2003). Teachers were able to develop these skills by asking open questions (rather than simple, closed questions) and scaffolding children's development of the following: more lengthy and rich responses, comprehension of story events, and articulation of their ideas in thoughtful and textually relevant ways. One hallmark of the Text Talk approach, open questions, offers children the opportunity to delve deeply into the information they hear during read-alouds while increasing their comprehension and language growth (McKeown & Beck, 2003).

TEXT TALK—EFFECTIVE DIRECT VOCABULARY INSTRUCTION

Text Talk addresses the challenge of the language gap and weak vocabulary instruction in schools by boosting children's word knowledge through direct vocabulary instruction. Text Talk has been confirmed through research to promote vocabulary growth in children, particularly those living in urban, low-income environments. Vocabulary instruction is enhanced by first carefully considering a number of factors when selecting which words to directly instruct.

Text Talk incorporates Tier 2 vocabulary words, which are chosen according to a few specific criteria. Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (2002) contend that some words will be more useful than others for children as they encounter different contexts. Tier 2 words do not represent familiar objects and actions, nor are they considered content area vocabulary. Rather, words that fall into the category of Tier 2 are easily relatable to concepts that children already understand. They are most successful for direct instruction because teachers can easily explain them in a variety of ways. Some examples of such words include *required, reality, absurd*, and *occurrence*. Tier 2 words can be thought of as "general but sophisticated" (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002, p. 18).

Text Talk vocabulary instruction focuses on a sufficient number of words that should be taught each year. This question of how many words an individual knows (e.g., Beck & McKeown, 1991) and how many words can be taught has received continued attention in the research literature (e.g., Stahl, 1999). The range of words that has been proposed by researchers, even at the lower end, may seem daunting to any teacher. Through their years of researching vocabulary and reading, McKeown and Beck (2003) have concluded that approximately 100 words per grade represents a reasonable number of words to teach for children in kindergarten and first grade. Text Talk provides the vehicle for teachers to help children meaningfully learn many important and useful words, sufficient to develop vocabularies of "mature literate individual[s]" (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002, p. 8).

Text Talk also provides children with repeated exposure to and interactions with words. Children in classrooms using Text Talk have the opportunity to engage with these target words in a variety of ways: teachers provide the contexts in which the word appears, children have the chance to repeat the word, teachers discuss the meaning of the target word, some other examples of the word in different contexts are provided, and children engage with their own examples of the word in the current or in a different context (p. 5). In Text Talk, target words are placed within multiple contexts, allowing children to gain more complete knowledge of these critical words.

Text Talk's instructional components help teachers provide direct, rich, and active vocabulary instruction through incorporating research-based best practices proven to positively influence children's vocabulary development.

Text Talk's instructional components help teachers provide direct, rich, and active vocabulary instruction through incorporating research-based best practices.

GRAPH 3: First-Grade Vocabulary Achievement: Text Talk and Control Groups
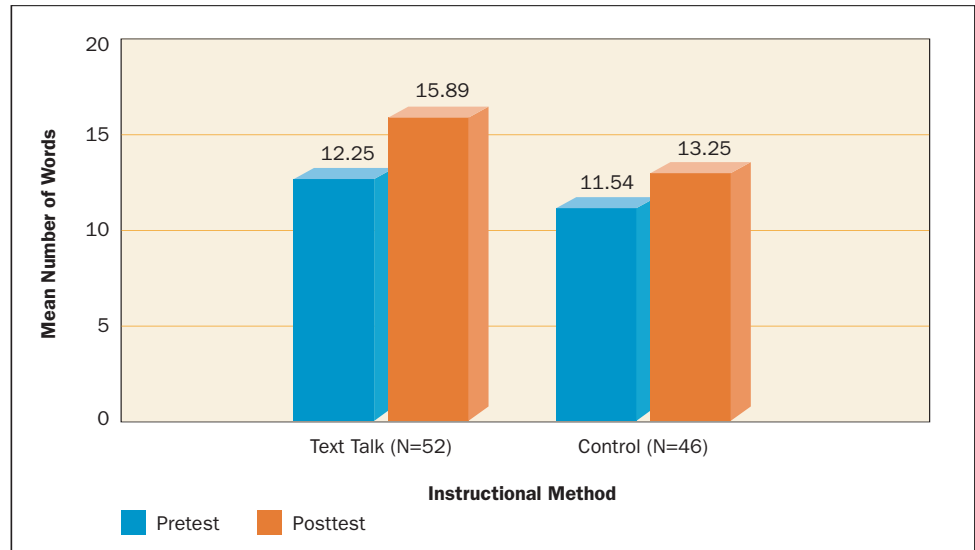
TEXT TALK—EFFECTIVE AT BUILDING VOCABULARY FOR ALL STUDENTS

Scientific research proves Text Talk's effectiveness at building young students' word knowledge. Beck and McKeown conducted research to examine the impact of Text Talk's instructional approach on children's vocabulary. In their initial study (Beck & McKeown, 2004), teachers working with low SES, predominantly African-American kindergarten and first-grade children incorporated Text Talk into their curricula. Key findings include the following:

- Kindergarten children in the Text Talk group demonstrated a significantly higher number of words learned (14.54 mean number of words) than children in the control group (10.36 mean number of words). In first grade, children receiving Text Talk again significantly outperformed the control group with higher gains in words learned (15.89 vs. 13.25 mean words). (See Graph 3.)

- Direct instruction of target words had a significant impact on children's vocabularies, confirming that children can be taught sophisticated words.

...providing Text Talk with more target words, more word encounters, and across more days of instruction led to almost double the vocabulary growth in first-grade children...

Follow-up research conducted by Beck and McKeown further revealed that providing Text Talk with more target words, more word encounters, and across more days of instruction led to almost double the vocabulary growth in first-grade children—6.88 mean words vs. 3.10 mean words learned (Beck & McKeown, 2004).

TEXT TALK—EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTION FOR VOCABULARY-DEFICIENT STUDENTS

Beck and McKeown's research demonstrated more pronounced results for the lower-performing kindergarten and first-grade students in the Text Talk group. Students who did not initially know many of the target words, and who received direct vocabulary instruction with Text Talk, fulfilled significantly more of their learning potential by mastering more new words than similar low-performing students in the control group. (See Graph 4.)

The message is clear: children as young as those in kindergarten and first grade, including at-risk children, have the capacity to increase their word knowledge significantly through direct vocabulary instruction and effective read-alouds.

GRAPH 4: Percent of Unknown Target Words Mastered for First Grade
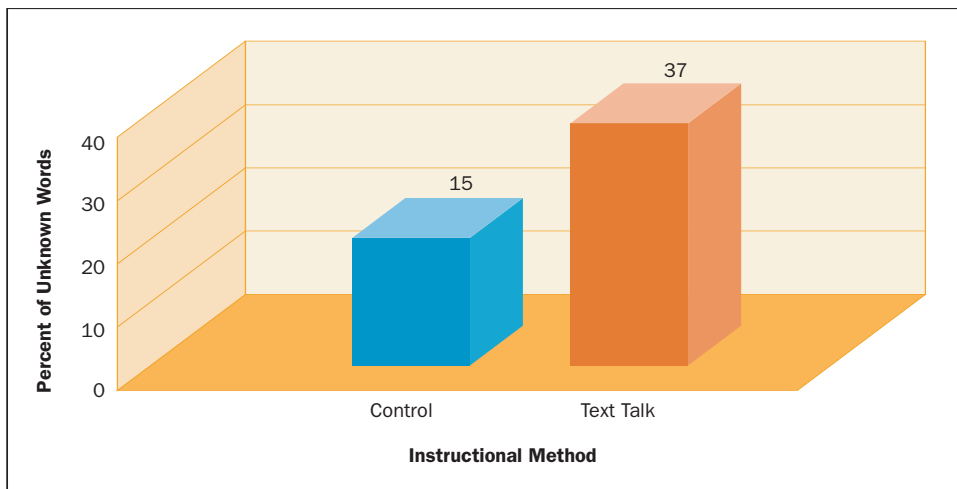
Conclusion

Implementing Text Talk in early elementary classrooms has great potential for addressing the disparities in language abilities among young children by helping to close the vocabulary gap.

Research reveals a significant vocabulary gap in our nation's schools, as well as a lack of direct vocabulary instruction and effective read-alouds in many primary-grade classrooms. Effective vocabulary instruction and classroom read-alouds are proven to positively impact the development of vocabulary and comprehension skills for all students, and are particularly important for those students who enter school with a vocabulary deficit.

Investigations into the effectiveness of Text Talk have demonstrated the positive and significant impact that Text Talk has on young children's vocabulary development and comprehension of read-aloud texts. Implementing Text Talk in early elementary classrooms has great potential for addressing the disparities in language abilities among young children by helping to close the vocabulary gap, and preparing all children for reading success.

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