

Vocabulary Addition to the National Assessment of Adult Literacy

What is the Vocabulary Addition to NAAL?

The Vocabulary Addition to the National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) is a new NAAL component being developed to assess the adequacy of adult Americans' vocabularies for purposes of reading and writing different types and levels of text.

Why is this study needed?

Words, singly and in combination, are the principal means by which written meaning is conveyed. Vocabulary is thus an effective predictor of reading comprehension across age groups, years of schooling, and languages—even when decoding ability is held constant. Conversely, skill analyses indicate that vocabulary weakness is a major deficit among the majority of students enrolled in Adult Basic Education courses. Thus the data this study will provide—about the breadth and depth of adults' vocabulary skills, and the relation of these skills to demographics and literacy proficiency—will contribute importantly to document design, workforce training, and setting education priorities.

What does this study measure?

Competencies to be measured fall into three categories, as indicated by the study's three modules: core vocabulary, text and document vocabulary, and productive vocabulary.

Core vocabulary. Linguistic analyses indicate that roughly 95% of spoken language and 80% of written language consist of approximately 2000 word families. Given that understanding of these core word families is essential to communication regardless of the topic, genre, or purpose, this study module will assess participants' mastery of the core vocabulary. Data collection for this assessment is currently planned in a multiple-choice format.

Text and document vocabulary. Whereas the core vocabulary covers nearly 80% of written text, the remaining 20% consists of many thousands of relatively infrequent words. Thus, although command of core English vocabulary may suffice for most oral communication, the demands of text comprehension are far greater. In fact, the information in a text derives disproportionately from its less frequent words, and reading comprehension depends on prior knowledge of at least 95% of the words in the text. Knowledge of core vocabulary alone is estimated to limit readers to the equivalent of a grade 4 reading level. This module, currently planned as a multiple-choice format, will assess participants' knowledge of text and document vocabulary.

Productive vocabulary. The number of words that people can adequately understand in reading or listening is greater than the number they can use properly in speaking or writing.

Because of the key role of writing abilities in meeting the demands of the workplace and everyday life, this study module will assess participants' ability to select and use appropriate words when communicating in writing.

What are the benefits of the Vocabulary Addition to NAAL?

Text and written documentation are the primary means of communicating both obligations and opportunities to American adults in public and private life, as well as in the workplace. *Effective* communication in a wide range of media (e.g., newspapers, legal notices, forms and affidavits, workplace memoranda and manuals, and medical information for patients) depends critically on the use of words and wordings that are clear and comprehensible to the intended audiences.

The data and analyses produced by the Vocabulary Addition to NAAL can markedly improve understanding of how vocabulary competencies relate to literacy attainment, text comprehension, and writing ability—and how these correlate with demographics. As a result, study benefits can include improved communications of a wide range of types, including those aimed at specific demographic groups and at the general public. For example, employers can benefit through more effective employee evaluation and training; educators and literacy practitioners can benefit through improved course materials and better targeting of resources; health professionals can improve the clarity of materials aimed at specific target audiences; and specific segments of the population can benefit through better comprehension of communication materials important to their successful participation in public life and the workplace.

Study plan

The *first stage* of the study will establish a conceptual framework to guide subsequent development of the Vocabulary Addition to NAAL. The conceptual framework will define the principles for selecting the specific items to be included in the three assessment modules; the general assessment methods and tasks to be used for each module; and the development of scoring criteria. This first stage will include (1) a review of the research literature on vocabulary knowledge and its assessment, (2) the identification and/or creation of appropriate word corpora from which items will be selected, and (3) analyses of the lexical and semantic characteristics that should inform the nature of the test items.

The *second stage* of the study will include development of assessment tasks, test procedures, and scoring criteria. This will be done using iterative evaluation and refinement of items based on results from small samples of respondents.

In the *final stage* of the study, assessment results from a large sample of American adults will be analyzed and interpreted. These results will provide much-needed information about the vocabulary strengths of specific demographic groups, as well as the specific training needed to improve their ability to participate effectively in the workplace and the community.

For more information about NAAL and its components, visit the NAAL website at <http://nces.ed.gov/naal> or contact Sheida White, NAAL Project Officer at the National Center for Education Statistics, by e-mail at Sheida.White@ed.gov.