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Brief Report

Learning words during shared book reading: The role of extratextual talk designed to increase child engagement



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ABSTRACT

Shared book reading (SBR) is a valuable context for word learning during early childhood, and adults' extratextual talk boosts the vocabulary building potential of SBR. We propose that the benefits of such talk depend largely on a reader's success in promoting children's active engagement (attention and interest) during SBR. When readers ask children questions about new words, especially if they respond to children in a prompt, contingent, and appropriate (positive) manner, this verbal responsiveness functions as an effective engagement strategy. We randomly assigned 3- and 4-year-olds to three reading conditions (low, moderate, and high) distinguished by the degree to which the reader used extratextual engagement strategies, including verbal responsiveness. Despite equal exposure to unfamiliar target words, children's performance improved on two measures of word learning across the three conditions, demonstrating the value of engagement strategies in extratextual talk. This study provides a strong experimental demonstration that adult verbal responsiveness directly benefits preschoolers' word learning.

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Introduction

Shared book reading (SBR) helps build a young child's vocabulary (Mol & Bus, 2011). Extratextual talk during SBR plays an important role in this process. In fact, Roberts, Jurgens, and Burchinal (2005) found that how much mothers talk when reading to 2- to 4-year-olds was more predictive of children's vocabularies by age 5 than how frequently mothers read to their children. Experimental research has identified some of the kinds of extratextual talk that increase word learning such as asking children questions about new vocabulary (e.g., Ard & Beverly, 2004; Blewitt, Rump, Shealy, & Cook, 2009; Ewers & Brownson, 1999; Sénéchal, 1997), defining words, and providing synonyms during reading sessions (e.g., Biemiller & Boote, 2006; Elley, 1989; Justice, Meier, & Walpole, 2005; Penno, Wilkinson, & Moore, 2002). Talking about new words in any of these ways increases performance on measures of word learning above and beyond reading alone. Identifying the kinds of extratextual talk that are most effective, such as the kinds of questions or comments that work best, has been a central goal of SBR researchers. Although progress has been made toward this goal (e.g., Biemiller & Boote, 2006; Blewitt et al., 2009), we propose that the adult's success in using extratextual talk to promote children's active engagement in the book reading experience, sustaining children's attention and interest, is key to the effectiveness of any kind of extratextual talk. We refer to this factor as *children's engagement*, but we argue that it can be heavily determined by adult behaviors.

What adult strategies are most likely to promote such engagement? Asking children questions about new words might promote engagement more effectively than commenting on the new words. Because questioning children requires their active participation, questions should encourage children's attentive processing of story information, including information relevant to new words. A few studies have compared the benefits of comments versus questions about new words while holding other factors (e.g., number of new word repetitions) constant, using a range of comment and question types across studies. The impact on children's word learning has been mixed but somewhat supportive of our analysis. Some studies find no differential effects (e.g., Ard & Beverly, 2004; Sénéchal & Cornell, 1993), but when differences are found questions have a greater effect than comments (e.g., Ewers & Brownson, 1999; Smeets & Bus, 2012).

The lackluster difference between questioning and commenting as promoters of word learning suggests to us that the manner in which questions are presented may be at least as important as the act of questioning. Children's engagement in SBR may be substantially affected by what Tamis-LeMonda and her colleagues have called "adult verbal responsiveness" in parent-child interactions—verbal replies to children's actions or speech that are "prompt" (temporally contiguous), "contingent" (dependent on children's behavior), and "appropriate" (positively connected to children's behavior) (e.g., Tamis-LeMonda, Cristofaro, Rodriguez, & Bornstein, 2006). Suppose a child were to say "It's gone!" when her glass of milk is empty. An immediate response like "You drank all your milk!" would qualify as responsive, but "Don't expect any more!" would not. The responsive reply is not only prompt and dependent on the child's focus of attention, but it has a positive supportive tone and may add some constructive information. In everyday interactions, parents' responsiveness to their infants and young children is correlated with children's vocabulary growth. For example, Bornstein, Tamis-LeMonda, and Haynes (1999) found that for 13- and 20-month-olds, mothers' verbal responsiveness was more predictive of lexical growth than the amount of mothers' language. Weizman and Snow (2001) assessed the frequency of "instructive" and "helpful" interactions between mothers and their 5-year-olds involving vocabulary. These interactions had the quality of verbal responsiveness described above (although they were not analyzed as such), and they were strong predictors of children's vocabulary both in kindergarten and in second grade.

Adult verbal responsiveness may support word learning for several reasons. First, its promptness and contingency help to ensure that the adult and child share a focus of attention. Second, responsiveness often provides information about the joint focus of attention and/or the words that pertain to it. Finally, as we are proposing, responsiveness encourages the child's continued positive engagement in a potentially informative communicative interaction.

In this experiment, we contrasted three story reading conditions representing three approaches to child engagement through extratextual talk. In the first condition (low engagement), each time a

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