



The effects of content-related shared book reading on the language development of preschool dual language learners

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ABSTRACT

This study was designed to experimentally examine the effects of content-based shared book reading instruction on the vocabulary development of Spanish-speaking preschool children who were learning English as a second language. Using shared book reading as the mode of instruction, 42 preschool teachers and 252 children from their classrooms were randomly assigned at the class level to either a highly specified content-related book reading intervention or a practice-as-usual shared book reading condition. Children were screened using the preLAS[®] and were selected for the study based on their scores at the pre-functional and beginning level of English proficiency. Intervention teachers implemented the curricular intervention in small groups of 5–6 students, five days per week, for 20 min per session, for 18 weeks. Based on multilevel models, findings indicated significant effects of this intervention approach on proximal vocabulary outcomes with no significant effects on standardized vocabulary measures. Implications for practice are discussed.

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1. Oral language and content knowledge acceleration

Oral language development, especially during preschool, contributes strongly to a child's later reading ability (Adams, 1990; National Early Literacy Panel [NELP], 2009; National Reading Panel [NRP], 2000; Scarborough, 2001; Storch & Whitehurst, 2002; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Oral vocabulary, a critical component of oral language, plays an important role in the development of conceptual knowledge (e.g., science, social studies), which strengthens and builds background knowledge essential for comprehension of text

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materials (August & Shanahan, 2006; Hirsch, 2006; Nagy, 2005; NRP, 2000; Verhoeven & Perfetti, 2011). Because language serves as the primary medium through which early content learning occurs (Boals, Kenyon, Blair, Wilmes, & Wright, 2015), instruction that targets content-specific vocabulary is crucial and exposes children to a broader “network of concepts” and ideas associated with a given word (Nagy, 1988; Stahl & Nagy, 2006). More effective preschool vocabulary instruction, therefore, should maximize instructional time by providing intentional opportunities for language interactions around vocabulary and connected concepts to deepen children's understanding of the surrounding world (McCardle, Chhabra, & Kapinus, 2008). In the present intervention study, 23 preschool teachers provided daily instruction around content related vocabulary in brief interactive book discussions to build lexical networks of knowledge important for academic learning and text comprehension.

1.1. The socio-economics of early content learning

Hirsch (2006) suggested that knowledge acceleration is dependent on early exposure to the “worlds of nature and culture” (p. 17) because these knowledge domains represent conceptual networks essential for text comprehension. The world of nature refers to science-related experiences while the world of culture refers to social studies concepts about the human condition in a diverse world (Hirsch, 2006; National Council for Social Studies [NCSS], 2010). Because children have an inherent curiosity about the worlds of science (Duschl, Schweingruber, & Shouse, 2007; Kuhn & Pearsall, 2000) and social studies (NCSS, 2007), world knowledge is initially accelerated via adult-child conversations and experiences in the home and community (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Charlesworth & Lind, 2013; Farkas & Beron, 2004).

Research findings, however, have documented sizeable discrepancies between economically disadvantaged children and their socioeconomically more advantaged peers in the depth and breadth of their conceptual understandings (Hart & Risley, 1995; Hirsch, 2006; Lareau, 2003) and access to rich knowledge and vocabulary-building resources (e.g., literacy materials, stimulating educational experiences) that parents use to foster their children’s oral language and knowledge acquisition (Bradley, Corwyn, McAdoo, & Coll, 2001; Neuman & Celano, 2001). Overall, vocabulary size seems to be the one aspect of language development that is most impacted by SES (Hoff, 2013).

Equally important, these early disadvantages may generate a “social stratification of knowledge” (Neuman, 2006) that is initiated at home and perpetuated in school settings when teachers of young children have little guidance in how to accelerate oral language and vocabulary learning (Neuman & Dwyer, 2009; Neuman & Roskos, 2005) or are not equipped to respond to the multidimensional needs of low-SES children who are also acquiring academic knowledge in English as a second language (Janzen, 2008). Learning to read and speak in two languages is not a risk factor as such but has far-reaching benefits (e.g., cross-cultural sensitivity, executive functioning, analytical thinking) (Bialystok & Craik, 2010; Bialystok & Hakuta, 1994; Rodríguez, Carrasquillo, & Lee, 2014). The vast majority of children who speak a non-English native language, however, live in high poverty settings with lower levels of parental education (Snow et al., 1998), limited economic resources (literacy materials in the home), and may have little exposure to rich adult/child home conversations in English prior to entering preschool (Hindman & Wasik, 2015). Overall, children’s socioeconomic status, initial knowledge, and home language experiences are highly associated with their vocabulary learning (Tabors & Snow, 2001).

A dual language preschool setting, therefore, may provide the optimal context and conditions for oral language stimulation and exposure to vocabulary and knowledge acceleration for children from high-poverty settings whose second language competencies are still emerging. There is evidence that children who attend bilingual preschools can make gains in English while still developing their Spanish language abilities (Winsler, Díaz, Espinosa, & Rodríguez, 1999). In our preschool intervention study, we included 252 children residing in a geographical region of Texas that has been federally identified as one of the most economically distressed counties in the nation (Mier et al., 2013). In our study, we refer to these children as dual language learners.

1.2. Oral language and knowledge acceleration in dual language learners

The federal office of Head Start refers to preschool emergent bilinguals, children who are still developing native oral language abilities while acquiring second-language proficiency, as dual lan-

guage learners (DLLs) (Goldenberg, Hicks, & Lit, 2013). These students are in the process of becoming bilingual and, therefore, often receive some amount of instructional support in the classroom to accelerate linguistic proficiency in two languages while developing the ability to discuss new subject-area content in English (García, Kleifgen, & Falchi, 2008). Currently, there are more than four million DLLs enrolled in early childhood programs (Goldenberg, 2013) and, by the 2030s, it is projected that 40% of the U.S. school population in general will be children who speak a language other than English in the home (American Speech, Language, Hearing Association, 2015; Magruder, Hayslip, Espinosa, & Matera, 2013).

Spanish-speaking children are the fastest growing group (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013; Passel, Cohn & Lopez, 2011), with more than 2 million Latino DLL children enrolled in preschool and early elementary grades K-3 (Kindler, 2002). Overall, Latino DLLs have lower academic achievement than non-Hispanic whites (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2013). Due to the increasing school population of Latino DLLs who are acquiring English as a second language (Lopez & Gonzalez-Barrera, 2015), many teachers will be responsible for the future instructional planning for a Spanish-speaking DLL child (Zehler et al., 2003), and must be attentive to approaches that make challenging academic content assessable when children are not English proficient. Overall, young DLLs have greater school readiness needs due to the key role that oral English plays in English literacy development and subject-area learning (Hoff, 2013).

Despite strong initiatives to understand and improve the instructional practices of DLLs in kindergarten through grade 3 (Goldenberg, 2013), fewer studies have investigated best practices for DLLs from birth to age 5. From the existing literature we know that emergent Latino preschool DLLs in high-poverty settings benefit more from high-quality explanations and discussions of new concepts during English and Spanish vocabulary instruction than from a focus on word meanings (Hindman & Wasik, 2015)—This is especially the case for DLLs entering school with lower English competencies. Similarly, Collins (2010) documented that rich word explanations can integrate the use of gestures and the use of vocabulary concepts in decontextualized statements. Further evidence confirms that young DLLs benefit from enriched language interactions with opportunities for individualized adult-child conversations (Espinosa, 2002) and clarifying feedback (Castro, Páez, Dickinson, & Frede, 2011).

Collectively, existing evidence suggests that, in general, oral language skills are crucial for English vocabulary and academic knowledge acceleration for DLLs (Gutiérrez, Zepeda, & Castro, 2010; Roberts & Neal, 2004; Saunders, Foorman, & Carlson, 2006). According to national standards established by the Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL; <http://www.tesol.org>), the development of academic English proficiency requires frequent listening and speaking opportunities around science, social studies, and math (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages [TESOL], 2006). TESOL standards underscore that DLL children should be exposed to specialized vocabulary and complex sentence structures to support academic learning (e.g., making predictions, summarizing, analyzing; [TESOL], 2006).

Because it may take five to eight years to develop and demonstrate a level of English oral language proficiency and vocabulary knowledge that can support subject-area learning (Crawford & Krashen, 2007; Hamayan, Marier, Sánchez-López, & Damico, 2013; Wright, 2010), teachers must scaffold instruction to enable children in the early stages of learning English to talk about academic content (August, McCardle, & Shanahan, 2014; Bravo & Cervetti, 2014). English as a second language (ESL) approaches (Fathman & Crowther, 2006) as well as nonlinguistic supports (visuals, ges-

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