



Preschool classroom conversations as long-term resources for second language and literacy acquisition[☆]

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 20 November 2009
Received in revised form 20 January 2011
Accepted 29 January 2011
Available online 13 May 2011

Keywords:

Classroom conversations
Vocabulary richness
Discourse complexity
Second language learning
Oral language skills
Literacy skills

ABSTRACT

This study investigated relations between preschool talk exposure and immigrant first graders' second language literacy and oral skills outcomes. Participants in the study were 25 children with Turkish as their first language and Norwegian as their second, attending various multilingual and ethnically diverse preschool classrooms in Norway and videotaped during preschool group conversations. Group conversations were coded for vocabulary richness, discourse complexity and emergent phonics talk. Relations between the qualities of the preschool group conversations that the children participated in and their second language vocabulary, listening comprehension and code related skills outcomes 1 year later in first grade were examined. Preschool classroom vocabulary richness and discourse complexity predicted first grade vocabulary (receptive vocabulary and word definition skills), but not listening comprehension. No associations were found between preschool classroom emergent phonics talk and first grade code-related skills. The findings have implications for early interventions addressing reading comprehension.

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This paper addresses the impact of preschool talk quality on young immigrant children's second language and literacy skills outcomes in first grade classrooms. More specifically, the purpose is to examine whether talk exposure quality in preschool classrooms attended by young Turkish-speaking children in Norway predicted their first grade second language oral skills (vocabulary and listening comprehension) and literacy skills. Though it is generally recognized in the literature that the quality of early exposure may be crucial to oral language and literacy acquisition, and though there are various studies examining the impact of intervention programs on language and literacy (Biemiller & Boote, 2006; Blewitt, Rump, Shealy, & Cook, 2009; Roskos et al., 2008; Silverman & Hines, 2009) few studies have addressed relationships between exposure and outcomes based on observed exposure in children's everyday life (but for review, see below). In particular there are few studies of qualities of preschool classrooms that predict second language and literacy learning longitudinally. As immigrant second language learners are over-represented among low-achieving readers in Norway and many other countries (August & Hakuta, 1998; Hvistendahl & Roe, 2004), identifying aspects of preschool classroom talk that support the

children's second language and literacy acquisition is of interest to both practitioners and researchers. Below, research on exposure that supports children's vocabulary development is reviewed first, and exposure that impacts children's code-related skills second. Because of a lack of studies examining young children's second language learning in settings of spontaneous talk, the review will include research on the relations between talk exposure and vocabulary learning in monolinguals.

Talk exposure and oral language development

Research on talk exposure and monolingual children's oral language outcomes, particularly their vocabulary, has suggested that the sheer amount of talk children hear may promote acquisition. Purely quantitative factors, such as the frequency with which a child hears a new word, is a major factor explaining differences in vocabulary size for young monolingual children (prior to the acquisition of literacy) (Hart & Risley, 1995; Hoff & Naigles, 2002) as well as for bilingual children (Vermeer, 2001). Moreover, studies have found an association between preschoolers' vocabulary knowledge and their exposure to word types in mother-child conversations (Pan, Rowe, Singer, & Snow, 2005) and in teacher talk in the preschool classroom (Aukrust, 2007; Bowers & Vasilyeva, 2011; Dickinson, 2001; Han, Roskos, Christie, Mandzuk, & Vukelich, 2005). Studies have also examined the impact of exposure to rare or sophisticated words in mother-child conversations, finding that children's vocabulary growth related to the occurrence of sophisticated lexical items in input (Beals, 1997; Weizman & Snow, 2001). Indeed, Weizman and

[☆] This research was supported by a grant from the Norwegian Research Council. The authors gratefully acknowledge the support of Kamil Øzerk in data collection. Thanks to the children, parents and teachers who contributed their time and conversations to this study.

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Snow found that sophisticated input (exposure to words that were not within the 3000 most common) was a better predictor of vocabulary performance than quantity of lexical input overall. These studies, mostly based on monolinguals, suggest that children may acquire larger vocabularies as a result of exposure to a lot of talk, to diversity in word types and also specifically as a result of exposure to rare words. Hardly any studies address how preschool or school talk exposure may predict second language vocabulary. Bowers and Vasilyeva (2011), however, included a small sample of second language learners when they investigated the role of teacher talk for preschoolers' vocabulary development across one year. Their findings suggest that exposure to a lot of talk was most supportive for the second language learners' vocabulary growth, while the diversity of word types was the strongest predictor of the monolingual children's vocabulary growth. The Bowers and Vasilyeva study thus underscore the importance of investigating how talk exposure in preschool may scaffold the vocabulary acquisition of second-language learners in particular.

Word learning is embedded in discursive contexts that support children's inferences about relevant word meaning. With a few notable exceptions, questions of word learning in the light of word exposure within varying discourse complexity have not been examined. Beals (1997) and Weizman and Snow (2001) pointed to the importance of the transparency of the pragmatic and discursive contexts in which children heard new words being used. Talk in school settings cannot be attuned to individual children's comprehension needs to the same extent as in the mother-child interaction studied by Weizman and Snow and by Beals. Still some studies of preschool interaction suggest an association between discourse participation and vocabulary acquisition in children. For example, Penno, Wilkinson, and Moore (2002) found that children made greater vocabulary gains when teachers provided an explanation in the context of target vocabulary items, compared with exposure without word explanation. In a similar vein, Tabors, Snow, and Dickinson (2001) found positive correlations between monolingual kindergarten children's extended discourse participation with teachers and the children's receptive vocabulary in 4th and 7th grade, and concluded that extended teacher discourse in preschool was a unique predictor of the children's later receptive vocabulary. Furthermore, Dickinson (2001) found that group-time conversations that were cognitively challenging and included a non-present topic correlated with the children's subsequent language and literacy development, and that the percentage of talk coded as explanatory was related to children's receptive vocabulary. Finally, Carlo et al. (2004) emphasized that, though important to all language learners, second language learners in particular rely on the discursive context in which words appear. When words appear within diverse and complex discourse contexts, children are offered more opportunities to develop a rich understanding of the various meaning aspects of the word. In sum, previous research has suggested that both word tokens, word types (all types as well as sophisticated ones) and *discourse complexity* may impact children's acquisition of word knowledge.

Emergent phonics talk and code-related skills in early literacy

Early reading requires the coordination of word meaning comprehension and recognition of individual sounds and letters. Studies have examined the relative impact of oral language and emergent literacy skills (code-related skills) on early and more mature reading. A substantial body of research suggests that code-related skills are important in predicting first and second grade reading, while vocabulary and more decontextualized oral skills best predict reading comprehension from grades 3 and 4 (Droop & Verhoeven, 2003; Proctor, Carlo, August, & Snow, 2005; Spira, Bracken, & Fischel, 2005; Storch & Whitehurst, 2002; Tabors, Snow, & Dickinson, 2001).

Whereas oral language may be acquired spontaneously in everyday talk, literacy must be taught either implicitly or explicitly. On a general level, Whitehurst et al. (1999) found that growth in emergent literacy skills from year to year was strongly influenced by variation in the education offered to children. Their study focused on the impact of centers and school districts (whether offering decoding- or comprehension-based literacy programs), but did not analyze more specifically the quality of the talk in which the children participated. Studies of intervention programs have found a positive relation between training phonological sensitivity with preschoolers and kindergartners and subsequent reading (Lonigan, Burgess, Anthony, & Barker, 1998; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). A study comparing a phonology-based reading intervention program with an oral language program found that training phonology fostered decoding skill whereas children in the oral language program had advantage over the phonology intervention group on measures of vocabulary and comprehension (Bowyer-Crane et al., 2008). Sénéchal and LeFevre (2002) found that reading skills may be related to different types of parental talk exposure. In their study, preschool children's exposure to books at home was related to development of vocabulary and listening comprehension which again was directly related to the children's reading in third grade. Parental involvement in teaching children about reading and writing words was on the other hand related to the development of preschool literacy skills, which predicted word reading in first grade and indirectly predicted reading in third grade. The various pathways that led to third grade reading thus had their roots in different aspects of children's early experiences. Relations between emergent phonics talk and children's subsequent code-related skills outcomes have in previous research mostly has been examined in intervention studies (but for exceptions, see anthropological studies such as Heath, 1986; Wells, 1987).

Research question and hypothesis

A previous study (Aukrust, 2008) found concurrent relations between talk exposure (vocabulary richness and discourse complexity) and vocabulary skills and listening comprehension in first grade, but not between emergent phonics talk and concurrent code-related skills in first grade. Learning to speak and read in a second language is, however, a process that takes time and effort. In this present study the research question addresses relations between talk exposure in preschool and first grade language and literacy outcomes. It was expected that the development of vocabulary, listening comprehension and code-related skills resulted from experiences with different types of exposure. We expected that children who experienced preschool classrooms characterized by rich word use and discourse complexity would have more developed vocabulary and listening comprehension skills in first grade. Second, we expected that children who experienced more emergent phonics talk in preschool would have more developed code-related skills in first grade.

Parental education has in many studies been shown to correlate highly with children's first (Hart & Risley, 1995; Hoff, 2003; Pan, Rowe, Spier, & Tamis-LeMonda, 2004; Tamis-LeMonda, Bornstein, & Baumwell, 2001) and second (Droop & Verhoeven, 2003; Leseman, 2000) language acquisition, as well as with their code-related skills (Bowey, 1995; Dickinson & Snow, 1987). Parental education is a factor that may introduce confounds into the analysis of relationships between preschool classroom talk exposure and subsequent language and literacy acquisition and will therefore be considered in the analysis. Moreover, first language vocabulary skills have been found to impact second language vocabulary skills in various ways (for review see Proctor, August, Carlo, & Snow, 2006). Ordóñez, Carlo, Snow, and McLaughlin (2002) noted, for example, that academically mediated vocabulary skills tended to transfer from bilingual children's first to second language. When identifying the predictors of Norwegian

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