



Impacts of a literacy-focused preschool curriculum on the early literacy skills of language-minority children



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ABSTRACT

Spanish-speaking language-minority (LM) children are at an elevated risk of struggling academically and display signs of that risk during early childhood. Therefore, high-quality research is needed to identify instructional techniques that promote the school readiness of Spanish-speaking LM children. The primary purpose of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of an intervention that utilized an experimental curriculum and two professional development models for the development of English and Spanish early literacy skills among LM children. We also evaluated whether LM children's proficiency in one language moderated the effect of the intervention on early literacy skills in the other language, as well as whether the intervention was differentially effective for LM and monolingual English-speaking children. Five hundred twenty-six Spanish-speaking LM children and 447 monolingual English-speaking children enrolled in 26 preschool centers in Los Angeles, CA participated in this study. Results indicated that the intervention was effective for improving LM children's code-related but not language-related English early literacy skills. There were no effects of the intervention on children's Spanish early literacy skills. Proficiency in Spanish did not moderate the effect of the intervention for any English early literacy outcomes; however, proficiency in English significantly moderated the effect of the intervention for Spanish oral language skills, such that the effect of the intervention was stronger for children with higher proficiency in English than it was for children with lower proficiency in English. In general, there were not differential effects of the intervention for LM and monolingual children. Taken together, these findings indicate that high-quality, evidence-based instruction can improve the early literacy skills of LM children and that the same instructional techniques are effective for enhancing the early literacy skills of LM and monolingual children.

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1. Introduction

Children who speak a language other than English at home are often referred to as language-minority (LM) children because their home language is not the language spoken by the majority of the population of the country in which they live. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2014), 21% of the U.S. population over 5 years of age speaks a language other than English at home. The majority of the LM population in the U.S. speaks Spanish at home, and, in recent years, this group has expanded due to immigration

from Latin America. Spanish-speaking LM children are often at an increased risk for the development of academic difficulties. Data from the National Assessment of Education Progress indicate that LM children in the U.S. score significantly lower than do their monolingual English-speaking peers on measures of reading at both 4th and 8th grades (Hemphill, Vanneman, & Rahman, 2011). Therefore, it is important to identify instructional techniques that improve the academic outcomes of LM children to begin to close the existing achievement gap.

1.1. Early literacy and intervention

Early literacy skills are those skills that are the developmental precursors to conventional reading and writing skills and are measurable as early as the preschool years (Lonigan, Schatschneider, & Westberg, 2008a; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Three early literacy skills that are predictive of children's later reading abilities

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are oral language, phonological awareness, and print knowledge. Oral language refers to children's ability to convey and understand meaning effectively, and includes children's vocabulary and syntactic knowledge, among other skills. Phonological awareness refers to children's ability to detect and manipulate the individual sound components of words. Print knowledge refers to children's knowledge of letter names and letter sounds, as well as knowledge of the conventions of print (e.g., text is read from left to right in English and Spanish). Each of these early literacy skills is related to children's later reading abilities, including word reading and reading comprehension (e.g., Lonigan et al., 2008a; Storch & Whitehurst, 2002; Wagner et al., 1997), and some evidence suggests that phonological awareness is causally related to children's subsequent reading skills (Byrne & Fielding-Barnsley, 1995). Prior research concerning the development of academic skills indicates that children's reading abilities become remarkably stable in the early elementary years (Scarborough, 1998; Wagner, Torgesen, & Rashotte, 1994), highlighting the importance of early identification of risk for reading difficulties. Several studies indicate that the same precursor skills (i.e., oral language, phonological awareness, print knowledge) that are important predictors of later reading ability among monolingual children are important predictors of later reading ability among LM children (e.g., Lindsey, Manis, & Bailey, 2003; Mancilla-Martinez & Lesaux, 2010; Nakamoto, Lindsey, & Manis, 2008).

Despite the fact that Spanish-speaking LM children are at a substantial risk of developing reading difficulties (e.g., Hemphill et al., 2011) and display signs of that risk in early childhood (e.g., August & Shanahan, 2006; Lonigan, Farver, Nakamoto, & Eppe, 2013), relatively little is known concerning effective preschool interventions to reduce this population's risk. In a recent review, Buisse, Peisner-Feinberg, Páez, Hammer, and Knowles (2014) summarized the experimental evidence concerning preschool interventions for LM children. They reported that only 25 studies had evaluated preschool interventions for LM children, despite LM children comprising approximately one fifth of the population of school-age children in the U.S. Additionally, several of these studies had small sample sizes, limiting the generalizability of their results. One major issue in research on LM children is the lack of an operational definition for this population. Emerging evidence indicates there is substantial heterogeneity in the skills and experiences of LM children (e.g., Gonzalez et al., 2016). Furthermore, research has demonstrated that the development of first (L1) and second (L2) language literacy-related skills differs for children who are exclusively exposed to Spanish at home and children who are exposed to both Spanish and English at home prior to school entry (Hammer, Lawrence, & Miccio, 2008). Therefore, interventions that may be effective for some subpopulations of LM children may not be effective for others.

Buisse et al. (2014) reported that no studies of preschool interventions for LM children provided an operational definition of their population of interest, and the majority of studies relied upon a single method of identification of children as LM, with parent report being the most common method. Additionally, less than one third of the studies reviewed assessed outcomes in L1 and L2 using the same measures across languages. In sum, few conclusions can be drawn from the current evidence regarding effective early education practices to improve the early literacy skills of LM children due to inconsistencies in the types of interventions used in prior research and the numerous methodological issues that have plagued research with this population. Nevertheless, most prior studies reported positive effects of instruction in both L1 and L2, suggesting that the early literacy skills of LM children can be improved by high quality, evidence-based practices.

1.2. Instructional techniques for early intervention

Whereas there is limited evidence concerning the effectiveness of preschool interventions for LM children, researchers have identified several successful instructional techniques designed to improve early literacy skills among monolingual children. First, code-focused interventions are effective for improving children's code-related early literacy skills (Lonigan, Schatschneider, & Westberg, 2008b). Code-focused instructional techniques involve teaching the alphabetic principle (i.e., letters in written language correspond to sounds in spoken language) and explicitly teaching phonological awareness skills. These techniques have been shown to improve children's phonological awareness and print knowledge abilities as well as children's later reading and writing skills. Additionally, methods such as dialogic reading have been shown to be effective at improving children's oral language skills (e.g., Lonigan, Shanahan, & Cunningham, 2008; Zevenbergen, Whitehurst, & Zevenbergen, 2003). In dialogic reading an adult (e.g., teacher, parent) interacts with the child during shared book reading by using scaffolding techniques such as asking the child questions about the pictures in the book, responding to the child's answers, and providing assistance when the child appears to not have the language needed to describe information in the book. The utilization of effective instructional techniques, such as dialogic reading or phonological awareness training, is important for improving young children's early literacy outcomes and potentially enhancing their later reading abilities, especially for those children at risk for the development of reading difficulties.

In a large-scale study of a preschool early literacy curriculum and two professional development models, Lonigan, Farver, Phillips, and Clancy-Menchetti (2011) reported significant and moderate effect sizes for a preschool curriculum that utilized techniques such as phonological awareness training and dialogic reading to improve children's early literacy skills. Children in classrooms that used the experimental curriculum scored significantly higher than did children in control classrooms on measures of oral language, phonological awareness, and print knowledge. When children in classrooms in which teachers attended professional development workshops were compared to children in classrooms in which teachers received in-class mentoring sessions in addition to attending professional development workshops the only significant group difference was for print knowledge scores. This finding suggests that in-class mentoring sessions provided to teachers were not sufficient to substantially improve student outcomes above and beyond the effects of attending professional development workshops alone.

1.3. Early intervention for LM children

Studies of intervention effects among samples of LM children indicate that the same instructional techniques (e.g., dialogic reading, phonological awareness training) that are effective at enhancing the early literacy skills of monolingual children are effective at enhancing the L1 and L2 skills of LM children (e.g., Farver, Lonigan, & Eppe, 2009; Madera & Gerber, 2008). However, significant effects are often specific to the language of instruction, such that English-only instruction typically enhances children's English skills but has no effect on skills in L1, whereas instruction that incorporates both L1 and L2 can enhance children's early literacy skills in both languages. In fact, Farver et al. (2009) reported that children who received instruction in both Spanish and English demonstrated greater advantages over the control group for English oral language and print knowledge than did children who received instruction in English only.

According to the developmental interdependence hypothesis (Cummins, 1979), development of proficiency in L2 is dependent

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