



The language of play: Developing preschool vocabulary through play following shared book-reading

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ABSTRACT

Two studies explored the role of play in a vocabulary intervention for low-income preschoolers. Both studies presented new vocabulary through book-readings. Study 1 children ($N = 249$; $M_{age} = 59.19$ months) were also randomly assigned to participate in Free Play, Guided Play, or Directed Play with toys relating to the books. Guided and Directed Play conditions involved different styles of adult support. Although children in all conditions showed significant gains in knowledge of target vocabulary words, children in both adult-supported conditions showed significantly greater gains than children experiencing Free Play. In Study 2, classroom teachers implemented our procedures instead of researchers. All children ($N = 101$; $M_{age} = 58.65$ months) reviewed half the vocabulary words through a hybrid of guided and directed play and half the words through a picture card review activity. Children showed significant pre- to post-test gains on receptive and expressive knowledge for both sets of taught words, but they also showed significantly greater expressive vocabulary gains for words reviewed through play. These results suggest that there are unique benefits of adult-supported play-based activities for early vocabulary growth.

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One proverb states, “All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy” (Howell, 1659). Yet, “All play and no work makes Jack a mere toy” (Edgeworth, 1825, p. 155). This poetic pair captures not only the benefits of children’s play but also its limitations. Time for play in classrooms is dwindling, as educators and policymakers emphasize other activities believed to be more educationally effective (Elkind, 2008; Miller & Almon, 2009). However, data show

that playful learning promotes language, cognitive, and social skills that are critical for academic success (e.g., Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk, & Singer, 2009; Roskos & Christie, 2000). Although a recent review of the research on the developmental benefits of play (Lillard et al., 2013) provided an important critique, the concerns are not equally applicable to all types of play or all developmental outcomes (Nicolopoulou & Ilgaz, 2013). To balance conflicting notions of the role of play in children’s development and education, we need to understand which types of play activities relate to which outcomes. As part of the broader Read-Play-Learn project, two studies presented here explored various approaches to leveraging play alongside more established book-reading methods to promote vocabulary growth in low-income preschoolers. Play provides a way to scaffold children’s vocabulary development through engagement with words in meaningful contexts. A playful review of new vocabulary items differs substantially from the didactic teaching methods commonly used in preschool classrooms (Early et al., 2010). Here we focus on vocabulary introduced through book-reading sessions and evaluate whether playful approaches activities to word learning assist low-income preschoolers in augmenting their vocabulary knowledge. We also examine whether

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play is more effective than a direct instruction approach to supplementing the vocabulary support occurring within book-reading.

1. Promoting vocabulary growth in low-income preschoolers

Early vocabulary powerfully predicts children's later language development, reading skills, school-readiness, and academic success (Dickinson & Porche, 2011; Morgan, Farkas, Hillemeier, Hammer, & Maczuga, 2015; Rowe, Raudenbush, & Goldin-Meadow, 2012). For example, Storch and Whitehurst (2002) found statistically significant indirect effects of preschool oral language skills (e.g., receptive and expressive vocabulary) on reading abilities in Grades 1–4. Also, rates of early vocabulary growth predict the structure of children's brains years later, with changes in cortical regions relevant to continued language development (Asaridou, Demir-Lira, Goldin-Meadow, & Small, 2017).

Although fostering vocabulary development is important for all children, it is especially crucial to examine trajectories for children from low-income families (Farkas & Beron, 2004; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). The quantity and quality of language input for children from low-income families is typically less than for their higher-income peers (Hart & Risley, 1995; Hindman, Wasik, & Snell, 2016; Hoff, 2013; Rowe, 2008). Both quantity and quality of early language input play a large role in language development (Cartmill et al., 2013; Goldin-Meadow et al., 2014; Hirsh-Pasek, Adamson et al., 2015), and quality often mediates the relation between socioeconomic status and language outcomes (Bracken & Fischel, 2008). Enhancing language environments in formal childcare or preschool initiatives (e.g., Head Start, universal pre-K) is one potential venue for providing language support to children otherwise at risk (Vernon-Feagans, Bratsch-Hines, & The Family Life Project Key Investigators, 2013), and that is what we aimed to do in the current study.

1.1. Vocabulary development in early childhood programs

Much work needs to be done to ensure that early childhood programs are providing high-quality developmental support for all children. Numerous studies have found low-quality language and literacy instruction in early childhood classrooms (Dickinson, Hofer, Barnes, & Grifenhagen, 2014; Hindman & Wasik, 2013; Justice, Mashburn, Hamre, & Pianta, 2008; Mashburn et al., 2008). Early word learning, in particular, is not sufficiently supported at many preschools (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008; Neuman & Dwyer, 2009). Recent data from Fuller, Bein, Bridges, Kim, and Rabe-Hesketh (2017) indicate that pre-kindergarten programming that is academically oriented (i.e., which spends significant amounts of time emphasizing oral language skills and preliteracy skills, as well as math concepts) is associated with greater gains in children's language and math skills than those seen for children in home-based care or less academic-oriented programming. Such research further suggests that incorporating high-quality support for language development is a key ingredient in maximizing the benefits of early education.

Part of high-quality support for vocabulary growth involves addressing the many aspects of what it means to know a word well. Vocabulary knowledge can be conceptualized as being along a continuum from not understanding a word's meaning to having a deep understanding, and vocabulary interventions and assessments differ in the level of knowledge targeted (Christ & Wang, 2011; Coyne, McCoach, Loftus, Zipoli Jr, & Kapp, 2009; Hadley, Dickinson, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, & Nesbitt, 2016). Although many efforts to improve children's word knowledge and the word gap focus on presenting many new words efficiently, children show

greater depth of vocabulary knowledge when they engage with new words in extended and varied ways (Coyne et al., 2009).

1.2. Efficacy of vocabulary interventions

Research on vocabulary acquisition suggests that word learning is facilitated through six principles: (1) frequent exposure, (2) capturing the child's interest, (3) interactive and responsive environments, (4) meaningful context, (5) diversity of words and language structures, and (6) leveraging of grammatical knowledge (Harris, Golinkoff, & Hirsh-Pasek, 2011; Hassinger-Das, Toub, Hirsh-Pasek, & Golinkoff, 2017; Konishi, Kanero, Freeman, Golinkoff, & Hirsh-Pasek, 2014; Reed, Hirsh-Pasek, & Golinkoff, 2017). Wasik, Hindman, and Snell (2016) particularly emphasize the value of systemic exposures to new words and a variety of tasks that invite children to truly engage with the words.

Our work focuses on common activities that can implement these principles within the preschool classroom: reading and playing. During these activities, vocabulary words and their meanings can be highlighted in interesting and relevant ways for children through explicit verbal discussions and images or props that depict word meanings, as well as gestures that provide nonverbal support (Goldin-Meadow & Alibali, 2013). Reading and playing are promising ways to go beyond rote memorization and facilitate children's deeper and longer-lasting word knowledge. Furthermore, playing especially enables the kind of adaptive and responsive interactions that should facilitate the natural learning of vocabulary.

1.3. Shared book-reading to support vocabulary

An extensive review of preschool and kindergarten interventions that were designed to build language found that shared book-reading is the intervention that most consistently results in vocabulary growth (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008). Meta-analyses that included studies completed after the cut-off point of the National Early Literacy Panel (Marulis & Neuman, 2010; Mol, Bus, de Jong, & Smeets, 2008; Mol, Bus, & Jong, 2009) continue to find consistent evidence that book-reading interventions yield moderate-to-strong effects on preschoolers' vocabulary. Although a recent systematic review of book-reading interventions (Wasik et al., 2016) noted that gains are typically modest in terms of the proportion of words that are learned, the authors also argue that book-reading lends itself to the types of opportunities for exposure to and engagement with words that best facilitate learning. We therefore used book-reading in our program and incorporated evidence-based strategies to enhance vocabulary growth. For example, we built in multiple exposures to words through repeated readings, questioning about words and the story, and provision of explicit definitions (Beck & McKeown, 2007; Biemiller & Boote, 2006; Coyne, McCoach, & Kapp, 2007; Coyne et al., 2009; Wasik, Bond, & Hindman, 2006). We also added opportunities for children to say target words (Sénéchal, 1997) and to observe and use gesture for non-verbal expression of word meaning (Goldin-Meadow & Alibali, 2013; Rowe, Silverman, & Mullan, 2013). More details on our book-reading approach can be found in Dickinson and colleagues (in preparation).

1.4. Play-based activities to further support vocabulary

Play might be another particularly effective component for vocabulary interventions (Weisberg, Zosh, Hirsh-Pasek, & Golinkoff, 2013). Play is often inherently interesting, interactive, and meaningful for children, and the interdisciplinary science of learning literature indicates that learning is maximized through such meaningful and socially interactive learning environments in which children are active and engaged (Chi, 2009; Hirsh-Pasek,

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