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Phonological awareness instruction: A program training design for low-income children

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ABSTRACT

This study describes the implementation of a program to enhance phonological awareness in Kindergarten Chilean students from a low-income background. The intervention included a special professional development course designed for teachers, to help them reflect and modify their practices, where classroom observations and feedback on instruction became a fundamental basis of the intervention. Children were assessed before and after the interventions, and results were compared with those of a control group. Results reflected how teachers' practices are a fundamental key to understanding children outcomes, and that immediate feedback is fundamental for instructional change that favors learning.

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1. Introduction

Lack of adequate development of literacy skills is one of the main concerns of education worldwide (Lundenberg, Larman, & Strid, 2012). The demand for more sophisticated reading comprehension skills is fundamental in a society that becomes more dependent on information processing. Among reading sub processes, phonological awareness is one of several key precursor skills for conventional literacy. Phonological awareness develops essentially during the preschool years (Phillips, Clancy-Menchetti, & Lonigan, 2008), and it contributes to the decoding process. It is therefore essential that it should be mostly developed in early childhood, through practice and training (Lundenberg et al., 2012). Although this is a crucial skill, according to Phillips et al. (2008), many early childhood educators lack of a robust preparation in this area; and therefore cannot provide good quality support to develop it among young children in a timely manner.

Early childhood education has been identified as a period of great importance to work on phonological tasks (Molfase et al., 2006), emphasizing that it requires encouraging the development of skills that will allow children to be better prepared to face more complex literacy demands such as decoding, vocabulary processing, and comprehension. Evidence has demonstrated that children entering Kindergarten, who are capable of segmenting words into phonemes or sounds, which constitute the basis of phonological awareness, show greater amounts of progress in reading development in the first years of schooling than those who do not (Villalón, 2008). On the other hand, children with insufficient experience hearing and manipulating sounds in words lag behind on reading comprehension ability well into the middle and high school years (Melby-Lervag, Lyser, & Hulme, 2012).

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1.1. Importance of phonological awareness for learning to read

Phonological awareness has been defined as the sensitivity to the sound structure of language. In order to be developed, it demands the ability to turn one's attention to sounds in spoken language leaving meaning aside (Yopp & Yopp, 2009). Phonological awareness develops as a continuous process (Phillips et al., 2008), with two dimensions that move from holistic and simple forms of awareness to more complex ones (Anthony, Lonigan, Driscoll, Phillips, & Burgess, 2003 in Yopp & Yopp, 2009). One dimension of phonological awareness is the size of the sound unit being attended to and manipulated. From larger to smaller, the sound units include words, syllables, onset-rime units, and phonemes. The second dimension is the type of manipulation of the sound units and the child's ability to recognize and perform such changes. Manipulations may include substituting one sound for another in a word, adding or removing sounds from words, blending sounds together to make words and segmenting words into smaller sound units (Yopp & Yopp, 2009).

The relationship between phonological awareness and learning to read can be considered from three perspectives: a) as a prior and predictive development, b) as a causal relationship; that is, having phonological awareness as a requisite for learning to read; and c) as an interactive process (Bravo, 2002). In any of the three cases, there is theoretical agreement about the necessary input of phonological awareness for the decoding process.

The Spanish language has a transparent orthography and a regular grapheme-phoneme correspondence. This means that there is a consistent relationship between letters and their corresponding sounds (Goldenberg, Tolar, Reese, Francis Ray, & Mejía-Arauz, 2014). According to Quiroga, Lemos-Britton, Mostafapour, Abbott, and Berninger (2002), phonological awareness may transfer across oral and written language, and needs explicit instruction. Due to this, native Spanish-speaking children have benefited from explicit, systematic instruction that shared many of the same elements that have been proven to be effective with native English speakers (Mathes, Pollard-Durodola, Cárdenas-Hagan, Linan-Thompson, & Vaughn, 2007).

1.2. Pedagogical features for phonological awareness instruction

Any effective pedagogical support needs an initial assessment or diagnosis to let the teacher know the real level of development of children's abilities in order to plan subsequent activities in line with baseline levels (Phillips et al., 2008). With this information, teachers can plan ahead lessons that are required for that specific group of children, to help them achieve knowledge and usage levels that would lead to a proper development on reading comprehension. Ehri et al. (2001) stress the importance of ensuring that teachers can teach phonological awareness effectively. Children require explicit and systematic instruction that follows a carefully planned scope and sequence, and that is intentionally focused on building conceptual understandings as specific tasks are mastered. Instructional sequencing, modeling and explaining of the task, scaffolding and providing corrective feedback are some of the characteristics of such instruction. Ehri et al. (2001) hold that children who received instruction focused on only one phonological awareness skill, exhibited stronger results on reading achievement; so it would be prudent to teach one skill at a time. Similarly, teachers should consider the type of manipulation (identifying, segmenting, blending, deleting, substituting among others) applied to the unit of sound (syllable or phoneme) and whether the activities are oral or include concrete cues when they are planning and designing learning activities (Yopp & Yopp, 2000).

Another distinctive feature of phonological awareness instruction is the importance of a clear and consistent articulation in the activities that teachers use (Phillips et al., 2008). Gambrell and Morrow (2015) state that phonological awareness activities must be incorporated in the context of oral language, reading, or writing instances that take part of a daily basis routine.

On the other hand, the quality of instruction and responsiveness of children also matter. Even if research suggests that phonological awareness activities have to be done on a daily basis, even when instruction occurs two or three times a week, it is possible to observe positive results; so rather than the amount of time of instruction, it is the *quality of instruction* and responsiveness of children that matters the most (Yopp & Yopp, 2009).

Research demonstrates that children from lower-income families generally lag behind those from more affluent families in phonological awareness development (Lonigan, 2004), but that they also benefit the most from high quality instruction (Ehri et al., 2001). The amount of time spent on oral language development and quality is shown to be related to socioeconomic status (Dickinson & Snow, 1987; Raz & Bryant, 1990 in Lundenberg et al., 2012) and may have an influence over the development of phonological awareness acquisition. A rich language-stimulating environment in the regular classroom may facilitate literacy acquisition of children whose home literacy environment cannot improve due to literacy factors.

In exploring effective interventions to improve current practices, there is consensus in that quality in education responds to the actions taken by educators in the classroom and it cannot be achieved without teachers reflecting upon their everyday practices. To this effect, teachers' instructional practices have become fundamental to achieve higher learning performance (Barber & Mourshed, 2007; Vaillant & Rossel, 2006). Therefore, demonstrating a reflective practice is of great relevance, since it contributes greatly to monitor learning from past experiences and improving (AEP, 2015). Another relevant element for effective instruction is tutoring (Ehri et al., 2001). Evidence has also demonstrated that students who receive individualized or small-group instruction on phonological awareness via minilessons overcome difficulties when beginning to read on their own (Pullen, Lane, & Monaghan, 2004).

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