



International Conference on Education and Educational Psychology (ICEEPSY 2012)

Increasing the Expressive Vocabulary of Young Children Learning English as a Second Language Through Parent Involvement

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Abstract

The Parents as Reading Teachers Nightly Encouraging Reading Success (PARTNERS) program was designed to provide low-income Hispanic families with training about how and why to read with their children. It provided parents and caregivers with dialogic reading training to help increase both families' literacy interactions with their children and children's expressive language skills. The researchers found that families' literacy interactions with their children were positively influenced with the dialogic reading training and that families' use of dialogic reading positively affected their children's expressive language skills. Parents and caregivers in the dialogic reading group allowed their children access to the book, posed and solicited questions, and elaborated on their children's ideas significantly more often than the traditional family time group. Children with parents or caregivers in the dialogic reading group posed and solicited questions, identified visual clues, and elaborated on ideas significantly more often than children in the traditional family time group. Children whose parents or caregivers received the dialogic reading training also attempted and acquired significantly more words from pre-test to post-test than children in the traditional family time group.

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Selection and peer-review under responsibility of Dr. Zafer Bekirogullari of Cognitive – Counselling, Research & Conference Services C-crcs.

Keywords: parent involvement; at-risk preschool children, English Language Learners

The statistics regarding English Language Learners (ELL) in America, and Hispanic families in particular are startling. According to the 2010 Census, the Hispanic population grew by 43 percent. That is more than four times the national growth rate of 9.7 percent. Seventy-six percent of Hispanics report speaking a language other than English in the home. Hispanic Americans are the largest growing ethnic group and are expected to represent 25% of the school population by 2025 (President's Advisory Commission, 2000). Mexican Americans, the largest segment of the Hispanic American population, have the lowest rates of educational attainment of any immigrant population in America (National Research Council, 2006). According to information from the 2000 Census, 68% of elementary school ELL students are low-income. Almost half of ELL children's parents have less than a high school education and 25% have less than a 9th grade education. In his report, "Increasing the School Involvement of Hispanic Parents", Morton Inger concluded that Hispanic children are the "most under-educated major segment of the U.S. population" (1992, p. 1).

Children who come from homes that do not speak English are at a distinct disadvantage academically. Data from the National Household and Education Survey (NHES) from 1993 to 1999 indicate that Hispanic children ages 3 to 5 are less likely to be read to compared with non-Hispanic children. Families in which parents' primary language is Spanish have especially low rates of participation in literacy activities. And, Hispanic families who do not speak English in the home are also less likely to participate in other prekindergarten literacy activities, such as storytelling or going to the library (National Research Council, 2006).

It is commonly accepted that parents are their children's first and most important teachers. This is true regardless of culture or socioeconomic status (Leung, Lau, & Lam, 1998). Parent involvement provides numerous benefits. Involved parents have children who achieve higher in both elementary (Jeynes, 2005) and secondary (Jeynes, 2007) school regardless of family income or ethnicity (Dearing, Kreider, Simpkins, & Weiss, 2006). In fact, research has shown that the most accurate predictor of school success is parent involvement (Sanders & Epstein, 1998).

One of the most common and beneficial ways that parents become involved in their young children's development and education is through reading aloud. Parental storybook reading has been found to have positive effects on children's early literacy skills (Bus, van IJzendoorn, & Pellegrini, 1995; Sénéchal, & LeFevre, 2002). Specifically, reading aloud with children increases their vocabulary (Hargrave & Sénéchal, 2000), facilitates receptive and expressive language (Baker, Mackler, Sonnenschein, & Serpell, 2001), and encourages later reading achievement and an understanding of language (van Kleeck, Stahl & Bauer, 2003). Early parent involvement regarding children's literacy practices has significant and long-term impact (Mullis, Mullis, Cornille, Ritchson & Sullender, 2004).

Although reading aloud to young children has extensive benefits, many Hispanic parents do not understand its importance. Reese and Gallimore (2000) explain that Hispanic parents often do not view parents reading to their children as part of their paradigm. Reading aloud does not fit within many Hispanic parents' schemata of how literacy develops. Therefore, Reese and Gallimore (2000) recommend regular assigned home literacy activities and programs that will help increase Hispanic parents' understanding of and views about literacy development.

Dialogic reading, also known as shared reading, has been proven to be effective in increasing young children's vocabulary (Hargrave & Sénéchal, 2000) and expressive language (Hargrave & Sénéchal, 2000). The focus of dialogic reading is more about parents talking about a book with their child rather than simply reading the book aloud. The aim of dialogic reading is to shift the interaction and conversation from being adult-led to child-led. Dialogic reading techniques focus on open-ended questions and on expanding upon children's comments and ideas regarding the book being shared. The program is based on encouraging children's participation, providing feedback, and adjusting verbal interactions based on children's ability (Arnold & Whitehurst, 1994).

Current Study

The current study is part of a larger project on dialogic reading. The project was designed to provide low-income Hispanic families with training about how and why to read with their children. It provided parents with dialogic reading training to help increase both family members' literacy interactions with their children and children's expressive language skills. The study took place in a school district in the Midwest located just outside of a major city. The school district is the highest performing majority Hispanic school district in the state. It serves the second most severe Limited English Proficient population in the county. The school population is 52 % low-income and has 71 % limited-English proficiency. The district provides pre-school programs for children 3 to 5 classified as "at risk" based on screening results of children's expressive and receptive language, fine and gross motor skills, and social / emotional and intellectual processing.

The school incorporates daily mandatory family involvement as part of their preschool program. Parents or caregivers spend the first 10 - 15 minutes of school reading aloud with their children before leaving the school each day. The current study used this "Family Time" to provide family training in dialogic reading to families involved in the morning preschool session. Families whose children attended preschool in the afternoon participated in the

traditional program called Family Time, which consists of families being asked to read aloud to their children without any further instruction.

Forty parents and caregivers participated in our larger study of the affect dialogic reading training had on family member's interactions with their children and their children's expressive language development. The current study looked at a subset of the group, parents who speak Spanish in the home as their primary language. This group included 28 parents and caregivers of 30 preschool aged children enrolled in the "at risk" preschool program. All of the parents and caregivers indicated speaking Spanish as the primary language in the home. A majority of the families are classified as low-income. About half (46%) of the parents did not complete high school including about a third (31%) who did not attend high school, as seen in Table 1.

Table 1: Educational Characters of Spanish Speaking Parent or Caregiver Participants in the Dialogic Reading and Traditional Family Time Groups

	Total Group (N = 26)	Dialogic Reading Group (N = 15)	Traditional Family Time Group (N = 11)
Education			
Less than high school	31%	33%	27%
Some high school	15%	20%	9%
High school	35%	27%	46%
Some college	19%	20%	18%

Note: Demographic data missing from 1 family in each group

There were 17 boys and 13 girls between the ages of 3 and 5 in the study. The children with family members in the dialogic reading group (9 boys and 8 girls) were on average 4 years 2 months (SD = 6.16 months) and the children with family members in the traditional Family Time group (8 boys and 5 girls) were on average 4 years 1 month (SD = 7.43 months).

An initial survey was given to determine if there were any significant differences between the groups other than home language that might impact the results of the study or give one group an advantage over the other. There were no significant differences between the two groups regarding, students' involvement in afterschool programs, the number of adults and children living in the home, number of books in the home, visits to the library, or the number of times children see a parent reading in the home.

Dialogic Reading Intervention

At the beginning of the school year, parents and caregivers in the dialogic reading group were provided training three days a week for the first 10 - 15 minutes of school every other week for 10 weeks. Every other Monday parents in the dialogic reading group participated in training focused on teaching parents and caregivers dialogic reading skills. The first two weeks focused on teaching parents the CAR strategy designed by Washington Research Institute (1997). The CAR acronym represents Comment and wait (provide a language model), Ask questions and wait (encourage interaction and reflection), and Respond and add more (build expressive language). The last three weeks focused on a technique designed by one of the authors called 1, 2, 3, Tell Me What You See. The number one asks children to comment on what they see (encourage expressive language). The number two asks parents to teach new words (build vocabulary). And, the number three encourages parents to connect the story to their children's lives (connect to background knowledge).

On Tuesdays parents watched dialogic reading being modeled with the preschool class. On Wednesdays parents practiced dialogic reading with the book being modeled that week. Parents and caregivers received sample questions in English and Spanish along with a copy of the book being modeled to help support their interactions with their children at both home and school. All presentations and materials were in English and Spanish. Both groups of families also received a random set of 5 picture books in English and Spanish to be kept in the home to

ensure equal access to literature for all families involved in the study. The books selected for use during the dialogic reading intervention supported the curriculum being used in the preschool classroom.

Adult – Child Interactive Reading Inventory

Parents and caregivers were videotaped reading with their children for seven minutes before the study began in the fall and again when the program was completed in the winter. Children had five books in English and Spanish to choose from. Adult / child interactions were analyzed using the Adult – Child Interactive Reading Inventory (ACIRI) developed by Andrea DeBruin-Parecki. The ACIRI is an observational tool designed to assess adult / child interactions during storybook reading. The ACIRI measures both adult and child behaviors related to 12 literacy behaviors in three categories of reading including: enhancing attention to text, promoting interactive reading and supporting comprehension, and using literacy strategies. Enhancing attention to text includes: maintaining physical proximity, sustaining interest and attention, holding the book and turning pages, and displaying a sense of audience. Promoting interactive reading and supporting comprehension includes: posing and soliciting questions, identifying and understanding pictures and words, relating content to personal experiences, and pausing to answer questions. Using literacy strategies includes: identifying visual clues, predicting what happens next, recalling information, and elaborating on ideas.

Parents and caregivers in the dialogic reading group allowed their children access to the book ($p < .01$), posed and solicited questions ($p < .001$), and elaborated on their children's ideas ($p < .05$) significantly more often than the traditional Family Time group (Table 2). Children with parents or caregivers in the dialogic reading group posed and solicited questions ($p < .01$), identified visual clues ($p < .01$), and elaborated on ideas ($p < .01$) significantly more often than children in the traditional Family Time group (Table 3). Overall, parents and caregivers in the dialogic reading group exhibited significantly stronger skills in two categories of reading: promoting interactive reading & comprehension ($p < .01$) and using literacy strategies ($p < .01$) (Table 4).

Results

Table 2: ACIRI Post-Test Means and Standard Deviations of the Interactions of Spanish Speaking Parents and Caregivers from the Dialogic Reading and Traditional Family Time Groups

	Dialogic Reading Group		Traditional Family Time Group	
	M	SD	M	SD
Enhancing Attention to Text				
Maintaining physical proximity	.06	.25	-	-
Sustaining interest and attention	.75	1.29	.25	.62
Holding the book and turning pages	.69**	.60	.08	.29
Displaying a sense of audience	.50	.52	.17	.39
Promoting Interactive Reading & Comprehension				
Posing and soliciting questions	18.25*	9.97	5.75	5.82
Identifying and understanding pictures & words	3.19	2.71	4.75	4.39
Relating content to personal experiences	.38	.62	.75	1.54
Pausing to answer questions	1.44	2.48	.50	1.17
Using Literacy Strategies				
Identifying visual clues	1.06	1.06	.75	.97
Predicting what happens next	.06	.25	.08	.29
Recalling information	-	-	.08	.29
Elaborating on ideas	.31	.48	-	-

* $p < .001$

** $p < .01$

Table 3: ACIRI Post-Test Means and Standard Deviations of the Interactions of Children from Spanish Speaking Dialogic Reading and Traditional Family Time Groups

	Dialogic Reading Group		Traditional Family Time Group	
	M	SD	M	SD
Enhancing Attention to Text				
Maintaining physical proximity	.06	.25	-	-
Sustaining interest and attention	1.44	1.03	3.08	2.81
Holding the book and turning pages	1.94	2.72	.50	.80
Displaying a sense of audience	-	-	-	-
Promoting Interactive Reading & Comprehension				
Posing and soliciting questions	16.94**	9.95	3.92	3.92
Identifying and understanding pictures & words	.50	1.10	2.42	2.84
Relating content to personal experiences	.31	.60	.08	.29
Pausing to answer questions	1.50	2.68	.50	1.17
Using Literacy Strategies				
Identifying visual clues	.94	.77	-	-
Predicting what happens next	.13	.34	.17	.58
Recalling information	-	-	.08	.29
Elaborating on ideas	.69	.87	-	-

** p < .01

Table 4: ACIRI Post-Test Means and Standard Deviations of Overall Scores for Spanish Speaking Parents’ or Caregivers’ and Children’s Interactions from the Dialogic Reading and Traditional Family Time Groups

	Dialogic Reading Group		Traditional Family Time Group	
	M	SD	M	SD
Attention to Text	1.36	.99	1.02	.67
Promoting Reading	10.63**	4.45	4.67	3.67
Using Literacy Strategies	.80**	.55	.29	.28

** p < .01

Test of Expressive Language

Preschool aged students’ expressive language was measured using the picture naming portion of the Individual Growth Developmental Indicators (IGDI) test developed at the University of Minnesota. Students taking the picture naming test are presented with pictures on individual cards. They are asked to name the objects on as many of the cards as they can in 1 minute. The number of words correctly identified and attempted are recorded by the test administrator. Students’ picture naming ability was assessed prior to the start of the study and again 10 weeks later after the completion of the training sessions.

Children whose parents or caregivers received the dialogic reading training acquired significantly more words (p < .01) from pre-test to post-test than children in the traditional Family Time group (Table 5). Also, the children with parents or caregivers in the dialogic reading training group attempted significantly more words than the traditional Family Time group at the end of the program (p < .05).

Table 5: Number of Picture Naming Words Correct and Attempted for Pre-Test / Post-Test Results on Individual Growth Developmental Indicator Including Means and Standard Deviations for Children with Spanish Speaking Parents in the Dialogic Reading and Traditional Family Time Groups

	Dialogic Reading Group				Traditional Family Time Group			
	Pre-Test		Post-Test		Pre-Test		Post-Test	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Number Correct	9.89	5.96	13.29**	5.31	11.23	4.91	12.38	5.97
Number Attempted	34.15	7.52	23.71***	4.87	17.92	4.63	19.92	4.55

** p < .01

*** p < .05

Discussion

The current study was designed to provide low-income Hispanic families with training about how and why to read with their children. It provided parents and caregivers with dialogic reading training to help increase both families' literacy interactions with their children and children's expressive language skills. The researchers found that families' literacy interactions with their children were positively influenced with the dialogic reading training and that families' use of dialogic reading positively affected their children's expressive language skills. Parents and caregivers in the dialogic reading group allowed their children access to the book, posed and solicited questions, and elaborated on their children's ideas significantly more often than the traditional Family Time group. Children with parents or caregivers in the dialogic reading group posed and solicited questions, identified visual clues, and elaborated on ideas significantly more often than children in the traditional Family Time group. Children whose parents or caregivers received the dialogic reading training also attempted and acquired significantly more words from pre-test to post-test than children in the traditional Family Time group.

These findings address concerns of previous researchers such as Mol, Bus, De Jong and Smeets (2008), who in their meta-analysis of dialogic reading questioned its usefulness for low income, high needs families. Even though the majority (53%) of participants in the program did not complete high school, were low income, and considered "high needs", they were able to effectively use dialogic reading to provide significant increases in student achievement and parent / child interactions.

Limitations

The relatively small number of participants involved in this study is a limitation. Also, attendance varied with participants. The post-assessment videos were taken with the same parent or caregiver as the initial videos to ensure consistency. However, sometimes children were represented by a different parent, childcare provider, or relative during the program. There was not a statistically significant difference in the attendance between the group that received the dialogic reading training and the traditional Family Time group. But, because of variations in attendance, some parents or caregivers received less training than others.

Another possible limitation on the effect of the program is the books selected to be used during the program. The books used aligned with the preschool curriculum. However, these books often were not the best examples of effective books for dialogic reading. The illustrations were often very simplistic and repetitive, possibly limiting the responses and interactions of parents. In the future, books with detailed and varied illustrations including culturally relevant items children are familiar with should be used for discussion and retelling. Books should also include a simple story line that is interesting and culturally relevant to the parent and child.

Conclusion

Children who are English language learners often score as well as native English speakers on skills such as word recognition and word attack (Geva & Zadeh, 2006). However, they perform significantly lower on reading comprehension (Harper & Pelletier, 2008) and oral language proficiency (Geva & Zadeh, 2006). Programs that

encourage literacy related activities at home, such as the one in this study, have been shown to be beneficial to ELL children. These programs have been found to help children show significant gains in their English language and literacy skills (Harper, Platt, and Pelletier, 2011). These essential skills can help address the discrepancies often seen in ELL children's literacy achievement.

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