English Language and Literacy Enrichment Comparing Comprehension and Alphabetic-Phonological Approaches

Paula Vergunst & Nickola W. Nelson
Western Michigan University

Abstract

Hispanic English language learners (ELLs; n=11; ages 3-7 years) were randomized into groups receiving early reading instruction, focused on (A) word structure skills (phonicogenic and alphabetic) and (B) story comprehension skills in either AB or BA order (seven 30-minute sessions each, 14 total). Pre-post-test results for the Early Literacy Skills Assessment (ELSA) showed significant changes in both word level and comprehension scores associated with the treatment, but not the control, conditions.

Background

• The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) reports persistent gaps between reading scores of Hispanic elementary students in the U.S. and their non-Hispanic peers (Lee, Grigg, & Donahue, 2007).
• Early achievement disparities for ELLs continue over time if left untreated (Vezina & van Heugten, 2008).
• Studies support the efficacy of providing evidence-based supplemental reading instruction to teach early reading skills (Gunn, Bilgan, & Smolakowski, 2003).
• Shared storybook reading/diagnostic reading can be used to target language and literacy goals, especially comprehension (Kaderavek & Justice, 2002).

Purpose

To evaluate the efficacy of two instructional approaches aimed at improving corresponding areas of early literacy performance in young children who are ELLs.

Methods

Experimental Design

Pre-post-test repeated measures study with comparison treatments administered in counterbalanced order to children who were matched and then assigned randomly to Group AB or BA (seven 30-minute sessions each, 14 total). The independent variable was the type of instruction: A) word level instruction, using an alphabetic-phonological awareness approach, and B) comprehension instruction using a dialogic approach. Each session, a new storybook (in English) was introduced and used for instruction for both groups.

Participants

11 children between ages 3 to 7 whose parents were enrolled in adult English language classes supported by their community’s Hispanic American Council.

The children were divided into pairs, roughly matched by age and English exposure (information collected via a family survey), and randomly assigned to receive treatment in AB (n=6) or BA (n=5) order.

Outcome measure (dependent variable)

• The outcome measure, the Early Literacy Skills Assessment (ELSA) (Cheadle, 2007), provided scores that served as dependent variables, including:
  o a composite word level score (composed of phonological awareness, alphabetic principle, and print awareness scores)
  o a comprehension score
• A pre-test administration of the ELSA was conducted prior to any instructional session.
• A mid-test administration of the ELSA was conducted after the first seven instructional sessions.
• The groups were then switched, so the children would receive the opposite type of instruction for the remaining seven sessions.
• A post-test administration of the ELSA was conducted at the end of the study.

Participants were grade clinicans in speech-language pathology who were blind to group membership of the children.

Limitations:

Small group size; use of an English language test (only) for ELLs; program and all testing were conducted from 6-8 pm

Discussion

Conclusions:

Both early literacy intervention approaches had measurable effects on the specific aspect of language targeted for the young Hispanic ELLs. Approaches focused on alphabetic-phonological awareness can have a significant effect on sound/word/print measures of word structure knowledge for young ELLs in a family literacy program.

Strengths:

Experimental/control conditions were administered in counterbalanced order. Students were randomized to group. Examiners were blind to group membership. A larger scale and longer term study is justified by these encouraging results. A longitudinal study could document whether or not these early interventions in emergent literacy can predict future success in reading achievement.

Recommendations:

• A larger scale and longer term study is justified by these encouraging results.
• A longitudinal study could document whether or not these early interventions in emergent literacy can predict future success in reading achievement.

Resources


Acknowledgements:

Families and children who participated: Mary Lu Light, Robin Pollens, Ramon Berlanga & associated members of the Hispanic American Council; WMU graduate clinician examiners; WMU Lee Honors College

Contact Information: paula.s.vergunst@wmich.edu