

STORYTELLING: ENHANCING LANGUAGE ACQUISITION IN YOUNG CHILDREN

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We know that children are active participants in their acquisition of language. Their language patterns are learned in social contexts while they are interacting with other children and adults. Studies continue to confirm that the development of vocabulary and syntactic complexity in language are more advanced in children who are frequently exposed to a variety of stories. Psycholinguists define reading as an active process based upon this interaction that is creative and predictive. When an audience listens to a storyteller, this type of thinking is demanded of them. The quality of that participation serves to enhance language usage. How does consistent exposure to a variety of stories improve the specific literacy skills of vocabulary, grammatics, length of utterance and sentence formation? How can we measure these gains qualitatively and quantitatively? What sorts of questions should we ask children to elicit creative and predictive thinking? This pilot study attempts to answer these questions and provide a framework for implementing the art of storytelling in individual classrooms.

Review of the Literature

Young children naturally enjoy stories. Children involved in education programs that utilize storytelling exhibit many positive behaviors related to increased literacy (Speaker, 2000; Allison and Watson, 1994). Improved listening skills, vocabulary development and an increased ability to organize narrative thought are all behaviors exhibited by young children who have been exposed to a variety of stories on a consistent basis. Storytelling has emerged as a key cognitive skill in the process of intellectual development (Kim, 1999). Cognition that is enhanced in specific ways when children are exposed to a variety of stories can also be measured in qualitative

ways (Reed, 1987; Britsch, 1992; Mallan, 1997). Storytelling is also an effective bridge to emergent literacy (Rosen, 1988 in Miller and Mehler, 1994; Soundy, 1993). Since we know that children are active participants in the acquisition of language, the interactive nature of show and tell or sharing time in the early grades is actually a recreation of a remembered experience (Miller and Mehler, 1994). These tales are personal stories created by the children as a result of direct experience. The language patterns learned in these social contexts while children are interacting with adults and other children are constructed and reinforced as the teller becomes more proficient in relating the story (Strickland

and Morrow, 1989). Reading stories aloud or listening and interacting with a storyteller are essentially a social experience (Britsch, 1992). Studies continue to confirm that the development of vocabulary and syntactic complexity in oral language are more advanced in children who are frequently exposed to a variety of stories (Roney, 1989; Phillips, 2000). The increases in attention span, listening skills, accuracy of recall, sequencing ability and fluency in writing have also been documented (Reed, 1987; Davis, 1982).

A "sense of story" aids in the comprehension of the many different types of stories to which a child should be exposed (Golden, 1984). This concept of story sense is also linked to an increase in imaginative play (Raines and Isbell, 1994). Schema theorists emphasize the importance of framework in understanding text. The words that are chosen to express particular ideas, the order imposed to create meaningful sentences and then manipulated to show relationships and contexts all combine to create meaning for children (Cherry-Cruz, 2001). Robert D. Friedberg (1994) argues that storytelling is a developmentally sensitive tool that can elicit thoughts that create a more ordered sense of the world. He also believes that storytelling promotes expressive language development in speech in addition to receptive language development in both reading and listening. The research reiterates that active participation in the storytelling process increases the fluency of verbal expression in young children. The creative-predictive process involved when a child is actively involved in a story does strengthen the detailed aspects of language

structure. Its value, however, is even more apparent when these techniques are implemented in a holistic way to refine language abilities. The story grammar that is introduced in storytelling and reading aloud becomes familiar to the child and is converted to later reading and writing activities (Cherry-Cruz, 2001).

For young children, the correlation between storytelling and optimum language development appears clear. The use of storytelling with young children supports early literacy development and expands the creative literacy potential in young children.

Methodology

In this pilot study, the authors attempted to assess the qualitative changes in verbal fluency (vocabulary, grammatics, length of utterance and sentence formation) in three, four and five year olds who were actively engaged in a vigorous storytelling preschool program. The children all attended the campus preschool at The College of New Jersey. The pilot study group was composed of three boys and two girls. The original group targeted for this study consisted of eight children ranging from three to six years of age. However, after the initial pre-testing was completed, only five children from the original group were chosen because they represented the most diverse populations within this group. The children selected also represented the developmental stage where language acquisition is most robust. Four weekly Storytelling units were developed based upon established themes chosen by the Director of the preschool program, i.e. Feelings, Holidays, Health

and Storytelling. Ten books were chosen within each of these units and questions were developed about each story to promote discussion and conversation about the story elements. The questions used were open-ended, thought provoking and intentionally written at the higher stages of Bloom's taxonomy. (Appendix 1).

Each child was pretested using the standardized test ASSET--Assessing Semantic Skills through Everyday Themes. The ASSET was used as the criteria for selection of subjects for this pilot study. ASSET is a test of receptive and expressive semantic abilities in pre-school and early elementary children. The construction of this test is based on the belief that theme-based stimuli are essential for optimal performance in young children, including those with language and learning disorders. Receptive and expressive word knowledge that was tested included: identification of and stating labels, categories, attributes, functions and definitions. Prior to addressing the test questions, each child was asked to look at a picture and talk about what they saw. This segment fostered spontaneous language sampling.

In order to gain a better understanding of the children's linguistic capabilities, speech/language samples were taken prior to and following the implementation of the storytelling program. A speech and/or language sample is an informal method for eliciting and collecting a number of representational/typical utterances (usually 50-100) produced by a child during either structured or unstructured activities. The derived language samples were unrelated to the storytelling themes. This was done to illustrate language samples most

similar to normal conversation discourse, as opposed to directed or context specific sampling. By employing this method, the authors attempted to illustrate that exposure to storytelling enhances language scripting and can be generalized to the overall qualitative development of expressive language.

The samples in this study were used to analyze several different components of speech and language: syntax (word order), morphology (grammar), semantics (vocabulary), and pragmatics (the use of language) (Justice and Ezell, 2002). A sentence structure analysis was performed to assess syntax and to analyze morphology. An involved analysis of Brown's fourteen grammatical morphemes was used to determine Mean Length of Utterance (MLU). Templin's Type Token Ratio (TTR) was utilized to determine semantic content (Templin, 1957). Several studies have been conducted on how the sampling environment affects the quality of the language sample. According to studies conducted by Schmidt and Windsor (1993), little difference was noted in the MLUs of both normally developing children and those with Down syndrome when samples were gathered from conversations during structured or unstructured activities. Research such as this suggests that regardless of the method of elicitation, whether structured or play situations, language sample outcomes remain the same (Paul, 2001).

This pilot study analyzed each child's language ability through unstructured (free play) and structured activities (narratives utilizing sequential picture cards and themed pictures) both before and after the

storytelling program was implemented.

"Emily" was chosen because she was the youngest child of this group, at three years and four months. She is Caucasian and female. In addition, she also exhibits a mild expressive language delay. Emily is an only child and lives with her mother and father.

"Ali" was chosen because he was the youngest male, three years and five months, and African-American. Ali also exhibits a mild-moderate speech and expressive language delay. Ali has an older brother and lives at home with his mother and father.

"Jacob" was chosen because he was the oldest male of this group and is Caucasian. No overt speech or expressive language difficulties were noted. He will be attending Kindergarten in the fall of 2003. Jacob, at four years and three months, is an only child and lives with his mother in a single-parent household.

"Lilly" was chosen because she was the oldest Caucasian female. Lilly is a very expressive child who displayed no overt speech or language difficulties. She will be attending Kindergarten in the fall of 2003. At the time of testing, Lilly was 4 years, 11 months. She has one older sibling.

"David" was selected because he was one of the oldest boys in the class. Although very expressive when he initiated the conversation, he was more reticent during the direct testing, needing prompts to venture a guess. David was 3 years, 11 months.

ASHA-certified speech-language pathologists collected a spontaneous language sample from each child for analysis using the protocol/suggestions from Ship-

ley and McAfee (1998). The children were seen individually for approximately twenty-five minutes. Each session was video taped or audio recorded and transcribed according to the methods outlined by Paul (2001) and Retherford (2000). Prior to the storytelling program, two of the four children exhibited mild delays in speech and/or language skills. According to the children's preschool teacher, none of the children received any prior speech and/or language therapy.

Findings

Following is an analysis of the samples utilizing Brown's Stages of Language Development and Templin's Type Token Ratio, which show pre and post intervention achievement.

Subject Sentence Analysis Syntax

"Emily" Pre-test

Negation - Early Stage 3 = 31-32 months

- Using negation between subject & predicate ("I don't know") = 100%
- Emergence of negation with auxiliary verb ("daddy *is* not playing")= 33%

Question formation – Early Stage 4 = 35-37 months

- May add "how" to other question forms; "what", "where", "who", & "why" = 100% ("what did she say?")

Noun + Phrase – Stage 5 = 41-46 months

- Using simple sentences of Noun + adjective + noun ("It's the yellow one") = 80%

Verb + Phrase – Stage 3 = 31-34 months

- Emergence of auxiliary (“He is running”)
- No use of modals (“can, could, might”)

Complex Sentences – Stage 2, emerging into stage 3 = 31-34 months

- Uses semi-auxiliary verb forms (“gonna & wanna” = “going to” & “want to”)
- Uses simple sentences

“Emily” Post-test

Negation – Late Stage 4 = 38-40 months

- Begins using “isn’t, doesn’t, aren’t, didn’t” (“that isn’t a sheep”)
- Emergence of modals, “wouldn’t, couldn’t, wasn’t” (“that wasn’t what I said”)

Question formation – Late Stage 4 = 38-40 months

- Addition of “how” and “when”
- Emergence of “why” with combination with other words; (“why did you do that?”)

Noun + Phrase – Late Stage 4/ Early Stage 5 = 39-50 months

- Noun or pronoun always appears in the subject position
- Noun + modifier

Verb + Phrase – Late Stage 4/Early Stage 5 = 39-50 months

- Emergence of modals (“could, would, might”)

- Auxiliary Verb + present progressive “-ing” appears

Complex Sentences – Late Stage 4/Early Stage 5 = 39-50 months

- Beginning to use conjoining (conjunctions) to expand upon utterances

“Ali” Pre-test

Negation- Early Stage 3 = 31-32 months

- Using negation between subject and predicate
- No instance of negation with emerging auxiliary verbs (i.e. “daddy *is* not playing”)

Question Formation- Late Stage 3/Early Stage 4 = 35-37 months

- “Why, who, & how” questions appear at this stage (“Why did it go ‘boom?’”)

Noun + Phrase – Stage 3 = 31-34 months

- Uses a few quantifiers: two, some, a lot

Verb + Phrase – Late Stage 2/Stage 3 = 31-34 months

- Using present progressive verb forms (i.e. “he eating”)
- Emergence of modals “can & do”

Complex Sentences – Stage 3 = 31-33 months

- Emergence of embedding (i.e. “I like white ice cream”)
- Compound sentences not yet emerging

“Ali” Post-test

Negation- Late Stage 3/Early Stage 4 = 35-37 months

- Begins using “isn’t, doesn’t, aren’t and didn’t”

Question Formation- Late Stage 4/Beginning Stage 5 =38-40 months

- Using “how and when” in utterances
- Emergence of auxiliary inversion (i.e. “Are they my buggies?”)

Noun + Phrase- Early Stage 4 =35-38 months

- Continues to elaborate by adding only one element in front of the noun

Verb + Phrase – Late Stage 3 = 35-41

- Overgeneralization of regular past tense (i.e. “It goed fast”)

Complex Sentences – Late Stage 3/Early Stage 4 =41-46 months

- Compound sentences (conjunctions) are being used
- Embedding of modifiers within a sentence
- No use of complex sentences as of yet

“Jacob” Pre-test

Negation- Late Stage 4 = 38-40 months

- Beginning to use “isn’t, doesn’t, aren’t, and didn’t” (i.e. “that rocket guy isn’t mine”)

Question Formation- Stage 5 = 41-46 months

- Uses proper and consistent auxiliary inversion (i.e. “Are you going to go to the other room?”)
- “Why” questions are used in combination with other words (i.e. “Why did the mean guy turn into the nice guy?”)

Noun + Phrase – Late Stage 4/Early Stage 5 = 31- 50 months

- Conjoins clauses, usually with “and” (i.e. “And the other guy in the rocket ship is R2 (D2) and the little robot and then another guy comes in and helps him”)

Verb + Phrase – Stage 5 =41-46 months

- Verb phrases are becoming more adult-like (i.e. “They would hop anyway.”)

Complex Sentences –Stage 5 =41-46 months

- Use of embedded modifiers and phrases; complex sentences (i.e. “The mean guys turn into the nice guys...”) (i.e. “She is sitting on a rock reading a story.”)

“Jacob” Post-test

Negation – Stage 5 =41-46 months and +

- Using “wouldn’t, couldn’t, wasn’t, and shouldn’t” (i.e. “...he couldn’t talk, he could only do this [makes animal noises].”)

Question Formation –Stage 5+ = 43-46 months

- “why” questions are now combined

with other words, auxiliary inversion noted, use of adverbial inversion (i.e. "Now can we go play?")

Noun + Phrase – Stage 5 =41-46 months

- Uses additional modifiers which continue to be in front of the noun

Verb + Phrase –Stage 5 = 41-46 months

- Continues to become more adult-like (i.e. "I've only seen two star wars.")

Complex Sentences – Stage 5 =41-46 months

- Elaboration and embedding continues (i.e. "Actually, no. I don't remember him.")

"Lilly" Pre-Test

Negation – Stage 5 41-46 months and beyond

- Using "wouldn't, couldn't, wasn't, and shouldn't" (e.g. "... the boy wasn't allowed to go outside; ... because my mom said I couldn't bring it to school")

Question Formation – Stage 5-5+ 41-46 months

- Why questions appear in combination with other words; auxiliary inversion is consistent; modals are more consistent e.g. "Can I go back to my class now?"; "Why does the girl look sad?"

Noun + Phrase – Stage 5-5+

- Elaborates by using modifiers in front of the noun, e.g. "It is my favorite big

shiny book."

Verb + Phrase – Stage 5 –5+

- Verb phrases more adult-like e.g. ... "she was going to surprise them and say boo!"

Complex sentences – Stage 5-5+

- Elaboration and embedding modifiers; conjoins sentences with and; because; e.g. "I saw a show where someone ate a frog and then I think he got sick."

"Lilly" Post-Test

During Pre test Lilly was solid at the Stage 5 level and was at the acquisition stage of Stage5+. Post-test Lilly continued to increase her stability in Stage 5+.

"David" Pre-Test

Negation – Late Stage 4 = 38-40 months

- Beginning to use "isn't, doesn't, aren't, and didn't" (e.g. "that isn't orange, it's red")

Question Formation – Stage 5 = 41-46 months

- Uses proper and consistent auxiliary inversion (e.g. "Are we all done yet?")
- "Why" questions are used in combination with other words (i.e. "Why do you have all this stuff in here?")

Noun + Phrase – Late Stage 4/Early Stage 5 = 31- 50 months

- Conjoins clauses, usually with "and"

Table 1

Subject	Age	(pre/post) Syntax	(pre/post) Morphological markers	MLU	TTR
Emily	3	stage 3 /stage 4	stage 2 /stage 4	3.94 / 4.54	.40 / .59
Ali	3	stage 3/ stage 4	stage 2 / stage 4-5	2.57 / 3.4	.50 / .58
Jacob	4	stage 4-5/stage 5+	stage 5/ stage 5+	7.7 / 7+	.43 / .44
Lilly	4	stage 5/5+/stage 5+	stage 5+/stage 5+	6.7/ 6.9	.73 / .75
David	3	stage 4-5stage/stage 5	stage 5/stage5-5+	5.1/5.3	.65 / .66

(e.g. “and I go with my dad to get gas and we just have to fill the tank.”)

Verb + Phrase – Stage 5 =41-46 months

- Verb phrases are becoming more adult-like (e.g. “They would play in the backyard.”)

Complex Sentences – Stage 5 =41-46 months

- Use of embedded modifiers and phrases; complex sentences (e.g. “If I do a really good job, can I get another sticker?” “Look, that’s the thing that is taking the car up.”)

“David” Post Test

Negation – Stage 5 –5+=41-46 months

- Using “wouldn’t, couldn’t, wasn’t, and shouldn’t” (e.g. “...she couldn’t read all that stuff ... it was too hard”).

Question Formation – Stage 5+ = 43-46 months

- “why” questions are now combined

with other words, auxiliary inversion noted, use of adverbial inversion (e.g., “Now can I go back to school?”)

Noun + Phrase – Stage 5-5+ =41-46 months

- Uses additional modifiers which continue to be in front of the noun

Verb + Phrase – Stage 5 –5+ = 41-46 months

- Continues to become more adult-like (e.g. “How come you know that I’m going to be Jimmy Neutron?”)

Complex Sentences – Stage 5 =41-46 months

- Elaboration and embedding continues (e.g. “I don’t know how to guess ... I don’t have anything else in my brain!”)

Discussion

The interpretation of syntax, morphological markers, and MLU are all based on research proposed by Roger Brown. It is easier to remember that all children

develop at their own rate and may be showing characteristics of more than one stage at the same time. In addition, the MLU corresponds roughly to the child's chronological age, in which case an MLU of 3.94 would roughly correspond to a 4-year-old child. This comparison or guide corresponds to the child's age until approximately 5 years of age. The interpretation of a Type-Token Ratio is performed by comparing it to Templin's normative data. Comparing a TTR of .58 to a 3.5 year norm reveals that Ali's ratio is higher than the norm (.45). This suggests that this child's vocabulary is more diverse than would be expected for the total number of words used. A TTR greater than .50 indicates more different words than typical for the total number of words. In contrast, a TTR below .50 may reflect a lack of diversity and may indicate a semantic deficit (Retherford, 2000). In addition, valuable information may also be gained by comparing a child's total number of different words and total number of words used to the norms as well. By calculating the standard deviation of each, it may be determined that a child is one or more standard deviations below the mean, again, indicating a possible language-specific deficiency.

Conclusion

The purpose of this pilot study was to assess the changes, via standards of language development, in the expressive language abilities of five preschool children after their participation in a rigorous storytelling program. Each of the five children involved in the pilot study displayed

improved language skills after the four-week program of storytelling was implemented in The College of New Jersey preschool curriculum. While the level of overall improvement varied in vocabulary, grammatics and sentence formation, significant gains in Mean Length of Utterance (MLU) can be noted. The increased use of elaboration and the use of complex sentences can also be seen in the post intervention stage. The changes in "Lilly", although not dramatic, were still present, relative to her refinement and continued elaboration skills. Although "Jacob" and "David" were both capable of constructing complex sentences in the pre-testing phase, continued improvement and development of their embedding skills within the construction of these sentences was apparent. They both made progress within the Stage Five/ Five+ category. In "Emily's" case the progress was more dramatic. Prior to participation, Emily exhibited language skills that placed her in Stage Two, however by the end of the four-week program, her language abilities were reflective of Stage Four. "Ali", who was a Stage Three before participating in the Storytelling Program, displayed the language/sentence skills of an Early Stage Four by the end of the program. He was able to compose compound sentences and embed modifiers within his sentences.

The progress made by the children in this pilot study would suggest that there is an important developmental trend indicating that increased exposure to storytelling may foster emergence of more advanced stages of language development. It appears from this sampling of pre-school children that the use of storytelling with

young children enhances grammatics, vocabulary, length of utterance, and sentence formation. Although this pilot study was qualitative in nature, improvement in overall expressive language development was identified after implementation of the storytelling program. Further investigation should confirm the findings of this pilot study, and strongly support the need for consistent and frequent use of storytelling as an important part of every curriculum for preschool children.

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APPENDIX I

1. Feelings Week:

1. Goss, Janet and Harste, Jerome. (1981). It Didn't Frighten Me. New York: School Fairs Inc.
2. Lionni, Leo. (1968). Swimmy. New York: Pantheon Books.
3. Joose, Barbara M. (1991) Mama, Do You Love Me? San Francisco: Chronicle Books.
4. Cohen, Miriam. (1967). Will I Have a Friend? New York: Collier Books.
5. Stanton, Henry and Stanton, Elizabeth. (1978). Sometimes I Like to Cry. Chicago: Albert Whitman and Company.
6. Kandoian, Ellen. (1990). Maybe She Forgot. New York: Cobblehill Books.
7. Gantos, Jack. (1976). Rotten Ralph. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.

2. Holidays Week:

1. Browne, Anthony. Gorilla. (1983). New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
2. Bond, Felicia. The Halloween Performance. (1983). New York: Harper and Row.
3. Rey, H.A. Curious George Takes a Job. (1947). Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co.
4. Bridwell, Norman. The Witch Grows Up. (1979). New York: Scholastic, Inc.
5. Stevenson, James. Could Be Worse. (1977). New York: Mulberry Books.
6. Kroll, Steven. The Biggest Pumpkin Ever. (1984). New York: Scholastic, Inc.
7. Ehlert, Lois. Growing Vegetable Soup. (1987). New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
8. Swamp, Jake. Giving Thanks. (1995). New York: Scholastic, Inc.

9. Cowley, Joy. Gracias, The Thanksgiving Turkey. (1996). New York: Scholastic, Inc.

10. Harness, Cheryl. Three Young Pilgrims. (1992). New York: Bradbury Press.

3. Health Week:

1. Wolde, Gunilla. Betsy and the Chicken Pox. (1976). New York: Random House.

2. Kessler, Ethel. Our Tooth Story. (1972). New York: Dodd, Mead, and Co.

3. Rockwell, Harlow. My Doctor. (1973). New York: Macmillan Co.

4. Rogers, Fred. Going to the Doctor. (1986). New York: Putnam's Sons.

5. Berger, Melvin. Germes Make Me Sick. (1985). New York: Thomas Y. Crowell

6. Showers, Paul. No Measles, No Mumps for Me. (1980). New York: Thomas Y. Crowell

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10. Rey, H.A. Curious George goes to the Dentist. (1989). Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co.

4. Storytelling Week:

1. Agee, John. Ellsworth. (1983). Singapore: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

2. Piper, Watty. The Little Engine That Could. (1986). New York: Putnam and Sons.

3. Pfloog, Jan. Puppies Are Like That. (1975). New York: Random House.

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