

The Effects of Storytelling and Story Reading on the Oral Language Complexity and Story Comprehension of Young Children

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The purpose of this study was to determine how storytelling and story reading influence the language development and story comprehension of young children from 3 to 5 years of age. During the study, two groups of children heard the same 24 stories. Group A heard the stories told and Group B heard the stories read from a book. The language pre- and post-samples were elicited from the participants by retelling a story they had heard and creating a story using a wordless picture book. The language samples were transcribed and analyzed using measures of language complexity and story comprehension. Both storytelling and story reading were found to produce positive gains in oral language. Differences between the two groups indicated that young children who heard the stories told demonstrated improved story comprehension in their retelling, while children in the story reading group improved their language complexity.

KEY WORDS: oral language; preschool; storytelling; story reading.

INTRODUCTION

The development of oral language is one of children's most impressive accomplishments that occur during the first 5 years of life (Genishi, 1988). According to Rubin and Wilson (1995), 4- and 5-year-olds have an enormous vocabulary, often made up of thousands of words. Their oral language is complex, as demonstrated in the sentences they use by the age of 5 (Genishi, 1988). It has also been found that children understand far more than they can speak (Genishi, 1988; Rubin & Wilson, 1995; Snow, 2001).

The early childhood classroom is an appropriate place to enrich the language of young children.

Meaningful experiences, during these early years, can provide language opportunities to enhance and sustain language growth (Fillmore & Snow, 2000; Genishi, 1988). Early childhood teachers can provide opportunities for young children to play with language, while gaining an appreciation of the sounds and meaning of words (Rubin & Wilson, 1995).

The Committee on the Prevention of Reading Difficulties in Young Children (National Research Council, 1998) recommends that all children should have environments promoting language and literacy growth. In addition, the US Department of Education has designated research in preschool and literacy as a national priority (Jacobson, 2001). Two methods for teachers to achieve this goal, which have received different degrees of attention from educational researchers, are storytelling and story reading. The purpose of this ongoing, multiphase study is to explore the corresponding and complementary ways that storytelling and story reading influence the language development and story comprehension of young children.

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Influence of Story Reading on Language Development

Storybook reading is one of the most studied formats for increasing language learning in children. Many research studies have shown that children make significant gains in various areas of development through shared storybook experiences (Kaderavek & Justice, 2002; Rubin & Wilson, 1995; Snow, 2001). Story reading benefits children in two ways by providing them with acquisition of language and literacy. Not only do children acquire language and literacy skills, but they also experience vocabulary growth, knowledge of handling books, and many other skills (Snow, 1983). Story reading can foster communication opportunities for young children, as they discuss the text and illustrations (Kaderavek & Justice, 2002).

Language growth is a primary area of focus during story reading in a classroom. Huck, Helper, and Hickman (1989) believe that children with high linguistic competencies are those who have been exposed to the most literature. Language expert, Chomsky (1972), believed that an increase in syntactic complexity and a growing vocabulary in young children could be attributed to the adult-child reading experience.

Many researchers have found important connections between reading aloud to preschoolers and their later literacy success (Ferreiro & Taberovsky, 1982; Kontos & Wells, 1986). Wells (1986) states that the number of hours a child is read to during their preschool years is the best predictor of the child's later reading achievement in school. Reading books aloud not only increases reading achievement scores, but also listening and speaking abilities. Children who are frequently exposed to storybook reading are more likely to use complex sentences, have increased literal and inferential comprehension skills, gain greater story concept development, increase letter and symbol recognition, and develop positive attitudes about reading (Silvern, 1985). More recently, Neuman (1999) found impressive improvement on measures of literacy, when basic teacher training was combined with book readings in childcare centers serving low-income children.

Influence of Storytelling on Language Development

While there have been many studies of reading to young children, storytelling has received little research attention. This method of sharing stories is frequently suggested in children's literature and

early childhood texts (Huck et al., 1989; Raines & Isbell, 1994). However, a limited number of research studies have investigated storytelling and its possible influence on the language development of young children.

When a story is read, the primary reference for the communication event is the text, as fixed upon the page. In a storytelling event, the words are not memorized, but are recreated through spontaneous, energetic performance, assisted by audience participation and interaction. Sobol (1992) describes the models as the oral interpretive and oral traditional modes of storytelling performance. In an oral traditional storytelling event, the primary references are the story, in its emergent, imaginative substance, and the relationship between teller and listeners, in the fluid interactive space of performance.

Although storytelling and story reading are similar in content, they diverge in crucial ways in their process. One difference is in audience participation. In storytelling, children are encouraged to join in repetitive phrases or refrains, and given the opportunity to suggest variations in certain free story elements. Roney (1996) has described these aspects of storytelling as co-creative and a form of two-way communication.

It has been suggested that imaginative development is a key benefit of stories being told (Ellis, 1997). In story reading, participation generally involves discussing the book illustrations. The storyteller usually uses more repetitive phrases, sounds, and gestures than the story reader. Both telling stories and reading quality children's books can enhance children's imaginations as well as encourage them to create mental pictures (Aina, 1999). Storytelling, however, seems to require more visual imagination than story reading, because there are no book illustrations to preempt the listeners' attention.

According to Zeece (1997), and Malo and Bullard (2000), eye contact is another major difference between storytelling and story reading. With a book, focus is on the text and illustrations. Without a book, the children look at the teller and the teller looks at the children. This increased interaction, through eye contact, makes the experience more personal.

Ellis (1997) suggests that storytelling is the most effective way to develop listening skills. Storytelling also provides an opportunity to experience the difference between listening quietly and listening actively, by participating in the process. Colon-Vila (1997) agrees that storytelling helps teach children to listen; it helps develop skills in both oral and written

communication, while developing understanding of story schema.

Storytelling is increasingly recognized as having important theoretical and practical implications (Kim, 1999). Collins (1999) determined that storytelling has many uses in the education of primary children. She concluded that stories provide a conceptual framework for thinking, which allows children to shape experiences into a whole they can understand. Stories allow them to mentally map experiences and see pictures in their heads; telling traditional stories provides children with a model of language and thought that they can imitate.

Farrell and Nessel (1982) found that storytelling enhanced fluency, vocabulary acquisition, and recall. According to Maguire's (1985) study, storytelling serves many purposes including increased vocabulary and concentration, as well as developing the young child's ability to think symbolically and metaphorically. Strickland and Morrow (1989) suggest that storytelling is a way to further language development in early childhood classrooms. Peck (1989) said that telling stories in the classroom furthers oral and written language development, as well as furthering comprehension for reading and listening. Malo and Bullard (2000) said that storytelling might be more powerful than other mediums at developing skills that prepare children for reading. In an observational study conducted by Palmer, Harshbarger, and Koch (2001), young children made gains in story concept, comprehension, vocabulary, and many other areas, after participating in a story time program using storytelling.

Myers (1990) conducted a study with children in second through fifth grade, where some stories were read and some told. In her study, she found that the children and storyteller enjoyed and interacted more during storytelling than story reading. In contrast, the children fidgeted and looked away during story reading. Trostle and Hicks (1998) conducted a study to determine whether children who heard stories told performed better on comprehension and vocabulary tests as compared to children who heard stories read. The children were between 7 and 11 years old and heard the same stories presented differently. Children in the storytelling group scored significantly higher on both the comprehension and vocabulary measures. Trostle and Hicks suggested that further research was needed to examine the use of storytelling with younger children, preschool to age 7. In a research study by Walker (2001), stories were presented to children in three ways: telling,

reading, and CD-ROM. Children in the storytelling group attained higher scores in comprehension than children in the other groups.

METHODS

Participants

The 38 participants in this 12-week study attended a lab school located on the East Tennessee State University campus in Johnson City, Tennessee. Participants in the study were in the 3- or 4-year-old classrooms in this center. The study consisted of two groups of children. Group A was randomly comprising one 3-year-old class and one 4-year-old class; this group had all the stories told to them. Group B was randomly comprising one 3-year-old class and one 4-year-old class; this group had all the stories read to them.

Approach

This article reports descriptive data gathered during a 15-week period. The research used in-depth language transcripts from participants' responses to retelling stories and creating a story using a wordless picture book. Both pre- and post-samples were analyzed to determine similarities and differences in language complexity and story comprehension.

Measurement

Oral language samples were collected by audiotape from all participants. Pre-samples were collected after the initial presentation; post-samples were collected after the final story. The samples were transcribed and analyzed using language sample measures: mean length of utterance (MLU), fluency (total number of words), and vocabulary diversity (number of different words), as demonstrated by Gavin and Giles (1996). The computer software program SALT (Systematic Analysis of Language Transcripts) was used for the analysis (Gavin & Giles, 1996; Weismer, Murray-Branch, & Miller, 1993). Interviews included retelling a story that the participants had heard. The retellings were examined for formal story conventions and comprehension, to see if the use of beginnings, ending, theme, setting (time and place), moral of the story (resolution), narrative (dialog), characters, and sequence were included, as suggested in Applebee's classic study of story understanding in children (Applebee, 1978). This approach was also used by

Morrow (1985), who used retelling of stories as both a pre- and a posttest in a language study with kindergarten children.

Procedure

The presenters shared 24 stories with the participants in both groups. Several criteria were used to select stories appropriate for the study, including that the stories must be effective for both telling and reading and the illustrations were appropriate to the age of the participants. The research team selected picture books, and a committee of experts evaluated the books, to determine the final selection for use in the study.

There were two story presenters throughout the study: a graduate student in the storytelling program and a professor of early childhood education. The presenters told stories to Group A and read the same stories to Group B. Each presentation began with two questions related to the story and a statement encouraging the children to listen for specific elements, then, the story was either told or read. After sharing the story, the presenter asked three or four literal, inferential, and/or creative questions, and the research assistant introduced a follow-up activity related to the story.

There were 24 stories presented twice a week for 12 weeks, except for the first and last stories, which were presented once, to facilitate the collection of samples. The research assistant obtained oral language samples during an individual interview with each child in the study. The same procedure was followed to collect pre- and post-samples. During the interview, participants were first asked questions to

get them comfortable with the process. Next, the examiner asked the child to retell the story they had heard, using cues to encourage them to continue the retelling.

Following the story retelling, the examiner showed the children a wordless picture book and asked them to tell a story based on what was happening in the pictures. The books used were *One Frog Too Many* (Mayer & Mayer, 1975) for the pre-sample and *Frog on His Own* (Mayer, 1973) for the post-sample. The examiner and research assistant worked together to transcribe and analyze the oral language transcripts for each child.

RESULTS

The research team analyzed the language samples for two main components. First, the samples were analyzed for language complexity using SALT. This area, with specific measures, provided the means for investigating the effects of the two treatments. The techniques used to obtain oral language samples were retelling a story and using a wordless picture book. In the area of language complexity, a number of variables were analyzed, including: MLU, fluency, and vocabulary diversity. Second, the team analyzed the samples to determine whether formal story conventions, such as a beginning and ending, were included. Other identified elements related to comprehension of the story included the use of theme, setting, moral, narrative, characters, and sequence. Analysis was completed using a story retelling sheet that was created for the language samples based upon a similar form used in a study conducted by Morrow (2001).

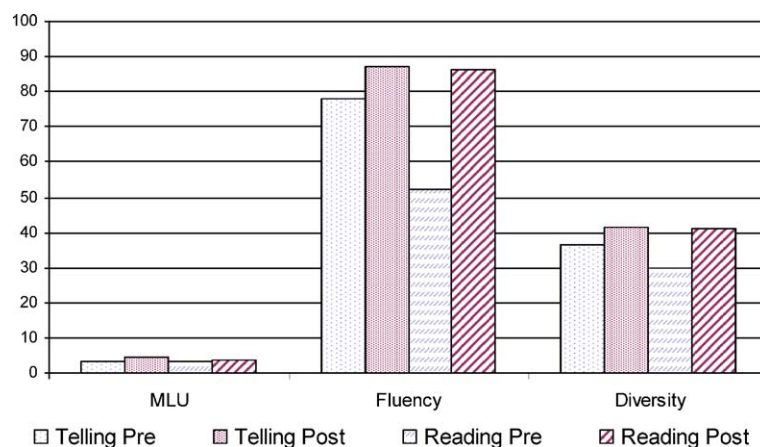


Fig. 1. Mean score comparisons of language complexity.

Retelling Language Samples

Analysis of the language samples showed positive gains in language complexity. There were gains in MLU—storytelling (1.3), story reading (0.46); fluency—storytelling (9.05); story reading (34); and vocabulary diversity—storytelling (4.64), story reading (11.47) (Fig. 1).

The story retellings were examined to identify story conventions and comprehension. None of the children used formal beginnings in the pre-sample. However, in the post-sample, the storytelling group increased 0.11, while story reading increased 0.16. Increases were also found in formal endings—storytelling (0.05), story reading (0.11); identifying the theme—storytelling (0.16), story reading (0.00); setting—storytelling (0.31), story reading (0.15); and the moral of the story—storytelling (0.11), story reading (0.16). When the data were analyzed, little difference was found between the language measures for boys and girls within and between the groups.

Wordless Picture Book Language Samples

Analysis of the language samples indicated several language complexity differences between the groups. Both groups made gains in MLU—storytelling (0.34), story reading (0.50); fluency—storytelling (19.74), story reading (69.00); and vocabulary diversity—storytelling (13.84), story reading (29.48) (Fig. 2).

The wordless picture book language samples were analyzed to identify the use of story conventions and comprehension. A formal beginning was provided by the researcher during the interview, while

increases were found in formal ending—storytelling (0.16), story reading (0.42); and use of narrative—storytelling (0.10), story reading (0.21). The analysis found little difference between the language measures for boys and girls within and between the groups.

DISCUSSION

Based on the results of the study, it was determined that the storytelling group performed better on the retelling, when compared to the story reading group. However, it was noted that the story reading group performed better when creating the wordless picture book story. It is therefore concluded that each group performed at the highest level when presenting the story in the same medium that was used with them over the 15-week period.

It is important to note that the reading group relied heavily on the illustrations to retell the story. The children in this group often described the illustrations, to help restructure the story. For instance, one boy in the story reading group struggled to come up with the word “goat,” and explained that, “It was a black thing with horns.” When children are provided with illustrations, they make specific visual associations. However, with the storytelling group, the children created their own diverse images, which were included in their retelling.

Another difference was that the storytelling group performed better in providing a formal ending. The storytelling group also performed better in providing a setting, naming the moral, and remembering characters in the story. This supports the conclusion

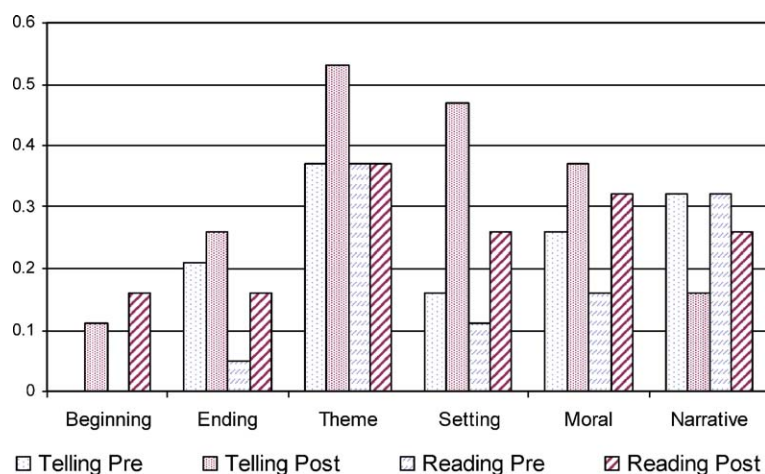


Fig. 2. Mean score comparisons of story conventions and comprehension.

that storytelling particularly helped the children's imaginative recollection of the story, while verbal factors were more or less equivalent in both modes of story transmission.

Results of this study indicate that storytelling and story reading are both beneficial to the development of oral language complexity and story comprehension in young children. Since story reading is a traditional activity in early childhood programs, this study indicates a benefit to adding a storytelling component to literacy programs. The inclusion of storytelling would assist children in expanding story comprehension, oral retelling, and recognizing the elements of a story. Combining these approaches could provide powerful literature experiences to influence the oral language development and story comprehension of young children—critical factors in their literacy development.

Future Research

While this study focused on language complexity and story comprehension, additional studies are needed that focus on attention. Egan (1986) and Paley (1993) have written that storytelling enhances the attention-giving and social capacities of young children. While presenting the stories, our researchers observed that there was a marked difference in attention levels between the groups. Before the language samples and measurements, our researchers commented that they "felt sorry for the children in the story reading group", because they were not being given the same quality of experience as the children in the storytelling group. It was observed that children were less easily distracted from the story during storytelling than during the story reading presentations. During story presentations, the researchers observed a variety of behaviors that indicated the storytelling group was more engaged, as demonstrated by facial expressions and anticipation displayed by children in that group. The researchers observed that children in the story reading group were interested in the story, but did not show the same expression and anticipation.

It is this existential quality of the storytelling experience with young children that needs to be more carefully attended to by educational researchers. Differences in attention and on-task behavior need to be carefully assessed. Do children pay better attention to one medium of story presentation than another? Moreover, are there implications of this in the realm of pedagogical theory and practice? An

additional study is also needed to compare the effects of storytelling and story reading on older children.

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