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Comparing Preschool Teachers' Language Use During Shared Book Reading
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COMPARING PRESCHOOL TEACHERS’ LANGUAGE USE DURING SHARED BOOK READING

By

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Abstract

Purpose: Shared book-reading is a useful tool in developing language and reading skills in young children. This study focuses on the methods and techniques used by teachers with preschool-age students who have developmental disabilities and those who don’t by comparing collected data from two preschool classrooms. The purpose of collecting this data is to provide a direct comparison of shared book-reading between teachers who have students with developmental disabilities and those who don’t – something that has not had much direct observation.

Introduction

Shared Book-Reading

Shared book-reading is a learning strategy that involves the shared reading of a book between students and teachers, though sometimes it can also be defined as shared book-reading among students, or between parents and their children (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). During shared book reading, interactions occur “when adults help children understand and interpret text by referencing the children’s experiences and background” (Doyle, & Bramwell, 2006, p. 555). Throughout the interaction, questions are asked and answered, with guidance and feedback being provided by the adult at an appropriate level for each child (Palinesar, & Brown, 1984). This technique is used to help build word knowledge and reading fluency in young children, especially those who may be struggling with their reading skills, by modelling proficient reading skills and fluency. It also provides support for the student to interact with the reader, which can help boost confidence in the student.

When used in a classroom setting, shared book-reading often takes place in a whole group, with the teacher placed in the center, book in hand, and the students placed around the
teacher, to ensure that all of the students have a clear view of the teacher. Shared book-reading can also be conducted between two individuals or small groups. Some common features of shared book-reading include the use of repeated storylines, ‘attention getters’ (i.e., a physical object that can be presented to the class that ties back to the story in some way), picture symbols paired with words, summarized text with controlled vocabulary (Browder, Trela, & Jimenez, 2007), and repeated readings (Mims, 2009).

Justice and Lankford (2002) found that through the use of shared book-reading, young children were able to gain emergent literacy skills, or the knowledge of the forms and function of print and the relationship between oral and written language (Teale & Sulzby, 1986). The promotion of emergent literacy skills during shared book-reading occurs by pointing to and talking about the print, asking questions about and commenting on the story and illustrations, and pointing out and tracking the print of the book throughout the reading. Through shared book-reading, the promotion of emergent literacy in typically developing children has been found to help engage them in the reading process (Whitehurst, 1988) increasing the development of their vocabulary (Blewitt, Rump, Shealy, & Cook, 2009), raising their print awareness, and increasing receptive word learning (Justice, 2002).

Though shared book-reading has become a widespread practice in classrooms, there is no one right way for a teacher to conduct their interaction. The main responsibility of the teacher is to set up the reading in a way that matches the text and its purpose and meets the needs of the children who are actively listening to the reading, without packing the session with too much information (Kindle, 2011). It is also expected that teachers will adjust their language and engagement based on what they are reading and determine the academic goal of each specific reading. Furthermore, the teachers should be able to adapt their interactions to support the needs
of their specific students, as what may work for one student may not work for another (Kindle, 2011).

**Shared Book-Reading for At-Risk Children**

Apart from typically developing children, shared book-reading has been shown to promote emergent literacy skills in preschool students who are considered at-risk. In the 1980s, a study was conducted on a group of 4-year-old children who were part of the Early Start program, a program aimed to individualize instruction and socialization for young children who were considered to be at-risk for school failure. Through this study, it was found that shared book-reading with books that were specifically designed to promote early literacy development contributed to letter naming knowledge, indicating that the children were at the early stages of reading (Mason, Kerr, Sinha, & McCormick, 1990). The findings of this study ultimately supported the use of context-supported reading for at-risk children, suggesting that simple-to-read books can help “guide young children through that brief but essential period when letter name and basic print concepts are acquired” (Mason, Kerr, Sinha, & McCormick, 1990, p. 7) and that this type of reading could be effective for language-focused programs for at-risk children, such as Head Start. Another study examined the shared-reading experiences of 4-year-olds in a Head Start program and found that a group of students who were provided with group reading of predictable books scored higher on a print concept test than students who had not participated in shared book-reading (Box, & Aldrige, 1993).

A study conducted in 2002 that focused on the intervention of at-risk children from low-income households followed the children’s participation in print-focused shared book-reading sessions. Results showed that implementing print clues in book-reading sessions was effective for improving print awareness (Justice, & Ezell, 2002). Prior to the study, the children had
performed poorly on a words-in-print and print recognition pretest, with the children answering on average approximately 3%-10% of the questions correctly. After receiving direct printed word interactions mediated by adults, the children were able to perform much better on the posttest than on the pretest, showing significant growth in alphabet knowledge (Justice, & Ezell, 2002). As a whole, this study found that print-focused reading sessions could improve children’s performance in various areas of print awareness and overall performance, though there was little effect on the children’s abilities in letter orientation and discrimination, as well as print concepts, and literacy terms (Justice, & Ezell, 2002).

Yet another study conducted in 2004 found that kindergarteners who had low receptive vocabulary were able to make greater gains in their vocabulary following storybook reading that featured explicitly taught vocabulary, in comparison to students who had received instruction through a commercial reading program (Coyne, Simmons, Kame’enui, & Stoolmiller, 2004).

**Shared Book-Reading for Students with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities**

In addition to children who are considered at-risk or those who are considered typically developing, shared book-reading has also been shown to be beneficial in promoting literacy for students who have developmental disabilities and may have extensive support needs. In this instance, the definition of a developmental disability is based off of the National Institute of Health (NIH) definition, which defines a developmental disability as “a severe, long term disability that can affect cognitive ability, physical functioning, or both. These disabilities appear before age 22 and are likely to be life-long. The term ‘developmental disability’ encompasses intellectual disability but also include physical disabilities may be solely physical, such as blindness from birth. Others involve both physical and intellectual disabilities stemming from genetic or other causes, such as Down syndrome and fetal alcohol syndrome” (NIH, 2018).
A study conducted in 2018 found that for young students who have autism spectrum disorder (ASD), adapted shared story book-reading conducted by parents was shown to promote engagement in literacy activities for these children (Golloher, 2018). This study showed that when a complete intervention package was put in place, the participants showed an increase in participation during shared book-reading interactions. During readings of non-adapted books, the children were given a designated opportunity to respond to the readings in a manner that is normal for typical interactions of shared book reading. In these instances, the students expressed a limited range of engagement. It was also found that through the use of individualized adaptations, a portion of the participants showed noticeable gains in their participation, though the data collected suggests that there would not be a possibility for further improvement overtime. Though the overall results of this study were positive following the implementations of individualized sessions, the biggest concern was generalizing the data and maintaining the results overtime. Though the students did show improvement in the study, it was unclear how well they would be able to maintain their newfound skills, and it was stated that the characteristics of individual children should be considered when determining which methods are most beneficial for their success (Golloher, 2018). This study suggests that shared story-book interactions for children with ASD specifically should be individualized for the student.

**Why This Research is Important**

Few studies exist in which language used by teachers during shared storybook reading is directly compared in preschool classrooms of students with developmental disabilities to students who are typically developing. Kindle (2011) observed different experiences of preschool children during shared book-reading sessions of the same book in four different classrooms, noting the different practices used by each teacher (Kindle, 2011). Through this study, it was
discovered that even between just four different teachers, they each had very different styles of shared reading, and even though the children were experiencing the reading, their experiences varied substantially between classrooms (Kindle, 2011). Though the focus was not to differentiate the techniques used by teachers with students who had developmental disabilities and those who didn’t, the study did breakdown the quantity and function of the language used by the teachers, similar to this current study, in a way that acknowledged the different techniques used between teachers.

Because there is a lack of observational studies on the quality and function of language used by teachers between students with and without developmental disabilities during shared book-reading, the current study is important because it provides more information on the accommodations made by teachers during group book reading. The current study allows for identification of similarities and differences in the language and literary concepts used by teachers in classrooms of students with and without developmental disabilities, by observing teachers in their natural classroom settings and breaking down the function of their language. The aims of the current study are to: 1) Describe the quantity of language input provided by each teacher using SALT variables (number of different words (NDW), mean length utterance in morphemes (MLUm), number of utterances), 2) Describe the function of language input provided by each teacher, and 3) Determine if there are differences in the quantity of language input using the SALT variables (NDW, MLUm, number of utterances) and function of language input (extratextual language, print referencing, etc.) between teachers.
**Methods**

**Participants**

Preschool teachers from 2 different private preschools in the greater Tallahassee, FL area participated in this study. In order to participate in the study, the teachers had to consent to being video recorded for the purpose of collecting data.

Students were given memos to take home to parents/guardians with information about the study, but no consent forms were needed as the children were not included in the video recordings and no identifying information was collected about them. The only information collected about the children was collected through a teacher survey. In this survey, teachers were instructed to answer questions about their classroom and students, with one question asking teachers to gage the most predominant developmental disabilities in their classroom, as well as how many students in their classrooms have been clinically diagnosed with developmental disabilities. Answering this question did not specify which students had disabilities and that information was never provided. Names of students were also not collected.

**Procedures**

The procedures for data recording, collection, and analysis were adapted from the Systematic Assessment of Book Reading (SABR) 2.0 observational protocol for classrooms (CIL, 2018). The classrooms were categorized into two groups 1.) Teacher 1 had less than 10 years of teaching experience and a classroom of children without a diagnosed developmental disability. 2.) Teacher 2 had over 20 years of teaching experience and had a classroom of children with 2 – 4 children with a diagnosed developmental disability, such as ADHD and sensory processing disorder, with the previously mentioned NIH definition of a ‘developmental
disability’ also being used in this instance. Individual students with disabilities were not identified to the principal investigator.

Prior to the day of observation, each teacher met with the principal investigator (PI) to review details of how the observation would be conducted. During this meeting, teachers were provided with a standard book to use during the shared reading sessions, representative of a typical book they would read in their classroom – *The Cat in the Hat* (Seuss, 1957). On the day of observation, the principal investigator again explained the procedure being used for the observation session. Prior to the recorded observation, a camera was set up in a position that provided a view of only the teacher and the book being used, avoiding any students who could potentially be in the frame. Any interactions between the teachers and individual students in which a student was caught in frame of the video (e.g., student pointing to the book, walking in front of the frame to assist in the reading) or heard in the audio (e.g., student answering a question, calling out a word) prompted a modification to the video to block out the image/audio of the student, in order to ensure that he/she could not be seen/heard during any coding conducted by other research staff.

Recording began from the time the book reading session began and the time it ended. The start of the session was defined as when the book-related discussion began (i.e., teacher telling the student it’s story time, drawing attention with a focal point, holding up a book to make it visible, or discussing a topic that is related to the book). Any additional discussion related to the book was also included, such as after-reading group discussion about any book-related concepts or reviewing any visual supports that were introduced throughout the story (i.e. graphic organizers, props/puppets).
Transcriptions and Coding

Following observations, the videos were transcribed using the System Analysis of Language Transcript Software (SALT) to note the quantity of the target language variables (e.g., MLUm, NDW, total utterances). The investigator and one additional trained research assistant were required to meet 90% reliability on SALT transcript conventions using a language sample separate from this study. Next, each teacher’s utterances during shared book reading were transcribed first by the investigator, and then checked by the additional trained research assistant. Any discrepancies were discussed, and a consensus was determined.

To code the function of teacher utterances, all utterances of the teacher were entered into an Excel spreadsheet and coded by breaking down their language into a coding system adapted from the Systematic Assessment of Book Reading (SABR) 2.0 coding system (CLI, 2018). This allowed for the function of the teachers’ communication with the students about the book to be described. Codes from three broad categories described in Table 1 were used - literacy related codes, behavior related codes, and meaning/comprehension related codes. Each utterance of the teachers’ language used throughout the book reading session was coded using one of the codes in Table 1.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language input codes based off of the SABR 2.0 Long Form coding sheet.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Literacy-Related</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading Verbatim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defining Vocabulary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Author-Illustrator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letter Reference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word Reference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book Conventions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Behavior-Related</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Behavior Management | Teacher elicits a specific behavior from child
---|---
Attention Directing | Teacher has to redirect the attention of the children to the reading
Acting Out & Pretend Play | Teacher dramatically acts out

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meaning/Comprehension-Related</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Character Reference | Teacher makes a reference back to a character mentioned in the story
| Event Reference | Teacher references something that happened in the story to a real-life event
| Feelings/Emotions | Teacher talks about emotions felt by character

**Reliability.** Following the coding of each transcript, percent agreements were determined between the data coded from the principal investigator and the data coded from the research assistant. In Teacher 1’s transcript, the codes that initially met 80% agreement were Reading Verbatim (97%), Letter Reference (100%), Behavior Management (91%), and Feelings/Emotions (100%). The codes that did not initially meet 80% agreement were Defining Vocabulary (35.7%), Author-Illustrator (0%), Book-Print Conventions (0%), Word Reference (0%), Attention Directing (10%), Character Reference (0%), Event Reference (0%), and Acting Out & Pretend Play (0%). Each code that did not meet 80% agreement was discussed between coders and consensus was determined. After coming to a consensus, all of these codes reached percent agreements between 91% and 100%. These percentages are shown in the table below. The codes that initially met 80% agreement for Teacher 2’s transcript were Reading Verbatim (99%), Defining Vocabulary (100%), and Acting Out & Pretend Play (100%). Those that did not initially meet the 80% agreement were Author-Illustrator (11%), Book-Print Conventions (64%), Letter Reference (16%), Word Reference (50%), Behavior Management (76.9%), Attention Directing (0%), Character Reference (16%), Event Reference (70%), Acting Out & Pretend Play (100%). Following consensus, all of these codes reached at least an 80% agreement, ranging between 90% and 100%. These percentages are also shown in the table below.
Table 2

Percent agreement for each code.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Code</th>
<th>% Agreement for Teacher 1</th>
<th>% Agreement for Teacher 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Literacy-Related</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading Verbatim</td>
<td>97%</td>
<td>99%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defining Vocabulary</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Author-Illustrator</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letter Reference</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word Reference</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book Conventions</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Behavior-Related</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior Management</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attention Directing</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acting Out &amp; Pretend Play</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Meaning/Comprehension-Related</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character Reference</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Event Reference</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feelings/Emotions</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Analysis Plan

In order to describe the quantity of language input provided by each teacher, we used the SALT variables NDW, MLUm, and number of utterances to calculate and compare the data collected from each teacher. To describe the function of language input being provided by the teacher, such as literacy related language, language for behavior management, and language related to meaning/comprehension, we used the previously listed codes adapted from the SABR 2.0 coding system. Literacy-related input (defining new vocabulary, referencing letters/words, acknowledging author/illustrator) was grouped into the first category, behavior-related input (behavior management, attention directing, acting out scenes and pretend play) was grouped into the second category, and meaning and comprehension-related input (character referencing, event referencing, discussing feelings and emotions) was grouped into a third category. These categories were used to understand each teacher’s communication functions during book reading.
Results

**Quantity of Language Input**

The overall quantity of language input was calculated for both transcripts through the SALT variables of NDW, MLUm, and total number of utterances. The totals for both transcripts are expressed in Table 3 below.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SALT Variables</th>
<th>Totals for T1</th>
<th>Totals for T2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number Different Words</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>303</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MLU in Morphemes</td>
<td>8.70</td>
<td>8.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Total Utterances</td>
<td>237</td>
<td>240</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: T1 = Teacher 1, T2 = Teacher 2.*

**Function of Language**

A percentage for each instance in which a specific type of language function occurred was calculated out of the total amount of teacher utterances in each transcript respectively. The transcript for Teacher 1 was ultimately coded for 237 lines of language input. The percentages of the function of language input for Teacher 1 were as follows: 73% reading verbatim, 4.2% defining vocabulary, 0.4% referencing the author or illustrator, 4.2 % managing the behavior of a student, 1.6% directing attention back to the reading, 1.2% referencing a character from the story, 1.2% referencing a real-life event that could or did happen, and 2.9% discussing feelings of a character from the book. Instances of language input that were not utilized by the teacher during this reading were referencing of letters or words within the book, book conventions, or acting out/pretend play. Twelve percent of the language input provided by the teacher fell under a category that did not apply to our specific set of codes, and therefore was coded as “Other Language Input”. Language that fell into this category mostly consisted of filler words, or words like “Wow” and “Uh oh”. This data is represented in Figure 1.
The transcript for Teacher 2 was transcribed with 240 lines of language input. For each type of language input, the percentages were as follows: 69% reading verbatim, 0.4% referencing the author or illustrator, 4.5% discussing book-print conventions, 0.4% discussing letters in the text, 2% discussing words within the text, 4.9% managing behavior of a student, 0.8% directing attention back to the reading, 0.8% acting act or pretend play, 3.7% referencing a character within the story, and 5.3% referencing a real-life event that could or did happen. Types of language input that were not used by the teacher during this reading were defining vocabulary.
and discussing feelings or emotions. 8% of the language input provided by the teacher fell into the category of “Other Language Input”. This data is represented in Figure 2.

![Figure 2. Percentages of coded language for T2.](image)

**Discussion**

The current study explored both the quantity and function of language input provided by preschool teachers who had children with and without developmental disabilities within their classrooms. Findings revealed that both teachers used similar amounts of language input in terms of NDW, MLU, and number of different utterances. However, there were differences noted in
the function of language input in terms of the proportion of each category of language input that was used. This exploratory study provides a preliminary look at both the utility of using an adapted version of the SABR coding scheme for preschool teachers of children with disabilities and suggests that one teacher with greater experience, as well as students with developmental disabilities in her classroom provided more input in terms of explaining book conventions and using meaning/comprehension-related language regarding the overall content of the book (i.e., character referencing and relating events in the book to real-life examples).

In regard to the SALT variables, no real differences were found in the quantity of language between the teachers. Both had similar scores for NDW, meaning their vocabularies were equally diverse, MLUm, meaning their sentences were equally complex, and utterances, meaning they had about the same amount of language input. The differences we found that were most important, however, were that of language function. In terms of literacy-related language input, Teacher 1 had more instances (77.6%), though Teacher 2 was very close to having the same percentage (76.3%). Teacher 2 had more instances of behavior-related input (6.5%), but Teacher 1 was very close with 5.8%. The biggest difference in proportions, however, came from meaning/comprehension related input, with Teacher 2 having 9% of coded language input falling into this category, where Teacher 1 had 5.3%. Though some of these percentages were very similar based on the type of codes, the proportion of specific codes utilized may have varied between teachers in some instances. Where Teacher 2 had proportionally more language input fall into the meaning/comprehension related category, Teacher 1 actually utilized all three types of language input in this category (character reference, event reference, feelings/emotions), where Teacher 2 did not. The instances in which this extra-textual language was brought up also varied between the two teachers. For Teacher 1, it was observed that whenever she provided any
language input outside of reading directly from the book, majority of her language occurred in response to student comments or questions. This was not the case for Teacher 2, however, where nearly every instance of extra-textual language input that occurred was led by the teacher, who then waited for additional input from the students in response. This difference could potentially be a reflection of the fact that Teacher 2 had documented students with developmental disabilities, therefore reflecting the differences in student response during shared book reading, as well as Teacher 2’s need to explicitly address extra-textual language with the scaffolding necessary for the children with developmental disabilities to best comprehend it.

This study provides us with a preliminary look at where we could intervene with teachers to create more robust shared learning instruction. Areas that teachers may need additional support to use with greater frequency are those relating to meaning and comprehension. They may also need more support in referencing literary concepts, such as letters and words from the text, as Teacher 1 did not do this at all. More explicit vocabulary instruction could also be supported, as Teacher 2 did not provide this type of input. In the future, this coding scheme could be expanded to include more codes, including those for instances of inferencing, counting, and picture referencing. The inclusion of more codes in the future would leave less room for language input that does not fit within the coding scheme, therefore reducing the percentage of language that falls under the category of “Other Language Input”. By reducing the percentage of language that does not fit within the coding scheme, we can more accurately understand the function of all of the language input being provided by the teacher. It would also be ideal to study more teachers at once, in order to get a bigger picture of the differences in language input that vary from classroom to classroom. We would also like to look more at teachers with
students who have more severe developmental disabilities, to see how they accommodate the needs of those students during a group reading session.
References


