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Evaluating the Effectiveness of Teaching Early Literacy Skills in a Dual-Language Program

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Effective literacy skills are essential to success in life. In order to gain these skills, a strong literacy foundation must be established during childhood. Any impairment of this skill has a profound effect on the life of a child. Children with delayed literacy skills have difficulties in learning and keeping up with their peers in school. Consequently they may fall behind in school and miss out on pertinent learning experiences.

As part of an adequate education, instructors must provide early literacy instruction to all children, including the rapidly growing population of Spanish-speaking children. Unfortunately, a recent study showed that 67% of children from Hispanic backgrounds were reading below a fourth-grade level (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1999). This poses a serious problem to educators on how to effectively target the Hispanic population and provide meaningful literacy instruction to them.

The purpose of this research project was to evaluate the effectiveness of a literacy project designed to meet the needs of Spanish-speaking children. The research was performed in conjunction with graduate student Maren Reese (Reese, 2003). We had three main objectives in the development of the literacy activities: (1) to create motivating and interactive activities, (2) to teach the students in their native language, and (3) to teach the students phonological awareness skills.

This project was conducted in two half-day Spanish/English dual-language kindergarten classes from Timpanogos Elementary School in Provo, Utah. The morning class consisted of 21 students and the afternoon class of 18 students. The mean age in the morning class was five years, eight months, and the mean age in the afternoon class was five years, nine months. Approximately 50% of the subjects were from low socioeconomic background. Seven students in the morning class and six in the afternoon class were of Hispanic descent, with both parents speaking Spanish in the home. Two students in the morning class and three in the afternoon class came from homes where one parent spoke Spanish and the other parent spoke English. All other students were monolingual English speakers.

The skills that were targeted during the activities were rhyme acquisition, alliteration acquisition and print awareness. Activities designed to teach rhyme highlighted the target ending by (1) teaching one rime per activity, (2) emphasizing the rime through intonation and stress, (3) providing many example of words that rhyme, and (4) explicitly explaining to the children that the target words rhyme. During the alliteration activities, the instructors highlighted the initial sound through exaggeration and repeating words that started with the same sound. For instance, in an *s* activity, the students sucked salty sunflower seeds and spit them in the sink. During the activity, the instructors would draw out the *s* sound in the word and say “salty and seed start with the same /s/ sound.” Word recognition was incorporated into the activities through the use of

posters, worksheets, word wheels, and word books. With the instructor support, the children would read the target word in order to continue with the activity.

Alliteration and rhyme activities were presented in both Spanish and English; however, only one language was used per activity. In order to provide support for the children who did not speak the language, instructors would first present items in the activity in the native language of the group, then switch to the target language.

Results from the study showed that the English-speaking children performed better on the alliteration and rhyme tasks than the Spanish-speaking children. Also, several Spanish-speaking children struggled with the transition from alliteration to rhyme, whereas the English-speaking children never struggled with the transition. For instance, during a rhyme activity (pat, cat, sat, etc.), I showed the children a poster of the target words with the *at* ending highlighted. I told the children that all of those words rhymed, and Mauro (a bilingual student) responded that those words did not rhyme. Later, when probed on other rhyme words, he produced words that started with the same sounds, instead of a rhyme word. For example, when I asked Mauro what rhymed with llama, he replied /ya/, and when I asked him what rhymed with cama, he replied /ka/.

Another problem that the Spanish-speaking children exhibited was that they struggled isolating the initial sound from the word. When asked for the initial sound of a word, the Spanish-speaking children produced the initial syllable instead of the initial sound. For example, when asked what sound *mochila* started with, all of the Spanish speakers said either /ma/ or /mo/. In contrast, all of the English speakers, except one, produced /m/. Since Spanish is a syllabic language, the Spanish-speaking children are more accustomed to breaking words into syllables versus a phoneme.

There is a need for future research on how to best teach literacy skills to Spanish-speaking children. Because the Spanish-speaking children had greater difficulty developing these skills, future research should provide Spanish-speakers additional support in rhyme and alliteration tasks. Future literacy programs should continue to teach reading in the child's native language and provide a motivational, interactive environment. Also, future research may need to provide additional support and increase the length of training so that Spanish-speaking children can master rhyme and alliteration skills.

References

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