

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine the effect of intensive vocabulary instruction embedded in a small group narrative intervention on first graders' vocabulary and narrative skills.

Summary

Vocabulary instruction embedded in a narrative intervention was delivered to students in small groups (i.e., 2-3 students) for 30 minutes per day over 12 weeks. Intervention effects were tested using a randomized control group design. Results indicated that explicit vocabulary instruction embedded in storytelling is an effective way to teach new vocabulary words to students with limited language skills.

Implications

Small group vocabulary instruction embedded in a narrative intervention can be an effective option for supplemental intervention for children with limited language skills. Given that oral language comprehension is a foundational skill for reading comprehension, it is essential that primary grade students receive preventative oral language interventions before reading comprehension problems emerge in later grades.

Explicit Vocabulary Instruction Embedded in Narrative Intervention

By Chelsey Gardner

Introduction

Early oral language skills are necessary for successful reading comprehension (National Early Literacy Panel [NELP], 2009). Reading comprehension is the product of both decoding and language comprehension (Hoover & Gough, 1990), and students with limited oral language skills are at risk for reading failure (Catts, Fey, Tomblin, & Zhang, 2002). The purpose of the study was to examine the effect of a small group narrative language intervention with embedded vocabulary instruction on students' ability to retell and infer the meaning of contextually supported vocabulary words. Vocabulary knowledge and narration are two oral language skills that are associated with reading comprehension.

Featured Study

Participants included 22 first grade students attending a Southwest elementary school with a high percentage of students receiving free and reduced school lunch. Using a curriculum based measurement tool for language, students demonstrated a need for supplemental language support and were considered at risk of developing reading comprehension difficulties. Students were randomly assigned to treatment or control conditions. Trained interventionists delivered the intervention to students in the treatment group (n=11) 30 minutes per day, four days per week, for 12 weeks. Intervention groups consisted of only two or three students. Each lesson featured a carefully constructed story in which two less common vocabulary words were embedded with contextual support. The interventionists

helped students look for clues in the story to help figure out the meaning and then gave the definitions of the target words. Students took turns retelling the story and were prompted to use the target words in the story. The interventionists ensured students had opportunities to practice the new words during the students' retells and to define them throughout the lessons. At the end of half of the lessons, students were asked to generate a personal story and use the new words. In the other half of the lessons, the interventionists delivered additional exemplars of the target words using photos unrelated to the story and led the students through extension activities such as word bingo and memory games. Teaching procedures included the use of simple pictures, colored icons representing story parts, systematic prompting, prompt fading, and frequent opportunities to respond with supportive and corrective feedback.

The effect of the intervention on narrative retelling skills and inferential word learning was examined using a randomized pretest/posttest control group design. The Narrative Language Measures Cubed (NLM3; Petersen & Spencer, 2012) was administered to all participants at pretest and posttest (after 12 weeks of intervention). The NLM3 has multiple forms designed for frequent monitoring of oral language skills (i.e., curriculum based measurement). The assessment consists of a short child-relevant story that includes consistent story grammar components and linguistic elements of complex language. The students retold the story, which was scored for the inclusion of story grammar and linguistic components.



After students retold the story, they answered three vocabulary definition questions related to the story. At pretest and posttest, students received three NLM3 stories in one session and their best scores were used in the analysis. Importantly, none of the words that appeared during the NLM3 assessments were trained in the intervention lessons. Results indicated that the treatment group showed statistically significant ($p < .01$) improvement over the control group in both narrative retelling and defining untaught words with large effect sizes ($d = 1.54$ for retelling; $d = 1.18$ for vocabulary).

Implications for Practice

The results of this study show that explicit vocabulary instruction embedded in storytelling is an effective way to teach students with limited language skills new vocabulary words and story retelling. The most interesting finding of this study is that the intervention had an impact on students' ability to

use the context of a story to figure out the meaning of novel words. This is significant because students who can learn new words from context will require less explicit instruction and learn new words through listening to stories and reading.

Best Available Evidence

This study adds to the research on narrative interventions for children with limited language skills (Spencer et al., 2014; Spencer & Slocum, 2010). It also extends previous narrative intervention research that has been conducted with children with disabilities (Petersen et al., 2014; Spencer, Kajian, Petersen, & Bilyk, 2014) in that the current participants did not have identified disabilities but were at risk of reading failure in later grades. Although there are many studies that show improvements on vocabulary knowledge measures of taught words, there are few that demonstrate an impact on word learning in general. This is an important contribution to the available evidence on vocabulary interventions.

Professional Judgement, Client, and Context

Explicit vocabulary instruction embedded in narrative interventions can be an appropriate research-based option for school teams that are ready to implement language interventions. As the research is emerging, the infrastructure and climate in schools may determine the extent to which such interventions can be feasibly implemented with children who do not have identified disabilities. Preventative services, although ideal and mandated, may displace resources otherwise allocated to students with disabilities, and decisions regarding the use of explicit language interventions should be determined in consideration of the school's personnel and financial resources. Further, where there are large numbers of culturally and linguistically diverse students who are often at higher risk of reading failure, a whole class intervention may be a more efficient and cost effective option (Spencer et al., 2012).



About the Author

Chelsey Gardner received her B.S. in Elementary Education from Northern Arizona University in May 2015. She worked as an undergraduate research assistant in the Child Development and Language Lab under Dr. Trina Spencer at the Institute for Human Development. Ms. Gardner was awarded a \$3500 Hooper Undergraduate Research Award (HURA) to conduct this study at NAU, with mentorship from Dr. Spencer.

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