Parent-Child Interactions in Book Reading and Narrative Skill for Prekindergarteners: Exploring “During” vs. “After” Book Reading Interactions

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Abstract

We investigated how parent-child interactions during and after book reading are related to narrative skills among prekindergarten-aged children. We addressed this question by using a nationally representative sample in the U.S., the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study - Birth Cohort (ECLS-B; unweighted $N \approx 550$; weighted $N = 2,766,947$), and by employing a latent variable approach. The results showed that parents employed a variety of interactional behaviors such as asking open-ended and closed-ended questions and directing the child to pictures during reading. In comparison, only a limited number of parents engaged in interactions after book reading. The results of structural equation modeling showed that interaction after, but not during, reading was uniquely related to the child’s retell skill after the child’s communicative oral language skill and family socio-economic status were controlled. These results suggest that interactions after book reading such as summarizing the book might be beneficial for the child’s story retell.

Keywords: book reading, retell, prekindergarten, parent-child interaction, during reading, after reading

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Children’s ability to retell stories is important not only to oral communication but also to literacy acquisition (Graesser, Golding, & Long, 1991; Mol, Bus, & de Jong, 2009; Reese, Suggate, Long, & Schaughency, 2010; Snow, 1983; Tabors, Snow, & Dickinson, 2001). One crucial mechanism for children’s narrative skill development is interactions involving book reading in the home (Pritchard, 1990). Listening to stories in a book read by an adult provides opportunities for children to learn vocabulary, language features (syntax and expression), interpretation of text, and text structure (Sulzby, 1985), all of which children can draw on in their own narrative production (Purcell-Gates, 1988).

According to Vygotsky’s social interaction framework, learning occurs via interactions between a competent partner (adult) and a novice learner (child). Similarly, Rogoff (1990) proposed that cognitive skills develop through apprenticeship involving interactions between a novice learner and an expert—a novice learner becomes more competent by gradually taking more responsibility from an expert. This applies to children’s language learning including vocabulary and oral narrative skills where adults act as experts and children as novice learners. In particular, parent-child interactions in joint book reading can provide an important context to facilitate children’s oral language such as narrative skill (White & Low, 2002; see below for details) as the adult can use various means to facilitate the child’s comprehension. Parent-child interactions during joint book reading include frequency, quality, types, and timing of various actions such as referring to pictures, asking questions, and providing comments for interpretation/understanding of the story.

Research has shown that parents (mostly mothers) vary in their interactional styles during joint book reading (see Fletcher & Reese, 2005, for a review). Large variations have been observed in the amount of extra-textual talk, types and frequency of questions raised, emphasis made, and comments and statements related to understanding the book (Haden, Reese, & Fivush, 1996; Hammet, van Kleeck, & Huberty, 2003; Ninio, 1980; van Kleeck, Gillam, Hamilton, & McGrath, 1997). Importantly, differences in these behaviors have been shown to be related to children’s retell skills. Mothers’ labeling and elicitation of description, amount of elaboration, previewing of books, and amount of prompting and questions were related to children’s retell skills (Kang, Kim, & Pan, 2009; Low & Durkin, 2001; Reese, 1995; White & Low, 2002). Evidence from parent-child book reading intervention supports the influence of parent-child interaction styles on child language skill (see Reese, Sparks, & Leyva, 2010 for a review). For instance, studies on dialogic reading, one approach to book reading, indicate that parents’ or teachers’ encouragement of children to talk about the story by asking questions and expanding on the children’s utterances are effective in improving the children’s language skills (Arnold, Lonigan, Whitehurst, & Epstein, 1994; Whitehurst, Falco, Lonigan, & Fischel, 1988).