

Executive Summary

Vocabulary Acquisition from Storybook Reading: Evidence from Two Studies

In a study of the effects of storybook reading on ELL preschoolers' sophisticated vocabulary acquisition, 70 native speakers of Portuguese were pretested on Portuguese (L1) and English (L2) baseline vocabulary and were assigned to treatment and control groups. Eight commercially available picture books were paired based on similarities in plot and illustration style.

Approximately 6 sophisticated vocabulary words were inserted into the text of each book. Sophisticated vocabulary was measured by rarity measures from oral language corpora, written language materials, and representative peer group. In small groups, children were read stories three times over a span of four weeks. Children in the experimental group heard rich explanation of sophisticated English vocabulary. Children in the control group heard stories read without explanation of sophisticated vocabulary. After the third reading, children were post-tested individually on target word learning with a picture vocabulary test. Findings showed significant effects of treatment on target word learning above and beyond other predictors (baseline English vocabulary knowledge, frequency of reading at home, and story comprehension). Baseline Portuguese vocabulary did not contribute to sophisticated English vocabulary acquisition.

A second study, currently underway, is examining effects of similar strategies on native speakers of Spanish. Preliminary results from the first year involving a cohort of 139 ELL preschoolers show similar effects of treatment (rich explanation) on sophisticated vocabulary acquisition. Factors predicting vocabulary acquisition include story comprehension and treatment with a modest contribution from baseline L2 vocabulary and no significant contribution from baseline L1 vocabulary. Findings show evidence for lack of L1 lexical transfer, support generalizing L2 vocabulary acquisition strategies in storybook reading to Spanish-speakers, and strengthen evidence for providing rich vocabulary support in preschool.