

Story Enactment Enhances Language Acquisition in English Language Learning Kindergarteners



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Abstract

Many children who speak a language other than English at home do not succeed in American schools. Adequate oral English is necessary to read in English and undergirds achievement in monolingual schools (Carlo et al., 2004). Fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension are as essential to literacy as phonological and print awareness (Linan-Thompson, Cirino, & Vaughn, 2007). Classroom activities focused on meaning, such as story reading and drama, support vocabulary development and emergent literacy (Connor, Morrison, & Slominski, 2006). Using a paired cluster randomized control trial design, 6 Title I schools were randomly assigned to treatment or control conditions. Treatment teachers received professional learning workshops in drama and collaborated with artists on 18 lessons over a 5-month period annually, 2008-12. Control teachers used the district's standard language arts curriculum. Students were 452 randomly selected ELL kindergarteners (221 girls; age at pretest $M=66.9$ mo., $SD=4.4$). The intervention had a significant and positive effect on students' English oral language as well as academic measures of language arts and mathematics. Teacher professional development in drama techniques enhances learning by enriching ELL students' engagement with the language used in the classroom.

Background

- The "achievement gap" begins before the first day of school.
- Language development in early childhood predicts school performance. Children who speak a language other than English at home underperform in monolingual American schools.
- In high-stakes, underachieving schools, kindergarten often does not resemble child-centered early education.

Theory

- Shared understanding and intentions are sociocognitive processes underlying cultural learning.
- Social and communicative experiences that support the development of symbolic functioning are essential in early childhood.
- ESOL best practices have commonalities with drama: meaningful contexts, props, gestures, facial expression, physicalization, and repetition enhance understanding.

Method

- Six volunteering Title 1 schools were randomly assigned to intervention and control conditions.
- Professional learning opportunities in drama for intervention teachers in fall and spring from 2008-12.
- Each year artists & intervention teachers collaboratively infused drama into 18 kindergarten language arts lessons over 5 months (November-March)
- Research Participants: Children whose teachers had all three years of professional learning (*treatment received*) and comparison children. $N=452$ ELL; Grade K; Age $M=66.9$ mo., $SD=4.4$.

Measures

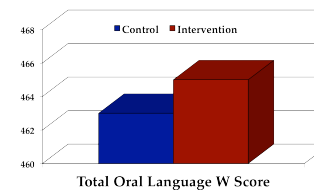
Pre-Intervention
Screening: WIDA-ACCESS Placement Test;
Listening/Speaking component (WAPT-L/S)

Year-Long
GKIDS (GA Kindergarten Inventory of Developing Skills)

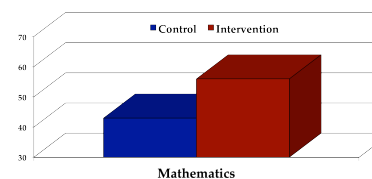
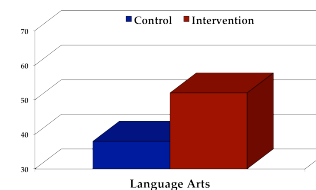
Post-Intervention
Woodcock-Muñoz Language Survey-Revised (WMLS-R);
Oral language subtests

Results

Post Intervention Oral Language WMLS-R (controlling for W-APT L/S and age)



Academic Achievement (GKIDS) (controlling for W-APT L/S and age)



Summary

- Language arts lessons enhanced by drama **significantly improved** ELL students' **English oral language** as well as academic measures of **language arts and mathematics**.
- Drama enhances students' **engagement with language** in the classroom and affects their **overall academic performance**.

Conclusions

- For a relatively brief intervention, the effects here are noteworthy. Given the heavy emphasis on drill and practice often seen in underperforming schools, the present intervention is consistent with school reform efforts.
- Teachers gave students an opportunity to engage in activities focused on meaning, activities frequently cited as essential to the acquisition of language. There were consequences for achievement in both language arts and mathematics.
- Enhanced language *engagement* versus language exposure or drill benefits ELL students.
- With its emphasis on the links among emotion, meaning, and words, drama builds on the foundation of pretend play and enhances the communication skills necessary for a successful transition to school for ELL children. These skills supported language development and academic during the kindergarten year. The implications for teacher professional learning are noted.

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