The Relationship Between Home Literacy, Language Practices and Phonological Awareness Skills in Young English Language Learners

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**Summary of Research**

**Abstract**

Within the United States, the English Language Learners (ELL) population has consistently increased. Many ELL students are living in low income communities and are at a higher risk of economic obstacles that may affect their school achievements (Georges, Brooks-Gunn, & Malone, 2012; Leyva, Alison & Reese, 2012), in turn causing a new issue for the school system. Educators have to learn how to teach ELL students in order to keep them at the same level as their peers. All the while, the ELL student is learning a new language at the same time. This is the challenge: trying to teach a student English while at the same time trying to teach them the core concepts behind English. The present study hypothesized that there is a correlation between home literacy practices and phonological awareness (PA) in ELL students. The first step is to understand characteristics that detect future reading abilities (i.e. emergent literacy) and at what age learning them has the greatest effect. The next is displaying the importance of home literacy practices for the future success of a student. The most significant point about Hispanic home literacy was the reason behind why they implement only some literacy practices in the home. If the parents felt the literacy practice helped their children succeed intellectually and morally then the practice would be utilized.

**Emergent Literacy**

Emergent literacy is a set of characteristics of pre-readers that may relate to later reading and writing (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Every child comes to school with some type of emergent literacy skills, but the ELL student may be lacking the fundamental skills that many English-speaking students come to school with. This article discusses three different types of emergent literacy: Oral Language, Print Knowledge, and PA. Oral language is based on spoken language learned over a process of time; through oral language vocabulary increases. In previous studies it has been shown that vocabulary is connected to phonological awareness and is a predictor of children’s future reading abilities (Leyva, Sparks, Reese, 2012). Print knowledge encompasses conventions of
print and knowledge in English. Conventions of print include knowing how to read from top to bottom, left to right, and knowing a book progresses from front to back. Also included are knowing the difference between pictures and text on a page and knowing the difference between the cover and the pages in a book. Knowledge of letters entails knowing the letters and the sounds they make, and also the ability to translate print into sound and sound back into print. PA refers to abilities such as rhyming, matching, initial consonants, and counting the number of phonemes in spoken word.

**Home Literacy Environment**

The first step in learning about the ELL student’s initial PA skills is evaluating home literacy practices. The present article explains that preschool home language plays a role in a child’s literacy development. Burgess, Hecht, and Lonigan (2002) discussed six conceptualizations of home literacy environments (HLE): 1) Overall HLE, 2) Limiting environment, 3) Literacy interface, 4) Passive HLE, 5) Active HLE, and 6) Shared reading HLE. Each conceptualization was equally important but targeted different ways parents integrate home literacy. The result showed that an overall home literacy environment correlated with oral language, phonological awareness, and word decoding ability. Parents are the very first teachers a child has. Previous studies have shown that “vocabulary skills at the beginning of preschool were correlated with phonological skills at the end of preschool” (Georges, Brooks-Gunn, & Malone, 2012; Leyva, Alison, & Reese, 2012). Children enter preschool with the literacy skills that they have been taught in their home literacy environments. Studies suggest that preschool literacy skills have a lasting effect on future reading abilities. A Lonigan, Burgess, and Anthony study conducted in 2000 indicated that emergent literacy skills at the preschool age are important for future reading. Overall, it is suggested that home literacy is of great significance for reading.

**Methodology**

The present study hypothesized that the more home literacy practices were engaged in, the better would be the literacy skills of the student. There was one research question that guided this study. That question was “what is the relation between home literacy and language practices and PA skills in young ELL Students?” The study used secondary data analysis on an existing data set of 164 parents and 164 preschool aged ELL students collected as part of a national study. Teachers recruited students and parents based on Spanish being their native language. Testing was conducted over a two-week time frame. The students completed a standardized measure of PA, administered by a trained bilingual tester. The standardized test was comprised of five parts: rhyme, rhyme production, initial phoneme, sentence segmentation, and syllable segmentation. Testing occurred at the preschool in 20 to 30 minutes sessions, three to four times a week. The parents received a survey about home literacy practices and demographics from the teacher.

**Results**

In order to address the research question two correlational analyses were completed, investigating a bivariate correlation between phonological awareness and the composite variable of home language and literacy practices. Due to age differences a second analysis was conducted; in turn the results were twofold. It was found that language environment and reading environment responses on the parental survey were significantly correlated. On the other hand, there was no substantial relation between PA and HLE.

**Discussion**

The results showed that there was not a significant correlation. These results may have differed from previous studies, such as, Burgess, Hecht, & Lonigan, 2002, because the present study sample was low-income Hispanic ELL preschoolers. Another reason for differences in this study may be because of the age range used in this present study. The present study used a young (i.e. preschool aged) sample, while other studies, such as, Duursma, Romero-Contreras, Szuber, Proctor, & Snow (2007) used older children (i.e. 3rd – 5th grade). Also, the students may have been nervous or frightened because the tester was unfamiliar. There are a few limitations to this study. First, the participants were not randomly selected; the classroom teacher recruited the participants. Secondly, the students’ unfamiliarity with the tester may have impacted their performance. Lastly, the parents’ desire to please the researcher may have impacted the survey.
Conclusion

The hypothesis was that there is a correlation between home literacy practices and phonological awareness in an ELL student. The results refuted the hypothesis. It is shown that emergent literacy skills are important for future reading abilities. Also, it is shown that phonological awareness at the beginning of preschool indicates the phonological awareness skills at the end of preschool. Previous studies have demonstrated that home literacy practices do affect the literacy skills of a student. This study differs. There are many reasons as to why this study may differ: demographics, age, etc. Though this study does not show that there is a significant correlation between phonological awareness and home literacy practices, this study has the capability to further inform educators on the effects of home literacy in ELL homes.

References


