Language, communication, and emergent literacy: a matter of opportunities

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Abstract:

In current daycare for Dutch young children with communication disorders, limited attention is given to emergent literacy, an aspect that is not self-evident in the intervention they receive. In this presentation, we will combine the results of a longitudinal research into the development of emergent literacy skills of children from minority and/or poorly educated families, and the first insights into an ongoing research project that is conducted in a day care center for atypically developing children. Both projects share an interest into the ways in which language, communication and literacy are optimally addressed, serving the needs of the children involved.

Research Description

Emergent literacy is the well documented process of acquaintance with written language that young children experience from early age until they receive formal education in reading (see Yaden, Rowe & MacGillivray, 2000, for a comprehensive overview). The literate abilities of young children are shaped in line with the environment in which they grow up, preferably in a playful manner. Storybook reading, meaningful contact with environmental print, singing songs and nursery rhymes are examples of activities that trigger the child’s growing knowledge of texts and other written resources.

Although development of emergent literacy skills appears to come forward almost naturally according to the description above, it is naïve to presume that all children become proficient readers to the same degree and with the same efforts. Many studies have indicated that children from low SES and/or minority homes are less successful in their reading achievement than middle class children (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Likewise, children with limited communicative abilities have shown to experience great difficulties in mastering (emergent) reading skills. For example, children diagnosed with cerebral pareses with average or above average intelligence suffer from severe reading disabilities in fifty percent of the population (Koppenhaver, Pierce, Steelman & Yoder, 1994). Parents and professional caregivers often assume that the limitations within the child form natural barriers that prevent these children from gaining knowledge about books and print. Yet, numerous studies (see Koppenhaver, Coleman, Kalman & Yoder, 1991 for an overview) have established that children with developmental disabilities are not served in their literacy needs as non-disabled children. Their literacy
experiences quantitatively and qualitatively deviate from their peers’ experiences, resulting in lesser opportunities to become literate. Moreover, the expectations of reading development in this population are also very low and are often not in correspondence with the child’s actual capacities. These circumstances all lead to missed opportunities, since it is known that to neglect the development of literacy in children with multiple disabilities is to neglect the reciprocal benefits of language and literacy learning in coherence (Koppenhaver et al., 1991). Research done by Stoep (2008) suggests that in the case of typically developing low SES and/or minority children, poor experiences and low teacher expectations also lead to lower scores on emergent literacy development.

Purpose

In this presentation, we will combine the results of a longitudinal research into the development of emergent literacy skills of children from minority and/or poorly educated families, and the first insights into an ongoing research project that is conducted in a day care center for atypically developing children. Both projects share an interest into the ways in which language, communication and literacy are optimally addressed, serving the needs of the children involved.

Methods

The first project forms part of a longitudinal project that extended over a period of three years, in which 89 kindergarten groups in the Netherlands were selected from a larger school sample participating in standardization of the revised Taaltoets Alle Kinderen (Dutch Language Test for Children, Verhoeven & Vermeer, 1998). During these three school years, nearly 900 pupils (typically developing children) were tested on their cognitive capacity, school results, and (emergent) literacy skills. During the occurrence of the project, the teachers of these children were questioned about their images of the children, the aspiration levels for the children, and the home support they expected from the children’s parents. The nature of book reading sequences was studied in the light of learning opportunities the teachers create. These and other teacher and family characteristics were connected with student outcomes on emergent literacy tasks.

The second project took place in a day care center for atypically developing children. In order to give attention to the early needs of children with multiple disabilities to gain insight into language, communication, and written language, the KLINc Atelier was developed. KLINc is the abbreviation of ‘Kids Learning to take INitiatives in communication’. Following the examples of Musslewhite and Kind-DeBaun (1997), amongst others, we anticipate possibilities for children with communicative needs in the Netherlands to participate in activities aimed at growth in the areas of communication, language development and emergent literacy, congruent with international findings of intervention projects (see Erickson & Koppenhaver, 1995). In the KLINc Atelier, a play and learning environment for children with developmental delays and communication disorders, a group of 13 children (ages 2-6) is provided with individual coaching in group-wise thematic cycles. Various techniques (AAC, computers, software) are used to enhance and assist the children’s communication.

Results

In the first project, we found that measures of emergent literacy skills in kindergarten are related to reading scores at grade one. As for the minority students in this project, teacher views on parent involvement proved to be a major factor in predicting outcomes on pretests of
grapheme knowledge and book orientation skills. Yet, parental reading expectations for the child was identified as the major factor for grapheme knowledge, and pretest scores on phoneme analysis could not be explained by the variables under consideration. Pretest scores significantly contributed to predicting posttest scores on all tests, except for phoneme analysis: Teacher view on parent involvement had a greater impact, and pretest scores added to the goodness of fit in second position. Teacher views also substantially impacted grapheme knowledge at the end of kindergarten. These results support the conclusion of Gill and Reynolds (2000), who found that teacher expectancy effects are more potent among children who are typically labeled as low achievers.

The insights of the first study led to us of procedures for Dynamic Assessment as an instrument for realistically based interventions and optimal chances for literacy development for the group of children with communication needs in our second project. In the absence of results that are forthcoming, we will present the procedures we used in our project.

Conclusions

Learning to read is a process that goes beyond formal reading instruction which takes place from a certain moment in time when teachers/parents think the child is ready to benefit from education in reading. Rather, it is a process in which print oriented experiences shape the child’s ideas of reading from a very early age on. The first study shows us that there is a strong link between emergent literacy skills and formal reading behavior. Anecdotal information coming from the second project sheds light on the manner in which teachers of children with speech and language difficulties can give room to meaningful interaction around print, using concrete objects and AAC.

Clinical implications

Given the influence of expectations on student outcomes on emergent literacy achievement, teachers should be well aware the fact that their views on group characteristics are of great importance to the emergent literacy skills of all children during and at the end of kindergarten, and the opportunities they provide for experiences with print. It is of great importance that resources for emergent literacy development are available for all children to benefit from, regardless of language ability.

References


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