

A case study of dialogic reading to promote young children's expressive language skills

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Abstract:

To investigate the intervention effect of dialogic reading on young children's expressive language skills. The Kindergarten Language Screening Tool (the tool was localised) was used to assess young children in terms of Language Comprehension, Articulation, Fluency, Voice. Connected Speech, two children were assessed before and after starting conversational reading to observe the changes in their language level, and the interview method was comprehensively used to communicate with the parents and teachers of the study participants to understand the situation and assess the children's expressive language ability during the baseline, intervention, and follow-up periods. Both children's language expression skills improved during the intervention period, and the effect was more significant in children with delayed language development. Dialogue-based reading can effectively promote the improvement of young children's expressive language skills.

Keywords: dialogic reading, early childhood language development, Children with delayed language development, case studies

1. Introduction

Dialogic reading is a strategy for improving comprehension, vocabulary, oral language, and print awareness skills in readers of all ages. It is an interactive approach that is most commonly used with young children, but is also applicable to individual and small group readers of all ages. Rather than simply reading the material, the adult or leader engages the reader in a series of questions that encourage them to think more deeply about the topic and understand it better, while developing related language and thinking skills. It is sometimes referred to as active reading [4]. The theoretical foundations of dialogic reading are largely derived from Vygotsky's so-

cio-cultural theory. Vygotsky (1978) suggested that children learn within their "zone of nearest development" and through interaction with experienced people. Dialogic reading promotes children's expressive language skills by providing adults with "scaffolding" and guiding children's active participation in the process of shared reading [5].

Research on young children's language development has long focused on the formation mechanism of language ability and its intervention methods, and the relevant results are relatively abundant. However, most of the existing studies are based on quantitative analyses of large sample groups, emphasising the universal applicability of strategies, relatively ne-

glecting the specific performance and dynamic changes of interventions for individual children, and lacking individualisation and matching. In particular, in daily educational settings, uniform reading assistance strategies may not be applicable to young children with different levels of language development, and it is more important to explore in-depth the intrinsic mechanisms of individuals. Therefore, this study will adopt a more context- and process-oriented research method to gain a deeper understanding of the language responses and growth processes of different types of young children in real-life interactions.

With a higher degree of ecological validity, this study takes two three-year-olds with different levels of language development as the research subjects, and observes the developmental process and performance characteristics of their expressive language skills through the practice of dialogue-based reading in daily teaching. Instead of focusing on comparisons, this study presents the language change paths of young children with different language development levels supported by the same strategy through individual perspectives, thus providing empirical support for more targeted reading interventions in educational practice.

2. Research methodology

2.1 Basic information of the case

2.1.1 Case A:

Case A is a male, 2 years and 11 months old. His parents are both working employees of a state-owned enterprise, and he usually lives with his parents. A has been assessed by a hospital doctor as a child with delayed language development, which is manifested by his lack of speech, reluctance to express himself, and occasional unconscious shouting for his mother. Other aspects of A's development (such as his large movements and fine motor movements) have reached the expected level for his age.

Parent's description of Case A: A loves to smile and responds to his parents' interactions with him, and will wave his hand to greet others when they take him out, but he does not speak; A is quiet and rarely cries, and he listens to his parents' words; A's mother has taken him to the hospital for assessment and examination and intends to take him to the hospital this summer to receive intervention therapy.

Interview with the teacher of Case A: A was very well-behaved in class, shared toys with other children, understood the order and rules of the classroom and followed them, and in kindergarten the teacher had time to talk to him one-on-one and bring him to pronounce his words; A was

willing to listen to the teacher, but he was still reluctant to express himself, and he belonged to the medical-medical integration of language development.

Observations of the researcher in Case A: A is gentle, willing to make friends and very receptive to new things; A likes to listen to stories and point to words on the word board and listen to the teacher pronounce them, but does not pronounce the words on his own, and the teacher's guidance does not have a significant effect.

2.1.2 Case B

Basic Information Case B, male, 2 years and 11 months old. His father is a company employee and his mother is a primary school teacher, and he lives with his parents. B's language development was assessed to be typical, and he is in a period of rapid language development, enjoying imitating adults and attempting to articulate and pronounce words on his own. Other aspects of his development (e.g., gross motor, fine motor, etc.) are at the expected level for his age.

Parent's description of Case B: B's willingness to express herself is very strong. She can clearly express her basic needs and describe events in three to five words in her daily life.

Case B's teacher interviews: B is able to express events verbally to the teacher in kindergarten and responds to and understands instructions given by the teacher; B enjoys playing house, interacting with peers in play situations, and enjoys listening to music and often sings along with the music; lyrics may be unclearly articulated but are clear enough to be understood by those familiar with the song.

The researcher of Case B observed that B's level of language development was in line with that of his age. His average utterance length is around 3 to 5 words. B has a rich vocabulary and is very interested in exploring and acquiring new vocabulary. When confronted with new vocabulary that he does not understand, he will ask questions to find out the meaning of words, and he will read along and imitate adults' pronunciation.

2.2 Methods of assessing young children's expressive language ability

2.2.1 Observation method

This study directly observed and recorded the language expression ability of Cases A and B in their natural state with the help of the observation method. The observation site was chosen in the reading area of the kindergarten, and was conducted in a relaxed and natural interactive manner to ensure that the children participated in a familiar and stress-free environment. The time span of the observations was five times a week, Monday to Friday,

for about 15 minutes each time. In total, it lasted eight weeks (the total intervention process was six weeks). The researcher conducted the observations as a participant-observer, using the Kindergarten Language Screening Tool (the tool was localised) before the start of the study and at the end of the study to assess the toddler's speech in terms of Language Comprehension, Articulation, Fluency, Voice, Connected Speech five aspects to assess the children's language level, to collate and classify the observation data, and to verify the effect of conversational reading on the children's expressive language skills.

2.2.2 Interview method

The baseline period was spent on interviewing teachers and parents of the cases to understand their basic situation and the status of their language expression ability. The intervention period is to keep in touch with the teachers and parents of the cases to find out the changes of the cases' language expression ability. During the tracking period, the researcher collects the changes of the cases' language expression ability through interviews with the cases' teachers and parents.

2.3 Implementation of conversational reading

intervention

This intervention consists of 3 phases: firstly, baseline data of the cases were collected during the baseline period, then the intervention programme was introduced during the intervention period, post-tests were conducted after the intervention, and lastly, tracking observations were recorded during the follow-up period. To ensure the smooth implementation of the study, before the study began, the researcher told the parents of the cases in detail about the purpose of the study, the implementation steps, and the significance of the study, and signed an informed consent form with the parents.

2.3.1 Baseline period (Week 1)

Picture books (including richly drawn pictures, obvious repetitive sentences, simple plots, and different genres) suitable for the age and language level of the cases were selected. Communicate with the case teachers and parents to understand the daily language use of the two cases. Initial assessment of expressive language skills of both cases and development of rapport with both children. The baseline profile of the two cases is specified in Table 1.

Table 1: Pre-test results of case toddlers' pre-intervention expressive language skills

	Language Comprehension	Articulation	Fluency	Voice	Connected Speech
Case A	1. was able to understand simple instructions and carry out two-step instructions, but needed to slow down to communicate with Case A. 2. Can point to objects in response to pictures. Recognises the names of 15-20 objects. Responds slowly but accurately. 3. Unwilling to answer teacher's questions.	Case A is reluctant to talk, not observed.	Case A is reluctant to talk, not observed.	Case A is reluctant to talk, not observed.	Case A is reluctant to talk, not observed.

Case B	1. Understands simple instructions and performs two-step instructions, e.g., pick up the ball and put it in the box. 2. Can point to objects in response to pictures and recognise 20 or more objects. Responds quickly and accurately. 3. Can answer simple questions asked by the teacher with logical answers.	It was observed that the child was able to correctly produce and apply the initial consonants /m/, /b/, /d/, and /h/. The child's pronunciation of single characters was clear, whereas the pronunciation of words was relatively less distinct (e.g., laohu "tiger," shizi "lion").	1. Speak sentences consisting of 3-5 words without pauses and fluently. 2. Speaks at a moderate pace, varying with mood: e.g., faster when excited.	1. Clear voice, no nasal/raspy tones 2. can raise or lower pitch as requested by the teacher, with voice changes appropriate to age and gender.	1. . can describe the content of pictures in about 3 to 5 sentences. 2. It was observed that the child's speech shows a sense of prosodic rhythm, with appropriate use of the light tone and erhua (the rhotacized suffix commonly used in Mandarin). 3. It was also noted that when producing two consecutive third-tone syllables, the expected application of tone sandhi (the tone change rule in Mandarin) was not consistently observed.
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2.3.2 Intervention period (weeks 2-7)

During the intervention period, the researcher worked with kindergarten teachers to conduct five conversational reading activities per week, each lasting about 15 minutes. Picture books were selected based on children's interests and comprehension levels, such as *The So Hungry Caterpillar*, *No, David*, and *Guess How Much I Love You*, which generally have repetitive sentences, sharp pictures, and concise plots. The researcher and teacher combined the PEER strategy (Prompt-Evaluate-Expand-Repeat) and the CROWD questioning method (Completion, Recall, Open-Ended, Wh- questions, and Distancing) to guide children's positive responses during reading[5][7]. Set up more targeted strategies for Case A:

(1). Use short, repetitive sentences[5][10]

Repeatedly use key words and sentence patterns while reading, e.g., "What is this?" "It's a dog. What is the dog doing? The dog is running."

(2). Differentiate questioning[7][12]

Avoid open-ended questions in favour of closed-ended or two-option questions, and if the child is silent, use a leading statement, "Let's say it together: the dog is running."

(3). Increase visual and motor support[3][9]

Use gestures, facial expressions, actions, or dolls to assist in storytelling and to help the child understand the language. Encourage children to imitate actions or point to pictures, e.g., "Can you point out where the bear is?"

(4). "Waiting time" strategy[4]

Give the child plenty of time to respond (5-10 seconds)

and avoid adding answers too quickly. If the child still does not express himself or herself, use "fill-in-the-blank guidance.

(5). Extended response (Language Expansion)[2][5]

Expand on the child's words or simple sentences.

(6). Emphasise interaction rather than correctness[7][12]

Do not force the child to express the 'right' answer; it is important to encourage the expression of intention.

(7). Integrate with everyday language[6]

After reading the picture book with the child, transfer the vocabulary or sentence patterns to everyday life (e.g., when eating, playing with toys).

Case A gradually began to actively produce sounds with repeated guidance from the teacher, and was able to imitate some monosyllabic words, such as "cat", "ball" and "book", and showed a greater willingness to speak during play, but was not yet able to use phrases independently. Case B was able to participate more actively in dialogues, not only answering questions, but also gradually expanding sentence lengths and adding life experiences to her narratives. The researcher recorded the changes of the two children's performance in the five dimensions of language comprehension, articulation, fluency, voice and Connected Speech.

2.3.3 Follow-up period (Week 8)

One week after the end of the intervention, the researcher continued to observe the two toddlers' language use in daily situations at the kindergarten and conducted inter-

views with parents and teachers. Case A showed a significant increase in the number of times she initiated talking in daily communication, and was able to occasionally try to express simple needs with single words when prompted by an adult, but this performance was still unstable, and most of the time she imitated the single-word pronunciation of an adult; Case B's narrative ability was further strengthened, and he was able to retell story segments in a more complete way under the guidance of the teacher, and spontaneously used the newly learned vocabulary in play.

The data from the follow-up period showed that both children maintained the trend of improving language skills at the end of the intervention.

3. Findings

Comparison of the pre-test, post-test and follow-up assessments revealed that dialogue-based reading had a positive impact on the expressive language skills of both toddlers. The specific results are as follows:

Table 2: Post-intervention changes in children's expressive language skills

	Language Comprehension	Articulation	Fluency	Voice	Connected Speech
Case A	1. Understands two-step commands more quickly, with shorter command response times; vocabulary recognition increased to about 30 words.	1. Imitates monosyllabic words (e.g., "book," "ball") with unstable articulation. Imitates words with a clear, smooth articulation.	Imitates monosyllabic words.	Can initiate sounds, but in a soft voice.	Can point to pictures and use single words, e.g., "ball". (Adult guidance is needed)
Case B	1. Understands more complex three-step instructions, such as "Pick up the book, put it on the table, and go back to your seat." 2. Can relate stories to life experiences, e.g., "I saw that in the supermarket."	1. Pronunciation accuracy improves and can say two-syllable words more clearly. 2. Can spontaneously correct their pronunciation, especially when singing or retelling stories.	Can organise language more naturally, with sentence lengths of up to 7-8 words when describing experiences. Speaks more smoothly; can pause less in dialogue.	Can express exaggerated emotional tones in storytelling and mimic character voices.	Can tell an event in more complete sentences with gradually clearer logic. Can retell a storyline more completely and expand on it with personal understanding and details.

4. Conclusion

The results of the study show that dialogic reading can effectively promote the development of young children's expressive language skills. Case A hardly spoke at all before the intervention, and could only call out "Mama", but was able to imitate monosyllabic words in the course of the intervention, which indicates that the intervention helped her to cross the transition stage of "silence-word", and her willingness to speak increased significantly, even though her expression was still unstable. This shows that the intervention has helped him to cross the transition stage of "silent-word", although his expression is still unstable. Case B, who already had a certain level of language ability before the intervention, showed longer sentences, clearer articulation, and richer narrative skills during the intervention and follow-up periods, suggesting that dialogic reading not only helps children with language delays to speak, but also promotes the further improvement of typically developing children.

These results are consistent with Vygotsky's theory of the "zone of proximal development,". Case A was able to break through the bottleneck of expressive language through the "scaffolding" support of teachers and parents, while Case B was able to build on her existing language level. Consistent with previous research [3], this study found that dialogic reading was particularly effective in promoting vocabulary and willingness to express in the short term, whereas more complex grammatical and narrative coherence required longer-term intervention.

The implications for educational practice are as follows: (1) Kindergartens should actively introduce dialogic reading in daily instruction and select picture books according to children's interests[3][7]; (2) Teachers should use stimulating questions to encourage children to actively participate in the reading process and promote interaction[4]; (3) Parents should continue the reading strategies at home to form a supportive language environment[6][11]; (4) Home and family co-education is an important guarantee of the effectiveness of the intervention, and the collabora-

tion between teachers and parents can form a supportive language environment both inside and outside the school. Teachers and parents can work together to form a consistent language supportive environment inside and outside the school[2]; (5) For children with delayed language development, we should insist on individualised and continuous interventions, focusing on stimulating motivation for expression and gradually guiding the transition to more complex language structures[1][8][12].

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