Explicit Print Referencing:
Do Intensity and Context Matter?
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Two recent studies examined the use of the explicit print referencing strategy with preschoolers in Virginia and Ohio to determine the effect of dose intensity and classroom context on children's print knowledge.

A consensus exists across researchers, policymakers and educators that explicit instruction in the preschool years about the characteristics of books and printed text—referred to as print knowledge—can increase children's achievement once they begin receiving formal reading instruction in kindergarten and first grade.

Children from low-income families disproportionately fail to achieve skilled, fluent reading and writing in the elementary grades, partly because they often enter kindergarten with inadequate print knowledge. For this reason, the Head Start program, which serves children from low-income families across the nation, includes print knowledge in its instructional standards.

Print knowledge appears to be a gateway skill and is one of the strongest predictors of early reading abilities in elementary school, with studies finding its predictive power to be as strong as, or sometimes stronger than, the well-known early skill of phonological awareness (the ability to isolate and manipulate sounds in words).

Two research analyses conducted by the Center for Advanced Teaching and Learning examined a teaching strategy called "explicit print referencing." Print referencing takes place as a teacher reads a book to students during shared reading time. The teacher makes statements while discussing the content of the book with students, such as "Let's look at the words on the next page and see what happens next," "Let's begin reading right here, at the top of the page" or "This word 'caterpillar' is very long, but this word 'sun' is short." Preschool teachers can adapt the practice easily, and previous studies have shown significant increases in children's preparation for reading as a result.

Study 1
To expand their understanding of the circumstances in which the print referencing strategy works, researchers assigned two groups of teachers in communities across Virginia and Ohio to attend professional development sessions about the print referencing strategy and designated a minimum number of shared reading sessions in which teachers were to use the strategy. Over the course of 30 weeks, 24 teachers offered the sessions twice a week and 31 teachers offered the sessions four times a week. The researchers also recorded how many times the teachers made individual statements about book and text characteristics within each session. At the end of the preschool year, children's print knowledge was assessed.

The researchers found that teachers made explicit print referencing statements ranging from an average of 16 times per session to an average of 51 times per session. Children who heard fewer references per shared reading session scored better on end-of-year skills tests when they experienced the sessions four times a week versus two. However, for the children who heard a much higher quantity of print referencing statements in each session, two sessions were nearly as effective as four.
These findings suggest that more intensity is not always an effective or efficient approach to implementing the print referencing intervention. That is, simply repeating the print referencing intervention more often may not be the best use of classroom time. In fact, the study showed that providing a high dose of print referencing twice weekly affords the same benefit as providing a lower dose of print referencing four times weekly. Therefore, it may be more useful to conduct print referencing twice weekly and consider ways of extending the instruction into other contexts, thus providing children repetition and opportunity to practice, but also chances to extend learning into novel materials or activities.

Study 2

Researchers also considered whether the print referencing strategy works the same for all children in all settings. They looked at data from 59 teachers and 379 children in preschool programs across a variety of communities in Virginia and Ohio. Their analysis considered the literacy environment of the classroom, children’s developmental characteristics, such as their attentional skills and language ability, and the quality of the classroom as measured by the Classroom Assessment Scoring System™. They found that for preschoolers in low and average quality classrooms, explicit print referencing improved their print knowledge. High levels of explicit print instruction during shared reading may indeed compensate for more global weaknesses in classroom quality. However, the benefit of explicit print instruction to preschoolers’ literacy development was not as strong for higher quality classrooms. Possibly, these high quality classrooms were doing many other things to help children’s literacy development.

Another finding was that the benefit of explicit print instruction to the literacy development of preschoolers was stronger for children with weak attention skills. Possibly, the nature of the intervention helped preschoolers stay oriented to the book and print because the technique involves a lot of question-asking and child participation. This sort of explicit, orienting approach to print instruction may be helpful to the print knowledge learning of children with weaker attention skills and may work differently or be less critical for kids who have better attention skills.

Conclusion

Together, these research findings confirm that children’s learning is a complex process. Even when a new educational method is supported by empirical evidence of its effectiveness, it may not work the same way in all situations or with all children. Discussions about effective instruction must acknowledge the contexts in which those practices will occur.

A full report of both studies can be found in


For information about the Classroom Assessment Scoring System™, see http://curry.virginia.edu/research/centers/castl/class

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Print Referencing Intervention

Objectives

1. Print Organization
   • Page Order
   • Author
   • Page Organization
   • Title of Book
   • Print Direction

2. Print Meaning
   • Print Function
   • Environmental Print
   • Metalinguistic Concept of Reading

3. Letters
   • Upper- and Lower-Case Letters
   • Names of Letters
   • Metalinguistic Concept of Letter

4. Words
   • Word Identification
   • Short vs. Long Words
   • Letters vs. Words
   • Concept of Word in Print