

Whole Class Oral Narrative Intervention: Impact on Grade 1 Students' Oral and Written Language

Research Questions:

Oral language skills, particularly oral narrative skills, have been linked to academic success including vocabulary, reading comprehension, and narrative writing quality (National Reading Panel, Kim et al., 2015; Heilmann et al., 2006; Botting, Simkin, & Conti-Ramsden, 2006; Griffin, Hemphill, Camp, & Wolf, 2004; Hatcher et al. 2004; Bishop & Adams, 1990). Oral and written narratives are strongly associated (Fey et al., 2004). Their connection has been consistently demonstrated with such commonalities as story grammar structure and complex literate language (Greenhalgh & Strong, 2001; Roth & Spekman, 1986; C. E. Westby, 1985; C. Westby, 1984).

Oral narratives can be thought as a cognitive bridge connecting oral and written language (Spencer & Petersen, 2018). Given this, one could hypothesize that improvements in oral narrative skills should be transferable to writing. Despite these associations, only a few studies have been conducted to investigate the connection between these skills, particularly at the grade 1 level. In one recent study, Spencer and Petersen (2018) found a positive effect on grade 1 student's writing following short term small group oral narrative instruction using the Story Champs intervention but group size was small. The present study provided an independent replication with the following research questions:

1. Does whole class oral narrative language instruction improve 1st grade students' oral and written narrative language?
2. Are improvements in oral and written narrative language maintained after the withdrawal of instruction?

Methods:

The current study employed a between-groups crossover design including 63 grade one participants in four classrooms assigned randomly at the classroom level to two groups who received the intervention first or second with a one month break in between. The intervention involved explicit teaching of story grammar during 12 whole class lessons (20-30 minutes/lesson) over a 3-week period. Lessons consisted of a modeled story using sequenced pictures and story grammar icons, a story gesture activity, a class retell, and a partner retell or personal story.

The oral narrative language outcome measure was the Narrative Language Measure:Listening (NLM:Listening); Spencer & Petersen, 2012), which was completed pre- and post- intervention one, and pre- and post- intervention two. The NLM:Listening consists of a personal-themed narrative retell, story grammar comprehension, and vocabulary comprehension. The written language outcome measure was individual 5-minute student writing samples completed in the classroom using a photo story prompt approximately twice per week throughout the study.

Analysis and Results:

Oral narrative language measures were analyzed for story grammar, language complexity, episode complexity, story grammar comprehension, and story vocabulary comprehension. Significant improvements associated with the intervention were observed for oral story grammar only, and were maintained at post intervention in both groups.

Writing samples were analyzed for story grammar and holistic quality. Word level measures included total number of words, percent words spelled correctly, and mean length of the 5 different longest words spelled correctly. A significant effect of time was found such that

scores increased over the assessment periods for all written language measures, however, no significant interactions with intervention group were observed.

Implications:

This study demonstrates that explicit whole class oral narrative instruction can be an effective teaching method for improving the oral narrative skills of grade 1 students. The limited results for written language suggest that combining oral and written narrative instruction may be necessary to facilitate the transfer of skills to this domain. In addition, these results may suggest that young students need more time to consolidate newly developed oral language skills before a transfer to written skills can occur. Further research should investigate the impact of simultaneous oral and written narrative intervention on the writing skills of grade 1 students.