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Learning New Words by Reading an Electronic Book Compared to Mothers Reading a Printed Book to Their Children

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Abstract

Reading a book to a child is considered an activity that supports the development of language, including the acquisition of new words, and parents tend to attribute importance to this activity. However, it has been reported in recent studies, that parents do not often supply a meaning to difficult words when reading to the child in a “natural activity”. Parents seldom supply a short meaning to a word, or expand the story content while reading. The relationship between the frequency and quality of word meaning while reading and child's general vocabulary level is not clear yet. A weak relation was found between the frequency and quality of the support in word meaning while reading and the child’s general vocabulary level. We found almost no studies that tested children’s progress in learning new words following reading of a parent to a child, which are not structured intervention studies where parents received guidance.

Today, with the increase in the number of electronic books (e-books) on the market, along with listening to printed books being read by an adult, young pre-school age children can “read” and listen to e-books independently. Studies of the past 15 years demonstrate that e-books, particularly those with a dictionary, may significantly support the learning of new words that appear in the story. In light of the above, three main questions are raised in the present study: (1) Will reading an e-book with a dictionary support the learning of new words by the child more than the “natural activity” of a mother reading to a child without receiving special guidance? (2) Will the frequency and manner of providing a meaning for words that the mother reads to the child in a “natural activity” be found to be related to learning the new words in the book? (3) Will the child’s initial language level make a contribution to the child’s progress in learning words, and what will be the extent of this contribution beyond the adult support or support of the software itself? Study participants included 108 kindergarteners (aged 5-6 years) from a middle-high socioeconomic status, who were randomly assigned to three groups (36 subjects per group). The first group, served as the control group, and the children independently read the e-book without a dictionary. In the second

group, the children independently read the same book, in an electronic version that includes a dictionary, which gives the meanings of difficult words in the story. In the third group, the mothers were asked to read as they usually do. All groups read the book four times. The fourth reading of the mother to the child with the printed book was videotaped, and the transcripts were used for testing the frequency of providing a meaning to a difficult word in the story and the manner in which the meaning was presented. Prior to the intervention the children were tested in general measures of word comprehension (the PPVT test). Pre-and post-intervention the children were tested in the following: receptive understanding of the dictionary words, defining the dictionary words, and using these words for production of the story. We hypothesized that: (A) Independently reading the e-book with a dictionary will support the learning of new words more than the mother reading to the child from the printed book in a "natural activity", and that the two types of reading will support the child more than reading the e-book without a dictionary; (B) the child's progress in learning new words will be found to be related to the frequency as well as the manner in which the mother will mediate these words in the book. Specifically, a higher frequency as well as expansion of the meaning beyond the dictionary explanation (use of the story context or connection to personal experience) will make a greater contribution to learning the new words in the story; (C) the higher the child's initial language level, the greater their word learning level. The highest contribution will be from the child independently reading the e-book with a dictionary, followed by the mother reading a printed book to the child, and the lowest will be from the child independently reading the e-book without a dictionary.

Results showed that children's independent reading of an e-book with a dictionary was the most effective on all measures (receptive understanding, definitions, and use), compared with mother- child "natural reading" group and with control group that read the e- book without a dictionary. In addition, mother- child group progressed in definitions and word use, compared with control group. Independent reading of an e-book with a dictionary was the only group progressed in receptive understanding of new words.

Study results also showed that there was no correlation between the frequency and manner of word explanations by the mother and the child's learning of new words across the three study measures. Nonetheless, a relationship was found between the child's initial language level and their level of improvement in word learning in two contexts: (1) In each of the intervention groups, the higher the child's initial language level, the greater the child's progress in learning explanations of words; (2) in the group that read with the dictionary, the higher the child's initial language level, the greater the child's progress in receptive understanding of the words. It can thus be seen that the two intervention groups improved in word learning, yet the group where children independently read with a dictionary made greater progress. In the discussion, we will detail the pedagogical implications of the study's results relating to parent-child shared reading and the use of e-books with a dictionary as a way to enrich children's vocabulary. Similarly, we will note the study's limitations and propose further research.