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## Enhancing Language Development through Shared Reading in Preschool Children in Albanian Kindergartens

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### Abstract

Language development is a process that occurs since infancy and develops throughout the life course. First years of life are crucial to this process as they make up what is called the critical period. Language development is actually the development of certain parts of the language system which should evolve and work in a proper way so to fulfil the outcome of human speech (Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2002). These parts of language development consist on phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics and pragmatics.

Language development occurs naturally in the environment the child is raised. But, not only nature does its job to help children develop their language, it requires that parents and care givers help by communicating with the little ones. Researchers assume that language can be enhanced by nurturing through frequent verbal communication, verbal play with peers and/or adults, alphabet toys, shared reading, etc.

The present study was designed as a quasi-experiment aiming to test the impact of shared reading to language development in preschool years. Two groups of 17 children aged 3-5 were tested on their narrative skills with the Narrative Assessment Protocol (NAP) instrument. After the first test one of the group was subject of the experiment and the other group was let unchanged as a control group. The experimental group followed an intensive shared reading program while the control group continued the same routine.

Results show that after a period of six weeks there is a high and considerable enhancement of the narrative skills (again measured with the NAP). On the other hand, the control group's results show a minor change.

Shared reading provides preschool children with wide lexicon, accurate syntax and morphology, and better understanding and use of pragmatics and semantics.

**Keywords:** Shared Reading, Narrative Skills, Narrative Assessment, Preschooler

## Introduction

Development is a complex process that starts in prenatal period and continues through the entire life span of an individual. Development occurs in three dimensions: physical development, cognitive development and social development (Pettijohn, 1996). Physical development refers to physical changes that a person experiences throughout her/his life. Cognitive development on the other hand includes cognitive changes such as: thinking, language, memory, intelligence, attention and problem solving. Social development refers to personality trait's changes, emotions and individual social functioning.

In the present article will be further discussed one of the tasks included in cognitive development. Namely language development. Language development is actually the development of certain parts of the language system which should evolve and work in a proper way so to fulfil the outcome of human speech (Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2002). These parts of language development consist on phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics and pragmatics.

Language development occurs naturally in the environment the child is raised. But, not only nature does its job to help children develop their language, it requires that parents and care givers help by nurturing and communicating with the little ones. Researchers say that language can be enhanced by nurturing through frequent verbal communication, verbal play with peers and/or adults, alphabet toys, shared reading, etc.

The present article will discuss the enhancement of language development through shared reading. Shared reading is a term presented Helen Ezell and Laura Justice (2006), which refers to the interaction occurring between an adult and a child when they read or look at a book together. The tested hypothesis is: Shared reading for preschoolers results in their narrative language skills enhancement.

## Shared Reading

Shared reading is the interaction that occurs between an adult and a child when they read or look at a book together (Ezell & Justice, 2006). This interaction may include an adult and a child, or one or more adults and a group of children. It can occur in many settings, i.e. in children's kindergarten, in a preschool class room, in a clinic or in the child's home. Ezell and Justice (2006), impart that shared reading of books is an activity that will help children familiarize with the sounds and grammar of their language, pragmatics rules of their first language, and also it will acquaint children with organizing models of histories and narratives in their culture.

Researchers emphasize the importance of a number of skills that "well read" children develop. These could seem to have a direct relationship with language and literacy skills. Such skills include the use of literary or formal linguistic style when children are involved in a pretended reading. Other verbal skills will be possessed by children to enable them to easily read include academic language skills such as word or concept definition and storytelling. These skills show that these children are engaged in cultural practices related to literacy. They have been read books and rhymes (Snow, 2004).

Events in books are rich with a diverse lexicon. Children are able to record in their memory the new words they hear and use them in similar situations when they discuss with grownups. Through rhyming and language fluency used in tales written for children, these words, and even long phrases are easier to memorize. Dickinson and Tabors (2002) suggested that teachers who

use interesting and various words may help into creating a rich lexicon environment in a classroom where children are encouraged and exposed to different new words. As cited in Beck and McKeown's study (2011), one of the most valuable aspects of the reading aloud activity is the possibility of introducing children to a decontextualized language experience. In such case they may understand the meaning of ideas that happen out of the moment and the current situation. According to Rowe (2013), the more the decontextualized language is used the more, also through reading books, the more vocabulary will the 4-5 years old child possess.

In their study, Sénéchal and Cornell (1993), discussed on the benefits of read aloud for the 4-5 years old. They proved that children could learn new words only through reading, regardless of the reading methods.

Repeated reading of the same story or book will reinforce word meanings, which will expand the general vocabulary. And the more a story is read, and words are repeated, more new words will the child record in her own vocabulary. This will also be noticed when the child is 'reading' aloud from the memory and is using words that are beyond her vocabulary level (Sénéchal, 1997), (Penno, Wilkinson, & Moore, 2002), (Elley, 1989), (Robbins & Ehri, 1994), (Justice, Meier, & Walpole, 2005). Gradually, these words will be included in daily conversations of the child.

### **Language Development Assessment in the Preschool Years**

Language development assessment generally is based on clinical cases to identify language difficulties, or disorders like aphasia CELF Preschool-2 (Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals) (Semel, Wiig, & Secord, 2006) is a clinical test used to evaluate language abilities in children of 3-6 years old. CELF Preschool-2 produces a holistic language evaluation, perceived language composition, expressive language composition and the result index. Another clinical instrument is the Index of Narrative Microstructure (INMIS) (Justice L. M., et al., 2006) which is used to evaluate the productivity and complexity of child language in 5-12 years old. This will be used later to compare the results to school tests. Other similar instruments, such as the Index of Narrative Complexity (INC) (Petersen et al., 2008) are designed to be used as a progress monitoring instrument to clinical intervention.

Rather than clinical aspects of evaluation there has been a continuous need to monitor child language development from educators, teachers or government program education campaigns. It was also needed to pre-assess if a child in preschool age has already had the ability to understand, absorb and assimilate knowledge given later in school. To evaluate the narrative assessment of children in their natural developmental trend, Laura Justice (2010) and colleagues presented a language assessment instrument for preschoolers, appropriate to be used from educators and other professionals to assess preschooler's expressive language skills in the narrative context, i.e., telling a story. This was called the Narrative Assessment Protocol (NAP) (Justice et al., 2010).

Narrative is referred to story-telling, as a definition, it is the production of a story from real or fictive experiences and events. Narrative is often treated as the kind of discourse which can derive from conversation and exposure. It includes production or understanding of certain sentences and expressions that are unfolded through time. Narratives, stories, might be produced by children in order to evaluate their skills and their discourse language level, also the

use of specific language forms or functions in a natural context and not as an obligation (i.e., reproduction, sentence imitation, learning by heart).

Narrative evaluation is done in macro-structure level (Van Dijk, 1976) and micro-structure level (Hoffman, 2013). NAP is characterized as an instrument that evaluates the characteristics of narrative micro-structure, as it documents the presence of syntax, morphology and lexicon that the child is using during the process of producing a narrative (Justice et al., 2010). Micro-structure assessment is seen as a way to provide an approximate evaluation of child expressive language skills in a natural and functional context.

### **Methodology**

The methodology used to test the hypothesis of the study was designed as a quasi-experiment conducted in kindergartens. 34 children aged between 3 to 5 years old were the participants of the study. Prior to assigning children to their respective groups, their parents were briefed about the study and written permission was taken from them. The children were divided into two groups of 17 children each. The experimental group was subject to the intervention that consisted of normal everyday activities plus shared reading activities for six weeks; while the control group carried on with its everyday activities.

The intervention was applied through with 24 reading sessions that were given in a period of 6 weeks (4 days/week – Tuesday to Friday). The control group continued in its same routine during these 6 weeks. A group of volunteers, psychology students in their third year of bachelor studies, were trained to read to children based on the appropriate requirements of a group shared reading. Two books with tales and stories for 3-5 year old children were chosen to be read to the experimental group. The books contained appropriate educative material with a rich expressed language and attractive illustrations, so the children would stay focused.

Firstly, during the first 3 weeks of the intervention the children only heard one story from one book, starting with the shortest and simplest ones. After that, in the other 3 weeks, were the children themselves who requested being read to more, so the volunteer reader was advised by the researcher to read one tale/story from each book, offering so a longer reading sessions for the group.

The Narrative Assessment Protocol (Justice et al., 2010) was used to measure narrative language skills of every child before and after the intervention. NAP is operated by measuring a fantasized narrative from children while using illustrated books to prompt their story telling. The produced narrative is coded through a standardized scale which includes sentence structure (i.e. use of complex sentences), phrase structure (i.e. use of elaborated noun phrases), modifiers (i.e. use of adverbs), nouns (i.e. use of possessive forms) and verbs (i.e. use of correct past tenses). NAP assesses the preschool child's ability to express in a narrative context.

Nap has 18 items measured in a scale 0 to 3 representing the frequency in which each from the above elements was used. Repeated word (i.e. usage of the adjective "beautiful" twice) were not counted in compliance to the coding manual offered originally from the NAP authors.

The NAP was translated with the permission of its first author into Albanian in a team of experts: linguists and psychologists. It was tested in a smaller group of children and then the final version was used in this study. All 34 children were recorded in a pretended reading session which helped the author to obtain assessable narratives for every child.

Results between groups and within groups in different times were compared to evaluate the effect of the shared reading activity in the development of language skills in preschool children.

### Results

Study results show that the instrument chosen to take measurements was good in the Albanian context. The assessing tool, the NAP, was found to be a reliable instrument in the present study with a Cronbach’s Alpha of  $\alpha=.724$ .

T-test was conducted to look for the differences between the two groups in their NAP performance as well as to compare the performance of the experimental pre and post intervention.

The experimental group, as shown in the table above has gained a very high difference in the second phase of 10.11 points, while the control group has a change of 2.35 points.

**Table 1: Groups’ means for measures before and after the intervention**

<b>Group Statistics</b>				
<i>Experimental Gr.</i>	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
NAP1	12.24	17	5.081	1.232
NAP2	22.35	17	7.373	1.788
<b>Group Statistics</b>				
<i>Control Group</i>	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
NAP1	17.12	17	7.262	1.761
NAP2	19.47	17	5.832	1.415

The correlation between NAP1 and NAP2 – describing pretest NAP results and posttest NAP results respectively, is high and statistically significant,  $r = .452$ ;  $p < 0.01$ , demonstrating a strong effect of the experimental intervention on the group results.

**Table 2: Correlations of pre-measures and post-measure**

<b>Correlations</b>		NAP1	NAP2
NAP1	Pearson Correlation	1	.452**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.007
	N	34	34
NAP2	Pearson Correlation	.452**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.007	
	N	34	34

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

### Discussions

The main hypothesis tested in this study was: Shared reading for preschoolers results in their narrative language skills enhancement. So the impact of shared reading in 3-5 years old children’s language skills was measured. A quasi experimental designed research was applied dividing children into two groups, one being the experimental group, and the other being the control group.

The final results revealed that at the end of six weeks both groups were better at their narrative skills. Children in the experimental group produced considerably more advanced narratives, using more complex sentences and more advanced words and expressions. They are at the age in which they acquire quickly new words, master different expressions and tell stories. The main issue was to look into the stimulation given to this increase through the shared reading.

There were several statistical analysis performed, but one of them is the most crucial one that confirms the study hypothesis: the t-test in the post intervention performance for the children in the experimental and control group. The differences in their performance, as measured through NAP were remarkable, it is easily identifiable from the groups' means, and confirmed by t-test,  $t(32) = 1.264$ ,  $p > .05$  while the primary difference confirmed by t-test was,  $t(32) = -2.271$ ,  $p < .05$ , thus showing that though the primary results of the two groups were differing the first group (experimental group), through the intervention reached the level of the second group (control group). More than this, through the raw data comparison we can see that starting from approximately 5 points lower, the experimental group reaches and surpasses the control group's NAP results with approximately 3 points.

### Conclusions

Results of the study show that there is a significant impact of shared reading offered to preschoolers in their language and narrative skills. The quantity of shared reading will impact preschoolers' narrative skills. This will lead to better language development which eventually will help these children grow literate and succeed in school.

The more the child is read to the more words s/he will know and the more expressions s/he will produce to conduct a full conversation with peers and mostly adults. Previously known words will serve as a basis to describe new words, and this will make the process of learning new words easier for the preschooler. So, shared reading helps the child learn words that will continue in a chain of word-learning by providing definitions for new words. This means that the more words a child knows, the more words s/he will be able to learn day by day, book after book.

Based on the above conclusions and the strong correlation of variables, it would be strongly suggested that parents and educators include more shared reading in the daily activity of their preschooler children.

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