

Shared reading, a factor influences child's language improvement

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Abstract

Shared reading means the activity of reading books between parent and child and the verbal interaction that developed between them. We assume that this verbal conciliation essentially contributes to the development of the infant's vocabulary much more than if they have just played together. In this study involved 30 mothers whose children were assessed by an official state organization and "Language and Speech Problems" were diagnosed. They resided in semi-urban areas. A two-part questionnaire was designed. The first part concerned personal information and the second one consisted of semi-structured questions, which referred to family's reading habits, leisure time activities and how mothers are used to spent time with their children. Analysis of the data revealed maternal literacy beliefs. They reported engaging in fewer literacy practices such as reading with their offspring or talking about their children's queries because they consider that this process is about joining the school education. Furthermore, mothers are neither used to read books, newspaper or magazines and prefer to spend their free time by watching television or meet their friends.

Key words: home literacy, language development, shared reading.

Introduction

Reading books from mother to child is a process that contributes substantially to child's psycho-emotional development. It is the moment that both, mother and child, interact verbally in a calm family environment during which questions are answered, phobias are eliminated and feelings are expressed. Children's literary books, with lavish and interesting illustrations, are the means for the development of this interaction and as researchers point out, literature is an important tool but also a mediator for children's all-round development. It contributes significantly to infants' literacy as their oral speech can be developed through reading activities (De Jong & Leseman, 2001) and social interaction is promoted (Reese, Cox, Harte, & McAnally, 2003). The children have the opportunity to learn the conventions of a printed text and develop storytelling skills (Bus, Van Ijzendoorn, & Pallegrini, 1995; Mol & Bus, 2011). In addition, they have the opportunity to come in contact with a vocabulary that they usually do not use in their everyday talk (Sénéchal, LeFevre, Hudson, & Lawson, 1996) and books have a 50% richer vocabulary than television programmes (Hayes & Ahrens, 1988).

But how do we define shared reading? It is the reading of books between two people, in this case between child and one of the parents, most often mothers, and the verbal interaction that developed that moment. The process is not limited just to reading and listening, but involves the submission of questions, descriptions and narrations, aimed at both developing not only understanding and also cultivating emotional proximity between reader and listener. Shared reading contributes to the verbal interaction between mothers and children, and it is very likely children's vocabulary be developed much more (Brackenbury & Fey, 2003; De Temple & Snow, 2003; Mol, Bus & de Jong, 2009; Vivas, 1996; Wells, 1983) than if they just play together. That happens because a text is more strictly structured in language than spoken language (Snow & Ninio, 1986; Fletcher & Reese, 2006; Snow, Nathan & Perlmann, 1985). In addition, these factors contribute significantly to the acquisition of reading skills (Baker, Mackler, Sonnenschein & Serpell, 2001; Read, Macauley, & Furay, 2014) and researches have



shown that these pupils experience fewer difficulties in reading skills (Lonigan, 2004; Catts, Fey, Zhang, & Tomblin, 1999).

In addition, shared reading promotes social, mental and emotional development of the child (Vandermaas-Peeler, Sassine, Price, & Brilhart, 2011). Toddlers have not yet known how a story is built and presented, so the parent undertakes to play the role of mediator between virtual and real world (Bus, 2003). Young children are fascinated by listening stories and by the colorful, abundant illustrations of children's books. At a very young age, they cannot separate reality from the one presented in an illustrated form. The parent gradually guides the acquisition of this knowledge by enriching the child's reading experiences. Shared reading gives the opportunity to toddlers, as previously mentioned, to acquire literacy and language skills that are necessary for their day-to-day interaction with both peers and older people. Handling printed material under the guidance of an experienced reader, through questions, comments about illustrations and any other form of language transaction, contributes to the acquisition of the abovementioned skills (Anderson, Anderson, Friedrich & Kim, 2010; Vandermaas-Peeler, et al., 2011).

Children whose parents used to read with them, have a much better expressive vocabulary, use longer sentences, use sentences more often than just words. These differences, as researchers have highlighted, remain for a long time after participating in an intervention program in order to restore language deficits (Whitehurst, 1994). It has been found that shared reading influences positively in the language development of younger children (two or three years old) than the older one (Mol, Bus, deJong, & Smeets, 2008). This reading interaction between child and parent precedes more than a simple process of problem solving and explanation of words that child does not know. For this reason, it contributes to the development of the vocabulary, the understanding of stories and, more generally, on the emerging literacy of infants (De Temple & Snow, 2003). In addition, it helps to develop more meaningful relationships between parents and toddlers as they are given the opportunity to discuss about various topics that may be relevant to the content of the book or not. This interaction gives infants the opportunity and the motivation to use their oral language, broaden their vocabulary and enrich the structure of the sentences.

Reading books from parents to children has been and continues to be a pleasant activity through families (Bus, 2001; Sonnenschein, Baker, Serpell, & Schmidt, 2000) and family reading habits play an important role in this process. At the same time the benefit is multidimensional as it affects significantly in child's development (Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2001). A large number of studies indicate that language difficulties in infancy significantly influence reading skill acquisition (eg Bird, Bishop, & Freeman, 1995; Catts, Fey, Tomblin, & Zhang, 2002) and be reported that language difficulties in early childhood are a powerful predictor of reading difficulties (McCardle, Scarborough, & Catts, 2001). For example, the development of phonological awareness begins at the age of two (Lonigan, Burgess, Anthony, & Barker, 1998) and develops between four to seven years old, as it moves from the level of phonemic discrimination to the level of phonological syllable structure (Gillon, 2004).

As a result, home-based interventions with parental involvement have a good effect on the language development of infants with difficulties (Crain-Thoreson & Dale, 1999) and contribute generally to infant literacy (Justice & Ezell, 2002). However, it should be noted that the type of relationship that develops during this evolvement plays an important role (Bergin, 2001). Therefore, it is not enough just to engage in such a process as listeners but to take actively part in this process. For this reason, reading quality has been a field of research (Karrass, vanDeventer, & Braungart-Rieker, 2003). These surveys are usually quantitative, estimating the frequency of reading books as well as the number of books at a given time. These results however do not provide information on the type of interaction that be developed and their effects are ambiguous (Kassow, 2006). Hence, we have decided to conduct a qualitative pilot study. We selected a specific sample, mothers' of infants who had



been diagnosed with language difficulties, in order to investigate the factors that hinder their normal language development. We set as our primary goal the family's reading habits. We first explored whether parents and more specifically mothers are used to read children's picture books or faire tales with their offspring and then whether they themselves had this habit as a leisure time activity. The following research questions were asked: a) Are mothers used to read books with their children? b) Do mothers prefer for themselves reading as an activity for pleasure? c) Do mothers think that reading children's books from infancy contributes to children's language development?

Method

Qualitative method was used because the purpose of this research was general information to be gathered that will be used to study in depth the topic (Patton, 2002). We relied on the views of participants in order to explore the factors that influence infants' language development. For collecting data, we used personal interviews and general questions to permit participants to generate responses (Creswell, 2008).

Participants Description: We chose purposeful homogenous sampling because we wanted to gather information that would help us better understand the phenomenon (Creswell, 2008). The total sample consisted of 30 mothers, (25-35 years old) whose children had been assessed from an official government agency for students with disabilities and they had diagnosed with "Oral Language and Speech disorders". The assessments were individuals and contacted by a professional group that was made up by a social worker, a psychologist, a special education teacher and a speech-language therapist. The language difficulties that were recorded were mostly limited vocabulary, very short in structure sentences (e.g. only a verb or a noun), one-word answers, wrong word spelling and confusing of some phonemeas (figure:1).

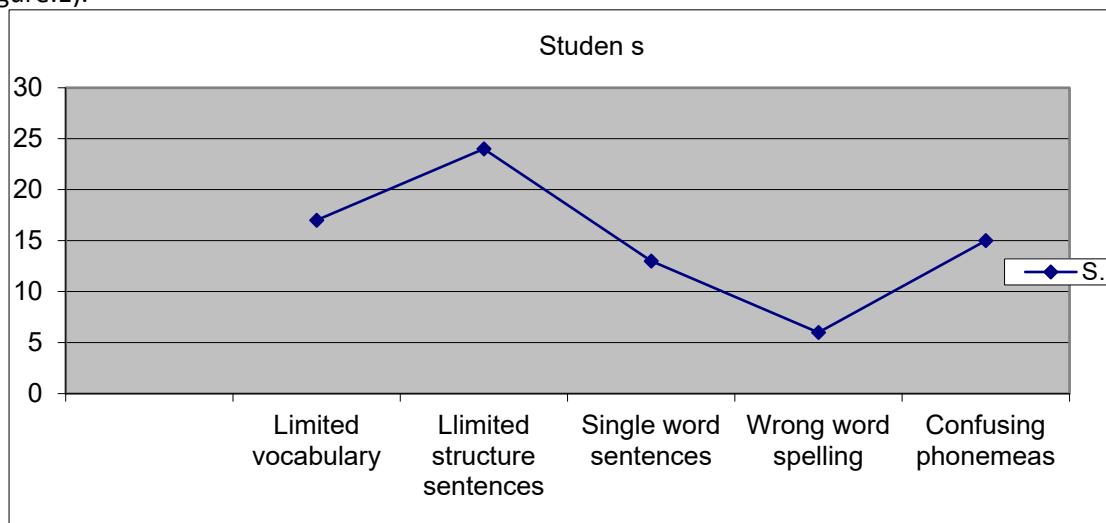


Figure 1: Children's language difficulties

There were 22 boys and 8 girls, and their age was ranged between 45 to 70 months with a mean age of 5 years and 2 months. All mothers and infants were Greek native speakers. The family residence was almost semi-urban and twenty out of thirty infants resided in two-parent households. Maternal education was rather low, as 13 of them (43.3%) held a high school degree, 10 (33.3%) completed the compulsory education (Gymnasium) and

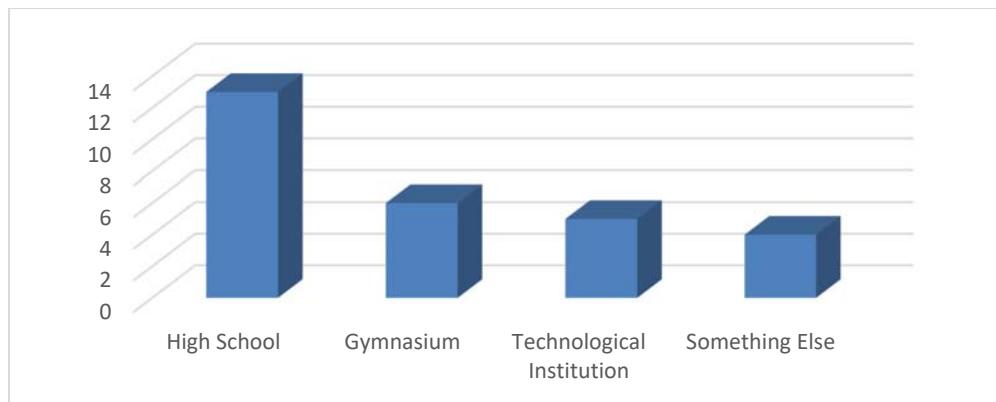


Figure 2: Mothers' education

only 5 of them (16.6%) held a 4-year diploma from Technological Institutions (figure 2). Of these, a small percentage was out-of-home workers (23.3%), some of them were unemployed (16.6%) and the rest (50.0%) were simply housewives and some of them did another job (10.1%) (figure 3).

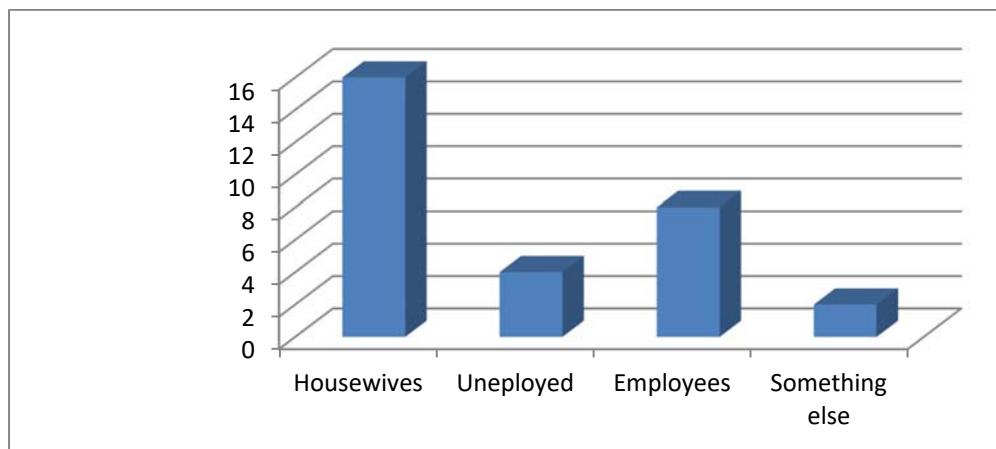


Figure 3: Mothers' occupation

Tools: A questionnaire was designed that consisted from two parts. The first one concerned personal information, such as age, education, occupation, number of children and birth order of child who was diagnosed with speech and oral language disorders. The second part consisted of 10 open-ended questions about family habits, leisure time activities and how parents interact with their children.

Procedure: The data collected through one-to-one interviews. In a quiet room the researchers explained to each participant the purpose of the study, assured the confidentiality of the data and promised to inform them about the results of the research. Responses were recorded as long as there was the participants' consent and at the same time the researchers kept some personal notes that they would probably use when they are going to analyze the data. They effort to gain participants' confidence and encouraged them to talk more in detail about their habits.

Results

In general, the findings revealed that the mothers were not used to read books to their children as they reported that this employment was related to the child's entry into education. During the discussion, it was mentioned that they might occasionally tell a fairy tale or read a

book to their child usually at bedtime. This activity, however, was casual and the toddler participated as a listener. When they asked if they used to read in their personal free time, they reported that they rarely read a literary book or a magazine. None of them used to read a newspaper in print or online. More generally, it was reported that not only they had no library in their home but had never visited one to borrow books. Some of them said that they had only kept their school textbooks and some of them texts from their higher studies. In conclusion, when asked how they spend their free time, they said that generally do not have as much free time as they would like and usually spend their leisure time with a friend of their discussing or watching television. They also mention that they rarely used to play with their children, and more often fathers used to play with their infants. Most often their offspring used to play alone or with peers or siblings and their favorite activity is watching television (figure 4). However, even in these cases, they do not get used to comment or discuss each other about the plot or the characters in the series that they all watch together

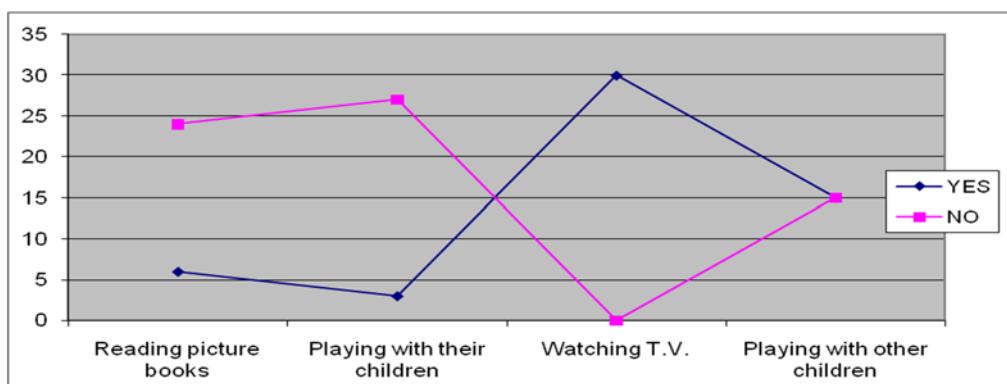


Figure 4: Leisure time activities

At last, when we asked them about their infants' language difficulties most of them (73.3%) pointed out that themselves do not worry, they do not think this difficulty is a problem because, as their toddler gets older will improve his/her speech. On the contrary, they consider that this particular way of speaking is a characteristic of infancy and indeed is a lovely childhood characteristic. Many of them pointed out that they used to record infants' speech so that they could remember it as they grew up. On the contrary, a smaller percentage (15.2%) reported that from the very beginning they were concerned about this language delay as their children's speech was not as expected. That's why they had already visited a speech-language therapist and had begun sessions to improve their infant's oral language. At last, fewer mothers (11.5%) reported that as the teacher in the kindergarten ascertained that there was a problem with their child's speech and this difficulty hindered his normal integration into the school environment, they followed the teacher's advice and sought help. The age of the mothers and the order of birth of the infant with language difficulties did not appear to affect their responses. However, mothers' education seems to have influenced their responses to both, reading habits and seeking help in time. Mothers who had graduated from higher school and some of those who graduated from high school were more aware than others. Moreover, they were the ones who most often used to interest for the emergent literacy of their child. As they said they used to paint, learn letters and numbers through games, and read books discussing the plot, the characters or the illustrations.

Discussion

How often parents read, if they used to read books to their children from early childhood, and whether there is printed reading material in their home are conditions that shape

children's reading habits (Davis-Kean, 2005; Johnson, Johnson, Roseth, & Skin, 2014; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002). Some parents consider the reading process at the utmost importance and believe that the school is not solely responsible for acquiring this skill, so they play an active role (Sénéchal, 2012). The research that we carried out confirms the above suggestion as, as reported by mothers, reading was not for them an attractive occupation and as a consequence, they did not consider it necessary to engage with their child. In addition, each family's social and educational profile diversifies opportunities for access to a stimulating reading environment. These differences, as expected, have a significant influence on infants' cognitive and language development, and also in emergent literacy (Adams, 1990; Anderson & Pearson, 1984; Storch & Whitehurst, 2001; Vernon-Feagans, Hammer, Miccio, Manlove, 2001). The definition of family literacy is multi-level and each researcher gives his or her own interpretation. For example, Sénéchal & LeFevre (2002) differentiate intentional reading from reading for pleasure which is shared between parents and children. In the present study, infants' families were mostly of rather low educational status, lived in semi-urban and rural areas, and mothers' education level was not particularly high. The absence of any reading material, the choice of occupations other than reading books in their spare time and the view that the school is responsible for the literacy of their children confirm the above positions. Researchers have also noted that from a very early age shared book reading contributes significantly to the development or improvement of language skills of infants and especially boys. As pointed out by professionals who have conducted large-scale studies, girls' language development is much earlier than that of boys (Locke, Ginsborg, & Peers 2002; Galsworthy, Dionne, Dale, & Plomin, 2000) and difficulties are scarcely observed in verbal comprehension and production (Berglund, Eriksson, & Westerlund, 2005). This is also confirmed by the present study as the number of boys with language difficulties was much higher than girls. The order of birth does not appear to have influenced language development here, although it has been argued to the contrary, that first-born children are usually verbally ahead of those later born (Berglund, et al, 2005). However, it was not investigated whether there was a gene factor that may have affected infants' speech since about half of the infants were first-born. Another factor that did not affect mothers' responses is the age of them, although there is no corresponding research data reported (Westerlund & Lagerberg, 2008).

Reading books from parents to children has been a popular habit in the past (Pellegrini, 1991) and today with the development of technology a shift away from printed reading material has been observed. For this reason, scientific journals, parenting magazines, books, web sites, etc. advise and encourage parents to focus on reading books to their children as numerous studies have reported on the positive results of this habit. When we talk about shared reading we mainly refer to mothers. However, Anderson and their colleges (2004) have indicated that fathers were more interactive with their children than mothers. In fact, when elaborated information books they have been more consistent in using clarification and confirmation strategies. In this case, fathers appear to have abstained from this process, however, as mother reported, they used to play various games with their children.

Searches with similar results evidence the contribution of shared reading to the development of oral speech (Evans, Shaw, & Bell, 2000; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002; Sénéchal, LeFevre, Thomas, & Daley, 1998). It is a very favorite process as it is the time when the parent and the child in calm and safe family environment exchange information, express thoughts, expose experiences and generally have the opportunity to develop a positive attitude towards reading and promote the language interaction. Talking about the meaning of the text the child's vocabulary improved and has a positive effect on their oral language (Wasik, Bond, & Hindman, 2006). Rodriguez, Hines, & Montiel (2009) have examined the shared book reading among families from different socio-economic status and they reported that mothers of middle status gave opportunities to their infants for speaking more often than those mothers of low socio-economic status. The results of this study are in line with the above results as



mothers did not used to read with their infants and as we can infer language interaction among them was also limited. They believe that young kids play with other kids, language difficulties at this age were not a problem and just watching television is a common spare time entertainment.

As a conclusion, from this pilot study we highlight that we ought to search in debt if language difficulties of infants are connected with their family's literacy habits. We must investigate if there are corresponding language difficulties in toddlers who growing up in a reach of cognitive stimuli environment and whether the developing dialogue between them and parents contributes to their vocabulary. There are a few limitations in this study, but as we firstly said, it is a pilot one in order to construct meaning which will give us the opportunity to investigate empirically this topic.

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