



Contexts of reading instruction: Implications for literacy skills and kindergarteners' behavioral engagement[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This observational study examined kindergarteners' ($n = 170$) exposure to literacy instruction in their classrooms ($n = 36$), child-by-instruction interactions, and behavioral engagement in relation to literacy skills. Time spent in four instructional contexts was coded according to who managed children's attention (teacher-managed, TM or child-managed, CM), and the content focus (basic skills such as teaching letters and their sounds, or meaning-focused such as discussing a book); children's behavioral engagement and off-task behavior were also coded live five times over the year. Word-reading and phonological awareness skills were assessed in fall and spring. Hierarchical Linear Modeling results indicated that kindergarteners with lower initial skills gained more in word-reading, but not phonological awareness, when they were exposed to relatively more time in TM basic skills instruction. In contrast, more time in CM meaning-focused instruction did not interact with initial skills to predict either outcome. Engagement analyses indicated that students were more likely to be off-task in CM than in TM contexts. Children who spent more time off-task during TM contexts had lower spring scores on both outcomes. Discussion explores the implications of this work for both literacy learning and behavioral engagement in the transition year of kindergarten.

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Learning to read is the principal task of the elementary school years. Many children struggle with this task, and those who fall behind early face an uphill challenge as they proceed through school. Since No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was signed into law in 2002, school accountability policies have heavily targeted elementary reading achievement. Some states responded to NCLB by requiring research-based literacy curricula and teacher practices, mandating minimum amounts of classroom time devoted to reading instruction, and providing targeted instruction for struggling readers early in their school experience. Perhaps as a consequence of these efforts, the 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) showed overall improvement in Grade 4 reading compared to 2005 results (Lee, Grigg, & Donahue, 2007). Yet, reading problems are far from resolved. NAEP gains from 2005 to 2007 occurred in only 18 states; in the other 32 states, no change

occurred. Further, over 30% of fourth-graders still do not read at a basic level.

Multiple explanations for the discrepancy between policy, instructional mandates, and literacy outcomes are possible. We apply ecological perspectives from research on early literacy acquisition (Connor, Son, Hindman, & Morrison, 2005; Morrison, Bachman, & Connor, 2005). Ecological theorists seek to understand how child and environmental factors separately, and through complex interactions, contribute to development (Cairns & Rodkin, 1998). To learn to read, children must master the oral and written language system that humans use to communicate (Bialystok, 1995). This system includes component skills that vary within children, including vocabulary, syntactic knowledge, phonological awareness, orthographic/alphabet knowledge, insight to the alphabetic principle, and automaticity with written code (Catts, Fey, Zhang, & Tomblin, 1999). A growing base of evidence suggests that most children require deliberate instruction to acquire the component skills involved in reading (Adams, 1994; Foorman, Francis, Fletcher, Schatschneider, & Mehta, 1998; Rayner, Foorman, Perfetti, Pesetsky, & Seidenberg, 2001). Furthermore, researchers have described, with increasing detail and specificity, the environmental (i.e., instructional) experiences associated with literacy competence (Connor, Piasta, et al., 2009; Morrison et al., 2005).

The centrality of instruction in reading development turns our attention to the social system of homes, classrooms, and schools in

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Table 1
Examples of kindergarten literacy activities using a dimensional approach to instruction.

	Teacher-managed (TM)	Child-managed (CM)
Basic skills	Teacher leads a rhyming game with children Teacher holds up a picture and children name the beginning letter of the noun represented in the picture (e.g., what letter does <i>dog</i> start with?) Teacher leads children in the alphabet song	Children complete worksheets where they circle words that start with a specific first letter (e.g., circle the words that start with “B”) Children complete a worksheet finding the objects on a page that include a certain sound Children complete a hand-writing worksheet
Meaning-focused	Teacher reads a book with children and asks them to predict what will come next Teacher explains the meaning of a new vocabulary word Teachers lead the children in acting out a story	Children look at books silently on their own Children create illustrations that correspond to a sentence provided by the teacher Children write in “journals” about their experiences

which children learn to read (Coyne, Kame’enui, & Simmons, 2001). Most work has used parent- and teacher-reported practices or has targeted the amount and type of instruction in classroom contexts to predict children’s literacy outcomes (Connor et al., 2005; Sénéchal, 2006; Wasik, Bond, & Hindman, 2006). For example, an emerging base of both observational and experimental research shows that the optimal approach to literacy instruction depends upon children’s baseline language and/or literacy abilities (Connor, Morrison, & Katch, 2004; Connor, Morrison, & Slominski, 2006; Connor, Piasta, et al., 2009; Juel & Minden-Cupp, 2000). Yet children are not passive recipients of various instructional experiences but rather, are active participants in the learning process (Greenwood, Horton, & Utley, 2002). The present study examines children’s behavioral engagement in four contexts of literacy instruction, and contributions to emergent word-reading and phonological skill improvement during kindergarten, a developmentally challenging transition year (Pianta, Cox, & Snow, 2007).

1. Dimensions of literacy instruction

Like others, we use a multi-dimensional approach to conceptualize and measure reading instruction (Connor, Morrison, et al., 2009). The first of two dimensions – basic skills versus meaning-focused – pertains to the content of what is being taught.

1.1. Basic skills versus meaning-focused instruction

Basic skills instruction focuses explicitly on the skills that underlie fluent word-reading such as rhyming, segmenting, and matching letters to sounds (i.e., the alphabetic principle). Instruction in phonological skills seems particularly important for later reading proficiency, especially for children at risk for poor literacy outcomes (Juel, 1988; Rayner et al., 2001). Observational and experimental studies have shown that first graders with low initial word-reading skills improve more when teachers provide direct, explicit instruction in basic decoding, such as helping children to recognize letters and the sounds in letters and words (Connor, Morrison, & Katch, 2004; Connor, Piasta, et al., 2009; Juel & Minden-Cupp, 2000). In contrast, meaning-focused activities explicitly target skills such as listening and reading comprehension, problem-solving through text, and extracting meaning from what is read. In an advantaged preschool sample, Connor et al. (2006) found that preschoolers with strong initial word-reading (i.e., alphabet knowledge, word recognition) gained more in word-reading skill when they spent relatively more time in teacher-managed activities where comprehension and meaning-making was the goal (e.g., teacher-led book-readings). Note that this dimension varies according to its explicit focus (Connor, Morrison, et al., 2009). In other words, it is possible for students to learn new vocabulary during a rhyming exercise, and they may learn about sound-symbol correspondence as they read for understanding (Olson, Wise, Forsberg, Sameroff,

& Haith, 1996). In the present study, however, the basic skills or meaning-focused distinction is based on the explicit (versus implicit) focus of observed instructional activity.

1.2. Teacher-managed versus child-managed instruction

The second dimension of instruction designates who manages children’s attention—the teacher or the child. In teacher-managed (TM) instruction, the teacher focuses the child’s attention on the target activity, such as in whole-class discussion or individualized tutoring. In contrast, child-managed (CM) instruction occurs when students themselves focus their own attention and are responsible for carrying out an activity. Examples include looking at books in the library corner or completing worksheets independently. This distinction differs from the commonly used terms of teacher- and child-directed, which pertain to who selected the activity, regardless of how instruction is actually delivered (Stipek et al., 1998). Because of our interest in kindergarteners’ attention and participation, we use the teacher- versus child-managed distinction to highlight activities that are initiated and sustained by the teacher or the child.

Taken together, the two dimensions – basic skills or meaning-focused, and teacher- or child-managed instruction – create four possible instructional contexts with regard to literacy: (1) TM basic skills (2) TM meaning-focused, (3) CM basic skills, and (4) CM meaning-focused. Examples of kindergarten literacy activities within these four contexts are shown in Table 1.

1.3. Links among dimensions of literacy instruction and word-reading in early childhood

The dimensional approach to reading instruction has been used to explain how instruction relates to literacy outcomes at multiple grade levels, including preschool (where children would be considered pre-readers or emergent readers), first grade (with some readers and some non-readers), and third grade (where most children would be considered readers but with varying levels of comprehension) (Connor, Morrison, & Katch, 2004; Connor, Morrison, & Petrella, 2004; Connor et al., 2006). These observational and experimental studies suggest that literacy instructional dimensions interact with child characteristics to predict achievement. In general, spending more time in CM meaning-focused contexts predicts fall-spring improvement for children who have a sturdy base of word-reading skill (Connor, Morrison, & Katch, 2004). This makes sense because students who already identify letters and decode new words can rely on that knowledge even when basic skills are not an explicit focus of instruction, as in sustained silent reading (SSR) or shared story-book reading. In contrast, research has shown that greater exposure to TM basic skills instruction predicts improvement for students with weaker initial word-reading skills (Connor, Morrison, & Katch, 2004; Juel & Minden-Cupp, 2000).

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