Shared Book Reading: Effective Parent Verbal Scaffolding Techniques for Preschool Children

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Abstract

In a world of evolving technology and research, it is essential to continue to educate our youth in the most effective ways possible to allow them to succeed in the future. Language learning begins at an early age and continues throughout childhood; thus, we must know how to implement reading and vocabulary knowledge to support language growth. My study aims to determine how parents can effectively teach their children vocabulary terms while participating in shared book reading. Studies have shown the importance of receptive and expressive learning through reading and the importance of an adult to help guide this learning. My goal for this research study is to narrow down different expressive learning strategies to find one that best fits a preschool-age audience. This study was done in a laboratory setting where parents and children participated in joint book reading. This proceeded to a picture-naming vocabulary task for target words they had read previously. Through transcriptions and coding of 21 participant video data, I concluded on five scaffolding strategies used most often by parents: elicitation, correction, definition, recall, and real-life connections. Through greater analysis, I found that most scaffolding strategies, aside from real-life connections, had an insignificant effect on vocabulary acquisition. I found that the children could recognize and name target words more than control words, proving that vocabulary learning occurred during their visit to our lab. These findings are significant because they assist in future research to narrow down strategies that produce significant results to better help parents and educators understand the most effective ways they can teach their children. With some confounds to this study, these techniques should not be deemed insufficient language learning strategies.

Introduction

Research has shown that parent-child book-reading interactions utilizing different scaffolding techniques significantly contribute to vocabulary retention and positive relationships with schooling in the future (Kaderavek & Sulzby, 1998). These findings are crucial to the emergent literacy behaviors of young children as they begin to read and write and play a significant role in language development (Morgan et al., 2015). Shared reading also encourages the application of joint attention. Joint attention is when one person purposefully coordinates his or her focus of attention with that of another person (MED UNC, n.d.). Joint attention is applied as early as nine months old, from reading storybooks to playing with toys and from dyadic (one-to-one) or polyadic (group). Studies have shown that children who are immersed in joint attention regularly experience faster vocabulary growth than those who do not participate in joint attention (Brooks & Meltzoff, 2008). It has been shown that children with higher vocabulary knowledge enter kindergarten with higher math and literacy achievement, self-regulation skills, and fewer anxiety-related behavioral problems (Baker, 2013). All of these, in combination, allow for tremendous success when entering kindergarten and following through with greater education.

Significant research has been done on different scaffolding techniques, such as verbal and nonverbal communication, that caregivers can display when reading to a child. Scaffolding is a process in which an expert partner provides help to a novice partner, increasing or decreasing the level of assistance depending on the novice partner (van Geert & Steenbeek, 2005). In the case of shared book reading with children, there are nonverbal scaffolding techniques, such as pointing or gestures, and verbal techniques, such as relating the book to the child's life experiences or giving positive feedback (Trivette et al., 2010). Lisa Ard and Brenda Beverly conducted a study

using receptive (nonverbal) and expressive (verbal) techniques on preschool-aged children. In the posttest, receptive vocabulary scaffolding resulted in better correctly guessed target words than expressive techniques (Ard & Beverly, 2004). Expressive and receptive were studied under four conditions rather than under one condition using different scaffolding techniques. In this study, I focus on verbal communication and specific techniques that may be implemented to teach target words in a semi-natural setting. My study differs from similar studies as I focus on very specific scaffolding strategies, some of which include elicitations. I am also exclusively interested in verbal techniques, as my interests outside this study are speech and language.

Other forms of expressive scaffolding have been studied by many and include, but are not limited to, positive feedback, expanding on children's feedback, and following interests. Cell Reviews found that some of the most effective scaffolding techniques they studied included relating to experiences, positive feedback, and follow-up questions. Less effective scaffolding included attention-getting, labeling, and correction (Trivette et al., 2010). New ways and ideas to teach vocabulary during joint book reading are constantly coming to light, creating a more knowledgeable understanding of how preschool-aged children learn best.

While most studies focus on a broader range of scaffolding techniques, my study focuses specifically on verbal interactions between caregivers and their children when reading books generated in our CU Boulder campus research lab. These scaffolding techniques include elicitation (Balcom, 1985), corrections (Valdez-Menchaca & Whitehurst, 1992), definition (Gonzalez et al., 2014), real-life connections (Trivette et al., 2010), and word recall. More meaningful verbal scaffolding offered by parents will positively correlate to better vocabulary retention and learning for the child. These meaningful interactions assist in strong childhood language development and relationships between caregiver and child.

Methods:

Participants

The participants in our study were recruited through the University of Colorado, Boulder database, where parents chose to enroll their children in a range of psychological studies on campus. Parents were contacted via email and asked if they were interested in participating. Families typically live in the greater Boulder area and attend local preschools. The greater Boulder area comprises a large Caucasian population and middle—to upper-class demographics, which reflects our participants. Participants in this study were preschool-aged children between the ages of three and six with various schooling enrollments.

There were 35 participants, but 14 were not included in this study for various reasons, including fussiness during the appointment, other languages besides English being used, and camera malfunctions. With the data collected and analyzed through this paper, there were 21 total participants, nine males and twelve females. The mean age of the participants was 63.04 months, with a standard deviation of 7.41. The average child was about five years old.

Design

Our study was a laboratory experiment, with the independent variable being the type of verbal scaffolding procedures parents used when reading and the dependent variable being accuracy on a post-reading vocabulary game. The independent variable is categorical, representing different types and groups of verbal scaffolding, while my dependent variable is continuous as it is measured by the number of words correctly guessed. We randomly assigned each child to one of eight potential book conditions, making this a between-subjects experiment. Each condition had four different books with five varying target words throughout each book, totaling up to twenty target vocabulary words identified.

Table 1. Scaffolding Terms, Definitions, and Examples

Scaffolding Term	Definition	Examples From Research Study
Elicitation	**Elicitation** involves trying to bring out information from the child. Most parents who participated in elicitation would use the phrases "What is this?" or "What is a ____" (in reference to the term), which would then require the child to identify the word or photo. This was the most common form of scaffolding and led to the development of another variable: elicitation, followed by definition.	**Vocabulary term: Bald** Parent: "What does bald mean?" Child: "No hair" Parent and child move on. **Vocabulary term: Collie** Parent: "What is a collie?" Child answers a type of dog, parent, and child move on.
Correction (originally called Elicitation, then Definition in my study)	Parents who participated in **correction** often had a child who incorrectly responded to the original elicitation question. This correction is essential for ensuring the child understands a vocabulary term's true meaning.	**Vocabulary term: Nostril** Parent: "Do you know what a nostril is?" Child: "It is like a bone" Parent: shows the child where their nostril is and explains they use it to smell **Vocabulary term: Grove** Parent: Do you know what a grove is? Child: incorrectly answers Parent: "It is a group of trees."
Definition	Parents who participate in **definition** scaffolding do not ask their children what a term means before teaching. They reach a vocabulary term and explain what it	**Vocabulary term: Acrobat** Parent: "An acrobat is like a performer who like spins and twirls and jumps."

	means immediately with little interaction with the child.	**Vocabulary term: Tuba** Parent: "A tuba is like a big horn people play, kinda like a trumpet, but it is bigger."
Recall	A **recall** occurs when a parent returns to a previously learned vocabulary term and quizzes their child on the definition or context.	**Vocabulary words: Accordion, juggling, tightrope** Parent: "What was the man doing?" Child: "Playing with the accordion, juggling and tightrope" **Vocabulary word: Magenta** Parent: "Do you remember what color his fur was?"
Real-Life Connections	**Real-life Connections** allow the child to reflect on their experiences and relate the term to what they already know. Connecting a new word to something they already know can benefit quicker learning.	**Vocabulary term: Elk** Parent: "Do you remember visiting the Rocky Mountain National Park and seeing the elk on the side of the road?" **Vocabulary term: Blond** Parent: "Mommy's hair is blonde."

Apparatus and Materials

Data was collected through video using a SONY camera and paper response sheets, which the researcher filled out while going through the production task after reading. After collecting the video data, our research assistants used ELAN, a transcription software (https://archive.mpi.nl/tla/elan), to transcribe and analyze the recorded data. This analysis is

critical for noting different scaffolding techniques used while a parent and child interacted. With this data, Microsoft Excel was used to conduct various statistical analyses to test correlations between variables and create visual representations of my data. Along with these analyses, RStudio performed more advanced statistical tests, including ANOVA and partial correlation measures.

Measures

Conditions in my greater research lab were created by dividing all thirty-two books into eight groups, with four unique books for a group. Each child was randomly assigned to a condition before their appointment. Books were created using AI models through my greater research lab, and specific target words were given to generate our completed stories.

We measured the dependent variable, correctly guessed vocabulary terms, by testing the child directly after reading one-on-one with their parent. This test consisted of twenty vocabulary words mentioned in the books they read and twenty they did not read to act as a control. During the vocabulary task, the child is shown a photo of the intended word and asked to name the image. For example, one of the target words was almond, so during the test, the child would be shown a photo of an almond and asked, "What is this?".

If incorrectly guessed, children are given several prompting questions before moving on to the next word. Occasionally, words similar to the target word, like "alligator," will be produced when the intended word is gator. In similar situations, research assistants in our greater lab will come together and decide whether this is a correct or incorrectly produced word. All answers to target and control words are then inputted into a spreadsheet to determine the total number of correct answers throughout the appointment. These numbers are not studied or analyzed until transcriptions and analyses of scaffolding occurrences are completed.

A higher score on the vocabulary test corresponds to high levels of picture naming identification through the vocabulary game played after reading. A correct response would be the exact word, not synonyms or similar-sounding words. Thus, a low score correlates to low levels of word identification. If, for example, a child says crocodile when the target word is alligator, this would be marked as incorrect. The researcher offers multiple prompting questions for the target word before moving on to the next, giving each child numerous opportunities to identify correctly. As mentioned above, some children might answer with a word we are unsure right away is incorrect or correct. These are later determined by research assistants if they receive the point or not.

Once the vocabulary task was completed, I transcribed each of the videos using ELAN, a transcription software, to pinpoint verbal patterns used by parents to teach a vocabulary term. After going through all twenty-one videos, I was left with five distinct verbal scaffolding terms used by the parents: elicitation, correction, definition, recall, and real-life connections. I came up with these techniques on my own during the transcription process and then reviewed previous research to find other studies that had similar or the same measures. Recall and Definition were two I found little to no research on.

In addition to these five scaffolding techniques, I coded for the total number of words spoken during the shared book reading interaction, the number of turns taken between parent and child, and the number of times each target vocabulary was spoken by either parent or child. These constructs will be essential in analyzing child responses to the vocabulary game and narrowing down how parents can effectively teach their children vocabulary terms in a shared book setting.

Procedures

When conducting appointments with parents and their children, we began with an informed consent sheet, which included agreements to film the interactions and participate in the study. The adult was given a second copy of the consent paperwork to bring home if they would like. Parents signed for themselves and their children before beginning the shared book-reading task during this consent process.

In my greater research lab, I recorded interaction data between parents and their children through a camcorder. In these videos, parents read four books to their children. To create as natural an environment as possible and avoid the Hawthorne Effect, the researcher steps out of the room when the parents read to their children. Before reading, parents are told that their child will be participating in a vocabulary naming task where the words mentioned in the book will be present. It is then up to the parent to decide whether or not to bring up these terms throughout the reading process. During this reading interaction, the parents have no time limit or stress as they are instructed to read how they typically would be at home. This could include rereading books, returning to previous pages, or the order in which parents bring up the target vocabulary terms.

After reading, the child does a vocabulary task where they are prompted to name a photo shown to them. This vocabulary task comprises 20 vocabulary terms they read in their books as well as 20 other words that were not presented in the readings to act as a control. The vocabulary task begins with three practice trials, beginning with familiar words: ball, dog, and eating. The parent is in the room the entire time but is encouraged to refrain from assisting the child in naming the photos presented. Exceptions to parental involvement occurred when the child became fussy or was not interacting with the researcher. All forty photos are shown to the child during this vocabulary naming task. Once the child answers the name correctly, the researcher

will move on to the following identification. Still, if they guess incorrectly, the child is given several prompts to guide them to the answer before moving on. After completing both tasks, parents were debriefed on the greater research study's aims and provided $5 in gas compensation.

Once the parent and child have completed our lab tasks, we transcribe each video while looking for nonverbal cues between the reader and listener. Multiple research assistants in our lab analyze and transcribe this video data to ensure interrater reliability for the most comprehensive analysis of these important interactions.

Once I had divided up differing observed scaffolding phrases into each of the five categories, I was left with my five measures. One minor change that was made during my coding process was changing 'elicitation then definition' to correction to ensure a better understanding of how each scaffolding term is different from another. Phrases and interactions I decided to leave out of this study included: "Find the word on this page that starts with grr," asking the child to count how many almonds were on the tree, speaking about other topics not related to the story, or asking the child to sit down/pay attention. While some of these are viable scaffolding techniques, there was not enough data to include them as a separate measure in my study.

Results

Vocabulary learning, as described earlier, was tested through a post-reading test to determine what words, if any, a child learned while participating in joint book reading with their parent. Through statistical analysis, I found no significant effect on most scaffolding terms I assessed in this study.

In this study, I used an ANOVA analysis to compare all five scaffolding techniques and the three global measures: number of words spoken, number of turns taken, and target word frequency. These results are reflected in Table 2 and Table 3. I also used partial correlations with

each scaffolding technique and the global data information compared to the target and control

total scores, as seen in Tables 4,5,6, and 7.

Table 2. ANOVA Between All Scaffolding Terms

	Df	Sum Sq	Mean Sq	F-Value	P-Value
Target	1	82.88	82.88	11.896	0.00154**
Elicitation	1	0.02	0.02	0.003	0.95457
Corrections	1	17.96	17.96	2.572	0.11800
Recall	1	0.01	0.01	0.001	0.97479
Real-Life Connections	1	27.23	27.23	3.900	0.05646
Definitions	1	0.94	0.94	0.134	0.71609
Residuals	34	237.42	6.98	-	-

Table 3. ANOVA Between Global Data

	Df	Sum Sq	Mean Sq	F-Value	P-Value
Target	1	82.88	82.88	11.085	0.00202
# of words	1	4.22	4.22	0.565	0.45712
# of turns	1	0.09	0.09	0.011	0.91556
Target Word Frequency	1	10.11	10.11	1.351	0.25267
Residuals	36	269.17	7.48	-	-

The target vocabulary words had better accuracy than the control words through the

post-reading test, with a P-value of 0.00154 (Table 2). Target vocabulary terms had a mean of

8.619048 and a standard deviation of 3.089922, while control vocabulary terms had a mean of

5.809524 and a standard deviation of 2.249868. This means that children were more likely to

name pictures of target words more often than control terms. This is an expected result of the

study, as familiarity and learning processes allow children to recognize words and pictures they have seen recently.

The scaffolding technique of real-life connections produced a marginally significant effect on vocabulary learning (P = 0.05646), while all other techniques did not produce any significant results. Each method was mutually exclusive of the others. This is congruent with previous research on scaffolding terms, relating an unknown vocabulary word to something the child already knows. This allows for the best vocabulary learning out of my five scaffolding techniques.

Looking at the global data results, I found none of my measures significantly correlated with picture naming results in this research study. The total number of words (P= 0.45712), the total number of turns taken (P= 0.91556), and the target word frequency (P= 0.25267) were all insignificant.

Table 4. Global Data Partial Correlation with Target Total (top half includes p-values)

	# of turns	# of words	TW frequency	T-total
# of turns	-	0.001345558	0.7846631	0.9161592
# of words	0.68042364	-	0.3624870	0.5161919
TW Frequency	0.06717709	0.2213326	-	0.9159330
T-total	-0.02590610	0.1587723	0.02597624	-

Table 5. Global Data Partial Correlation with Control Total (top half includes p-values)

	# of turns	# of words	TW frequency	C-total
# of turns	-	0.001235629	0.8145140	0.9486264
# of words	0.68414517	-	0.3184146	0.7392608
TW frequency	0.05769461	0.24189194	-	0.1716894

C-total	-0.01585739	0.08178097	-0.32706377	-

Table 6. Scaffolding Data Partial Correlation with Target Total (top half p-value)

	Elicitation	Correction	Recall	RL Conn.	Definition	T-total
Elicitation	-	0.5807484	0.6311564	0.6481332	0.0678634	0.5004174
Correction	0.1442329	-	0.5418545	0.1746168	0.4265440	0.3268430
Recall	-0.1255413	0.1591221	-	0.6517708	0.3324961	0.7598113
RL Conn.	0.1193786	0.3453137	-0.1180660	-	0.5045448	0.2394650
Definition	-0.4529691	0.2064806	-0.2503375	0.1738608	-	0.5261632
T-total	0.1755220	0.2531846	0.0801346	-0.3015680	0.1652621	-

Table 7. Scaffolding Data Partial Correlation with Control Total (top half includes p-values)

	Elicitation	Correction	Recall	RL Conn.	Definition	C-total
Elicitation	-	0.1662506	0.3765275	0.7981087	0.0374192	0.1115345
Correction	0.3517009	-	0.2238875	0.1149531	0.1424239	0.0504848
Recall	-0.2290522	0.3112978	-	0.3558833	0.2088758	0.2008234
RL Conn.	-0.0670792	0.3966465	-0.2388460	-	0.9555739	0.2086991
Definition	-0.5078403	0.3711741	-0.321093	0.0146246	-	0.2067171
C-total	-0.4001052	0.4812586	-0.3265367	-0.3212112	-0.3225390	-

As reflected in Tables 4, 5, 6, and 7, no meaningful significant values were reported between scaffolding and target total values. There were some significant values between scaffolding and control total; however, this is likely a coincidence as none of the terms tested under control total were presented during the reading. This could also reflect words the child knew prior to the appointment. The only marginally significant value reflected my ANOVA

values with Real Life Connections with a p-value of 0.2394650. Overall, these findings are consistent with other data analyses I have conducted during this paper: the scaffolding terms are not significantly correlated with the total number of vocabulary terms correctly guessed in the post-reading vocabulary task.

Qualitative Data

Through my experience transcribing videos and facilitating the post-reading vocabulary game, I have encountered many children who were disinterested in reading or the test afterward. While reading, some children would crawl around on the couch, make comments about other things in the room besides the books, and fidget. These children tended to respond similarly in the vocabulary task after reading by saying "I don't know" when asked what something was or looking to their parents for assistance. Parents tried to keep their disinterested children on track by engaging them, which only sometimes had results. These actions reflect a lack of interest in reading the books and learning through scaffolding techniques that the parent might still impose. An example from my data transcriptions was when a child was climbing on the couch instead of listening to their parent read. The parent multiple times asked the child to sit down, pay attention, and listen. These requests often worked for a few pages into the story before they began to repeat the same actions. Child fussiness was a common factor in many of the participant data points.

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Discussion

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There are various explanations for the insignificant results found throughout the study. My study included 21 participants, which is a relatively small dataset. A larger data set typically allows for more reliable results that increase statistical significance, especially for my study since my global measures have been proven significant in many studies before mine (Lim & Cole, 2002)

Age is also an important factor when discussing my results. With participants ranging from four to six years of age, children tend to learn differently throughout this age span in many ways, such as peer interactions (van Geert & Steenbeek, 2005), nonverbal cues (Ard & Beverly, 2004), book genre (Nyhout & O'Neill, 2013), and others depending on the child and their learning style. However, no matter the age, reading proficiency depends on the child. Parents often shape how they teach by their child's experiences and abilities. Late talkers and language learners are common factors in young children. Studies have shown that children who are late talkers typically do not benefit from traditional shared storybook reading (Penno et al. 2002). One study looked at storybooks for young children who fell into the literacy gap and read books where they directly gave a child vocabulary terms and definitions within the reading (Coyne et al., 2004). These children had higher vocabulary retention than those reading typical storybooks. A child's age does not directly correlate with their vocabulary acquisition level, so it is important to observe participants who do not fall under the category of being on track.

We also experience a variety of differing personalities and moods both during reading and during our tests. I observed children who were bored and unresponsive during reading and also children who were engaged and enjoyed the task. These differences can incredibly affect responses in the post-reading vocabulary test. Four of the participants who were removed from my study fussed out or did not complete their vocabulary task, and many others were unresponsive during this time. Uninterested children tend to give incorrect answers purposively or "I don't know" to get through the vocabulary task quicker due to disinterest.

It has been shown that book type, whether a narrative, no narrative, or word books, impacts the different ways parents should implement scaffolding techniques to better support their child in language learning (Fletcher & Finch, 2014). Since our books were created using AI

generation and not with a specific genre, aside from the criteria that they are children's books, most of the stories had similar characters and plot lines. A mix of differing genres and main characters could be a great addition to a similar study.

It is important to remember that all children learn differently, and parents will adapt to their child's needs. One potential cause for the lack of statistical significance throughout my study could be because parents scaffold to the amount their children need. Parents who participated in little to no scaffolding could be confident in their child's reading and comprehension ability. Just because there is little to no extra interaction between parent and child during the reading process does not mean the child does not understand what is happening around them. Future studies could include participants whose parents did not participate in any scaffolding process to understand this point better.

It is interesting to note that little research has been done yet on AI-generated books, as this is a new topic. However, even though each book was AI-generated, parents seemed to use the same scaffolding techniques as they would have on books written by humans. This is a simple point but could lead to more research on this topic.

Limitations

One potential limitation of my study was the lack of a pretest. The children who participated in this study had a variety of backgrounds, schooling types, and spoke other languages. Before coming into our research lab, there was no way to tell if a child knew any of our control or target words. Some target words were obscure and likely are not part of a child's vocabulary, such as bugle or grove, while others might have been learned prior, such as almond or chimpanzee. However, a pretest would potentially sensitize children to the vocabulary terms studied, causing carry-over effects. This would cause the child to perform higher on the

post-reading vocabulary test than in my study, where they were not exposed to the words before reading.

Our study also included participants specifically in and around Boulder County. Boulder Valley School District is one of the top school districts in the state of Colorado, which could skew our sample to have more advanced vocabulary learners. This sample would be more representative if it included various participants from around the state and in different school districts.

Future Directions

Technology and AI are ever-changing. Future studies can and will include more advanced forms of technology to better assist children, their parents, and educators in increasing vocabulary retention. More research can and should be done to pinpoint more effective ways to teach vocabulary terms and participate in shared book reading through joint attention. More research should continue on all aspects of my study and with a more diverse participant set. We must further our understanding of learning and language acquisition so all children can succeed. Language skills are essential at all stages of life and begin with these fundamental skills taught through shared reading and interactions between the child and a trusted adult.

Future studies could also examine parents who participate in scaffolding in other languages. Multiple participants were dropped from my study due to the different languages used. Most of these parents read to their children in English but then spoke about the story and target vocabulary words in a different language. This area has little research, although this is likely a common trend in many households.

Conclusion

Overall, while my findings were insignificant, it is important to note that joint attention and shared book reading have been proven to be incredibly important factors in child learning. It is critical to continue researching and understanding more about language learning and vocabulary acquisition to support our future generations best. New ways of learning and teaching are constantly being tested to maximize a higher level of learning.

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