

ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

THE IMPACT OF READING ON CHILDREN'S COGNITIVE AND LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

Literature has always been regarded as one of the best methods available that can positively influence the development of young preschool and kindergarten children, but also older school kids. However, in order for it to make a significant impact, we need to make sure that the content that is being read is appropriate for the age of the children we are reading to. If young children are exposed to adult literature or such that they cannot understand at their language level, it does not help their language improvement and development. In order for literature to make a full impact on both language and cognitive development, we need to use appropriate materials to reach satisfying results, in this case, genres which have been specifically crafted for the language level of the targeted audience. The aim of this paper was to explore the impact of reading to children (specifically literature designed for their language level) by doing a replication study based on the paper done by Fekonja et al. (2007), analyse the results and compare the two classes on a language measurement scale in order to see the impact of literature on language development. The results showed a significant difference in language development between the two groups, favouring the experimental group, which reinforces the importance of incorporating systematic reading of children's literature into educational practices.

Keywords: literature, cognitive development, language development, children, story-telling, children's literature, young adult literature



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1. Introduction

When we are born, we are often regarded under the metaphor of a “blank slate”, meaning that everything that we learn, gain and experience shapes us to evolve into the high functioning adults that we are today. On our way of development, there are different paths we can take in order to achieve the main goal, which is full mental and physical development. There are several ways in which this can be achieved, especially considering how impactful children are during their developmental period.

A special significance in this period of development is given to literature, specifically children's books. Studies done by Pellegrini (1980) and Browne (1999) have all proved the influence of these books on cognitive, language and social development, along with establishing academic skills, in children. This literature is also said to be used as the basis for children's moral thinking (Biskin & Hosskisson, 2014). In her book *“Developing Language and Literacy 3-8”*, Browne (1996) gives a review of the contributions of children's literature in different developmental fields, such as intellectual and social. She notes that well written children's books should have similar effects and opportunities like those of adult texts such as experiencing a wide range of emotions, the chance to learn something new and engage the reader's attention the entire time. For social development, children's books should give opportunities for them to analyse the nature of society, explore social relationships, give different views and opinions of the world and express different cultures, traditions and values. In the fields of intellectual and linguistic development they should make ideas accessible, have deeper meanings than what is shown, give new knowledge and understanding ideas, give them an opportunity to see different writing structures and writing styles and demonstrate the power of language.

In order for children to properly develop these functions, their teachers and parents need to understand the importance of their clear comprehension of the text, therefore, taking special care in giving them age appropriate texts they will be able to understand without any confusion. If we were to give children of the age of six a text that is meant for adults, while they are able to read through it, it is not likely they will be able to understand what is being talked about considering that it is meant for someone whose reading comprehension is on a higher level than their own. We need to be careful

with this because we will not be able to achieve much if the literature that children read is not appropriate.

Literacy, from the point of view of language development should be seen as a part of a continuum that starts at a very young age. This early development of literacy is the footing on which children keep building on with each new experience influenced by their previous ones. There is no specific age where this development starts, considering that children start establishing it even before their school life, impacted by the life around them such as the house and communities they live in. However, it is further worked on and is helped flourish by their work in schools and of course, books they are given to read.

The aim of this paper is to explore the effect of reading on children's language and cognitive development through comparison of two groups, one of which was exposed to reading while the other had continued their activities with no change in curriculum and completely skipping the exposure to reading. This paper is a replication study based on the study done by L. M. Umek, U. Fekonja, S. Kranjc and P. L. Musek in 2007, in which they in detail reviewed and tested how this could affect young learners.

2. Literature Review

After reading and studying different research papers on this specific topic, there are some conclusions that we can reach based on the previous research done on the topic.

Syntax, the study of arranging words into sentences, is one of the more convoluted topics of development when it comes to children. Palermo and Molfese (1972) were the first to discover that children do not have advanced command over these rules as it was once believed to be. This was further supported by Loban (1976) who expanded that the lack of these syntactic skills may cause further problems when it comes to children expressing themselves orally. Complicated structures of grammar and syntax may even lead to problems of reading comprehension. However et al. (1981) presented a four step cycle in developing syntax in children by using writing, oral activities and most of all, reading. The biggest part in the reading process is based on children's literature. Children are given books to read with target structures they want to focus on. Healey (1978) and Stotsky (1975)

were the first ones to recommend using children's literature in order to introduce them to complex structures. The further examination of this program has shown that many literature books, especially children's books, can be used to directly improve the syntactic comprehension in children. Fletcher and Reese (2005) emphasised that reading introduces kids to intricate sentence forms and various grammatical structures. By observing, children absorb the principles of constructing sentences, which enhances their capacity to create grammatically accurate sentences. This literature can play a very important role in acquiring the necessary skills for syntactic competence.

Children's literature, according to Hoskisson and Biskin (1979), can also be used for developing moral thinking in younger generations. When we use appropriate stories based on what group of kids we are examining, we can help them in analysis of the moral dilemmas that the characters are experiencing, then go on to discuss the choices that they had made and whether they would have done the same or something completely different. This encourages them to think about alternate solutions and not only helps them with their moral development, but also their problem solving skills. Their paper further went on, about how we can use these stories and books to help children develop based on Lawrence Kohlberg's stages of moral development. Many recent studies have supported this claim. Mol et al. (2018) propose that dialogic reading, with discussions about characters' motivations and emotions, supports children's prosocial behaviour which is an important aspect of moral development. Moreover, Yang et al. (2020) found that exposing children to prosocial themes in picture books was linked with higher levels of prosocial behaviours such as helping and sharing.

Kohlberg in his book *Child Psychology and Childhood Education* (1987) conducted a survey in which he expressed the links that literature has with language and thoughts, both philosophical and developmental. Along with him, both Vygotsky (1981) and Piaget (1984) stressed the importance of challenging the thoughts of children in order to improve them through literature. More recently, Dehaene et al. (2015) and Hutton et al. (2017) have emphasised that neuroimaging indicates that reading enhances neural connections linked to language processing, visual imagination, and conceptual understanding. These neural adaptations bolster overall cognitive functions and reasoning skills. Additionally, engaging in reading

tasks, particularly those with intricate storylines and thought-provoking questions, aids in the development of self-regulation in children. This entails their capability to regulate emotions, focus, and conduct themselves with reduced reliance on parental supervision (Dore et al., 2018).

Krashen (1981) was one of the most important figures to emphasise the importance of reading for language acquisition. He theorised that language acquisition occurs through exposure to comprehensible input just beyond the learner's current proficiency level, emphasising the significance of extensive reading. Similarly, the Natural Approach, developed by Krashen and Tracy Terrell (1983), stresses the importance of creating a language-rich environment in which learners will acquire the target language naturally. However, he highlighted reading in terms of exposure to input rather than being active participants, which is something he was criticised for.

However, according to Dillon (1988), we should try and include the children in the discussions as much as possible in order to let them develop their own thoughts and opinions on what they have read. Through a study that he did in an American senior high school, during lessons which were based on a book that was read in class, the teacher was the one that ended up asking the most questions throughout the class. In total, he found that teachers ask about 80 questions an hour but only 11 students asked questions in the span of 27 lessons. Tizard and Hughes (1984) ended up finding the same pattern in nursery schools, and linked them to the previously mentioned Kohlberg's stages of moral development.

While school setting is important when it comes to development, home setting proved to be another key element. Duskin Feldman et al. (2001) have conducted research in which they followed children whose caregivers read to them and those who did not. They concluded that the frequency and the manner they are reading to the child has a positive influence on them, including their language competence and reading. Those children who were read to by their parents also learn to read early. This type of reading out loud allows for easier establishment of social interaction, emotional intimacy and the ability to use language in different situations. Dombey (1983) has also found that those parents who had read to their children helped them with their understanding of different words along with help in differentiation in different intonations

and tones of words. He also went on to emphasise the importance of reading for the metalinguistic development in younger generations. Likewise, Senechal and LeFevre (2014) five-year longitudinal study supports those findings, with shared reading in the home having a significant positive impact on children's vocabulary, decoding skills, and overall reading ability over time.

Types of literature for children and their history

When it comes to the types of literature that we should expose children to, children's and young adult literature are the two genres that have been used the most, considering that they were specifically made for children and with their proficiency, literacy and development in mind. There is a lot of debate and talk among scholars on the difference between these two terms. In order to proceed with the rest of the research, we should first define these two terms and highlight the most important differences in them.

Grenby (2014) in his book "The origins of children's literature" says that the first modern children's book appeared in mid-18th-century England. Influenced by John Locke and his theories of childhood innocence was what inspired the developing middle-class to create the concept of childhood. Grenby went further on to explain that the publishers of those times began to create books designed for the pleasure of younger readers as their specific audience. One of these authors was Mary Cooper, who wrote what is today considered the first known nursery rhyme collection under the name *Tommy Thumb's Pretty Song Book*.

A *Little Pretty Pocket-Book* is the book that is widely considered as the very first modern children's book. It was the first publication aimed for the enjoyment of younger readers, and it included traits that would appeal to them such as rhymes, pictures and even interactive games to get them involved in the reading. It was small, smaller than the normal sized books meant for adults and were coloured with bright, outstanding colours in order to appeal to children. Something like that was quite new in the publishing industry, started by the publishing company Newbery, which were the beginning of toy books which became popular in the next century (Lundin, 1994).

Jean-Jacques Rousseau was another researcher who influenced the development of this

genre. He insisted that this genre should develop naturally, and this idea to appeal to the things that children enjoy widely spread in writers. The Brothers Grimm also rose to fame in Germany, as they published traditional fairy tales. Because of these, more modern and realistic children's literature books were looked down upon, which urged the spread of the more traditional stories. Hans Christian Andersen is also one of the pioneers of children's literature, who travelled through Europe and gathered many, well-known fairy tales and created his own, new stories under the genre.

Now, when we mention young adult literature, many people are quite confused on what this term represents and what it encompasses. This genre of literature was created for audiences from twelve to eighteen years of age, they focus on youth and they were developed to make the transition from children's to adult literature less severe. There has been quite some confusion on what fits this label and this confusion has led teachers and parents alike to consider young adult literature nothing more but cheap, penny novels that you can find in grocery stores. Another main point of young adult literature is to get adolescent readers into reading with topics that relate to them such as first love, relationships and problems regarding identity. One of the first books under this genre is *The Catcher in The Rye* by Salinger, J. D. (1991), which is considered the pioneer of the genre to this day.

Storytelling

A very important factor in all of these books, one that they all share when analysed in more detail, is storytelling. The reason why storytelling is so important when talking about children's literature is how much it helps the younger readers, who are still not as developed as adults, to understand things in a clearer way. Not only that, it makes the words on the paper come alive, therefore making it more interesting than if we were to present them with facts. It appeals to their different preferences towards learning and even their personalities, as not all children are the same as most adults like to think. The act of storytelling is able to ensure that even the shyest students who do not talk too much are involved in what is happening.

There are two ways in which we can express storytelling and those are with narration or pictured sequences of events that we show to the audience, in this case children. It is believed by some researchers that this is one of the vital factors that

will allow children to draw their own conclusions and messages, understand different situations and sequence of events and help them with the mental image of the story they have in their heads. They should be allowed to create stories and tell them to the class in order to work on their language and cognitive growth. The act of storytelling is influenced by the books children read at this time, as it gives them ideas for their own stories and tales which will then improve their development and imagination. Fein (1995) said that the stories they create at first will be simple, not supported by any existing rules for story writing, nor will they have a specific message, problem that has to be solved, the goal the characters have to reach or even the resolution at the end. At first, their stories will only consist of a series of events followed by another and so on. He went on to say that their storytelling takes a turn when they reach the age of four, which is when they begin to include information which is deemed necessary for their stories to be considered literary works. This is the age where they go through most of their development and begin to understand and accept concepts which may have been arbitrary or unknown to them. They start to think about different problems their characters may face and how they will solve those problems. The character's thoughts, emotions and actions also become important and rather than the story just being sequence of events told in a specific order without any stakes or problems arising, it will start turning into a solid piece of work that has its distinct problems, goals, resolutions and message that it wants to get across to the reader.

Considering this is a very formative age, it is where children's and young adult literature is most important. It is crucial for parents and most of all, teachers, especially those in kindergarten, to have regular and pre-planned storytelling and reading hours where they will devote themselves to introducing their students to selected literature. Of course, they have to make sure that the books they have chosen are age appropriate and match the level of competence they have at that point in time. The literature chosen should also have an impact on the general development of their language competence and storytelling analysis.

3. Method

Participants

This study included 30 children aged five to seven years. They are divided into two classes

of students, one of which will be the experimental group (exposed to a programmed and systematic reading of children's books) and the other will be the controlled group (their activities were carried out as usual without much, or any difference to the official curriculum). The structure of the sample is as follows:

Table 1.
Sample structure

	Children's average age	Number of children (by gender)
Experimental group	5;7 years	14 (9 boys, 5 girls)
Controlled group	5;7 years	16 (9 boys, 7 girls)

The children in the sample come from the same private primary school institution, and all of them are attending first grade. The school follows the Cambridge Primary English Curriculum and all instruction is done in English, despite the students knowing and speaking one native language. Most of the children have started school with either some prior knowledge of English, while some were still unfamiliar with it. The books read to them were in English. At the point of this study, despite some children not being able to fully express themselves in English, all of them were able to understand it without hindrance.

Research questions

The study was driven by three main research questions, serving as a roadmap for the investigation.

R1: Does exposure to programmed and systematic reading of age-appropriate literature influence language development in young children?

R2: How does exposure to programmed and systematic reading of age-appropriate literature influence language development in young children?

R3: To what extent does the introduction of age-appropriate literature affect children's ability to comprehend and retell stories?

Materials and instruments

To test the children's language development, the Junior Oral Language Screening Tool was used (Britain, Hunt, & Keany, 2003). The scale consists of three parts and measures development in vocabulary, pragmatics (social language), and grammar. However, the main focus is on expressive language while receptive language can be evident from the way specific questions are answered. Speech sounds are not included in this tool.

Along with this, an unstandardized test of retelling a story was used in order to understand the language comprehension of the students. The story that was used in the test was Rapunzel in production (narrated and animated) of Little Fox Stories (2023) on their official YouTube Channel. The focus of this test was the number of sentences the children used, how well they recalled the events of the story and the structural complexity of the sentences they used. The structural complexity refers to specifics such as retelling the events in chronological order, using time and space specifications, relations between the characters and causal relations.

For the experimental group, the teacher used six different fairytale stories in the form of a video, with animated scenes and narrator. Along with this, four physical books were read to the students over the span of three months.

4. Procedure

In the experimental group, two times a week the children were shown a video of the fairytale, which would span for the next week or two due to the length of the video. Each video was separated into chapters. After each chapter, the teacher would pause the video and ask children various questions about what they had just watched, ranging from recalling the events of the story to drawing their own conclusions or offering their own opinions about the work. All other activities also continued as usual. This systematic reading of books continued for three months, two times a week. In the control group, the teacher worked strictly by the curriculum and there were no extra reading activities.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data collection for the study was conducted in two separate ways, quantitative and qualitative. The quantitative data collection was done through a language screening tool. At the end of the semester, both the experimental and

control groups were tested based on the Junior Oral Language Screening Tool. Each child was individually taken and asked questions presented in the screening tool. The screening tool tested children in vocabulary, social language and grammar. For each correct answer, the child was awarded one point with fifty-one points in total.

For the second qualitative part, the students were all individually shown a short story, similar to the ones that they have seen, heard and watched during their entire semester in the case of the experimental group. In the case of the control group, this was the first time they were exposed to such reading material. After the children were finished, they were asked comprehension questions based on what they had seen in order to recall certain events, important details and characters from the story. These questions were administered orally and the students were audiotaped, after which the tapes were individually analysed. Special attention was paid to the recall of events, the language and pragmatics the students used to describe the event and the complexity of sentences used.

After collection, the quantitative data was analysed using SPSS programs of descriptive analysis and individual T-test, while qualitative data was transcribed from the aforementioned audiotapes and then analysed by comparing the results of both control and experimental groups.

5. Results

Quantitative analysis

The results gathered from the Junior Oral Language Screening Tool showed a difference between the experimental and control group and their overall test scores.

In order to analyse the results from both groups, an independent sample t-test was used in order to determine whether or not there is a significant difference between the results of the experimental and control groups. The results were coded for each student, with the experimental group being coded as '1' while the control group was coded as '2'.

Through the table of the group statistics, we can already see a difference between the two groups. The average test score for the experimental group was 39.2143, while the average test score for the control group was 25.000. The standard deviation of the experimental group was 8.45057,

while for the control group it was 9.41630. Lastly, the variation of the sample mean by chance was 2.25851 in the experimental group, but 2.35407 in the control group.

Table 2.

Group statistics of the experimental and control group

GROUP (1=Experimental, 2=Control)	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Experimental	14	39.2143	8.45057	2.25851
Control	16	25.0000	9.41630	2.35407

Table 3.

Independent Sample T-test for Experimental and Control Group

	F	Sig.	t	df	One-Sided p	Two-Sided p	Mean Difference	Std. Mean Difference
Equal variances assumed	.095	.760	4.325	28	<.001	<.001	14.21429	3.28665
Equal variances not assumed			4.357	27.975	<.001	<.001	14.21429	3.28665

When it comes to the independent sample t-test which was done through SPSS by putting all the student's scores and then analysed, first we can look at the Levene's Test for Equality of Variances. Because the significance level is 0.760, which is a greater value than 0.05, the null hypothesis of equal variances is not rejected and therefore we assume that the variances are equal between the groups and we will look at the results of the first row in the table.

The analysis of the independent sample t-test revealed that there is a statistically significant difference in the test scores between the two groups. In both instances, the two-tailed p-value is <.001 and since this value is less than the alpha level of 0.05, the null hypothesis is rejected once again and we conclude that the difference in the test scores between the two groups is statistically significant. Along with this, the mean difference between the groups was 14.21429 points.

Further analysis of the results showed that the experimental group demonstrated a high frequency of correct responses for questions regarding vocabulary and pragmatics (social

language). However, the percentage of correct responses for grammar questions ranged from 50% to 100% with mean scores between 1 and 1.5.

On the other hand, while the control group did demonstrate some percentages of correct responses, specifically regarding questions of pragmatics (social language), their percentages were lower than those of the experimental group. Overall, the control group performs less strongly than the experimental group on the JOLST, with lower mean scores and greater variability.

Additionally, the students were asked to name six animals out of memory, the only students that were not able to name all six were from the controlled group.

Qualitative analysis

To support the quantitative results, a qualitative analysis was also done with the children, in which they were asked to give their own interpretations and thoughts on the story. One example was selected from each of the two groups.

Experimental Group

T: *What happened with Rapunzel in the story?*

C: *Well, first she was a little girl. Her mom was sick so her dad got the... the... plant. I forgot what it is called.*

T: *It is like her name.*

C: *Rapunzel! It was from the witch and the witch got mad. She want to steal Rapunzel when she gets big. So, she takes her away from her parents when she gets big. But Rapunzel brings Prickle with her.*

T: *Who is Prickle?*

C: He was a bird but then the witch got mad and turned him into a hedgehog. But he is Rapunzel friend. The witch makes Rapunzel work for her. And she can't sing because the witch don't let her. And she can't learn magic. She can only make potions for the witch. And then... then they sell them at the market. Because the king... the king nema kose. Kako se to kaze?

T: The king has no hair, he is bald.

C: Yes, he has no hair! He buys potion to make his hair long.

T: What else happens?

C: Rapunzel spills the potion on herself. Her hair grows long, long and the witch get mad. She takes her to a big tower. Rapunzel can't leave and she is alone in the tower. But she mix potions for witch so she can sell at the market. And the prince, the prince is looking for Rapunzel. He hear her song in the tower! He wants to be Rapunzel friend. And he... he go up Rapunzel hair and they be friends. But witch! Witch get mad and she throw prince out of the tower and cut Rapunzel hair!

T: Oh, wow, that sounds awful! What happened after that?

C: Prickle turn back to bird and he help Rapunzel. He picked the hair and give it to her and she... she... (at this point, the child is showing tying motions with their hands) I forgot...

T: She tied...

C: She tied the hair! Together and then... then... she climb down and run away. She find the prince and he is hurt here (pointing at the side of their head) but his friend take them to the castle. The prince was sleeping because it hurt and Rapunzel sing for him. And then... he wake up! And him and Rapunzel and her mom and dad lived together, in the big castle and witch is gone.

The child from the experimental group demonstrated a detailed and coherent understanding of the story. They not only recalled key events but also provided additional details, such as the king's baldness and the potion-selling subplot. They required minimal support from the

teacher and were able to go into detail about the events of the story. The events that they described were in logical and chronological order with little to no variations. The narrative was coherent and well-organised, with a distinct beginning (Rapunzel's childhood and meeting the witch), a middle (Rapunzel's life in the tower and her work) and an end (escape from the tower and Rapunzel's happy ending).

They also displayed high engagement with the material by including smaller, less significant details such as Prickle and his transformation from a bird into a hedgehog, visiting the market and how Rapunzel helped the prince recover. This shows that they were able to grasp the source material fully, and understand it in its entirety, both the more significant and minute details.

The vocabulary usage is vast, varied and specific to the story which they have been told and they do not have a hard time remembering or using that specific vocabulary. The vocabulary is also quite advanced for their age, such as "bald", "tower" or "potions", however the child showed no problem in understanding those terms. They were used in order to provide specific information about the story. The child's use of descriptive language is also quite significant as they were able to emphasise the significance of some details with the words that they used, such as " Her hair grows long, long".

The child from the experimental group also shows usage of complex sentences and structures, showing further understanding of both the language and source material. In phrases such as "king nema kose" we see that despite not being able to remember the word which is used for somebody not having hair, the child is able to convey information they want to say and appropriately ask for help despite struggling with languages and displaying a good problem-solving ability. Rather than getting discouraged of not being able to remember a word in English, they instead asked in the language that was known to them and then easily followed and understood the teacher's help, continuing their recalling of the story with no problems. Despite, English not being their first language, they showed great use of grammar and tenses, occasionally making mistakes but with no change in clarity and understanding of the story telling.

Control Group

T: So, who is Rapunzel?

C: A girl.

T: And what is special about her?

C: She has long hair.

T: What else?

C: Her hair is very long. The witch steal her from her parents.

T: Why did she do that?

C: She... she take her... I don't remember.

T: That's okay. What else happens?

C: She goes to a tower with the witch.

T: Anything else? What happens in the tower and the witch? Can Rapunzel leave the tower?

C: No. She make potions.

T: Anything else? Was anyone there with her?

C: No. Wait... There was a... a mouse!

T: Was it a mouse? Or something else?

C: I... I don't know.

T: That's okay! Is there anything else you remember?

C: (shaking head 'no')

Unlike the child from the experimental group, the child from the control group is not able to recall the story and the details that have happened in the story. Their recount of the story is much briefer and way less detailed, with responses that were short and lacked specificity. Other than some of the most basic information, the child did not recall any events nor did they sort them in any chronological order. They remembered that Rapunzel had long hair that she was taken by the witch, but struggled when it came to remembering the reason why, what happened while she was in the tower or the involvement of any other side characters in the story. They needed to be prompted by the teacher

the entire time in order to try and think about some things that happened in the story. The structure of the recount was also less organised and much more fragmented, with a lack of a distinct beginning, middle and end. Key elements were missing and they struggled with the progression of the story.

The engagement of the child from the control group was very limited, shown by their inability to provide additional information on the details of the story. The child struggled to articulate what happened and often got discouraged or disconnected from the conversation, which led to the teacher having to prompt them to answer. This shows a lower engagement with the source material in comparison to the experimental group.

The vocabulary of the student from the control group was very limited in comparison to that of the experimental group. They used three to four terms which related to the story (girl, tower, long hair) and stuck to those, repeating them often with little to no variation. It also lacked specificity and detail about the character or events of the story. It was very much a broad representation of what had happened in the story. The descriptive language is minimal, with phrases which are very simple such as "she has long hair."

When it comes to grammar and the syntactic structure of the sentences the child from the control group used, they were very simple sentences with a lot of sentence fragments or incomplete sentences e.g. A girl. Similarly to the experimental group, the child also struggled with verb tenses, however at a much higher rate than the child from the experimental group. The use of pronouns and articles was also very minimal which furthermore simplified the sentences that the child worked with.

The overall narrative of the story was less coherent than the experimental group, with unconnected fragments and missing parts of the story. There was also no structure to the way that the student retold the story. Prompting from the teacher was needed, however even then, the child answered with minimal detail and engagement, without expanding the story narrative or even trying to do so by asking questions. The communication between the child and the teacher was also more passive, in the sense that the student had less indication of asking for help or even clarification when it came to struggling in certain parts. They simply stated that they did not understand or know

something, without further engagement or trying to seek answers.

To sum it up, the child from the control group faced challenges in recalling and articulating the storyline. Their responses were brief and lacked chronological order. The child struggled to recall specific events and details, often requiring prompts.

6. Discussion

The analysis of results indicates a significant difference in language development between the two groups, favouring the experimental group. Both sets of data analysis, qualitative and quantitative, show significant improvement in the case of the experimental group. In the case of the control group, the results were very much negative and showed little to no improvement in children's literacy skills among others. In this section, we will discuss the findings, their implications, and potential avenues for future research.

The quantitative results show a significant difference in language development between the experimental and controlled groups in the areas of vocabulary, grammar and pragmatics. The analysis of the Junior Oral Language Screening Tests, showed a clear difference between these two groups, which was then further proved and analysed through the independent samples t-test. The overall group statistics show that the experimental group scored significantly higher in these areas than the control group. The experimental group, exposed to systematic reading of children's books, demonstrated higher percentages of correct responses across most questions compared to the controlled group. This can be linked to the earlier mentioned Krashen's (1981) theory of comprehensible input which was focused on the significance of extensive reading and how exposure to a language-rich environment can help further a child's language development.

Furthermore, these results can be used in order to answer the first proposed research question on whether or not exposure to programmed and systematic reading of age-appropriate literature influences language development in young children. We can see through the quantitative results that there is a significant influence and correlation between planned systematic readings to young children, as the experimental group has notable improvement in relation to the control group, in all the areas of vocabulary, grammar and

pragmatics, which is then further supported with the results from the qualitative analysis.

The qualitative analysis of narrative responses provides further insights into the impact of systematic reading of age-appropriate literature. The results are in accordance with the findings of both Dehaene et al. (2015) and Hutton et al. (2017) which commented on the neural connections which are enhanced through reading and how it improves all language processing, visual imagination, and conceptual understanding. Through the analysis of the qualitative results, we can see that the experimental group has been able to significantly better recall the events of the story they have read along with being able to tell certain details, tell it in a chronological order but also use complex vocabulary and sentence structures within the retelling. These results can also be related to the Fein (1995) study of storytelling and how children as they grow older are able to understand and accept new concepts, think about certain problems about the characters and are able to tell a story in specific order, not a sequence of events. The experimental group supports this narrative, as they were able to thoroughly recall the story and tell it to the teacher in a series of chronological events. They also showed awareness to the problems that the characters faced such as the princess in the story spilling the potion and her hair growing long, or the father stealing the flower which was needed for the mother to get better.

On the other hand, the storytelling is very much lacking in the case of the control group, and in case of Fein's (1995) storytelling theory, they are still not at the proper level where they are aware of certain structures, despite being of age to do so. Their narrative was incoherent and fragmented, unable to recall specific events in chronological order or even provide enough details to form a comprehensive story retelling.

We can use these results in order to answer the second research question of how this exposure influences the language development of young children. Through the results we can state that their language development in all three areas of grammar, vocabulary and pragmatics is supported by both quantitative and qualitative results. In the case of vocabulary, through the quantitative results we can see that the experimental group had the highest correct percentage rate, while the control group was significantly lower. Through the qualitative analysis, we can see that the child from

the experimental group was able to use specific and complex vocabulary in relation to the context of the story, with little to no repetition. They also used descriptive language with clear and detailed descriptions of both the story, characters and the events. On the other hand, the control group was not as successful with their usage of vocabulary being rather repetitive and simple, with common terms often used. There was little to no variety in the language that was used, along with specificity which accounted for a very broad and not detailed recollection of the story which felt lacklustre, especially when compared to the results of the experimental group.

When it comes to grammar, the child from the experimental group used syntactic structures which were more complex, along with showing an understanding of the story. They were able to recall details and explain them fully. Despite making some mistakes in the grammar tenses, this did not affect the clarity of storytelling and everything was easily understandable. The control group was not as successful as they used less complicated and complex sentences, with one or two words and simply stated what they remembered from the story. Unlike the experimental group, which retold the story in engaging details, the control group retold the story in sequences without connecting the events to each other. They also lacked any significant details and were not able to recall any minor details within the story.

The comparison of the pragmatics also showed significant engagement from the experimental group, who asked clarifying questions and despite some language barriers, sought help from the teacher in order to fill in the gaps in their knowledge. The control group showed less engagement, with no questions for clarification or asking for help to further their retelling of the story, but rather simply stating they did not understand or not know a certain event or order of events. This supports the emphasis of Fletcher and Reese (2005), which stated that reading introduces kids to intricate sentence forms and various grammatical structures which is shown in both the examples of the experimental and control groups.

The last research question of to what extent does the introduction of age-appropriate literature affect children's ability to comprehend and retell stories can also be answered through the previous analysed results. There is a significant difference in how the experimental group recalled the events

of the story and how the control group did. As mentioned previously, the experimental group was able to recall specific details in complex structures and sentences with continuous engagement with the teacher, while the control group was only able to give simple and not complex sentences, with little to no reference to specific detail or vocabulary. This suggests that a structured and consistent reading positively influences language development in young children, which also supports the research's hypothesis that the exposure to programmed and systematic reading influences language development in young children in a significant way.

The study revealed challenges in recall and articulation within the control group which furthermore shows support to the research hypothesis that exposure to age-appropriate literature affects children's ability to comprehend and retell stories to a great extent. This highlights the potential limitations of traditional curriculum-based approaches that may not adequately prioritise language development through literature. It suggests a need for curriculum adjustments to include dedicated time for systematic reading and comprehension activities.

The findings align with the replicated study by Fekonja et al. (2007) that emphasises the role of literature in language development and cognitive growth. The positive outcomes observed in the experimental group suggest that educators and parents should prioritise incorporating age-appropriate literature into children's learning environments.

Conclusion

This research investigates how reading, specifically children's books, plays a crucial role in shaping the minds of young learners and affects their cognitive and language development. The paper aimed to contribute to this understanding through a replication study of Fekonja et al. (2007), comparing two groups of children—one exposed to programmed reading of age-appropriate literature and the other continuing curriculum-based activities without this exposure. The research questions and hypotheses guided our exploration into the influence of literature on language development, comprehension, and storytelling abilities.

Our research design incorporated a sample of 30 children aged five to seven, divided into an

experimental group (exposed to a programmed and systematic reading of children's books) and a controlled group (their activities were carried out as usual without much, or any difference to the official curriculum). The Junior Oral Language Screening Tool and a story retelling task were employed for quantitative analysis, revealing a statistically significant difference favouring the experimental group. Additionally, qualitative analysis of narrative responses highlighted the deep understanding and logical coherence revealed by the experimental group compared to the controlled group. The findings suggest that a structured and systematic approach to reading age-appropriate literature significantly influences language development in young children. The experimental group, exposed to regular storytelling sessions and curated reading materials, exhibited not only enhanced language skills but also a deeper comprehension of narrative elements.

In conclusion, this study reinforces the importance of incorporating literature into the educational landscape, with a particular emphasis on age-appropriate materials. The positive results observed in the experimental group underline the potential for literature, presented in a structured manner, to serve as a facilitator for cognitive and language development of young learners. Future research could explore the long-term effects of such interventions and further explain the specific aspects of literature that contribute most significantly to children's developmental milestones. Ultimately, recognizing the power of literature in shaping young minds is essential for educators, parents, and policymakers seeking to foster holistic development in the next generation.

Implications

The study's results highlight the importance of integrating systematic reading of children's literature into educational practices, especially in early childhood education. Teachers and parents should be encouraged to implement designed reading programs that expose children to age-appropriate literature, fostering not only language development but also narrative comprehension skills.

Future Research Directions

While this study provides valuable insights, there are suggestions for future research. Long-term studies could explore the continued effects

of systematic reading programs on language development throughout different stages of childhood. Additionally, investigations into the impact of various genres of children's literature, including young adult literature, could contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the subject.

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