

RESEARCH-TO-PRACTICE SUMMARY

Professional Development for Transitional Kindergarten Teachers of Dual Language Learners: Learning and Applying Scaffolded Dialogic Reading

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This research to practice paper summarizes a study on professional development in the form of in-situ coaching for transitional kindergarten (TK) DLL teachers as they implemented a practice known as scaffolded dialogic reading. The practice itself was effective at improving teachers' knowledge and competency in teaching DLLs, and coaching significantly increased this effect.

Keywords: dual language learners, dialogic reading, transitional kindergarten, teaching practices, professional development, coaching

Head Start teachers have access to very well designed, research-based guidance to develop a systematic approach to support preschool DLLs in the context of classrooms. This guidance is especially contextualized to fit in classrooms with one DLL child or many, when the classroom includes many different languages, and/or when the teachers' languages do not match the languages of the children. The findings from this research study illustrate a way in which teachers can be supported while implementing best DLL language practices in preschool classrooms with dual language learners.

Dialogic reading is a research-based practice with positive effects on children's language development (Hargrave & Sénéchal, 2000; Lonigan & Whitehurst, 1998; Valdez-Menchaca & Whitehurst, 1992). Vetted by the U.S. Department of Education's What Works Clearinghouse (2004) at the Institute of Educational Sciences, Dialogic reading studies have been published on the online Doing What Works website.

DLLs need additional support to facilitate their ability to make connections between prior knowledge and new concepts, ideas, and vocabulary in English (California Department of Education, 2013). To adapt dialogic reading for teaching DLLs, DLL language strategies are embedded in the original protocol to create a revised protocol called "scaffolded dialogic

reading” (see appendix). Using the scaffolded version, teachers can support DLL children’s language proficiency, regardless of the language of instruction. In a dual language approach, for example, teachers would use this version in their dialogic reading practice in both Spanish and in English.

While there is little literature on teacher professional development to meet the unique needs of young children, especially DLLs, the research affirms that teachers need effective training in evidence-based strategies that significantly improve children’s English language skills (Castro et al., 2013; Espinosa, 2010; Saunders et al., 2013). Research also indicates the importance of evidence-based support and reflection (Kohler, McCullough, & Buchan, 1995; Miller, 1994; Skiffington, Washburn, & Elliott, 2011). Additionally, newer research (Neuman and Cunningham, 2009) examines the impact of coaching on teachers’ knowledge of the language and literacy development of DLLs and related practices, and finds that typical sporadic and fragmented professional development trainings alone were ineffective, but achieved significant improvements when combined with instructional coaching (Neuman and Cunningham, 2009). Overall, the literature clearly indicates that coaching combined with sustained, high quality professional development is essential to support early childhood educators in developing young children’s language and literacy. Research, albeit scant, also supports the application of coaching with dialogic reading since positive effects have resulted from implementing dialogic reading practices through professional development in classrooms with DLL children (Blamey, Beauchat, & Sweetman, 2012; Cohen, Kramer-Vida, & Frye, 2012a).

The study presented here recognizes the findings of positive effects of dialogic reading and the need for support for teachers of DLLs and. It assesses the impact of in-situ professional development with and without coaching during the implementation of scaffolded dialogic reading.

Scaffolded Dialogic Reading Practice

Scaffolded dialogic reading extends across the original three stages, with a pre-level to help assess language skills. The practice begins with teachers setting up groups of three to five children (small groups are a foundation strategy for DLLs) and also sharing the storybook with families to. As in un-scaffolded Dialogic Reading Practice, teachers choose storybooks that are attractive, have a clear sequence of events, present a clear plot that gets resolved and fits in the context of a current theme/topic/project being studied. As preparation for scaffolded dialogic reading, support is needed for teachers in documenting and monitoring DLL children’s English language development and home language.

At the pre-level, teachers introduce the story, and present a short summary of what the story is about without giving the ending away. They ask focused questions showing two to three preselected pages in the storybook. These questions elicit children’s background knowledge and engage their language skills in the target language. With a child found to be at the initial stage of English language development, for example, the teacher needs to be able to ask questions that allow the child to participate over time at progressive stages of language development.

The first level focuses on vocabulary, and requires the teacher to prepare the lesson based on the individual children’s earlier responses (during the pre-level). In order to introduce new words, concepts and ideas, teachers use gestures, movement, clear explanations in the context of

the story, and connections with the children's own personal experiences. Additional strategies include bridging with the children's home language instead of using simultaneous translation, using the vocabulary in songs, poems, and extending them to play centers/activities. Using similar strategies, Level 2 focuses on building comprehension and expanding children's responses while Level 3 promotes children's retelling of stories and making connections with their lives and experiences.

The study summarized here measures the impact on participants with and without coaching support using the Observation Protocol for Academic Literacies (OPAL©) and the Dialogic Reading Teacher Survey (Lavadenz, Armas, & Matera, 2011). We found that data from classroom observations, teacher surveys, and coaching reflections indicate that initial implementation alone of scaffolded dialogic reading practices improved TK teachers' knowledge and oral language instructional strategies for teaching DLLs. Overall, quantitative data from the OPAL observations revealed mid-range ratings across the OPAL domains for both the coached and uncoached groups. Teachers who experienced coaching saw significantly greater improvement in tested areas of rigorous and relevant curriculum, connections, and comprehensibility.

Implications for Professional Development and Research

The findings stem from research with young DLLs and therefore apply to Head Start preschool programs where one third of the children enrolled nationwide are DLLs. Implications arise in two areas: (1) teacher professional development; and (2) research on language and literacy development of DLLs.

The study indicates that the duration and intensity of professional development in the form of coaching affects the depth of teacher learning and confidence. This supports Neuman's & Cunningham's (2009) finding that coaching as professional development "situated in practice", i.e., when embedded in classroom routines, appears to yield good results. The study also supports other work referenced above showing the value of evidence-based feedback. Facilitated by peers and coaches, coaching can make professional development effective for Head Start teachers implementing instructional practices for young DLLs. In-situ coaching needs to be ongoing and work progressively as teacher competencies improve. Time and flexibility for Head Start teachers to gather DLL children's language background experiences from families and assess individual language development in both home language and English before and throughout implementation. This will enable not only the practice itself, but the observations and reflections that are shared in coaching, and which are necessary for teachers to develop DLL instructional competencies.

The findings indicate that more research on language and literacy development would be beneficial in order to evaluate longitudinal effects of in-situ coaching. Additional research is needed that examines the impact of scaffolded dialogic reading on DLLs. Nested research designs could examine effects on teacher knowledge and skills, along with measures of the oral language and literacy development and growth of DLLs.

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