

The Effect of Interactive Book Reading Activities on Children's Print and Phonemic Awareness Skills

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Abstract

The purpose of the current study is to investigate the effect of interactive book reading activities on children's print and phonemic awareness skills. In the current study, the semi-experimental pretest-posttest control group design was used. The sampling of the study consists of 34 children attending independent kindergartens in the city of Kars. Of these 34 children, 17 were assigned to the experimental group and 17 were assigned to the control group. To the experimental group students, children's books were read three times a week for eight weeks in total through the interactive books reading method. The control group students; on the other hand, were read books through the traditional book reading method. In the analysis of the collected data, Mann Whitney U Test and for relational measurements, Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test was used. At the end of the study, it was found that the interactive books reading activities had significant effects of the development of the children's phonemic and print awareness skills.

Keywords: Interactive book reading, phonemic awareness, print awareness, pre-school period

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INTRODUCTION

The experiences gained by children in pre-school period affect their cognitive and socio-emotional development and provide the basis for reading and general academic achievement in the following years by improving their early literacy skills (Ergül, Akoğlu, Sarıca, Tufan and Karaman, 2015). One of the experiences provided to children in preschool period and affecting their early literacy skills is co-reading activities. According to Ergül, Sarıca, Akoğlu (2016), book reading activities, which children perform at home and school together with adults, are one of the intervention methods frequently used to develop early literacy skills. Oghi, Loo and Mizuike (2010) compared the neural activations of the children listening to stories from the video and those of the children to whom their mothers read stories and found that the children listening to their mothers had more neural activities in their frontal lobe responsible for the attention and linguistic development than the children watching videos.

There is a strong relationship between the quality of reading activities in the preschool education programs and children's linguistic and early literacy development (Justice and Pullen, 2003). When the related literature is examined, it is seen that the studies that emphasize the effects of the quality of book reading on children's early literacy skills draw attention to different book reading methods. According to Trivette and Dunst (2007), there are three methods to develop early literacy skills of pre-school children. These are, dialog-based book reading (interactive book reading), interactive collaborative book reading and collaborative book reading.

Interactive book reading is a book reading technique developed by Whitehurst et al. to develop children's linguistic and early literacy skills in the pre-school period by means of children's active participation and reciprocal collaboration. In this method of book reading, adults direct children to open-ended questions rather than close-ended questions, expand their answers by repeating them and use reinforcements according to the interests of children (Efe and Temel, 2018; Justice and Pullen, 2003; Lonigan, Anthony, Bloomfield, Dyer and Samwel, 1999).

Whitehurst et al. (1994) described the role of children and adults in interactive book-reading activities through the techniques called CROWD (Completion – Recall – Open-ended – Wh-questions - Distancing) and PEER (Prompt – Evaluate – Expand - Repeat). The technique abbreviated as CROWD includes activities such as asking children to define a term or sentence of a story, asking questions about characters or events, asking open-ended questions requiring children to describe pictures and to make guesses, asking 5N1K questions about the book, asking children to establish links with their own lives and the events. The PEER technique includes activities such as initiating the speech, checking the accuracy of the answers given by the child, expanding the child's answers using appropriate words or sentences, and asking for the repetition of the corrected or expanded responses. The main aspect that distinguishes interactive reading from other reading methods is that the roles of reader and listener are interchanged between children and adults during the reading. Adults ask questions as active listeners, encourage children to explain in more detail the events or pictures in the book and provide them with tips. Children are reinforced in line with their answers and adults expand their answers (Zevenbergen & Whitehurst, 2003).

Opel, Ameer and Aboud (2009); in their study conducted to explore the effect of the interactive book reading and the traditional book reading methods on preschoolers' vocabulary, found that a significant increase occurred in the vocabulary of the children who were read interactively while no change was observed in the vocabulary of the children exposed to the traditional book reading activities. Şimşek (2017) compared the interaction-based book reading, e-book reading and traditional book reading methods and calculated the receptive language, expressive language and total language scores of the participants. As a result of this study, the difference between the pretest and posttest mean scores of the children in the interaction-based reading group was found to be higher. While no difference was found between the pretest and posttest mean scores of the children in the e-book

reading group, the traditional method was found to have increased their receptive language mean score. Research on interactive book reading emphasizes that this method provides more gains than traditional book reading methods. In this context, reading activities in preschool educational institutions should be seen as a method that significantly affects early literacy skills rather than being perceived as a necessity of the curriculum. The use of interactive reading methods rather than traditional reading methods is important for supporting early literacy skills (Ergül et al., 2015). Interactive book reading significantly affects children's literacy experiences and attitudes in the following years by considerably improving their early literacy skills. Print and phonemic awareness is among the early literacy skills affected by the interactive book reading method. Phonemic awareness includes recognizing words, syllables, first sound, final sound and sound units (Strout, 2008). Children acquire phonemic awareness skills through books that are read to them and the interaction environment provided for them. Children who start to understand the structure of sounds can make a significant progress in the early literacy process. In order to support the development of early literacy skills in pre-school period, it is very important to understand the relation between written language and spoken language and to gain awareness about the sound units (Phillips, Menchetti and Lonigan, 2008).

Print awareness is the ability to understand the rules and functions of the written language. In the preschool period, children are expected not to read what has been written, but to learn the concepts of the written language and to develop awareness about writing (Justice and Ezell, 2004). Questions such as "What do children do when they take a book in their hands? Do they open it correctly? Do they start from the front face of the book? Do they look at the first page of the book? Are they interested in pictures or writings? Do they turn one page at a time? Where do they start the story? Where do they start reading? In which direction do they read?" are all related to print awareness skills (Clay, 2000). According to Justice and Sofka (2010), the components of print awareness are "book and writing order (name of the book, author, order of the pages and direction of the letter); meaning of the writing (function of the writing, environmental writings, and the concept of reading); letters (capital and lower-case letters, letter names, the concept of letter) and words (concepts related to words, short and long words, definition of the word)".

The related research emphasizes that in the interactive reading method, adults follow the writings in a book with their finger and voice the target sound units, which helps children to establish a connection between writing and reading, to recognize the sound properties of writing and words and that explanations made about the words before listening to a story contribute to children's learning vocabulary and promote their linguistic and vocabulary development (Ezell and Justice, Luo et al., 2014; 2000; Sim and Berthelsen, 2014; Wasik and Bond, 2001; Wing-Yin Chow, McBride-Chang, Cheung and Ce Chow, 2008; Zucker, Cabell, Justice, Pentimonti and Kaderavek, 2013).

In addition, studies that emphasize the effect of interactive book reading activities on language and early literacy skills of children in risk groups indicate that children at risk can perform similar to their peers in terms of literacy, reading comprehension and academic skills through these activities (Akoğlu, Ergül and Duman, 2014; Ergül et al., 2015; Fleury and Shwartz, 2017; Lonigan et al., 1999; Towson and Gallagher, 2016; Vally, 2012). Considering the relevant research, it is clear that the use of the interactive book reading method in pre-school period is important to support the multifaceted development of children. When the literature related to this subject in our country is reviewed, it is seen that research highlighting the effect of different intervention conditions and the family in the interactive book reading process comes to the fore. Determination the effects of the interactive book reading method used by teachers in pre-school education institutions is important to increase the diversity in the field and to shed light for further studies. In addition, conducting empirical studies on this subject will contribute to the widespread use of the interactive book reading method and active intervention programs instead of traditional book reading activities. In this regard, the purpose of the current research is to determine the effect of interactive book reading activities on children's print and phonemic awareness. To this end, answers to the following sub-questions were sought.

- Is there a significant difference between the pretest scores of the children subjected to the interactive book reading method and those of the children not subjected to this method?
- Is there a significant difference between the posttest scores of the children subjected to the interactive book reading method and those of the children not subjected to this method?
- Did the children's vocabulary and print awareness and phonemic awareness skills improve significantly after interactive book reading activities?

METHOD

Research Design

The current study employed the pretest posttest quasi experimental design with a control group. Experimental research allows exploring the effect of the differences created by the researcher on the dependent variable (Büyüköztürk, 2012). As the experimental and control groups were not randomly assigned and a match was sought between the pretest scores related to the dependent variable in the current study, the study can be defined as quasi-experimental. The independent variable of the current study is interactive book reading activities and the dependent variable is preschoolers' phonemic and print awareness skills.

Universe and Sampling of the Study

The universe of the current study is comprised of children attending state and independent pre-school institutions in the city of Kars in 2017-2018 school year. The sampling of the study consists of 34 children selected by means of the convenience sampling method. In the selected kindergarten schools, pre-test was administered and one of the classes with similar pre-test scores was assigned to the experimental group and another one was assigned to the control group. In both of the experimental and control groups, there are 17 students.

Data Collection Tools

The data in the current study were collected by using the "Phonemic Awareness Scale" and the "Pre-school Word and Print Awareness Evaluation Tool". The "Phonemic Awareness Scale" developed by Yangın, Erdoğan and Erdoğan (2008) aims to measure children's sensitivity towards sounds. The scale has five tasks each of which has seven items. While administering the 35-item scale, children are asked different questions. Each correct answer is assigned 1 point and each false answer is assigned 0 point. In order to evaluate the other dependent variable of the study; children's word and print awareness skills, the "Pre-school Word and Print Awareness Evaluation Tool" adapted to Turkish by Bayraktar (2013) was used. The evaluation tool consists of two parts which are concepts of writing (name of the book, front cover, back cover, title page, direction and function of writing and the concept of word and direction of the letter) and word recognition (short, long, initial, final letters, the number of words in a page, capital and lower-case letters, letter names, the concept of letter). For each part, a separate story book is used. Each correct answer is given 1 point and each false answer is given 0 point.

Data Collection and Analysis

In the kindergarten classes from the independent pre-school institution, the "Phonemic Awareness Scale" and the "Pre-school Word and Print Awareness Evaluation Tool" were administered as the pretest. Two classes with similar pretest scores were selected and one of them was assigned to

the experimental group and the other one was assigned to the control group. Considering the pre-reading stages of the interactive book reading method, a total of 24 books were selected to be read, three books each week, thus a total of 24 books in the 8-week period. The selected books were suitable for the development level of the students and for each book, the target words and sound units were determined. Then, the questions, examples and explanations were determined and the necessary physical arrangements were made. The seating of the children in the class was determined and then the children were introduced to the books. Via the open-ended questions, the children's guesses were elicited and then their answers were rearranged. During the reading process, the meanings of the target words were explained. The meanings of the target words were clarified with pictures and supplementary materials and examples that would be associated by the children with their own lives were presented. The other stages followed during the interactive book reading process were repetition of the meanings of the target words, making the story more relevant through past experiences, supporting phonemic and print awareness skills, asking 5N 1K questions, using repetitions and expansions and enhancing vocabulary with sentence completion. After the completion of the reading of the book, the story was summarized by using open-ended questions and through the activities, retention of the gains was reinforced (Ergül et al., 2016). In the experimental group, the interactive book reading activities were carried out by the researcher by following these stages for the 8-week period. No intervention was made to the control group; only traditional book reading activities were conducted. At the end of the 8-week period, both the experimental group and the control group were administered the "Phonemic Awareness Scale" and the "Preschool Word and Print Awareness Evaluation Tool" as the posttest. The collected data were entered into SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) program package. As the data did not show a normal distribution, non-parametric tests were used in the analysis process. In order to determine whether there is a significant difference between the participants' pretest and posttest mean scores depending on the group type, Mann Whitney U Test was used. In order to determine the effect of the interactive book reading activities on the children's word and print awareness skills and phonemic awareness skill, Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test was used.

FINDINGS

In this section of the current study, the findings are presented in the order of the sub-problems. Within the context of the first sub-problem of the study, Mann Whitney U Test was conducted to determine whether the children's receptive and expressive language skills vary significantly depending on the group variable and the results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. The Results of U Test Conducted to Determine Whether the Pretest Mean Scores Vary Significantly depending on the Group Variable

	Group	n	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	U	p
Word Awareness	Experimental	17	20,50	348,50	93,50	,070
	Control	17	14,50	246,50		
Print Awareness	Experimental	17	16,53	281,00	128,00	,561
	Control	17	18,47	314,00		

As can be seen in Table 1, there is no significant difference between the pretest mean scores taken by the experimental and control groups from the sub-dimensions of the Word and Print Awareness Evaluation Tool (word awareness: $U = 93,50$; $p > .05$; print awareness $U = 128,00$; $p > .05$). This shows that before the experimental intervention, the word and print awareness skills of the experimental and control group students were similar.

Table 2. The Results of U Test Conducted to Determine Whether the Posttest Mean Scores Vary Significantly depending on the Group Variable

	Group	n	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	U	p
Word Awareness	Experimental	17	25,71	437,00	5,00	,000
	Control	17	9,29	158,00		
Print Awareness	Experimental	17	25,21	428,50	13,50	,000
	Control	17	9,79	166,50		

As can be seen in Table 2, there is a significant difference between the posttest mean scores taken by the experimental and control groups from the sub-dimensions of the Word and Print Awareness Evaluation Tool (word awareness: $U= 5,00$; $p> .05$; print awareness $U= 13,50$; $p> .05$). When the mean ranks are examined, it is seen that the word and print awareness skills of the experimental group students subjected to the interactive book reading method are higher than those of the control group students. Thus, it can be argued that the interactive book reading method is more effective in enhancing children's word and print awareness skills.

Table 3. The Results of U Test Conducted to Determine Whether the Pretest Phonemic Awareness Mean Scores Vary Significantly depending on the Group Variable

	Group	n	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	U	p
Phonemic Awareness	Experimental	17	18,38	312,50	129,50	,601
	Control	17	16,62	282,50		

As can be seen in Table 3, there is no significant difference between the pretest mean scores taken by the experimental and control groups from the sub-dimensions of the Phonemic Awareness Test ($U= 129,50$; $p> .05$). This shows that before the experimental intervention, the phonetic awareness skills of the experimental and control group students were similar.

Table 4. The Results of U Test Conducted to Determine Whether the Posttest Phonemic Awareness Mean Scores Vary Significantly depending on the Group Variable

	Group	n	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	U	p
Phonemic Awareness	Experimental	17	25,00	425,00	17,00	,000
	Control	17	10,00	170,00		

As can be seen in Table 4, there is a significant difference between the experimental and control group students' posttest phonemic awareness mean scores ($U= 17,00$; $p> .05$). When the mean ranks are examined, it is seen that the phonemic awareness skills of the experimental group students subjected to the interactive book reading method are higher than those of the control group students. Thus, it can be argued that the interactive book reading method is more effective in enhancing children's phonemic awareness skills.

The results of Wilcoxon signed ranks test conducted to determine whether the children's pretest and posttest word and print awareness skills vary significantly are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. The Results of Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test Conducted to Determine whether the Children’s Pretest and Posttest Word and Print Awareness Skills Scores Vary Significantly

	Pretest- Posttest	n	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	z	p
Word Awareness	Negative Ranks	0	,00	,00	3,66	,00
	Pozitive Ranks	17	9,00	153,00		
	Ties	0	-	-		
Print Awareness	Negative Ranks	0	,00	,00	3,66	,00
	Pozitive Ranks	17	9,00	153,00		
	Ties	0	-	-		

As can be seen in Table 5, there is a significant difference between the participating children’s pretest and posttest word and print awareness mean scores ($z=3,66$, $p< .05$). When the mean ranks and sums of the difference scores are examined, it is seen that this difference is in favor of the posttest mean scores. Thus, it can be argued that the interactive book reading instruction has a significant effect on the development of the children’s word and print awareness.

The results of Wilcoxon signed ranks test conducted to determine whether the children’s pretest and posttest phonemic awareness skills vary significantly are presented in Table 6.

Table 6. The Results of Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test Conducted to Determine whether the Children’s Pretest and Posttest Phonemic Awareness Skills Scores Vary Significantly

	Pretest- Posttest	n	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	z	p
Phonemic awareness	Negative Ranks	0	,00	,00	5,025	,000
	Pozitive Ranks	33	17,00	561,00		
	Ties	1				

As can be seen in Table 5, there is a significant difference between the participating children’s pretest and posttest phonemic awareness mean scores ($z=3,66$, $p< .05$). When the mean ranks and sums of the difference scores are examined, it is seen that this difference is in favor of the posttest mean scores. Thus, it can be argued that the interactive book reading instruction has a significant effect on the development of the children’s word and print awareness.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In the current study, examining the effect of interactive book reading activities on children’s phonological and print awareness, it was found that the phonological and print skills of the children subjected to the interactive book reading method improved more than the other children. This can be explained as the reflection of the interactive book reading method on the children’s phonological and print awareness skills. While interactive book reading activities were conducted in the experimental group for eight weeks, the traditional reading method was used in the control group. Through the stimuli provided by adults in the interactive book reading method, children can recognize the rules of the written language and raise their awareness of the direction of writing, letters, spelling and punctuation. Efe and Temel (2018) investigated the effect of the interactive book reading program on the print awareness of the preschoolers with low socio-cultural characteristics and in this connection, they applied the program to the experimental group students for ten weeks, three days a week. At the end of this ten-week period, it was found that the interactive book reading program highly increased the print awareness performance of the children of the families with low socio-economic

characteristics and speaking a language different from the language of education. Justice and Ezell (2002) investigated the effect of interactive book reading activities on the print awareness and the skill of focusing on writing of the preschoolers from low-income families. As a result of the study, it was concluded that in all the measurements regarding writing, recognizing the words in writing and alphabet knowledge, the experimental group is more successful than the control group. Ergül et al., (2016) researched the effect of the interactive book reading (EKO) applications on the early literacy skills of the children at low socio-economic level and found that this intervention program had significant effects on the children's print awareness and phonemic awareness skills (Ergül et al., 2016). Research on the interactive book reading method (Chow and McBride-Chang, 2003; Hargrave and Sénéchal, 2000; Hindman, Skibbe and Foster, 2014; Levin and Aram, 2012; Mol, Bus, de Jong and Smeets, 2008; Şimşek and Işıkoğlu, 2015; Wasik and Bond, 2001; Whitehurst and Lonigan, 1998) emphasizes that these intervention programs offered to children at early ages make important contributions to their receptive and expressive language skills. When the findings of the current study are evaluated together with the related literature, it can be argued that the interactive book reading method has significant effects on the development of children's word and print awareness skills.

Another sub-problem of the study requires the comparison of the experimental and control group students' phonemic awareness skills as a result of the application of the interactive reading book method. It was found that the phonemic awareness skills of the experimental group students developed more than those of the control group students. These results are parallel to the findings reported in the literature. Justice, Kadevarek, Bowles and Grimm (2005) examined the effect of parents' interactive book reading activities on children's phonemic awareness skills and found that the interactive book reading activities enhanced the children's phonemic awareness when the parents drew the children's attention to phonemic characteristics of the words. Ergül et al (2015); Ezell and Justice (2000); Luo et al. (2014); Sim and Berthelsen, (2014); Whitehurst et al. (1994) are other studies reporting that interactive book reading activities have significant effects on language skills including phonemic awareness.

According to Ergül, Sarıca and Akoğlu (2016), phonemic awareness skills included within the early literacy skills and associated with the future literacy skills can be nurtured through interactive book reading applications. The target phonemes determined before reading should be highlighted where appropriate during reading (e.g, attracting children's attention the target phoneme when it is located at the beginning of the word, showing other words beginning with the same phoneme in the story, etc.) and phonetically encoding the target words (pronouncing individual phonemes making up words one by one) will contribute to the acquisition of phonemic awareness skills. In addition, asking children to repeat these encodings will help children to realize the phonological organization of words and to apply this skill to other words. In the current study, while the interactive book reading method was applied in the experimental group, the traditional book reading method was applied in the control group. Tepetaş Cengiz (2015) examined the relationship between children's language development and pre-school teachers' picture story book reading activities. In the study, it was found that preschool teachers did not perform any activity in the scope of phonological skills during the picture story books reading activities and that the phonological skills of the children aged 48-60 months were not supported by the preschool teachers. When the findings of the current study are evaluated in light of the related literature, it can be argued that the negligence of the phonemic awareness skills in the traditional reading methods can be one of the reasons for the less development of these skills in the control group students of the current study. Within the context of the current study, it was also determined whether the word and print awareness and phonemic awareness skills of the experimental group students varied significantly after the application. In light of the findings obtained in the current research, it can be said that interactive book reading method has a significant effect on the development of the children's word and print awareness and phonemic awareness skills. In studies conducted in different settings (family) or with different study groups (children at risk) in relation to interactive reading activities, the impact of these activities on language skills has been emphasized. Akoğlu, Ergül and Duman (2014) investigated the effect of an interactive book reading program on the receptive and expressive language skills of children at the age of 4-5 who are at risk and are in need of protection. As a result of the research carried out with the children staying in nursery schools and girls'

orphanages and continuing their pre-school education, it was determined that the interactive book reading program led to an increase in the number of morphemes and words and the diversity of different words used by the children. Yıldız Bıçakçı, Er and Aral (2018) examined the effect of parents' interactive story readings on language development of children. A three-session seminar was given to the parents about the process of book reading. After the seminar, parents were asked to read a total of 27 books to their children; three books a week. As a result of the research, it was concluded that the interactive book reading activities improved the children's language skills. Evans, Williamson and Pursoo (2008) conducted a study to determine the interest of preschool children in writing during the process of interactive book reading. Within the context of the research, the 3-5 year old children's interest in writing was investigated during the process of interactive book reading in relation to the variables of age, individual differences, and adults' pointing at the words. As a result, it was found that when the adults pointed at the words, the children looked at the book longer.

In light of the findings of the current study, the following suggestions can be made: Considering the impact of interactive reading activities on children's early literacy skills, these activities can be promoted instead of traditional reading activities. Research can be planned for the implementation of interactive book reading activities in different intervention environments (such as home, private education institutions, child protection institutions). In-service trainings for pre-school teachers can be organized on the role of teachers in the early literacy process. The current study employed the quantitative research method. The effectiveness of interactive book reading activities in terms of children, parents and children can be investigated by means of qualitative or mixed research methods.

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