

Effect of a performing arts program on the oral language skills of young English learners.

Greenfader, C.M., Brouillette, L. & Farkas, G. (2015). Effect of a performing arts program on the oral language skills of young English learners. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 50(2), 185-203.

Abstract:

The Teaching Artist Project (TAP) is a literacy program that provides K–2 teachers with professional development in theatre and dance with the goal of helping teachers boost the oral language skills of English learners (ELs). Each of the lessons contains key English language development activities and concepts, which can be built on by the teacher during the week. Using a randomized experimental design, this study explored the impact of TAP on the early literacy skills of ELs measured by scores from the California English Language Development Test (CELDT). Students participating in the program outperformed those who did not on speaking assessments with those with the most limited English speaking abilities at baseline benefiting most from the program.

Key Findings:

This study found that students participating in the program integrating dance and theatre into a literacy curriculum (N = 902) outperformed those who did not (N = 4,338) on speaking assessments to a marginally significant extent (an effect size of .06). In addition, the study found that the impact of TAP was strongest for students for students with the lowest levels of English language proficiency.

Significance of the Findings:

With the number of school-age ELs continuing to grow, a strong argument can be made that increasing the effectiveness of English oral language instruction for ELs in the early grades should be a priority. Although English oral language proficiency in the primary

grades is critical to the literacy development of ELs, little is known about how to foster these skills. The current study suggests that teaching theatre and dance as arts-integrated literacy strategies in the primary grades is one way to foster the English-language development of young ELs and, thus, addressing the critical importance of supporting the future success of this group of students.

Methodology:

This study used a randomized experimental design (by school). The program consisted of 28 weekly 50-minute lessons (14 drama and 14 creative movement/dance) co-taught by the classroom teacher and a teaching artist. Student (N = 5,240) speaking and listening skills were measured using the California English Language Development Test (CELDT) which is given annually at the beginning of the school year to measure English language proficiency in speaking, listening, reading, and writing. All students in the sample had at least two consecutive years of CELDT data, with the first year serving as baseline and the second as an outcome measure in the analyses. To generate the analysis sample, the authors combined data from the 2010–2011 and 2011–2012 cohorts. The treatment group (N = 902) outperformed controls (N = 4,338) on speaking assessments, but the gains were only marginally significant. The effect size (measuring the impact of TAP on the speaking skills K–2 ELs) was .06, as measured by Cohen's d.

However, because the TAP intervention was a low-intensity treatment (28 sessions of 50 minutes each, involving the entire class), it is not surprising that the effect size was low by Cohen's criteria. In their report reviewing 20 studies that examined the impact of technology interventions for struggling K–12 readers, Cheung and Slavin (2012) indicated that the average effect size of low-intensity interventions (less than 75 minutes per week) was .08, whereas high-intensity interventions (over 75 minutes per week) averaged an effect size of .19. Although these studies were somewhat dissimilar to the treatment in the current study, the findings illustrate comparable results for a low-intensity intervention for struggling elementary-age readers. The practical value of an effect of any size must be considered in relation to the importance of the outcome, compared with the cost (in effort and dollars) of the intervention required to produce it.

Limitations of the Research:

One limitation of this study was the use of the CELDT as a measure of oral language. The CELDT is a state tool used for the identification and tracking of EL students, as well as for measuring proficiency. As such, it was not designed as a specific assessment of oral

language. A second limitation was that the random assignment was done at the school level. Characteristics of the individual schools could have an impact on the language outcomes of ELs in the sample. Finally, this study examines only one year of the program and does not look at the long-term impact of the program on English language development.

Questions to Guide New Research:

Future research on TAP might consider the specific mechanisms through which ELs improved their oral language skills. In the research, the authors drew on literature about both the embodiment of language (grounded cognition theories) and social-emotional engagement (social theories). However, they have not yet disentangled the contribution each made to the enhancement of oral language skills. In addition, future research could examine the long-term impact of such programs on student English language development.

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