Parental Involvement in Storybook Reading in English Project: Beyond the Reading Vocabulary

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ABSTRACT

Since the 60s, research on emergent literacy has presented empirical evidence for the links between storybook reading to young children, parental involvement and language development. Stories, which provide children with vast opportunities to hear new words in a meaningful context subsequently lead to the acquisition of a richer mental model of both the world and vocabulary. Albeit research findings point to the strong causal links between storybook reading, literacy and language, development and parental involvement, little effort appears to be made in Malaysian's pre-schools to capitalise on storybooks as a vehicle to literacy development and engaging the young children's first teachers as partners for a common purpose. A structured program that builds bridges between schools and homes is lacking and researched upon. In exploring this missed opportunity, the Smart Partnership in Reading in English (SPIRE) project was piloted in a private preschool. 25 young children, their parents and the class teacher were involved in the project. The mix-mode method was adopted to gather quantitative and qualitative data. Findings show improved reading vocabulary and beyond: receptive and expressive language skills, print awareness, knowledge of grammar, meta-linguistic awareness. Implication is clear; storybooks can be a springboard to develop English literacy skills, specifically reading in English skills. Young learner providers would want to capitalise on this springboard, making learning to read more meaningful and pleasant, and less structured. A serious consideration ought to be made in involving parents (first teachers) to scaffold young learners' literacy development.

Keywords: *Smart partnership in reading in English, literacy development, vocabulary development, young learners, parental involvement.*

INTRODUCTION

Since the 60s, research on emergent literacy presents empirical evidence for links between storybook reading (SR) and emergent literacy develop-ment (Durkin, 1966; Hiebert, 1988; Huennekens & Xu, 2010; Morrow, 2015; Saracho & Spodek, 2009). It is said to be one of the best ways to usher children into the world of literacy (Holdaway, 1979; Trelease, 2006) and "there is no substitute for reading and telling stories to children, from the very earliest days" (Butler & Clay, 1979, p.17). Anderson et al. (1985) cited in Kerr and Mason (1994, p.23) asserted it is "the single most important activity for building the knowledge for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children".

LITERATURE REVIEW

Storybook Reading as an Emergent Phenomenon
Holdaway (1979) hypothesised that SR takes children beyond the reading vocabulary to acquire new syntactic forms, meanings and ways of organising discourse. Concurring with Holdaway, Mason (1992) maintained that these children would be better prepared for expanded vocabulary in printed text. Storybook encounters provide children with vast opportunities to hear new words in a meaningful context and to subsequently acquire a richer

mental model of both the vocabulary and the world. Positive relationships are found between early childhood reading experiences at home, and vocabulary development (Hargrave & Sénéchal, 2000; Morrow, 1985; Robert, 2008; Roskos & Burstein, 2011).

Studies have also found that storybook encounters develop metalinguistic awareness about alphabet and print knowledge (Justice et al., 2015; Nevo & Vaknin-Nusbaum, 2017; Schickedanz, 1981 cited in Teale, 1984; Vaknin-Nusbaum & Nevo, 2016) and awareness (Salinger, 1996), which is crucial in literacy development. Goodman (1986) reported L2 children's ability to demonstrate understanding of general terms, such as letter, capital, number, word, read, page, story and book.

Letter knowledge, which provides the basis for forming connections between the letters in spelling and sounds in pronunciations, is found to be a strong predictor of reading success (Share et al., 1984). Walsh, Price and Gillingham (1988) maintained that children who are able to name the letters of the alphabet with ease become better readers. Dyson (1984, cited in Mason & Allen, 1986) too highlighted that children, who otherwise have minimal encounters with books and storybooks, tend to have difficulty with print and with recognising letters. Natheson-Mejia (1994) maintained that they eventually recognise punctuation marks, and where words are written on the page. This orientation eventually enables children to recognise familiar words in storybooks.

Early studies have found that children who were read to had greater knowledge of complex language structures (Chomsky, 1972) and under-stood new words in a more meaningful context (Hindman, Wasik & Erhart, 2012). Shared SR experiences are also linked to language development (Mol & Buss, 2011), i.e. receptive (Meng, 2015; Sénéchal & Lefevre, 2002) and expressive language (Okyay & Kandir, 2017; Saracho, 2017; Sénéchal et al., 1998), improved oral and spoken narrative skills (Dockrell, Stuart & King, 2010), and improved listening and communication skills (Golloher, 2015)

Awareness that book language differs from daily conversation develops when children listen to stories and is evident when children begin to pro-duce literary language, such as "One day he said ..." or when they talk like a book (Clay, 1979). They realise that the vocabulary, and the syntax and intonation patterns of book language differ from everyday speech. They also tend to use markedly different language and their stories sound like the text of storybooks. They abstract identifiable lexical and syntactic knowledge about written narratives and use them to create language. They recycle words in their expressive language and produce formulaic phrases (Cameron, 2001).

The ability to produce literary conventions or book language is a critical value in becoming competent readers; it takes a child beyond his own language patterns. The production of literary conventions is distinctive characteristics of early readers. Repeated phrases, such as "who will help me to plant these seeds" "Not I" said the pig, "Not I" said the cat "Not I" said the mouse … "Then I will" in the story *Little Red Hen* introduces children to the consciously patterned forms of literature, which aids from being mere talkers and listeners to being competent readers and writers.

As children's episodes with SR increases, so does their word bank, and the ability to eventually read. According to Sulzby (1985), non-readers go through various stages in reading: *refusal and/or dependent reading*, followed by *pictures governed attempts* and finally *print governed attempts*. With adult scaffolding, children internalise the social interactions during SR and gradually progress from dependent to independent reading.

There is also empirical evidence in the past two decades that show that involving parents can positively affect young children's first/second literacy, language and vocabulary development (Ijalba, 2014; Martorana, 2015; McDowall, 2014; Newchurch, 2017).

Albeit research findings point to the strong causal links between SR, literacy and language development, and parental involvement, little effort appears to be made in Malaysian's pre-schools to capitalise on storybooks as a vehicle to literacy development and to engage the children's first teachers as partners for a common purpose. Formalised structured programmes that bridges schools and homes are not in place. There is a void in capitalising readily available first teachers in co-scaffolding young children's emergent literacy in Malaysia. This gap clearly ought to be addressed.

In exploring this missed opportunity of robing parents in working hand-in-hand with schools, the Smart Partnership in Reading in English (SPIRE) project was carried out at a preschool. The project was aimed at developing young children's ESL literacy skills, particularly reading in English. This paper presents one of the outcomes of the project, i.e. the children's vocabulary development that had eventually transcended beyond the storybooks.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Adopting the convenient sampling technique, 25 kids of 5 years old multiracial preschoolers, their parents and the class teacher (Celine, pseudonym) participate in this case study. The children's heritage languages included Mandarin (10 children), Malay (8 children), Tamil (5 children) and Portuguese (2 children). Except for the Portuguese children, the others conversed in mainly their heritage languages in school and at home. Only ten children were in their second year of informal education in the same school. All 25 preschoolers were non-readers before the study.

Instruments

The mix mode method was adopted to gather comprehensive data from multiple perspectives. Both quantitative data, using the Letter Identification (LI) Test (LIT) and Word Recognition (WR) Test (WRT) and the qualitative data via interviews, teacher journal (TJ) and record card (RC) were gathered to provide a lucid picture of the children's vocabulary development.

a.   Letter Identification Test

LIT, which is a subset of the Diagnostic Survey Clay's (1979), was used to assess the children's knowledge of letter-name, letter sounds and letter-word correspondence. As suggested, the large print alphabet was reprinted and mounted on a clipboard for testing purposes. The test was administered in accordance with the directions in the manual. The children were required to:

i.   name the letters of the alphabet
ii.   say the letter sound of the letters of the alphabet and
iii.   give a word that begins with the letter of the alphabet

In order to treat the letters in a random fashion, the teacher pointed to the letters across the lines. The test was administered at three points: per- (Time 1), while (Time 2) and post-project (Time 3). The highest possible score was 54.

b.   Word Recognition Test (WRT)

Clay's (1979) Word Recognition lists were adapted to include words from the Oxford Reading Tree (ORT), which is a recognisable graded set of materials that was made available during the study. As Clay (1979) noted "The most frequently occurring words in whatever basic reading texts being used will probably provide a satisfactory source of test items" (p. 21). The number of words in each list, i.e. 15 and an additional word, which was used for practice (and not scored), was retained. However, some words were substituted with high frequency words in the ORT, for example: Mother for Mum, Father for Dad, where for what, shouted for said. Alternate lists were used at each time of testing. The lists, which were reprinted and mounted on clipboards for testing, were not used for teaching purposes (Clay, 1979).

Similar to the LIT, the WRT was administered at three points and in accordance with the Clay's (1979, p. 21) instructions:

    i.   Ask a child to read one of the lists: Give list A or List B List or C.
    ii.   Help the child with the practice word if necessary and never score it. Do not help with any other words and do not use the list for teaching.

Clay's (1979, p.105) score sheet was adapted to record each child's response. Incorrect responses were noted beside the printed words. One point was awarded for each correctly recognised word and the scores were tallied over the highest possible score of 15.

INTERVIEWS WITH PARENTS, CHILDREN AND TEACHER

While both the teacher and children were interviewed in school, the parents were interviewed at their respective homes. The semi-structured interviews allowed for firstly, greater flexibility, leeway and control of the interview session and secondly, for richer interactions and more personalised responses. The sessions were conducted in an unthreatening manner to ensure everyone was comfortable.

a.   Teacher journal (TJ)

The teacher made daily entries of the children's reading behaviours at the end of the day. Her observations present a window into the children's reading behaviours throughout the project.

b.   Record Card (RC)

Together with the reading materials, the children took home record cards for both the parents and children to record their views of the reading materials or any other feedback that parents may want to convey to the teacher.

THE STUDY: SMART PARTNERSHIP IN READING IN ENGLISH (SPIRE) PROJECT

The formalised six-month SPIRE bridging project between a private preschool and homes was carried out to develop young children' English as a Second Language (ESL) literacy skills. The school adopted Malay and English languages as mediums of instruction and sight vocabulary as the reading approach.

Before the commencement of the project, both the principal and teacher were briefed on the project. The teacher eventually restructured her tight timetable to allocate an hour on Thursdays for the Strawberry Club (set up for the project).

The teacher was initially apprehensive of the use of storybooks as a platform to develop her children's reading skills. She feared that they would not be able to read the words and sentences in the storybooks. She was coaxed into using storybooks for reading pleasure rather than for teaching colours, objects or talking about pictures.

To create a rich ESL literacy environment, 363 graded and non-graded storybooks, 94 multimedia materials, including VCD, VHS, CD-ROMs and taped songs/stories/poem were made available in the club. In class, a reading corner with colourful and interesting storybooks, placed in pull out drawers replaced the old and tattered books in a small cupboard box. Storybooks were replaced weekly to draw the children to the corner; it proved to be effective.

Both parents and children were briefed on the project too. Parents received an introductory letter about the project and were given an option to refuse participation. Only one parent asked not to be involved. Similar to the teacher, they were equally apprehensive. They felt that the children were too young to be reading storybooks. At the launching, parents were briefed on the project and subsequent meetings were held to scaffold them in developing their child's literacy skills. They were encouraged to frequently and repeatedly read to/with/ listen to their child read. They were also encouraged to read interactively by discussing the stories and to fill in the RC after each read. The children were also encouraged to read storybooks as often as they can with their parents and to fill in the RC. Each child received a literacy bag to take home the reading materials they loaned from the club.

This study found obvious shifts from being disinterested in storybooks to being interested and motivated to read storybooks among all three parties. The teacher began reading storybooks aloud as frequently and repeatedly as possible, i.e. in the club, in-between lessons, before assemblies in the morning and after school. The parents, albeit at varying levels of frequency, started reading storybooks that they children took home. Strong links between parental involvement and reading development was also apparent. The more involved the parents were, the better was the children's reading progress (see Bava Harji et al., 2014; Harji, Balakrishnan & Letchumanan, 2016, 2017). As mentioned earlier, this paper presents the findings of the children's ESL literacy development, particularly in terms of letter and vocabulary development.

RESEARCH QUESTION

The research questions addressed in this paper are:
1. How did the children's concept of letters develop throughout the SPIRE project?
2. To what extend did the SPIRE project develop the children's vocabulary?

RESULTS

This section, firstly presents the descriptive data of LI and WR tests, followed by the qualitative data that highlight the children's vocabulary development that transcended beyond storybooks. The results are presented as per the research questions.

Research question: How did the children's concept of letters develop throughout the SPIRE project?

LETTER IDENTIFICATION TEST RESULTS

Quantitative Data

Table 1, which presents the distribution of the LIT scores shows that the children's knowledge of letters varied greatly at Time 1 (0) to Time 3 (54). Almost half the children (44%) scored less than half the total score (<27 points) at Time 1. However, by Time 2, 82 per cent children scored more than half the total score (>27 points) and 88 per cent children scored between 50 to 54 points.

Table 1: Distribution of scores for letter identification at times 1, 2 and 3

Scores	TIME OF ASSESSMENT		
	Time 1	Time 2	Time 3
	n (%)	*n* (%)	*n* (%)
50-54	8 (32.0)	20 (80.0)	22 (88.0)
45-49	3 (12.0)	-	2 (8.0)
40-44	1 (4.0)	1 (4.0)	1 (4.0)
35-39	1 (4.0)	1 (4.0)	-
30-34	1 (4.0)	-	-
25-29	3 (12.0)	1 (4.0)	-
20-24	-	1 (4.0)	-
15-19	2 (8.0)	1 (4.0)	-
10-14	2 (8.0)	-	-
5-9	2 (8.0)	-	-
0-4	2 (8.0)	-	-

The increase in LD is also seen in the descriptive statistics in Table 2.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of letter identification test

Time of Test	SCORES					
	Mean	Std Dev	Min	Max	% Zero Score	% Full Score
Time 1	32.3	18.9	0	52	4.0	0.0
Time 2	47.6	10.8	15	54	0.0	44.0
Time 3	52.7	2.9	44	54	0.0	88.0

While the mean scores gradually increased between Times 1 and 3 by 20.4 points, the standard deviation decreased by 16 points; indicating a wider difference in scores before than at the end of the project. Full scores were recorded from the middle of the project.

Teacher's Comments

The teacher's journal entries highlighted limited knowledge of letters, particularly among the first-year children before the project. While some children were confused with certain letters, others appeared to have difficulty in LI and were unable to differentiate the Malay and English languages. Only eight second-year children were able to recite most of the letters.

Before The Project

Improved knowledge of letter name, letter-word and upper-lowercase correspondence was evident by the middle of the project. However, the progress rates varied; some continued to demonstrate limited knowledge of letters.

[TJ] … only the second year children (Wong Yen, Grace, Hiew Jian, Christie, Ravi, Farah, Sara and Chin Han) can recite most letters and match uppercase with lowercase … but are unable to provide words for most of the letters … about 45% of the first year children can recognise about only half of the letters … (Chiew Wen, Syahina) can recognise less than 10 of the letters … (Nurul) is confused with 'i' for number one, 'j' for 'i' and 'n' for 'u' … (Grace) tend to mix the uppercase with lowercase … most children cannot give a word for a letter, their knowledge of letter-word correspondence is poor.

Month 3
Notable improvement, including understanding the concept of first and last letters in words was seen at the end of the project. Celine was proud of her children.

… About 80% of the children can locate the lowercase when asked to match it with the given uppercase letters … Within three months (Farah, Nurul, James) have shown lots of improvement … they know most of capital and small letters…
[TJ] … They can give me words for most of the letters … when they started school they didn't know mostly of the letters … but some cannot give me words for many letters yet.

End of Project

[Celine] … Their letters and word recognitions have improved tremendously … When I point to a capital letter in a word in the storybook and ask them to point the lowercase of the same letter – they can do so … most of them are able to show the first letter of a word and the last letter of a word …. They are confident … can identify the letters, when I point to randomly in the storybooks. They will shout out the letters … and almost all can even give words for each letter … I am proud of them …

Research questions 2: To what extend did the SPIRE project develop the children's vocabulary?

WORD RECOGNITION TEST RESULTS
Quantitative Data
The descriptive data in Table 3 provides evidence for the children's notable increased ability to recognise words at different points of the project. A mean difference of approximately 8 points (MD=7.9) was found between Times 1 and 3, with a mean score of less than 1 point at Time 1; an indication of limited vocabulary, before the study.

Table 3: Descriptive statistical of word recognition test

Word Recognition (n=15)	SCORES					
	Mean score	Std Dev	Min score	Max score	% scoring zero	% scoring full
Time 1	0.8	1.1	0	4	48.0	0 .0
Time 2	5.2	3.9	0	12	4.0	0.0
Time 3	8.7	3.8	3	14	0.0	0.0

As seen in the table, almost half the children were unable to recognise a single word in the word list (M <1) at Time 1. By the middle of the project, however, the obvious increase in word recognition is seen, i.e. with maximum scores of 12 and 14 by Times 2 and 3 respectively. No child recorded neither a full nor a zero score at Time 3. A closer examination of the distribution of scores attained is presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Distribution of word recognition test scores at times 1, 2 and 3

Band	Scores	TIME OF ASSESSMENT		
		Time 1 n (%)	Time 2 n (%)	Time 3 n (%)
Upper	14 - 15	-	-	3 (12.0)
	12 - 13	-	2 (8.0)	6 (24.0)
Middle	10 - 11	-	1 (4.0)	2 (8.0)
	8 - 9	-	4 (16.0)	4 (16.0)
	6 - 7	-	1 (4.0)	2 (8.0)
Lower	4 - 5	2 (8.0)	5 (20.0)	6 (24.0)
	2 - 3	1 (4.0)	6 (24.0)	2 (8.0)
	0 -1	22 (88.0)	5 (20.0)	-

All 25 children attained scores within the lower band at Time 1, but by Time 2, 32 percent children attained higher scores (8% children placed within the upper band). A shift is seen at Time 3; an almost equal number of children within the middle (32%) and upper (36% children) band.

Qualitative Data

The qualitative data, which provides a window to the children's vocabulary acquisition beyond the reading vocabulary is organised to firstly, pre-sent the children's firstly reading vocabulary development and secondly, vocabulary development beyond storybooks.

The participants' feedbacks are presented verbatim and when spoken in the Malay language, translations are made in parenthesis. Key words or phrase are italicised. Pseudonyms are used to conceal identify. Reference to participants is as follows:

   i.   Teacher (Celine) and Child (Gary)
   ii.   P/Gary (Gary's parent)
   iii.   RC/Gary (Feedback by Gary's parent on his record card)

Within the limitations of this paper, only one or two quotes are cited.

READING VOCABULARY

(i)   Receptive Language Skills: Word Recognition

With limited knowledge of letters before the project, it is not surprising to find that the children had limited receptive language skills. It was only the second-year children who were able to read simple English words that they had learnt in their first year. Their reading

vocabulary was limited to the "standard word list" that they were taught to represent letters, for example: 'A' for apple, 'B' for boy and not beyond the 'list'. The low scores in WRT affirms their limited vocabulary. At month 1:

> [Celine] … except for the second-year children who can recognise some simple words, which they learned- cat, dog, doll … The others cannot read even these simple words … most don't have the concept of words yet … their vocabulary is very limited …

Remarks on WRT sheets:

- Cannot differentiate words and letters (Syafa)
- Can only recognise a few words (Ravi)
- Difficulty in reading the word (Safina)
- Poor vocabulary (Yasim)

With SR both at home and school, the children's reading vocabulary had improved remarkably to beyond the standard word list. One parent expressed his pride in his daughter's progress:

> [P/Gary] … Yes, definitely his vocabulary has increase, since he was in this project. He knows words, like astronaut, doctor, police etc… he can read more words now …
> [P/Syafa] … she know big words like 'glow' and 'glowing' and I'm proud she can pronounce and read correctly …

By the end of the project, with a wider repertoire of English vocabulary, some children were reading 'whole' storybooks and scaffolding their friends by teaching them to read. The children who had difficulty with WR before the project were now able to recognise more words. They too were proud of their newly acquired words:

> … the children can read more words … not only simple, but also difficult words
> … (Syahina) shared that she can recognise words that she didn't know before, - 'octopus, crab, star fish' and she feels proud of herself because she knows more than her elder sisters …
> [TJ] … about 90% can recognise more words and some can read a whole storybook because they know all the words in the book … some even read storybooks to their friends or teach them to read …

(ii)   Recognition of Punctuation
Awareness of letters and words included punctuation marks and their functions. By month 2:

> [TJ] … some can remember punctuation marks (., ?, !). They will shout out that it is a , . ? when they see these symbols in the storybooks …
> [RC/Syafa] … My daughter tell me that a dot is called a full stop, a ',' - comma, '?' - question mark when I ask her. We are happy …
> [P/Nurul] … she know the full stop well. She know where to stop …

Formulaic phrases
Another evidence of increased vocabulary is seen in the children's ability to recognise and 'read' formulaic phrases or chunks. Their in-creased levels of confidence in the use of formulaic opening and closing (Cameron 2001) is also seen when they 'jump in' to begin and end the story during reading sessions:

> … Most of the children can recognise the repeated words/phrases - "Can you see me" … "Only joking, said the lobster" … they will read them when we come to the phrase during storybook reading … (Charlene) loves to read "The Ginger Bread Man" she will feel excited when her favourite phrase comes, e.g. "Run, run as fast as you can, you can't catch me because I'm the Ginger Bread Man" …
> [TJ] … by month 3 about 90% begin the story for me - I don't have time to start, because they will "jump in" to begin the story with "One day" and end it for me with "The end" …

(iii)   Confidence in Sight Vocabulary
The teacher's notes on the WRT score sheets at Time 1 highlighted the children's hesitance and low confidence, which could account for not making attempts to read unfamiliar words.:

- Hesitates and not confident to read (Chee Sze)
- Not confident at all. Does not try at all (Yasim)
- Can recognise only four works but hesitant (Grace)

> [Celine] … they feel uneasy because they don't know the words and hesitate to read them … if they don't know they will not read it …

This quickly changed as their storybook encounters increased. They began to recognise words by sight instantly and with certainty:

> [TJ] More children have better sight vocabulary now. They can recognise the common words very fast, confidently, no hesitation, with less difficulty … (Chee Sze, Chin Han, Yasim, Sara, Syafa, Selva, Nu-rul, Grace, Akhil, Ravi, Christie) can read new words in the story-books - swap, vanishing, knights with no hestiation … even (Farah, Hiew Jian, Syafina, Syahina, Veron) who had difficulty recognising even one word from the WR list can now identify more words …

(iv) *Distinguish English from Malay words*
Improved ability to distinguish English from Malay words was also evident before the middle of the project. Malay words were cited to represent the letters during the LIT and WRT at Time 1:

> [TJ] Sara, Farah & Syafina used to give me Malay words for the letters, - A – '*ayam*' (hen) when I conducted the first letter identification test … they will spell in *Bahasa* (Malay Language) (syllables) … saw (sa), me (ma), let (le) …

The children, who were reported citing Malay words for letter-word correspondence, were able to distinguish the two languages by the middle of the project:

> [TJ] … Sara, Farah & Syafina who were confused can now give me English words during letter test … they are confidently recognising the words in the word test …

(v) *Word Comprehension/Meaning*
The children's improved WR ability included understanding meaning of words:

> [RC/Selva] … My son understands the words, e.g. bone: '*tulang*', tailor: '*tukang jahit*', maid: '*orang gaji*'. I explain the meaning. He can answer and understand when I ask him…
> [P/Nurul] … Before when mention 'egg' or other words she didn't know. Now she know vocabulary very well '*lah*'. She gains a lot. It helps her a lot because she know the meaning of words. Before she knows nothing …

They began inquiring about meanings of words they come across in the storybooks during independent reading too. They understood that word meaning aids comprehension of stories. A change in roles is also seen with the children scaffolding the elder siblings with word meaning:

> [TJ] … now they began to ask me the meaning of words during story reading or when they read independently … Before they don't ask for meaning, because they were not interested in stories. Now they want to know the meaning of words because it helps them understand the story better … and they want to improve their vocabulary … so that they can use the words in their conversation … Even parents during home visit have told me that some children were helping their older siblings with meaning of words, e.g. (Syahina's) elder sisters will ask her for the meaning of words. (Ra-vi) helps his elder brother …

(vi) Reading Storybooks
Closing linked to levels of parental involvement, frequency and repeated reading episodes and types of social interaction was the varied levels of reading. Children, whose parents were highly involved, had interactive, frequent and repeated SR events at home were attending to print and read 'whole' storybooks independently by the middle of the project. Conversely,

the children who had fewer opportunities for storybook events, had limited frequent and repeated SR experiences made slower progress. They were attending to pictures even after six months. Their reading vocabulary was limited.

> [TJ] … (Chee Sze) has improved tremendously … she has started to read independently. She enjoys reading stories, with less support than before … (Syahina) is now at the phase of word-by-word reading, she will ask her friends or me for words that she doesn't know …
> [TJ] … (Chow Wen) is still at memory reading, … uses picture to help her with "reading" … after "reading" she will discuss the story with her friends … Some are still pretending to read and are looking at pictures instead of words … All love storybooks now …

According to the parents:

> [P/Nurul] … before we have to read … now she will read on her own and more fluently … she can read the story all and very fast …
> [P/Syafa] … *sekarang baca sendiri … buku banyak perkataan pun boleh … sebelum projek langsung tak tahu baca satu perkataan* English *pun* … (now she reads independently … reads books with lots of sentences … before the project she was not able to read even one English word) …

By the end of the project, 16 children were in the print-reading phase and only nine children in the picture-reading phase (Sulzby, 1986). The children's vocabulary acquisition had also extended to beyond the reading vocabulary encountered in storybooks.

BEYOND THE READING VOCABULARY
Expressive Language Skills
  I.   *Improved Productive Skills*
Improved productive skills including code switching, pronunciation and oral skill was apparent. Parents were clearly pleased with their child's expressive English language skills.

> [P/Syafina] … speak English '*lah*', e.g. 'I no friend you, you no friend me'. Before the project she doesn't try to speak English … That's why I tell you she starts from zero you know when she went to the kindergarten …
> [P/Sara] … lately she likes to speak English although 65% of the language. My family usually answers her verbally in English. *Dia cakap* English *dengan kucing dia, tetapi campur-campur dalam Bahasa* … (she talks in English to her cat, but mixes her conversation with the Malay language)

With a larger corpus of vocabulary, increased confidence to converse in English with siblings, grandparents, pets are not surprising. They urged peers and family members to speak in English too:

[P/Syahina] … Yes, she speaks English now … *dia selalu cakap 'Ibu* speak English to me *lah*' (…and always says 'Mum speak to me in English')
[P/Yasim] … *dia suruh saya cakap* Inggeris … *dia cakap dengan adiknya Inggeris juga* (he asks me to speak in English … he speaks to his siblings in English too) …

English soon became the medium of communication in school:

[Celine] … By end of project they want me to speak to them in English … (Swee Kiong) has started to speak more in English to his friends and to his fish … (Wong Yen) speaks confidently with his friends in English … they ask their friends to speak in English if they speak in other languages.

II. Book Language

"Talking like a book", which Clay (1979) noted, is a crucial step in learning was also apparent in some children. They adapted literary language, constructed grammatically correct sentences and recycled (Cameron, 2001) chunks or repetitive refrains that they acquired from storybooks:

[RC/Charlene] … (Charlene) will say - My sister said that I'm very naughty … Today, papa said he will bring me to shop … Good Morning. Hope you have a nice day … Thank You … The chicken is delicious … she can say more words like: Junior, please come here …
[RC/Ravi] … he uses words that he learned from storybooks all the time, e.g. words like neither, either, and especially when he comes back from school – he will say June said this, 'Tomorrow I shall say …

III. Use of Similes

Parents' notes on the RC showed that the children either adopted or adapted similes to make comparisons:

[RC/Chin Han] … can compare - 'fast like a lion', fat as an elephant …
[RC/Ravi] … [use similes] this sweet is hard as rock, [his brother] is a big as a hippopotamus, fat as a balloon' …
[RC/Yasim] … once he said … slow as a tortoise, fast as tiger, light as paper …

IV. Listening Skills

The children had displayed limited concentration at the start of the project. They preferred playing or talking:

[Celine] … most of them can sit still only for a while to listen to stories. Then they get restless … they start talking or doing other things or playing … they have a very short span of concentration …

However, with increased interactive storybook events, they became more attentive, which consequently resulted in improved listening skills and concentration span:

> [TJ] … have also improved their listening skills … (Grace, Chin Han, Syafa, Christie, Selva, Hiew Jian, Ravi, Akhil, Gary) have the highest level of listening - can listen to stories from beginning to end and they understand the story … they can now listen to stories longer than before … will listen attentively… better concentration …

> [P/Akhil] … when I try to read a storybook last time, he can only listen less than 5 minutes, both now he very eager to listen to whole story …

V. Knowledge of Grammar
The children had progress from word recognition to understanding shades of grammar:

> [P/Nurul] … Before she doesn't know grammar … now, she knows where to put 's'. She knows with 's' means more, and without 's' means, one. She knows past and present tense and she asks why 'eat' and 'ate' different words but she knows it's the same meaning. Before she knows nothing … improved very much …
> [RC/Syafa] …. Sometimes she uses the right grammar, e.g. She will say 'Every-day Pak Dollah drives his car. He is an old man in Kampong Damai. My father buys bread … she speaks in English now and with right grammar…

VI. Awareness of Environmental Print
Print appeared as meaningless letters, which they were unable to identify (as seen in LIT Time1) and therefore, they paid no attention to environ-mental print before the project:

> [TJ] …. Children are not aware of print around the class … there are some posters (nursery rhymes) on the wall, but they do not pay attention to them … they do not look the words at all but are only attracted to the pictures and will look at the pictures for a short while before they start playing …

By the middle of the project, they began reading words beyond the storybooks; they read print on newspapers, magazines, labels, road signs and billboards:

> [TJ] … They have begun to notice print in their environment- in and out of the class, … quite a few can recognise most of the words in the posters around the classroom now … they use a ruler to point to the words and try to teach their friends to read … during a stroll around the school, some were eager to point out and read print that are on the school walls …
> [RC/Chin Han] … can read the road sign … he always reading … 'fine for littering' - 'Parkson. 'In' and 'Out' during an evening walk around town … and he learn more words … and he can read some words in the newspaper, like sports, photo frame, sailing …

VII.   Meta-linguistic Awareness

The teacher found a greater need to translate instructions into the Malay language before than at the end of the project:

> [TJ] … at the beginning I had to translate every instruction in *Bahasa* [Malay] because they cannot understand English … *Di mana muka depan buku cerita ini? Dari manakah kita mula membaca? Ini huruf apa? Apakah perkataan ini?* (Which is the front of the book? Where do we start reading? What letter is this? What is this word?) …

Towards the middle of the project, meta-linguistic awareness was evident and the need for translations was gradually for individual words with-in a sentence and to only a small group of children:

> [TJ] … now I don't need to translate into Malay much … only a few of the children and some words only. They can understand the instructions …

End of project

> [TJ] … now I don't need to translate into Malay at all when I give them instructions … they understand me well …

Word Recognition Strategies

Spelling out words appeared to be the most common strategy to recognise unfamiliar words before the project:

> [Celine] … when I conducted the word test, I found that most of my children spell the words a few times to figure it out … read only the first letter of the word … repeat some letters a few times to figure the word out… if they don't know they will not read them …

However, they employed varied strategies to read unknown words throughout the project. While more children began recognising words by sight, others employed 'spelling' strategy or graphophonic or picture clues or mummy!:

> [Sara] … *eja, kalau tak tau perkataan* … (spell if I do not know the word) …
> [TJ] … Chin Han sound the words, when he comes across words that he is not sure.
> [Chee Sze] … I see pictures …
> [Hiew Jian] … ask mummy …

DISCUSSION

This study found positive associations between shared SR events with richer reading vocabulary and beyond among the 5 years old L2 young children. As Mason (1992) highlighted, the SR experiences had prepared them for the expanded vocabulary in the text. It provided an avenue for words to be 'recycled' (Cameron, 2001), for improved metalinguistic awareness, word comprehension, and receptive as well as expressive skills.

The children's richer vocabulary is seen in their increased ability and confidence to recognise words in storybooks, other reading materials and environment by sight.

The improved reading ability is suggestive of the increased word acquisition. In contrast to all 25 being non-readers before the project, 16 children were reading 'whole' storybooks independently by the end of the project. Much to the surprise of most parents and the teacher, who had under-estimated the children's ability, the storybook experience resulted in acquisition of even more 'difficult' words. This ability to learn 'big' words clearly shows the children's capabilities of learning words that adults categorised as difficult. As Wood, Burner and Ross (1976) highlight, with scaffolding, what these children were able to do with collaboration, they were able to do independently later.

The rather contrasting opportunities of SR encounters at home was reflected in the greater variation in WR scores. The children, who were read to regularly, had greater opportunities to 'revisit' words, internalise and familiarise themselves, which resulted in greater ability to recognise words. They were either reading independently or with lesser adult assistance at the end of the study.

The initial hesitance and reluctance to read unfamiliar words gradually dissipated as a result of their frequent and repeated readings of story-books. These encounters provided occasions to repeatedly revisit words that they gradually grew familiar with. Evidence of the learned phrases is seen in the spontaneous responses to read aloud repeated phrases during SR sessions in class. They had internalised the English words, phrases and language structures and eventually recycled and/or adapted them in their context. They were able to recognise words by sight and with certainty.

One interesting change in behavior was from not paying attention to environmental print to actively reading aloud labels and posters. Another interesting change was the deployment of more varied WR strategies, including the phonetic approach of sounding the letters and the ability to decipher English from Malay words.

As Cameron (2001) maintained, words and word knowledge can be seen as being linked in networks of meaning. These links to meaning and further links to grammar were also apparent. Their awareness that word meaning aids comprehension is indicative of their awareness that print and not pictures convey message. They also displayed a growing ability to understand the correct inflection, the use of appropriate tenses, and the construction of grammatically correct language structures and complete sentences. Least expected was the reversal of roles, i.e. they scaffold their older sib-lings with meanings of English words.

Linked to the growing ability to adapt storybook vocabulary to their own context, is the growing confidence to speak in English. Equipped with the newly acquired vocabulary, the children preferred speaking in English and interestingly requested others to do the same. The confident use of the learned vocabulary enabled them to code switch spontaneously from Malay to English and vice-verse. There was also the emergence of 'talk like a book' in their conversations and adaptation of storybook language structures into their context. Their expressive language skills included formulaic phrases and similes which they adapted and/or coined. SR was a social event, i.e. with their peers, siblings, adults as well as with their 'cats' and 'fish'.

There was also evidence of meta-linguistic awareness. The children were able understand the teacher and the instructions in English. Translations were not needed while administering the tests at Time 2. It could be argued that since the same tests were used twice, the children may have grown familiar with the instructions. However, evidence of increased me-ta-linguistic awareness of letters, words and sentences refutes this argument.

Improved listening skills may also be another possible explanation. The children demonstrated better listening skills and were more attentive during story readings session. The increased listening skills is attributable to interactive SR and positive attitudes towards storybooks. They eventual-ly loved storybooks.

Implication of this study is clear. Storybooks can form a springboard to developing reading in English skills. Early childhood providers would want to capitalise on this springboard, making learning to read pleasant and less lesson-like. They ought to endeavor to venture into untapped terrains of the homes and involve parents as partners in spearheading the children along the path to literacy or even multilingual literacy of target languages. They have nothing to lose, but much to gain from this partnership of working hand-in-hand for a common purpose. A structured programme such as SPIRE offers evidence for the successful partnership that has taken 5-year olds from limited knowledge of letters and words to acquisition of reading vocabulary and beyond. The partnership is remunerative and propitious!

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