The Affordances of Three Play Types for Learning to Rapidly Read Ten Unfamiliar Words by Sight

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Abstract
This paper reports on an observational study in which I explored the affordances of three play types for learning to read 10 unfamiliar words by sight. In conducting this qualitative study with two Hebrew-English speaking children (five-year-olds), I aimed to discuss alternatives to supporting children’s sight word acquisition. My observations confirm that play is an effective alternative for the teaching and learning of sight words, where play provided meaningful contexts for literacy learning. My observations also highlight the importance of children’s engagement and interest, which seemed to play an important role in motivating participants to continue interacting with the words.

Introduction
Childcare centres, like schools, send home what is referred to as sight words, where children are expected to practice these words with their parents/caregivers at home in efforts to better prepare children for grade school. Sight words are vocabulary words that learners “are able to . . . immediately recognize . . . without expending any effort decoding the word” (Ehri, 1995, p. 116). However families are not given much guidance or strategies to aid their children in acquiring these words at home. Often times, I have seen parents/caregivers drill children until these words are memorized. This strategy may be employed by parents/caregivers due to misconceptions within the broader educational landscape about overt instruction and/or what school readiness entails for early learners. Many scholars, including the New London Group (2000) have tried to put an end to such misconceptions stating, “overt instruction does not imply direct transmission, drills, and rote memorization (p. 33), though unfortunately such cognitive conceptions still dominate school readiness discourses within the broader educational landscape.

In conducting an observational study that explored the ways in which and the extent to which spontaneous literacy-related play activities contributed to Hebrew-English speaking children’s use and recognition of 10 English sight words, I aimed to provide alternatives to supporting children’s sight word acquisition. I asked:

(1) What types of play activities did the young children engage in when making use of the sight words?
(2) What were the affordances of these types of play regarding the children’s use and recognition of the sight words?
(3) What motivating factors contributed to children’s desires to continue interacting with the sight words?

Literature Review
It is well understood that reading is a complex process. Learning to read an alphabetic language, for example, involves phonetic analysis but is said to also involve the recognition and comprehension of words that have sound/symbol irregularities - ones that do not lend themselves to the alphabetic code. Researchers (e.g., Browder & Lalli, 1991) have referred to these words as
sight words; but Ehri (1995) dispelled this misconception about sight words stating, “even easily decoded words, become sight words” (p. 116) once mastered. According to Ehri (1992), sight word reading refers to the process by which learners read by accessing words in their memory. Thereby, sight words are idiosyncratic; the more fluent a reader is, the larger their sight word repositories are. Though, it has been and still can be wrongly understood as a method of teaching through direct transmission and rote memorization, usually through what Ehri (1995) referred to as “the flashcard method” (p. 116).

There are several ways learners can come to recognize unfamiliar words by sight. Browder and Lalli (1991) found that prior to being able to rapidly recognize words by sight, learners employ various strategies to aid in the initial word identification process. Thus it is important to afford learners opportunities to use whatever strategies come to hand so that learners can use the methods that are most salient and meaningful to them at an individual level. Substantial bodies of literature attest to how play creates a space for this to occur (e.g. Wohlwend, 2011, 2008); but too often I have witnessed attempts to increase learners’ sight word repositories through futile and unappealing procedures (e.g., flashcard drills). Such procedures are said to potentially “result in the nonfunctional skill of ‘word calling’” (Browder & Lalli, 1991, p. 204). This outcome, of course, is problematic as it raises a number of questions about what accounts as reading. Play spaces not only allow learners to practice and transform what they know, but also allow them to do so in functional ways (e.g., word recognition and comprehension).

Methods

Participants

The participants for this study were recruited through convenience sampling procedures. Two parents of Hebrew-English speaking children (five-year-olds), whom I currently tutor, provided informed consent for their children’s participation in this study. These children are both males and are enrolled in two different privately funded Hebrew-English bilingual schools in Ontario, Canada. Their names are Ray Mysterio and Zackary (pseudonyms selected by participants).

Play Setup

First, 10 vocabulary words were selected that children had not yet mastered by sight. Six nouns and four verbs were selected: story, book, water, picture, people, man, say, eat, take and give. Each word was printed on separate cue cards. The parents of each child were invited to write the meaning of each word in Hebrew on each cue card next to the English word to promote language transfer.

I set up the play environment in stations. In one station I made traditional print material available for each participant (e.g., construction paper, pencil, erasers, markers, crayons and etc.). Next to this station I placed a chalkboard, chalk, a wipe board and markers. In another station, both two-dimensional and three-dimensional representations of the new vocabulary words along with the printed words on cue cards were provided. Lastly, hand puppets and action figures were offered at another station.

Data Collection and Analysis

This study employed observational data collection methods in order to examine the ways in which and extent to which various literacy-related play activities contributed to the recognition
of 10 unfamiliar words. The visits occurred one day a week (approximately one hour) for three weeks.

During each visit, I took on the role of participant observer (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). Minor notes were documented as needed during each visit, while more extensive, detailed notes were recorded immediately after the visits. Observer commentary (Merriam, 1998) was also included in my notes, particularly concerning the research questions.

Each participant was interviewed for approximately 10 minutes after the final visit, using what Cohen et al. (2011) call the “interview guide approach” (p. 413). These were my interview questions:

1. Did you like these activities we have been doing to learn these words?
2. What did you like about them?
3. Do you think the activity helped you learn the words? How?
4. What would you want to add or change about these activities to help you learn these words better?

The interviews were audio-recorded and later revisited for analysis.

Data were analyzed in a four-stage process. First I identified the three types of play activities participants engaged in when handling the words by highlighting key words that described participants’ play experiences. The play activities that shared common traits were grouped together. After this initial grouping, I triangulated the data sources—observational field notes, interviews and children’s artifacts—to compose vignettes of the three play types. These vignettes were critically analyzed by drawing close attention to any recurring ideas and motifs most salient to the research questions about the affordances of the three play types for children’s use and recognition of the vocabulary words as well as the motivational factors that contribute to participants’ desire to continue interacting with the words. I then crosschecked my findings by revisiting the data sources outlined above.

Observations

Types of Play and their Affordances

The following play activities were identified from the data: socio-dramatic play, competitive play, and playing around with designs and symbols. The play activities seemed to afford opportunities that encouraged children to make meaning of the vocabulary words in ways they were most comfortable, promoted positive change in children’s use and/or recognition of vocabulary words, as well as endorsed a positive desire for the children to learn. The vignettes I composed are offered in this section to provide thick descriptions (Geertz, 1949) of the complexity and multiplicity of the participants’ play experiences with the vocabulary words and to contextualize my findings.

Socio-dramatic play encouraged the use of the vocabulary words through meaning and experience as well as provided context to which the words can be used. Both Ray and Zackary engaged in pretend play numerous times. Action figures and puppets were made available during each visit but surprisingly the children made use of the puppets more than the action figures during pretend play moments. The puppets were, at times, spontaneously incorporated into some of the other play types, but in this section I will report solely on my observations of isolated instances of socio-dramatic play with the puppets.

The moments where Ray and Zackary preferred to play with the puppets during these isolated instances, I would facilitate and incorporate, both directly and indirectly, the use of the
words; but despite my attempts to do so, this type of play alone appeared to encourage nothing more than the imitation of verbs through gestures, sound effects and gaze. My observations of the children engaged in socio-dramatic play revealed that the children would miss opportunities to make use of and/or recognize the vocabulary words through sound/symbol associations as well as make use of the words syntactically, whether that be through oral or written form. The following vignette describes a single episode of Ray’s socio-dramatic play with puppets that sums up the interactions that were commonly observed during this type of play activity:

Ray picks up one of the puppets and puts it in position. He knew exactly what to do and required no assistance whatsoever. “Num, num, num,” Ray says as he pretends to eat with a puppet that is in the shape of a bunny. He purposefully imitates the motion of eating. “Mmmmm” he says.

Using the puppet, I copy Ray’s gestures and use the word “eat” in a sentence. Ray looks at me, looks back at his puppet and says, “bunny num, num, num,” moving the bunny’s mouth in the motion of eating. After some time had passed, I overtly ask whether Ray’s puppet can try putting “eat” into a sentence. He turns back to look at his puppet, moves the bunny around, mumbles a bit, then says a few words unrelated to the word “eat.”

Although the isolated instances of socio-dramatic play with puppets did not appear to encourage the children’s use or recognition of the vocabulary words through sound/symbol associations or in sentences, this type of play activity did, however, encourage the use and recognition of the words through meaning and experience and provided context to which the words could be used.

The eclectic nature of competitive type play created endless opportunities for the use and recognition of the vocabulary words. An activity that I had proposed to initiate some play during my first visit was one in which the children had to match the words with the corresponding images or the physical representation of the words. Over the course of the study, however, this activity was altered based on the children’s suggestions for improvement and my own observations and reflections about what appeared to elevate the children’s interests. At first, this activity was altered to a timed running activity, where the children had to run by themselves from one end of the room to the other and retrieve the matching image or physical representation of the word. The activity was then altered further to include me as a member of a race, which ultimately changed the dynamic of the activity to more competitive and collaborative type play.

During this activity, children made use of and/or recognized the vocabulary words through movement, images and their gaze. Sound effects were also displayed; however, these sound effects were unrelated to the words that the children were handling. Through gaze, children attempted to master the phonological properties of the words, both with and without my assistance; and through image and movement, they were also able to make meaning of the words when finding the corresponding representation of each word. The vignette below offers a more detailed glimpse into participants’ experiences during this type of play activity as well as shows some moments of professional reflection on my part as tutor and participant observer—an important skill to espouse for my continued development of praxis.

“Can we play the racing game again?” Zackary asks after exploring some options for play. “Sure!” I reply. We begin playing and Zackary says “No, but can you play with me
this time, like a real race?” In this very moment, I realized that I needed to act more as a co-learner, engaging more with the children through play. “What a good idea!” I say.

“On your marks, get set, GO!” we say together as we prepare for the race. We read the first word and both dash across the room to retrieve the image and/or objects that represents the word. Zackary is in the lead. He laughs out loud as he dodges back across the room with the image in hand. “Yeah!! I won,” he says jumping for joy and laughing hysterically.

The next word was “water.” We dash across the room again after recognizing the word. Zackary is still in the lead. He laughs again as he returns with the image that represents the word “water” in his hand.

The next word was “people.” This time it took Zackary a little longer to recognize the word. I helped him sound it out. He shouts out “picture!” I draw his attention to the other letter features in the word. He then shouts out the word “people!” We dash across the room again. This time Zackary slides across the room and it takes him some time to get back up. I was in the lead. I snatch the 2-dimensional image that represents “people” and run back across the room. I gain a point but Zackary is still in the lead. The game continues . . .

As shown, this play activity offered the participants various opportunities to use and/or recognize the vocabulary words. It is important to note, however, that this activity focused solely on the reading of each word and did not afford opportunities for participants to make meaning of these words syntactically, whether orally or in written form. One competitive game that did, however, was a racing game that involved print. As part of this game, we had to write the words into sentences and whoever wrote the most vocabulary words in their sentences was the winner. Upon completion, we read our sentences aloud. During this activity, I noticed that participants took risks and used whatever symbols came to hand. Karen Wohlwend (2011) refers to this as approximating print (p. 84). During this competitive play activity, Zackary and Ray not only used the words orally and in print, but they also used the vocabulary words in meaningful sentences.

**Zackary Approximating Print**

Frst he eat a Bna. next he eat a a forrolap. nexxt he eat Beesle. He was vare tooybr. Last he wt to see tin aninns Bce. hen it was mornig.
Participants also played a version of Pictionary, but with words and images, which I also classified as a type of competitive play. If the opponent was able to guess the appropriate word, then one point was awarded to the one using print to represent its meaning. This type of activity encouraged the use and recognition of the vocabulary words through images, symbols and gaze. My observations revealed that participants attempted to recognize the words they handled through letter/sound relations as well as through meaning. The following vignette provides a detailed account of these findings:

“I have an idea!” Ray says to me upon finishing an activity I proposed to initiate some play. “I’m going to write something and you have to guess what it is,” Ray explains. He picks up the word “say” with one hand and picks up a black marker with the other, and then purposefully places the top of the marker on the left side of the whiteboard. Looking closely at the cue card in one hand, he begins to copy the word with the other. Once he is done, he looks up at me and asks me to guess what he wrote. I look at the cue card in his hand and look at the whiteboard and guessed the correct word. He looks down at the cue card that he has in his hand and says “Hey! That’s cheating!” He turns the cue card over along with the 2-dimensional image that represents the word so that I can no longer see. He then directs me to close my eyes. I cover my eyes with both hands waiting for further instruction.

With his mind now at ease, he selects another cue card and purposefully positions the marker on the left side of the whiteboard. Once he finishes copying the word, he shouts, “okay, you can look now!” I uncover my eyes and he quickly pushes the cue card and the image that represents the word under his bed. He chuckles. I look at all the other words on the floor and scratch my head. “Hhmmmm” I say. Ray laughs then makes sounds of anticipation.

I verbally make my guess, pointing to the word along with its image. He carefully looks at the word, trying to decode the phonological properties of each letter cue, shakes his head then looks at the image that represents the word. He quickly shouts “nooooo!” and pulls the correct word from under the bed. He looks at the image and says, “I picked ‘guy,’” pointing to the word “man.” I respond and say, “Ohhh, you picked ‘mmmman,’” pointing to the letter “M” in the word “man” and emphasizing the sound that the letter “M” makes. “Yeah! I mean I picked ‘man.’” Ray says. The game continues . . .

The above account of Ray’s experience playing a unique version of Pictionary sums up the ways in which the participants infused reading and writing of the vocabulary words during this activity. But even though this version of Pictionary offered the participants multiple ways to make meaning of the words and recognize them, ways that adult culture may not use or sanction (Gillen & Hall, 2003), the use and recognition of these words in sentences was not afforded to participants. A different competitive type of activity that did afford the syntactic use of the vocabulary words, however, was a version of Charades that involved the use of both verbal words and gestures. This competitive type activity encompassed experiential learning as the very nature of the activity encouraged participants to enact the words that they chose to handle. Similar to that of the socio-dramatic puppet play activity, these enactments provided the participants with context to which the words were used. The vignette below further elucidates these findings:
“So cool! Can I keep one of these?” Zackary says once I take the puppets out from my bag. He puts his hand in position and begins to make different motions with the puppet. I direct his attention to the vocabulary words and ask him how we can use these words with the puppets. He looks at the words alongside the images that represent the words and begins pretend eating. I pick up the word “eat” along with the 2-dimensional image that represents the word and ask Zackary to guess what word I’m acting out. Using the puppet, I say “la, la, la, I’m eating a cookie and it’s delicious!” Zackary quickly replies in a loud voice, “eating!” We cheer and give each other high fives, then move on.

Zackary picks up the image that represents “take,” looking for some assistance to find the correct word cues that correspond with the phonological properties of “take.” I say “t, t,” making the sound for the letter “T.” He looks around for a few seconds longer and then quickly was able to find the word “take.” He gasps then shouts, “here it is!” He looks at his puppet, moves it around saying, “I am taking this marker.” I quickly guess the word “take.” We cheer and then give each other high fives. We each have a point. Now we are tied. The game continues . . .

As noted, this version of Charades afforded participants opportunities to use and recognize the words through experiential learning where the participants verbally put the words into sentences. Additionally, this activity afforded the participants to use and recognize the words through making letter/sound associations as well as afforded opportunities to extend these vocabulary words by playing around with morphemes (e.g., the -ing suffix to verbs); however this activity failed to afford opportunities for Ray and Zackary to make meaning of the words through print.

Interviews with participants revealed that the competitive type activities best motivated the children’s use and recognition of the vocabulary words. Participants stated that following factors elevated their desires to continue interacting with the vocabulary words: running, competing with an opponent, combining reading and writing tasks as well as singing, all but one factor—singing—was incorporated in the competitive type play activities. The eclectic nature of this type of play afforded opportunities to cater to children’s interest. Singing was the only activity children mentioned that was not incorporated during this type of play, but it certainly can be. Teachers can infuse competitive type vocabulary singing games as a means to motivate children to learn new vocabulary words.

Playing around with designs and symbols creates context for knowledge transformation. During each visit, I also made traditional print material readily available in hopes that it would inspire the participants to use and explore the material in ways they felt most comfortable. Although I had anticipated that Ray and Zackary would use and transform the artifacts they produced in ways that transcended into their socio-dramatic play, to my surprise participants used opportunities with traditional print material to approximate print. The following vignette provides a more detailed overview of the types of interactions I observed with traditional print material:

“I want to colour!” Zackary says after exploring some of the other play options in the room. He approaches the area in the room where some traditional print material was placed. “Can I draw anything?” he asks. “Sure!” I reply.

First, he draws a man and labels it “man.” Then he draws a storybook and labels the
picture “story” in both English and Hebrew, using the cue cards to copy the graphic cues of each word in each language.

Zackary later draws a picture of a bowl of bananas. I asked whether there were any words we have been working with that we can use to create a story with the picture of bananas. He looks at the words on the floor along with the 2-dimensional and 3-dimensional representations and then shouts, “eat! A man ate a banana. Then he ate a cookie.” That was it; he created his story. He continues approximating print to write his story.

The above vignette illustrates that participants put the vocabulary words in meaningful sentences in both oral and written form. This type of play offered the participants the opportunity to use and recognize the words through storytelling and story writing tasks, which endorses notions of reading for experience and meaning. During the storytelling process, like that of the Charades activity, children used extensions of the words, changing verbs to past tense like the use of “ate” and/or adding the –ing suffix to the word “eat.”

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**Discussion and Conclusions**

This present study contributes to the current Education scholarship by shedding light on how three specific types of literacy-related play activities contributed to two Hebrew-English speaking children’s use and recognition of new vocabulary words. As did other researchers (e.g., Dever & Wishon, 1995; Wohlwend, 2011, 2008), I found that play provided meaningful contexts for literacy learning where the children practiced and transformed what they knew about literacy.
in a number of ways. My observations revealed that both participants of my study were able to familiarize themselves with the vocabulary words through each play type; though the eclectic nature of the competitive type play activities seemed to best motivated the children’s use and recognition of the vocabulary words. This is likely because this play type was most sensitive to children’s idiosyncratic interests and abilities—a pedagogy that many scholars advocate for today (e.g., Begum, 2014). It is said that building on students’ varied interests and abilities is what good teaching and learning is all about (e.g., Gee, 1989). Nevertheless, overall my observations revealed that students’ level of engagement and interest seem to play an important role in how motivated they are to continue interacting with the vocabulary words. These findings align with studies that show students’ motivation and learning achievement are correlated (for e.g., Dörnyei, 2005). With this said, I recommend that parents/caregivers, teachers and the like critically reflect on what best motivates children at an individual level when supporting children’s sight words learning and to be adaptable when children’s interests shift.

Implications for Further Study

For further study, I suggest an investigation into teacher and parent/caregiver inquiry through action research. Seeing as how action research is a catalyst for reflective practice, participants of action research projects can dispel any lingering misconceptions they may hold about sight words and/or overt instruction, which in turn may help create more spaces for play in and out of the classroom. Through this type of research project, teachers, parents or tutors can also explore the role of more “capable peers” (Wink & Putney, 2002, p. 86) during learners’ interaction with unfamiliar words. Future research may even want to extend this study to other populations, perhaps to make comparisons about the affordances of different play types across populations and/or to explore the affordances of other play types for young children’s sight word learning.

References


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