

Comprehension Strategy Instruction During Parent–Child Shared Reading: An Intervention Study

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This study examined the effectiveness of a series of workshops and at-home activities designed to teach parents to integrate comprehension strategy instruction into read-alouds with their pre-kindergarten-aged children. Twenty parent–child dyads were randomly assigned to condition and parents in the experimental (workshop) condition were taught to engage their children in retelling, recognition, and use of story structure elements, activation and use of prior knowledge, and talking about text. Results revealed significant changes in interaction patterns between parents and children in the experimental group reflecting the strategies, as well as significant effects on children’s comprehension. Findings indicate that children are capable of strategically comprehending text well before they are reading connected text independently and that a low-intensity intervention with parents can facilitate the process.

Keywords comprehension, strategy instruction, family literacy

Home literacy practices have been shown to powerfully influence literacy outcomes for children in a number of ways (e.g., National Early Literacy Panel, 2008; Purcell-Gates, 2000), affecting

- children’s motivation to read or be read to (Sénéchal, 2006; Weigel, Martin, & Bennett, 2006);
- interest in books (DeBaryshe, 1993);
- acquisition of concepts and skills related to word and letter identification, decoding and encoding words, vocabulary, concepts of print, and comprehension (Bus, van Ijzendoorn, & Pellegrini, 1995; Justice & Ezell, 2000; Neuman, 1996; Reutzell, Fawson, & Smith, 2006); and,
- behaviors related to literacy learning such as frequency of reading and writing and use of lower-frequency vocabulary words in speech (Goldenberg, 2006; Purcell-Gates, 2000).

In a similar vein, we know that there is a strong correlation between children’s early and continued exposure to, and presumably engagement with, literature and their later reading abilities (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997; Hood, Conlon, & Andrews, 2008; Sénéchal, 2006; Stanovich, 1986). However, there is considerable variation in the quality, types, and frequency of literate interactions across families, resulting, in some cases, in better outcomes for some children than others (e.g., Aram, 2009; Goldenberg, 2006; Li, 2006; Sénéchal, 2006).

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Perhaps because parent–child interventions have been found to be most beneficial before children are reading conventionally (Bus & van Ijzendoorn, 1995), there are a large number of observational and intervention studies of joint reading that focus on young children and their parents, many of which are centered on dialogic reading (e.g., Elias, Hay, Homel, & Freiberg, 2006; Lever & Sénéchal, 2011; Martin & Reutzel, 1999). Programs utilizing dialogic reading teach and encourage parents and others to read *with* children, as opposed to reading *to* them (Whitehurst et al., 1994), to engage in ongoing dialogue about the text and graphics with children, and to share control over the flow of conversation (Elias et al., 2006). Interestingly, few studies have examined the impact of interventions designed to encourage or improve these interactions, despite the relationship between quality and quantity of parent–child read-alouds and later reading achievement. Furthermore, studies utilizing comprehension as an outcome variable are all but nonexistent (for a notable exception, see Jordan, Snow, & Porche, 2000). This is somewhat surprising, given that we know that older children often struggle with comprehension (e.g., Applegate, Quinn, & Applegate, 2006), young children are capable of learning to comprehend (e.g., Baumann & Bergeron, 1993; Hansen, 1981), and listening comprehension skills can transfer to later reading comprehension (Garner & Bochna, 2004).

Studies regarding the potential of young children to learn to comprehend (e.g., Baumann & Bergeron, 1993; Hansen, 1981; Morrow, 1985) and effective teachers (e.g., Morrow, Tracey, Woo, & Pressley, 1999) have highlighted both the appropriateness and effectiveness of teaching comprehension skills, even to our youngest learners. For example, Bauman and Bergeron (1993) found that first grade children, when taught to strategically attend to story structure, outperformed peers in a control group on measures of retelling performance (length, coherence, sequential organization), identification of important parts of a story, and selection of good summaries. Similarly, Morrow (1985) found that kindergarten children who received instruction on retelling after listening to narrative stories later performed better on tests of comprehension of those stories than peers in a control group who were asked to draw a picture related to the story after listening. Studies of effective teachers of young children, such as that of Morrow et al. (1999), also contribute to the validation of these findings. Their study involved first grade teachers, identified as exemplary based on administrator recommendation; student achievement, test performance, reading levels, motivation, engagement, and writing abilities; articulation of their teaching philosophy; and observations by the researchers. The researchers found that these exemplary teachers consistently embedded strategy instruction into their read-alouds of story books and guided reading lessons. Specifically, they taught students to retell, engage in repeated reading, make predictions, and draw conclusions (among other strategies).

Beyond the asking and answering of questions, perhaps the most widely used classroom instructional practice is strategy instruction or “intentionally and explicitly teaching cognitive strategies that readers use to construct meaning while interacting with text” (Foley, 2011, p. 196). The primary goal of this type of instruction is to teach novice and struggling readers to read purposefully and flexibly, using a variety of strategies appropriate to particular situations and in conjunction with prior knowledge (Pressley et al., 1994)—a hallmark of skilled reading (e.g., National Reading Panel, 2002; Pressley, 2000; Smolkin & Donovan, 2002). While some children naturally use strategies and become strong comprehenders in the absence of explicit instruction, many others do not (e.g., Gersten, Fuchs, Williams, & Baker, 2001), but can be taught to do so (Duke, Pressley, & Hilden, 2004; RAND Reading Study Group, 2002). Using a gradual release of control model to teach less proficient readers to engage in a small number of strategies as they read can be an effective way to promote comprehension (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983; Pressley, 2000; Roehler & Duffy, 1984), even for very young, emergent readers (e.g., Gregory & Cahill, 2010).

This study, in light of its relatively short duration and the literature that indicates the need for instruction to be iterative in order to be effective (e.g., Brown, Pressley, Van Meter, & Schuder, 1996; Pressley et al., 1994), only focused on four commonly taught strategies that have been shown to have a positive impact on young children's comprehension in classroom settings: retelling, attention to story structure, activation and use of prior knowledge, and talking about text (used strategically as a scaffold for productive, independent thought about text). For brief definitions and select citations for each, see Table 1. Parents of 10 preschool children from a range of settings attended small-group and individual workshops held at or near their children's schools in which they were taught to implement these strategies via modeling, scaffolding, and discussing specific things that good readers do to understand text. An additional 10 parents and their children served as a control group.

The study was designed to examine two questions:

1. To what extent are parents able to implement comprehension strategy-based instructional practices into shared reading with their children in response to workshops on the strategies?
2. What are the effects of that implementation on children's comprehension of fictional narrative text?

Table 1
Definitions and Select Citations for Strategies

Strategy	Description	Select Citations
Retelling*	At intervals during the story or at the completion of the story, the reader/listener retells, in order, the most important main ideas and details	Elias, Hay, Homel, & Freiberg (2006) Garner & Bochna (2004) Hansen (1978)
Story structure*	The reader actively focuses attention on characters, setting, events, problem(s), and resolutions(s)	Stevens, Van Meter, & Warcholack (2010) Whitehurst, Zevenbergen, Crone, Shultz, Veltin, & Fischel (1999)
Activation and use of prior knowledge	Readers actively search for background knowledge relevant to a text and then use that knowledge to help them better understand the text (e.g., to empathize with a character or make a prediction)	Duke, Pressley, & Hilden (2004) Gersten, Fuchs, Williams, & Baker (2001) McIntyre (2007) Meyer, Brandt, & Bluth (1980) Pressley et al. (1994)
Talking about text	Readers talk about text (aloud or self-talk), particularly when actively working to make meaning of challenging text	Beck & McKeown (2001) Bergman & Schuder (1992) Blank & Frank (1971) Dickinson & Smith (1994) McIntyre (2007)

Note. *The citations provided for retelling and story structure are combined, as the two are typically taught and used together.

Theoretical Framing

This research was grounded in the social constructivist assumption that “children’s cognitive development is an apprenticeship—it occurs through guided participation in social activity with companions who support and stretch children’s understanding” (Rogoff, 1990, p. vi.). Comprehension, generally speaking, is a covert activity (Pressley et al., 1992)—the work of comprehending happens inside our heads, and is thus invisible to novice readers. Making these processes overt through strategy instruction during parent–child read-alouds presents children with a window into the mind of a more skilled reader and an opportunity to learn through apprenticeship.

In addition, this study is predicated on the assumption that the locus of the reading at which comprehension is optimal moves from external (being read to), to adjacent (reading aloud to oneself), to internal (reading silently) as readers become more experienced and proficient (e.g., Prior & Welling, 2001). Moreover, this shift occurs gradually, likely not reaching completion for most children until some point during adolescence (Prior, Fenwick, Saunders, Ouellette, O’Quin, & Harvey, 2011). Researchers who have investigated this assumption have primarily done so in the context of children’s oral and silent reading of text and argue that each stage supports the development of the next. For example, younger children tend to have higher comprehension when reading aloud to themselves than when reading silently, but the fluency that is built by reading aloud likely supports them as they develop into more proficient readers. In turn, older and more proficient readers tend to be able to read more fluently (at least in terms of rate) when reading silently, and theoretically this increased fluency contributes to their tendency toward having higher comprehension when reading silently than when reading aloud (e.g., Prior & Welling, 2001; Prior et al., 2011). Building on that research, the design of this study also assumes that, if present, external instruction in, modeling of, and support for strategy use for young children similarly support independent, internalized use of strategies as readers become more proficient, which should lead to higher levels of comprehension (Pressley, 2000). Inherent in this assumption is that the ways in which emergent readers interact with more knowledgeable others around text influence the ways in which they will subsequently interact with it independently. That being the case, the content, quality, and frequency of those initial interactions is crucial.

Methods

Participants

Parents or other primary caregivers and children in their final year of preschool or child care prior to kindergarten entry (parent–child dyads) were recruited from three diverse types of settings in the Midwest—urban Head Start, suburban preschool and developmental kindergarten classrooms, and tuition-based childcare. The particular settings were purposively selected in order to create a participant pool that was ethnically, socioeconomically, and geographically diverse. Consent forms and a brief cover letter explaining the study and workshops (content, timeframe, locations, provision of childcare and snacks, provision of books and materials) were sent home with all age-eligible children in the participating centers/schools. Students in the final sample ranged in age from four years to six years, one month old (mean age of four years, eleven months for the control group and five years, three months for the experimental group, a non-significant difference). All participants were native speakers of English, and none were receiving special education services at the time of the study.

Table 2
Child Participant Demographic Information

		Condition	Control <i>n</i> (%)	Experimental <i>n</i> (%)
Gender	Male		6 (60)	6 (60)
	Female		4 (40)	4 (40)
Ethnicity	Caucasian		6 (60)	7 (70)
	Chicano/Mexican-American		2 (20)	0 (0)
	Hispanic		1 (10)	1 (10)
	Asian-American		0 (0)	1 (10)
	African-American		0 (0)	1 (10)
	Other		1 (10)	0 (0)
Socioeconomic Status*	Low		3 (30)	3 (30)
	Middle		1 (10)	5 (50)
	High		6 (60)	2 (20)

Note. *For the purposes of sample description, mother's highest level of education was used as a proxy for socioeconomic status (Entwisle & Astone, 1994): low SES was defined as the mother having a twelfth grade education or less, middle SES as the mother having completed a two- or four-year college degree, and high as having completed a master's or doctoral degree.

Twenty parent-child dyads attended the workshops and completed all stages of data collection. Dyads were assigned to matched-pairs, within site, based on children's initial comprehension scores on the Early Literacy Skills Assessment (ELSA) (DeBruin-Parecki, 2005), and one dyad from each matched pair was randomly assigned to each condition (control or experimental). Although group composition changed due to attrition, there were no significant differences between the resulting groups on initial ELSA scores. Children's ages were fairly evenly distributed and there were equal numbers of boys and girls across conditions. Both groups had an equal number of low socioeconomic status (SES) participants (as determined by mother's highest level of education; Entwisle & Astone, 1994), however, the experimental group had two more middle SES participants, while the control group had three more high SES participants. Because final analyses indicated that socioeconomic status did not significantly influence the effectiveness of the intervention, this difference was likely inconsequential. For additional participant demographic information, see Table 2.

Data Collection Measures and Procedures

Data were collected on both parents' implementation and children's comprehension. Data on the experimental group parents' implementation was obtained by audio recording parent-child read-alouds pre- and post-intervention. Parents were also asked to record frequency of read-alouds, number and titles of books read, and strategies used at home. However, uneven rates of return for these logs and the strong possibility of selection bias precluded their use in the final analyses. Children's comprehension was measured pre- and post-intervention using a commercially available measure, the ELSA (DeBruin-Parecki, 2005), and researcher-designed retelling protocols.

Implementation Measures. All parent-child dyads read one of two comparable books (Henkes, 1993; Pilkey, 2004), counterbalanced by matched-pair, at the beginning of the

pre- and post-intervention sessions (described later in this section). Parents and children were seated in relative isolation (out of earshot of both the researcher and other dyads) and parents were instructed to read with their children as they would at home, using audio recorders to record their reading and interactions. The recordings were then analyzed to determine implementation scores, as described in the data analysis section, which reflected the degree to which they were employing the instructed strategies. Prior to final scoring, to obtain interrater reliability on the coding, six randomly selected transcripts were scored by both the researcher and a doctoral student in the field of early literacy using a codebook created by the primary researcher. Disagreements were discussed and the codebook was refined accordingly. Interrater reliability was then estimated at 0.95 (i.e., raters agreed on 95% of codes) by having both the expert and researcher independently code an additional 25% of the transcripts and comparing across raters.

Child Measures

Early Literacy Skills Assessment (ELSA, DeBruin-Parecki, 2005). The ELSA, an assessment in which a storybook is read aloud to a child with questions asked of the child periodically during the reading, was administered both pre- and post-intervention to all study participants (using alternate forms). The assessment taps three constructs of comprehension (prediction, retelling, connection to life), which are scored in terms of number of correct, chronological (in the case of retelling) responses to open-ended questions. Typically, raw ELSA scores are converted to one of three developmental levels. However, during the pilot work for this study, the levels were judged to provide insufficient variation to facilitate the formation of matched pairs and analyses, so raw scores were used. Using item response theory, reliability for the comprehension portion of the ELSA is adequate at $p \geq .83$ (Cheadle, 2007). Concurrent validity is not reported for the comprehension portion of the assessment. However, face validity is high based on research regarding the factors that contribute to comprehension.

All research assistants who administered the ELSA were trained per the publisher's recommendations, using the publisher-provided video cases. Interrater agreement was calculated at 98%, based on the scoring of the video cases (that is, scoring was identical between the researcher and research assistants for, on average, 98% of all responses; no research assistant had below a 95% match).

Retelling measure. All children in both conditions gave audio-recorded retellings of a story read to them by a research assistant both pre- and post-intervention (one of two *Froggy* books [London, 2003, 2005] each time, counterbalanced by matched pair). In order to control for familiarity, a different research assistant (unknown by the child) collected the retellings at each time point. After listening to a story read one-on-one with a research assistant, each child was prompted by a second research assistant who was not present for the initial reading to "start at the very beginning and tell me as much as you can remember of the story." When children appeared to be finished, they were given the prompt "Anything else?" until they responded by indicating that there was not.

The recorded retellings were scored using a checklist developed and refined during the pilot phase of this study and reviewed for validity by several researchers in the field of early literacy. The checklist consisted of items organized by weighted categories based on story elements (i.e., characters, setting, problem, resolution, and episodes). (See Appendix A for an example.) So as to hold constant the number of possible points across books and protocols, each category was given a maximum number of possible points, determined based on

the relative importance of each category to comprehensible retellings of stories, in general. For example, referring to the characters by name was allotted fewer points than explaining the problem of the story because the gist of the story could be conveyed without character names, but not without the problem. This format helped mitigate the slight differences in length and complexity in stories for cross-story comparisons.

Although reliability and validity statistics do not exist for this measure, expert review of the protocols showed high construct validity. Face validity is also high based on extant research linking story structure knowledge to comprehension. To assess interrater reliability, a randomly selected 50% of all retellings (20 protocols) were independently scored by the researcher and a graduate student in the field of early literacy, both of whom were blind to participant condition and time point. Interrater agreement was 95% (that is, scoring was identical between the researcher and research assistant for 95% of all responses).

Procedures

This intervention design was carefully constructed based on the literature regarding successful family literacy and tutoring interventions. Generally speaking, effects of interventions are stronger when parents or tutors are taught to intervene in specific ways (Cohen, Kulik, & Kulik, 1982; Sénéchal & Young, 2008) and when tutors have access to frequent feedback and opportunities to ask questions (Wasik, 1998). Research also suggests that interventions do not need to span large amounts of time in order to be effective (Cohen et al., 1982), a finding that figured prominently in the decision to limit the intervention to five sessions over the course of eight weeks in the hopes that a shorter-term commitment would also be less daunting for parents and facilitate the inclusion of a larger number of participants.

Experimental Treatment. Parents of children assigned to the experimental group attended four informational sessions created by the researcher in consultation with experts in the field. The sessions took place at 2-week intervals and each lasted 40 minutes to an hour. The specific dates and times of the sessions were determined by polling the participating parents and offering sessions at the times that the majority of parents at a particular site indicated to be convenient (individual sessions were held for parents for whom those times were not convenient). During the sessions, parents were taught ways in which they could integrate strategy instruction into one-on-one read-alouds with their children. Additionally, they attended a final session in which the workshop series was debriefed and children were administered final assessments. For the first four sessions, parents first recorded a joint-reading session, and then met as a small group and were verbally introduced to a focal strategy as they followed along on a written handout (see Appendix B for an example). Then, they watched a video of a parent modeling the target strategy, with live narration from the researcher to point out instances of strategy use and address participant questions. Immediately following the video, there was time for discussion and for the parents to ask questions, which typically included inquiries such as “Which story structure element should we start with?,” “How often should we stop and talk?,” and “What if my child loses interest?” Before the children came back into the room, parents were also given time to preview a book, if they so desired, and then were given time to read that book with their child, using the strategies and receiving guidance on an as-needed basis from the researcher and research assistants. Finally, beginning with the second session, parents had the opportunity at the beginning of each session to share their experiences with the previously learned strategy or strategies and ask questions

prior to learning a new strategy. For example, in the session following the session focused on retelling, one parent stated, “I tried retelling with my daughter and she made up a completely different story, what should I do?” When parents were unable to attend the group session, for whatever reason, sessions were conducted at an alternate time, individually. (For a typical session schedule and description of the elements of each session, see Figure 1.)

Written materials were also distributed at and in between sessions. At each of the first four sessions, parents received a tip sheet on the focal strategy to take home. (See Appendix B for an example.) In addition, a letter reminding parents to read with their children using the strategies introduced to date, a bookmark containing reminders about the most recent focal strategy (an abbreviation of the strategy handout), and a fictional narrative book to be used for practice were mailed to participants between sessions, for a total of four mailings.

Control. Participants in the control condition attended an initial session that closely mirrored the structure of the initial experimental session, but instead of receiving information on strategy instruction, they received general information on the importance of reading with their children and basic information about how to facilitate shared reading. This procedure was designed intentionally to reflect advice commonly given to parents (i.e., to read more often), without specific information as to how to improve the quality of the reading. Data identical to that of the experimental group were collected from the control group during their first and second/last sessions, which corresponded chronologically to the first and fifth experimental sessions.

5-10 Minutes- Each parent-child dyad engaged in a recorded shared reading session of a fictional narrative picturebook (pre-selected by the researcher).

10-15 Minutes (beginning with the second session)- While the children were out of the room engaging in arts and crafts or outdoor play with helpers, parents talked and asked questions about previous target strategies, shared success stories, and raised concerns.

15-20 Minutes- Parents were introduced to a new strategy via discussion, a handout, and a video of the strategy in action. Following these activities, parents were also given the opportunity to ask questions.

15-20 Minutes- Parents were invited to choose a book, preview it, and read it with their children using the new strategy. The workshop facilitator was available to answer questions and give support.

FIGURE 1 Timeline of a typical workshop.

Control group parents were also given a handout on shared reading at their first session (similar to that of the experimental group, but differing in content) and were mailed the same books on the same schedule as the experimental group. The mailings also contained bookmarks and letters that included reminders of the importance of shared reading and its facilitation.

Analyses

Implementation. Transcripts were coded for (a) parent and child turns (utterances bounded by reading of the printed text, utterances by the other party, or a combination), (b) parent and child initiation of conversations (initiating an exchange about the text, for example, “He lives alone?”) and uptake (responding to the other person’s comment related to the text, for example, child: “He lives alone?,” parent: “No, the doggy has a family, remember?”), (c) total number of strategy use instances within and across individual categories (with all talk relevant to the text that was not clearly a use of another strategy coded as “talking about text”), and (d) range of strategies used (i.e., number of different strategies used during the read-aloud). Because tests for normality of distribution and homogeneity of variance revealed non-normal distributions for several variables (which was expected due to the relatively small sample size and the tendency of literacy experiences of young children to be heterogeneous [e.g., Hood et al., 2008]), nonparametric statistics were used to determine differences in outcome variables at both time points and within and across condition.

Comprehension. Although related in underlying construct and thus likely correlated, retelling and ELSA scores differed in that the retelling scores and sub-scores were coded as continuous variables (a percentage of total possible points earned) and ELSA scores and sub-scores were coded as count variables (raw scores without a ceiling score), therefore the analyses for the two measures were run separately.

Likely for the reasons noted above, tests for normality of distribution and heterogeneity of variance performed using ELSA and retelling scores revealed violations on several subscales, thus nonparametric statistics were again used to look for statistically significant differences, both across groups at both time points and within groups, across time points. In addition, Mann-Whitney U tests were used to test for differences between conditions and gender groups (two independent conditions); and Kruskal-Wallis tests were used to test for differences between socioeconomic groups.

Interaction Between Implementation and Comprehension. First, nonparametric tests were used to determine whether there were significant differences in comprehension outcome measure means within and between groups from time point one to time point two. Because no significant differences were found using the retelling measure as an outcome variable, no further analyses were run to explore the relationship between the implementation variables and retelling.

In order to determine the relationship between implementation and comprehension as measured by the ELSA (on which there were differences for the experimental group between time points), a negative binomial regression was run using raw ELSA scores as the dependent variable. Number of turns and range and number of instances of strategy use were entered as between-subjects factors, and socioeconomic status and gender were entered as covariates.

Results

Parent Implementation

Frequency and Range of Strategy Use. Pre-intervention, there were no statistically significant, between-group differences in the range of strategies used, total number of strategy use instances, or number of times that individual strategies were used during parent–child reading. Across time points, as compared to the control group, the participants in the experimental group made statistically greater gains in the number of instances of retelling ($p = .011$) and talking about text ($p = .007$). Differences between groups approached significance for story structure ($p = .052$). Although participants in the experimental group had more instances of activation and use of prior knowledge, results were non-significant ($p = .280$). Dyads in the experimental condition also engaged in significantly more instances of strategy use ($p = .004$) and used a significantly wider range of strategies ($p = .035$). The effect sizes for the statistically significant differences were small to medium, ranging from $r = -0.25$ to $r = -0.63$ (see Table 3).

Turns, Initiation, and Uptake. Pre-intervention, there were no statistically significant differences between group means for either parents or children in the total number of turns taken or instances of initiation or uptake. There were, however, significant differences between groups at $p < .05$ in the amount of growth between time points, with medium effect sizes (ranging from $r = -0.38$ to $r = -0.70$) for all of these counts except for child initiations ($p = .089$). From pre- to post-intervention, parents and children in the experimental condition significantly increased the frequency with which they talked about the text as they read ($p = .001$ for parent turns; $p = .004$ for child turns) and became significantly more likely to

Table 3

Nonparametric (Mann-Whitney U) Statistics for Post-Intervention Implementation Means and Effect Sizes Based on Strategy Use From Analyses of Parent–Child Read-Alouds

	Condition	<i>n</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>z</i>
Retelling	Control	10	0.10	0.32	-.63**	-2.82
	Experimental	10	2.10	2.38		
Story structure	Control	10	0.90	0.88	-.44*	-1.99
	Experimental	10	2.00	1.25		
Activation and use of prior knowledge	Control	10	1.60	1.43	-.25	-1.12
	Experimental	10	4.40	4.48		
Talking about text	Control	10	8.30	2.58	-.59**	-2.63
	Experimental	10	13.00	4.76		
Total strategy use instances	Control	10	10.80	3.08	-.62***	-2.77
	Experimental	10	21.50	8.72		
Total number of different strategies used	Control	10	2.40	0.84	-.52**	-2.33
	Experimental	10	3.30	0.68		

Note. * $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$.

Only scores for the post-intervention time point are included as there were no statistically significant differences pre-intervention.

Table 4
 Nonparametric (Mann-Whitney U) Statistics for Post-Intervention Implementation Means and Effect Sizes Based on Turns, Initiation, and Uptake Analyses of Parent–Child Read-Alouds

	Condition	<i>n</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>z</i>
Number of parent turns	Control	10	19.10	5.63	-.70***	-3.14
	Experimental	10	47.00	20.57		
Number of child turns	Control	10	14.20	5.87	-.63***	-2.81
	Experimental	10	38.70	20.96		
Number of parent initiations	Control	10	8.80	3.99	-.64***	-2.84
	Experimental	10	16.70	5.31		
Number of child initiations	Control	10	3.80	2.49	-.38*	-1.71
	Experimental	10	7.10	4.73		
Number of parent uptakes	Control	10	10.30	4.11	-.58***	-2.57
	Experimental	10	30.30	18.40		
Number of child uptakes	Control	10	10.40	4.33	-.65***	-2.89
	Experimental	10	31.60	16.92		

Note. * $p < .10$, *** $p < .01$.

Only scores for the post-intervention time point are included as there were no statistically significant differences pre-intervention. ANOVA models included initial scores on each measure as covariates.

respond to topics raised by one another ($p = .009$ for parent uptake; $p = .003$ for child uptake). In addition, parents were also significantly more likely to raise new topics ($p = .003$ for parent initiation) (see Table 4).

Effects of Implementation on Comprehension. The relationships between the number of instances and range of strategy use during the time point two read-alouds and ELSA and retelling scores at time point two were non-significant (further explanation of this is in the following section).

Child Comprehension

Early Literacy Skills Assessment (ELSA). While there were increases in total ELSA scores across time points for both groups, the change for the control group was not statistically significant ($p = .083$, $\bar{x}_{\text{pre-intervention}} = 5.20$, $\bar{x}_{\text{post-intervention}} = 6.80$) with an effect size of $r^2 = 0.42$, while the experimental group change was ($p = .045$, $\bar{x}_{\text{pre-intervention}} = 5.30$, $\bar{x}_{\text{post-intervention}} = 9.00$) with a larger effect size of $r^2 = .52$. Although growth for the experimental group on the ELSA was statistically significant and the growth for the control group was not, there were no statistically significant differences between groups at time point one or two (see Table 5).

Retelling Measure. There were no statistically significant differences between time points for either group on retelling scores. There were also no significant differences between the control and experimental groups on children's total scores pre- or post-intervention (see Table 5).

Table 5
Pre- and Post-Intervention Means and Effect Sizes Based on Repeated-Measure ANOVAs of Group Comprehension Scores

	<i>n</i>	Mean (pre)	<i>s</i> ²	<i>SD</i> (pre)	Mean (post)	<i>s</i> ²	<i>SD</i> (post)	<i>f</i>	<i>r</i> ²	<i>df</i>
Total (ELSA raw score)										
Experimental	10	5.30	7.12	2.67	9.00	18.00	4.24	6.40	0.52**	1
Control	10	5.20	13.96	3.74	6.80	18.84	4.34	4.31	0.42*	1
Total (retelling percentage score)										
Experimental	10	0.30	0.03	0.16	0.28	0.04	0.20	0.32	0.04	1
Control	10	0.19	0.06	0.24	0.24	0.04	0.21	3.25	0.35	1

Notes. * $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$.

Gender and socioeconomic status were entered as covariates, but did not prove to contribute significantly to outcome measures at either time point, and are thus not reported here.

Comprehension in Relation to Implementation. A negative binomial regression using ELSA post-intervention total scores as the dependent variable and total number of turns, number of strategy use instances, and number of strategies used as independent variables showed effects approaching statistical significance at $p < .05$ for two of the independent variables ($p = .075$ for turns, $.086$ for number of instances), and approaching statistical significance at $p < .10$ for the third ($.186$ for range), indicating the possibility that level of implementation had some influence on comprehension scores.

Negative binomial regressions run to determine the influence of socioeconomic status and gender on comprehension (as measured by the ELSA) showed no significant differences for either variable. However, given the small cell sizes, these results should be interpreted with caution.

Discussion

Results of this investigation indicate that a relatively low-intensity series of workshops and between-workshop activities, if carefully planned to include best practices in instruction (i.e., explicit instruction and modeling of strategies, feedback, and high levels of support during sessions), can have a significant influence on parents' interactions with their children as they read together. For example, in this study, 8 out of 10 dyads in the experimental condition broadened the range of strategies that they used, as compared to only two dyads in the control condition. Parents in the experimental condition also increased the frequency with which they engaged their children in strategy use during read-alouds, which parents in the control group did not. Finally, post-intervention, parents in the experimental group were more likely to use strategies that were seldom used by either group pre-intervention. Retelling is an excellent example of this phenomenon: initially, only three dyads in each condition engaged in any type of retelling during their shared reading. Post-intervention, 7 of the 10 dyads in the experimental condition engaged in some form of retelling, as compared to one dyad in the control condition.

While quantitative results were less dramatic, the results do suggest that these changes in reading patterns were beginning to affect reading comprehension. After eight weeks, children in the experimental group showed statistically significant increases on one of the two comprehension measures, the ELSA, while their peers in the control group did

not. While these results were quite modest, it is possible that the lingering effects of the intervention on parents' future time spent reading with their children would increase the impact of the intervention; a compelling area for future research. These results, in combination, suggest several implications related to the potential of parent-child read-alouds, the potential of young children to be active, strategic comprehenders, and the potential of similar interventions.

The Potential of Parent-Child Read-Alouds

Children who are not reading on grade level by third grade are, unfortunately, unlikely to catch up (National Reading Panel, 2002). Schools work under constraints of limited time, high student-to-teacher ratios, and curricula that cannot be tailored to all children at all times, among others. Many families, on the other hand, while perhaps lacking self-efficacy and/or knowledge, are much more likely to be in a position to spend time with children one-on-one. Parents who took part in these reading workshops and were taught effective ways to engage with their children around print interacted with their children more often, were more likely to respond to topics initiated by their children, and were more likely to model strategy use and scaffold use of strategies for their children. More importantly, after only eight weeks, the beginnings of change were apparent in children's comprehension, an effect that may continue to grow over time.

Young Children as Active, Strategic Comprehenders

Results of this study lend further support to the argument that young children can benefit from comprehension instruction before they are independently reading. This low-intensity intervention produced measurable gains on ELSA total comprehension scores for children in the experimental group, with a moderate effect size. In addition, children assigned to the experimental condition were significantly more likely to verbally interact with the text and their caregivers in ways that supported active meaning making (i.e., utilizing the instructed strategies). For example, when reading the book *Owen* (Henkes, 1993), the following exchange, exemplifying the use of activating and using prior knowledge, took place between a parent-child dyad in the experimental group at the final time point:

- Text: That night Owen's parents told Owen to put Fuzzy under his pillow. In the morning Fuzzy would be gone, but the Blanket Fairy would leave an absolutely wonderful, positively perfect, especially terrific big-boy gift in its place (n. p.).
- Parent: Does that . . . does that sound like something's gonna happen to the blanket?
- Child: Yeah, he's gonna take it?
- Parent: He's gonna take it?
- Child: And throw it away.
- Parent: How would you feel if that happened?
- Child: Um, sad.
- Parent: Sad. How do you think Owen feels?
- Child: Sad.
- Parent: Yeah?

In this example, the parent helped the child to use his own prior knowledge to infer how the character likely felt, which is integral to understanding the story. While dyads in the control group also talked about the book during the reading, they did so less often and

their comments tended to be less supportive of comprehension, with parents focusing more on the word level or giving children information, as opposed to co-constructing it. For example, when reading the same book (*Owen*) during the final session, a parent and child in the control group engaged in the following exchange:

- Text: “Isn’t he getting a little old to be carrying that thing around?” asked Mrs. Tweezers. “Haven’t you heard of the Blanket Fairy?” Owen’s parents hadn’t. Mrs. Tweezers filled them in. That night Owen’s parents told Owen to put Fuzzy under his pillow (n. p.).
- Parent: It’s kind of like the tooth fairy . . . ’cept for, where do you put your tooth?
- Child: In a bag.
- Parent: Yeah. . . . What word is that?
- Child: In? . . . No, I don’t wanna read this.
- Parent: OK.

While the parent does attempt to engage the child in thinking about the meaning of the text and to connect to prior knowledge, what is not evident here (and in most control-group transcripts) is an attempt to connect the prior knowledge to the story in a way that helps the child to use it to better understand the story.

The mean total number of text-related turns per story (both parents and children) for dyads in the experimental group at the end of the intervention was 85.7 (range of 27 to 146 and a median of 91)—nearly triple that of the control group, 33.3 (range of 14 to 54 and a median of 31.5). Parents and children in the experimental group were also statistically significantly more likely to build on one another’s comments as opposed to cross talking, which stood in stark contrast to both groups at time point one and the control group at the final time point. Sociocognitive theory (e.g., Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978) holds that this interaction, or joint meaning-making process, is imperative to children’s later abilities to make meaning on their own.

It is important to note that the time frame of the study may have affected the results. It is possible that, if given more time between the last instructional session and post-assessment, the children’s comprehension scores might have shown greater improvement due to an extended period of implementation. As opposed to rote skills (e.g., naming letters), measureable comprehension growth often requires a much longer time period (Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002). It is also possible that results would diminish over time in the event that parents reverted back to their previous reading styles. More research is needed in order to determine maintenance effects.

Finally, the fact that both groups showed some measureable improvement over time in the form of increased interaction around text (measured by the total number of turns taken by the child and parent) and comprehension (measured by the ELSA) both supports and strengthens previous research that has indicated the importance of parent–child interaction around print. While parents in the control condition did not receive any particular intervention, it is possible that the attention drawn to the issue through the initial parent session and subsequent mailings may have influenced or increased the frequency of their interactions with children around print. The areas in which the experimental group outperformed the control group speak to the value-added nature of the intervention itself.

Promise of This Intervention

In the current economic climate, interventions must be budget-friendly to even merit consideration. The cost of this intervention is extremely low in terms of material and human

resources. In terms of supplies, the workshops require only paper copies of a limited number of materials, four to six books (library books or low-cost paperbacks), demonstrations of strategy use (easily and inexpensively video-recorded or live), and snacks to encourage attendance. The only human resources needed are the time of one project leader (about 1.5 hours per session, including preparation time) and staff or volunteers to provide child care during the sessions. The cost effectiveness of this intervention also increases capacity; large numbers of families can participate without a substantial budgetary increase.

Anecdotally, many parents in the experimental condition reported a sense of confidence in their implementation of the intervention. One parent, for example, said that she never knew how to help her daughter understand books because she had never been a good reader and often did not fully understand them herself. She went on to state that she feels good about reading with her kids now and does so more often because she knows how to help them understand the books. On several occasions, other parents noted that they had never considered that their children might not fully understand the books that they read together; the workshops had made them more cognizant of and better able to monitor for and address misconceptions. The sense of efficacy and utility that these parents demonstrated is important and should be addressed as a central goal of family literacy initiatives because parents are much more likely to participate in their children's educations if they feel that they are needed, know what to do, and are able to do it (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). As with many tasks, it is likely that valuing the potential outcomes in combination with the expectation that they are capable of making a difference was highly motivating for parents to initiate and sustain momentum in a program such as this (Vroom, 1964).

Finally, in the case of this particular study, the sessions were conducted by the researcher, a former kindergarten teacher. However, the design of the sessions was such that they could have easily been led by a teacher, administrator, literacy specialist, or other professional tasked with improving the literacy skills and knowledge of young children. The information was not complex, but would likely be beyond the common knowledge of most adults outside of the field of education. An important lesson that we can learn from this research, as well as research on other initiatives and interventions such as Parent and Child Together (PACT[®]) Time, Project Early Access to Success in Education (EASE) (Jordan, Snow, & Porche, 2000), and Project Family Literacy: Aprendiendo, Mejorando, Educando (FLAME) (Shanahan, Mulhern, & Rodriguez-Brown, 1995), is that the support of educators with knowledge of how to facilitate positive interactions with parents is an invaluable resource for families, many of whom are likely to have little knowledge of the types of best practices in education in which we hope they will engage.

In summary, although the nature of this study did not facilitate analyses related to the relative contribution of each design factor, in combination, explicit instruction, modeling, provision of materials (i.e., books, handouts, bookmarks), and between-session reminders of strategies effectively influenced parent-child interactions during joint reading and, subsequently, their children's comprehension.

Limitations

The limitation of most concern in this study was that the nature of the research lent itself to self-selected participants (i.e., parents who volunteered to participate may well have varied in significant ways from those who did not) and a high level of attrition. These issues did not affect the comparison of the two groups of families because matched pairs were created within sites, assignment to condition took place after families signed up for the study, and all families knew that they would be able to participate in the workshops (the control group

after the completion of the research study). However, it does raise questions as to whether these self-selected participants might significantly vary in some way from other families that would cause them to react more or less favorably to the intervention.

One factor that likely influenced participation decisions was family stressors. The need to take care of other children, prepare meals for the rest of the family, and find transportation all contribute to parents' abilities and motivation to attend workshops with regularity (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Still, it was disheartening how few parents agreed to participate in such a low-intensity activity, and how few of those followed through. In addition, self-selection bias influenced socioeconomic groups disproportionately, with the participants with the lowest socioeconomic status being least likely to follow through (although, interestingly, most likely to sign up for the workshops). The rate of attrition among low SES participants was nearly 82% (27 of 33 dyads; only one of those who dropped out attended even the initial session), while that of their middle and higher SES peers was much lower (4 of 11, or 36%; and 1 of 8, or 12.5%, respectively). The majority of the low SES parents were recruited from the Head Start program, which also had a disproportionate number of racial/ethnic minority students, resulting in higher rates of attrition for minorities.

While a few parents noted changes in job status or household obligations as reasons for discontinuing their participation, the vast majority simply did not attend or respond to the researcher's attempts to contact them, providing little indication as to what might improve participation in subsequent studies. While it is likely that many of these parents are actively involved in their children's educations in other ways (Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 2007), it does make it appear likely that many of the parents who could most benefit from programs such as this one are the very parents who are least likely to be willing or able to avail themselves to such opportunities. It should also be noted that this attrition level refers to parents who did not attend with enough frequency to use their data for the *study*, which is not to say that they did not gain anything from the intervention or that parents participating in this type of intervention who are unable to attend all sessions would not benefit from them.

On a related note, another limitation of the study was the small number of participants. Of the approximately 300 eligible families, only 53 parent–child dyads consented to enrollment in the study and only 20 completed it. As with the reasons for attrition, the reasons for families declining to enroll in the workshops are unclear. It may be that parents were uninterested in the study, the invitation came from a researcher (as opposed to someone from within the school), or other factors simply made attendance a logistical impossibility. The statistical power of this study was undoubtedly affected by the relatively small amount of data generated for analyses. While results were indicative of a clear trend, more research with a larger number of participants is certainly needed.

Finally, the decision to limit the number of sessions to five was made, in part, in an effort to make committing to participation in the workshops less daunting for families. However, it is possible that a series of workshops with more sessions, if parents were willing to attend, would have had a greater impact.

Directions for Future Research

The field of family literacy is ripe for research on many fronts; however, this study clearly points to the need for further investigation on several topics, including

- Further study of what factors determine initial and continued participation in family literacy initiatives and how we might work within and around these factors to increase participation;

- The relative effectiveness of strategy instruction embedded in read-alouds versus explicit instruction of cognitive strategies;
- Best practices in parent–child shared reading of texts from other genres (e.g., informational or poetic texts); and,
- Effects of similar interventions when led by the children’s own classroom teachers or other educators involved in their schooling (both on participation and literacy learning).

These are just a sampling of many possible directions, and are, themselves, likely to illuminate the need for additional studies.

Conclusion

Home literacy practices influence later literacy achievement; this is well established. However, especially in comparison to the amount of support given to practicing teachers, there is very little attention given to preparing parents to take on this role. Providing parents with the support they need to maximize their contributions to their children’s learning is one way in which we can help ensure that all of our children become readers. This intervention, in which parents were taught to model their own use of comprehension strategies and support their children to use those same strategies, proved to be an effective way of influencing parent–child interactions, increasing parent efficacy, and improving children’s abilities to comprehend fictional narrative text. As a relatively low-cost intervention, the series of workshops described in this article is a practical way in which schools might support families to become more involved with their children’s literacy learning. In addition, this study contributes a framework on which future interventions in this critical area can be built.

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Appendix A: Example of a Retelling Scoring Protocol

Book: *Froggy's Sleepover* (London, 2005)

ID Number

Date

Time Point:

Pre

Post

Characters:

1- Froggy

.5- Froggy's mom

.25- Froggy's dad

1- Max

Total (max 2)

Setting:

1- Froggy's House

1- Max's House OR his friend's house

.5- Outside

.25- at night

Total (max 2)

Problem:

1- Max told scary stories and Froggy was scared

1- Max had a tummy ache and wanted to go home

2- They kept changing their minds about where to stay (OR Froggy was scared, Max wanted his pillow, Froggy wanted lemonade) and going back and forth

Total (max 4)

Episodes:

1- Froggy got ready for his first sleepover/he packed

1- Froggy kept forgetting things and going back to get them (or specifically mentions forgetting either the toothbrush or Huggy/doll- .5 pt. for each one mentioned)

1- Froggy got all ready for bed, but it was too early (or mentions any of the following in place of "got all ready for bed": set up his sleeping bag, brushed his teeth, got called a baby by Max)

1- After dinner/then, they went to bed

.5- Froggy knocked over the lamp and/or fish bowl

1- Froggy's mom made them popcorn

1- They went back to bed

1- Froggy and Max had a pillow fight

Total: (5 max)

Resolution:

1- Froggy and Max went to Froggy's house

1- Froggy and Max went to Max's house

2- Finally, it was morning and they fell asleep at Max's house

Total: (max of 3)

TOTAL RETELLING POINTS: /16

Appendix B: Example of a Strategy Handout



Prior Knowledge

What is it and why should I do it?

What is it?

You and your child have had lots of experiences and have a lot of information stored in your brains. You can use that information to help you understand what you read.

Why should I do it?

Connecting to prior knowledge lets kids build on what they already know, which can make stories easier to understand.



Summer Reading Workshops

Tips:

- ☉ Read in a comfortable place with few distractions.
- ☉ Try to bring the story to life by reading with expression.
- ☉ Keep the attitude positive—this should be a treat, not a chore.
- ☉ After you are finished, let your child know how much you enjoyed your time together.

How do I do it before reading?

Talk about what you think the book will be about. Help your child think of things they know that relate to the topic. For example:

- *This book is called Danny and the Dinosaur. Look at the picture; he's walking the dinosaur like*
- *he's a dog. You have walked the dog before. Do you think it would be as easy to walk a dinosaur? Why or why not? Would a dinosaur make a good pet? Why or why not?*
- *What do you know about dinosaurs?*
- *This reminds me of...*

How do I do it during reading?

Continue to relate the events of the story to things that your child already knows or has experienced. Point out places in the book where you or your child can make a connection. For example:

- *Now he's using the dinosaur as a slide! Wouldn't that be fun? I love the slides at the park, so I bet Danny is having a*



good time sliding down the dinosaur's back. What do you think?

- *It's starting to get late. What do you have to do when you are playing outside and it starts to get late? Do you think Danny will have to do that, too?*
 - *Have you ever...*
 - *Do you remember when...*

How do I do it after reading?

Try to help your child relate the story to other stories or to his or her life. For example:

- *In this story, Franklin got lost. Have you ever been lost? How did you feel? How do you think Franklin felt when he was lost?*
- *You knew a lot about going to the*

zoo before we read this book.

Did you learn anything new?

- *There was a wolf in this story just like in Little Red Riding Hood. How were they the same?*
- That book re-minded me of...



Remember! When you help your child activate prior knowledge, be sure to relate what he or she already knows to the new things in the book.

What kinds of prior knowledge might you and your child have?

Stories in General

- You and your child know about story structure. You expect to read about characters, setting, at least one problem, events, and at least one solution.

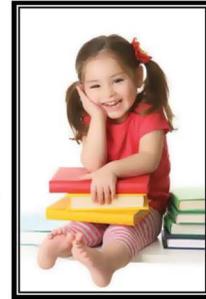
Personal Experience:

- You might have been in a similar situation that can help you understand how the characters feel (for example, if the character is afraid of the dark and has to find a way to be brave).
- You might have tried to do the same thing that the characters are doing and know how it worked

out for you (for example, if the character breaks the rules in school).

Other Books:

- You may have read books with similar stories or problems that can help you predict what will happen in this book.
- You may have read other books by this author and remember things that the books have in common.



Dates to Remember:



In the meantime, don't forget to fill out your reading logs and be on the look out for special packages in the mail!