



Enhancing Formal Word Definitions: An Educational Intervention Plan for Monolingual & Bilingual Children

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Received: 28 September 2020/ Accepted: 04 December 2020/ Published: 12 November 2020

Abstract

The development of word definitions is related to literacy and school success. Moreover, definitions depict vocabulary development, since “good” (i.e. formal) definitions reveal that the word is well-established to the mental lexicon and it can be properly used. The role of education is pivotal for the improvement of definitional abilities. The current paper discusses the importance of formal word definitions and suggests an educational proposal of activities to improve the definitional abilities of monolingual and bilingual children. The proposed plan exploits didactic principles, works on the comprehension of formal definitions, and gradually moves to their production by improving vocabulary organization, at once. Additionally, it utilizes differentiated instruction to be implemented in classes with a mixed population of monolingual and bilingual elementary students. This paper aims to help teachers/language instructors in order to enhance their students’ definitional abilities and increase their school success in the long run.

Key words: Educational interventions; formal definitions; monolingual and bilingual children

How to cite: Dosi, I. (2020). Enhancing Formal Word Definitions: An Educational Intervention Plan for Monolingual & Bilingual Children. *Journal of Innovation in Psychology, Education and Didactics*, 24(2), 179-188. doi:10.29081/JIPED.2020.24.2.05

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1. Introduction

The development of definitional abilities has been studied intently, because it is linked to literacy, school and overall academic success (Snow, Cancino, Gonzalez & Shriberg, 1989; Snow, 1990; Watson & Olson, 1987). Furthermore, definitions depict linguistic knowledge (Nippold, 1998), since the speaker needs to select the appropriate terms and word characteristics to provide a “good” word definition (Marinellie & Johnson, 2002). In other words, a formal definition. Formal definitions indicate that the word is well established to the mental lexicon and it can be properly used for linguistic purposes. Consequently, definitions also reflect the development and organization of vocabulary (Johnson & Anglin 1995, Marinellie & Johnson, 2002). The development of definitions progresses with age (Dourou, 2019b; Dourou, Gavriilidou & Markos, 2020; Wolman & Barker, 1965). However, factors such as literacy, educational level and career orientation seem to affect definitional abilities. Bilingualism also has an effect on the production of definitions (Charkova, 2004), since bilingual speakers have better metalinguistic abilities, and, thus, they seem to produce better definitions. Nevertheless, language proficiency and the literacy of the bilingual speaker also have an impact on the use of formal definitions.

Most of the studies have examined the definitions of nouns, and more specifically, concrete nouns (Gutierrez-Cleflen & DeCurtis, 1999; Marinellie & Johnson, 2002; To, Stokes, Man & T'sou, 2013). Few are the studies that compared nouns to verbs (Marinellie & Johnson, 2004; Marinellie, 2010) and even fewer are those which also investigated adjectives (Gavriilidou, 2011, 2015; Dourou, 2019a, b; Dourou, *et al.*, 2020). The findings of the latter studies suggested that the grammatical category plays an important role in the production of definitions. Thus, children use more formal definitions in nouns compared to adjectives and verbs (Benedict, 1979), and then, they use more formal definitions in adjectives compared to verbs (Gavriilidou, 2011, 2015). Another factor that affects the successful production of formal definitions is frequency (Marinellie & Johnson, 2003, Marinellie & Chan, 2006).

Recent studies investigate not only the content of definitions but also their form (i.e. syntax; Benelli, Arcuri & Marchesini, 1988; Watson, 1985). Studies are not in consensus on which aspect is easier in an acquisition. A study by Johnson and Anglin (1995) has shown that children produced better definitions in content compared to form; while, in a recent study by Dosi and Gavriilidou (2020), scores in content were lower compared to those of form. Educational language interventions can boost students' definitional abilities (Marinellie, 2010). They can also improve the language and cognitive abilities of monolingual and bilingual children (Robinson & Sorace, 2018).

To date, limited studies have discussed how to improve the definitional abilities of school-aged children and even scarcer are those which proposed an intervention plan (Marinellie, 2010). The current proposed educational intervention plan suggests activities to improve students' formal definitions starting from comprehension (receptive abilities) and moving to production (expressive abilities) while enhancing students' mental lexicon development and organization. Besides, it can be implemented in mixed classes of monolingual and bilingual elementary students, since it utilizes differentiated instruction methodology.

2. The importance of formal definitions & the role of education

The importance of the development of definitional abilities has been repeatedly demonstrated by previous research since definitions exhibit information about linguistic abilities and predict reading abilities and the general school/academic success (Gutierrez-Cleflen & DeCurtis, 1999; Kikas, 1993, Snow et al. 1989). Definitions depict semantic knowledge and organization, since speakers access their mental lexicon and cautiously select the required information (characteristics, meaning, categories; cf. Johnson & Anglin, 1995; Marinellie & Johnson, 2002), to give a fluent and accurate definition (Snow 1990). The aforementioned process refers to the development of formal definitions, in which a superordinate term and one or

more characteristics of the defined word are contained (Johnson & Anglin, 1995; Marinellie & Johnson, 2002; Snow *et al.*, 1989). Superordinate terms (e.g. *chair* is a piece of furniture) appear at school years (however they meliorate with age), while terms like “a thing” or “something” are replaced by these more specific words (Nippold, 1995; Skwarchuk & Anglin, 1997, Snow *et al.*, 1989). Word frequency was also found to be an important factor in terms of the accuracy of definitions (Gavriilidou, 2015; Marinellie & Johnson, 2003; Marinellie & Chan, 2006); hence in words with higher frequency, it is more often to use formal definitions compared to words with lower frequency. Formal definitions also indicate decontextualized language abilities that are not evident in informal definitions, in which the context is required (Snow *et al.*, 1989). The development of definitions improves with age. In other words, definitions are more concrete, functional, personal, and action-oriented in early childhood and they become more formal and abstract after the age of 13 (Caramelli, Borghi & Setti, 2006). They are, usually, completed in adulthood (Dourou, 2019b; Dourou *et al.*, 2020; Wolman & Barker, 1965). Nevertheless, contextual factors (such as literacy, educational level, and career orientation) affect the frequent use of formal definitions. More specifically, more educated individuals use more often formal definitions (Dourou *et al.*, 2020). Another factor that seems to affect the use of formal definitions is bilingualism/multilingualism (Charkova, 2004). Since bilingual/multilingual children have better metalinguistic abilities, they can produce earlier, more often, and more successfully formal definitions. Nevertheless, the role of language proficiency and literacy practices of bilingual speakers was found to affect the accuracy of word definitions (Charkova, 2004).

In research, most of the studies have focused on the investigation of the definitions of nouns, and especially, the definitions of concrete nouns (Gutierrez-Cleflen & DeCurtis, 1999; Marinellie & Johnson 2002; To *et al.*, 2013). Few are the studies that compared nouns to verbs (Marinellie & Johnson, 2004; Marinellie, 2010) and even fewer are those which also investigated adjectives (Dourou, 2019a, b; Dourou *et al.*, 2020; Gavriilidou, 2015). The findings of the latter studies indicated that the grammatical category plays an important role in the production of definitions. More specifically, formal definitions are more often used in nouns than in adjectives and verbs, because nouns are more frequent and they refer to fixed entities, and thus, arise earlier in children’s lexicons (Benedict, 1979). Besides, formal definitions are more frequently used in adjectives than in verbs, since adjectives are less abstract (Gavriilidou, 2011, 2015).

Apart from the content definitions have also been investigated for their form (Benelli, Arcuri & Marchesini, 1988; Watson, 1985). Studies are not in consensus on which aspect comes first in development. Some studies indicated that children produced better definitions in terms of content compared to form (Johnson & Anglin, 1995); while other studies have shown that scores in the form are better than those in content (Dosi & Gavriilidou, 2020). Thus, the latter study suggested that content is a more “sensitive” indicator of the development of definitional abilities than form.

The role of education is pivotal for the development of formal definitions (Snow, 1990; Snow *et al.*, 1989) because children are exposed to formal language and accurate definitions at school; whereas, usually, the home environment provides more informal language (Snow, 1990). Also, children’s vocabularies and their literacy skills are improved through schooling and teachers’ feedback, and subsequently, definitional abilities can be implicitly enhanced, as well (González *et al.*, 2014, for a review, see Malekian *et al.*, 2014). A study by Marinellie (2010) has shown that the accuracy in the production of formal definitions is subjected to explicit instructions. By explicit instructions, it is meant definitional strategies, teacher modeling of definitions, practice, and self-evaluation. In the same study, Marinellie (2010) has claimed that educational language interventions can boost students’ definitional abilities even though they might be a one-time lesson. Besides, it was found that educational language interventions improve language and cognitive abilities of monolingual and bilingual children, through input and social interaction (Robinson & Sorace, 2018). Finally, in a study by Charkova (2004), the

outcomes suggested that early foreign language education also has a positive impact on the quality of children's formal definitions in their first language.

3. Methodology

Since there are very limited studies on the improvement of definitions, the present paper aims to offer a completed educational plan for the improvement of formal definitions in different grammatical categories (nouns, verbs, adjectives), since, to date, the majority of studies focus, predominately, on the improvement of nouns. The proposed plan addresses teachers who have elementary students (9-12 years old) and classes with mixed populations (monolingual and bilingual children). It also uses differentiated instruction.

The methodology is the following: a pre-test with definitions will be administered. A 4-month intervention will be implemented after the testing. After the completion of the intervention, a post-test will be administered to check the impact of the intervention on definitional abilities. Below the procedure and rationale of the plan will be presented.

4. Results

The teacher has to work on three phases. The first concerns the testing of word definitions, to check students' definitional abilities before the intervention (pre-testing). The 4-months intervention will aid the improvement of definitions along with the enhancement of vocabulary. Initially, students will work on their receptive definitional abilities, and later they will develop their expressive skills. Students will learn how to define words both in terms of content and in terms of form. Semantic associations will be enhanced and better established through the intervention since it will be also put effort into vocabulary improvement. After the intervention, a post-test will be given. The results will be compared to the results of the pre-test, to check the effect of the intervention.

4.1. Pre-testing

Prior to the intervention, it is suggested to administer a pre-test with definitions of different categories (nouns, verbs, adjectives) and of different frequency (low, medium, and high-frequency words; for Greek, see Dosi et al. in press; Dourou, 2019b; Gavriilidou, 2015). The pre-test will show a clear picture of students' definitional abilities.

4.2. Intervention

The intervention will last 4 months, and it is suggested to take place twice a week for 90 minutes each session. During the intervention, apart from the exposure to the formal definition paradigm, the teacher will work on vocabulary expansion and organization, as proposed afterward. Another important aspect to be considered is the imageability of the words (Marinellie, 2010). The definitions of the three grammatical categories (nouns, verbs, and adjectives) are worked separately in different phases (almost one month per phase), starting from nouns, moving to adjectives, and, finally, verbs. Also, initially, there are presented the most frequent words per category and then the less frequent ones.

Before presenting indicative activities that practice both the comprehension and the production of definitions, different types of definitions will be displayed (see Table 1 and Table 2) for the teacher to be able to categorize and assess them both in terms of content and form.

Table 1. Content coding

Content category	Noun (apple)	Adjective (funny)	Verb (read)
<i>Function</i>	<i>I eat an apple</i>	<i>when we are doing funny things</i>	<i>I read a fairy-tale</i>
Descriptive	something that we eat	somebody does funny things and we laugh	when you open a book and you learn something
Concrete example	it's an apple on the backside of my phone	my daddy is funny (and he touches his tummy)	I do that (and he pretends that he read)
Association	juicy	jokes	a book
Class non-specific	food	I say funny things	I see letters and say them
Class-specific or Synonym	fruit	amusing	to study
Partial Formal	a red fruit	someone who makes us laugh and has fun	when I read aloud words and I use a book
Formal	is a fruit we bite and has seeds	somebody that has a sense of humor and makes people laugh	to look at words and understand their meaning

Table 2. Form coding.

Form category	Noun (apple)	Adjective (funny)	Verb (read)
One word (+determiner) (not the superordinate category)	red	laugh	book
Verb phrase	we eat it	we mock	I read a text
Transitional ("Something" or "thing" + referential sentence)	something that we eat	something that causes our humor	something that I do with a book
Partial formal definitions (superordinate category)	a fruit	when somebody makes jokes	when I study a text
Formal definitions	round and red fruit with seeds	somebody that makes the other laugh	decoding a text recognizing the written symbols that compose it and comprehend its meaning

The teacher has to work on both content and form of definitions, at once. Receptive skills are initially improved through paradigms; while vocabulary is also expanded. At the last phase of the intervention, students are encouraged to give their definitions both in oral and in written form. The teacher gives explicit instructions and feedback.

4.2.1. Activities on the receptive definitional abilities

Formal definitions are initially presented by the teacher and the student is asked to find the defined word. For instance, the teacher says, “*a round and red fruit with seeds is called...*” and students have to answer “*apple*”. In the next activity, the teacher gives the definition in pieces (for example, “*funny is/makes the other / when somebody/ laugh*”) and the students place it in the correct order (*funny is when somebody makes the other laugh*). The third activity helps the students understand the difference between an informal and a formal definition. In this activity, five different “good” and “bad” definitions of the same word are presented, and students must find the “good” (i.e. formal) definition. For instance, in the following example the accurate response is (e):

Read means...

- (a) I read a book/ fairy-tale
- (b) when you open a book and you learn something
- (c) to study
- (d) when I read aloud words and I use a book
- (e) to look at words and understand their meaning

The teacher discusses with the students why the last definition is the best one, explaining that a ‘good’ verb definition starts with an action in the form of *to + verb*, accompanied by the second description of the action. A ‘good’ noun definition starts with the superordinate term accompanied by one or more characteristics of the noun. While a ‘good’ adjective definition begins with *somebody/something that* and one or more characteristics of the adjective. The aforementioned explicit instruction and feedback aid the students to understand how the content and the form of a ‘good’ definition should be.

In this phase, the activities are not differentiated for monolingual and bilingual students, since they tap into their receptive skills. A good practice to overcome possible difficulties is to encourage the students to work in pairs/groups.

4.2.2. Activities on vocabulary expansion and organization

Vocabulary will be trained in parallel with receptive skills. The most important part in vocabulary, apart from learning the new words, is the proper organization of the words in semantic categories; especially in terms of noun definitions, since a superordinate category is required.

The teacher can write on the board the word and students brainstorm the words that they can recall. The teacher organizes the recalled words based on the grammatical category. If there is a noun, the teacher notes the superordinate term. Thus, the words are hierarchically organized in the mental lexicon and can be more easily retrieved. For the learning of new words, the teacher can use flashcards, in which the word will be depicted. Therefore, the selected words need to have imageability.

Another technique leverages context; hence, students are often instructed to guess the meaning of the word relying on the context (Mediha & Erisa, 2014) or to write a sentence using the word that is being learned (Ekiaka Nzai & Reyna, 2014). Other strategies include the teaching of word families, the teaching of the word’s internal structure (stems and affixes).

In this phase, bilingual students are encouraged to use synonyms or translation equivalents in their second language (Ekiaka Nzai & Reyna, 2014; Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 2007).

4.2.3. Activities on the expressive definitional abilities

In the third phase of the intervention, students are asked to write their definitions. They receive a booklet, in which they note their definitions (10 per grammatical category) leveraging the methods that were presented in the previous phases (Marinellie, 2010). They can, initially, work in pairs/groups, to feel more self-confident and negotiate the content and form of the definitions. Later, they will be encouraged to work on their own.

It is expected that bilingual students will progress earlier on how to form definitions since they have better metalinguistic abilities. Nevertheless, they possibly have more issues finding the proper words. Therefore, when working in mixed groups (a bilingual with a monolingual child), bilingual children will be helped in terms of choosing the correct words and monolingual children will be assisted regarding their metalinguistic abilities. In this phase, bilinguals will be also encouraged to write the definition in their second language.

The teacher gives immediate and explicit feedback, so as for students to understand why their choice is incorrect and, thus, to improve their defining abilities.

4.3. Post-testing

After the end of the intervention, a post-test will be given to check the outcomes of the intervention. In the post-test, all the words should be matched with the pre-test (e.g. apple-pear, read-dance, funny-sad; similar to Marinellie, 2010). The scores of the pre-test and the post-test will be compared and it is expected to differ significantly in favour of the outcomes of the post-test.

5. Discussion

The current intervention plan is expected to shed more light on the importance of formal definitions and to suggest a full plan for teachers/language instructors to improve their monolingual and bilingual students' receptive and expressive definitional skills.

One of the fundamental ideas of the proposed plan was to follow didactic principles and, initially, tap into students' receptive skills and gradually move into their expressive ones by means of structured production (Dosi & Dolaptsoglou, 2020). In the proposed plan, the emphasis was put on the training of all four skills (listening, reading, speaking writing) in terms of definition abilities. This plan also considered the improvement of both content and form, since both are important aspects for the development of definitional abilities (Marinellie, 2010). A novelty of the current plan is that the definitions of adjectives are included, while previous studies focused on the definitions of nouns and verbs (Charkova, 2004; Marinellie, 2010). Also, vocabulary enhancement was a significant dimension of the current plan. Hence, students will expand their lexical knowledge and better organize their mental lexicon (Johnson & Anglin, 1995; Marinellie & Johnson, 2002). This plan also took into account word frequency which is important for the development and improvement of definitions (Marinellie & Johnson, 2003; Marinellie & Chan, 2006). Moreover, word imageability was considered (Marinellie, 2010), since it will be easier for the students to more successfully store the words and their definitions.

Other important aspects of the implementation of the intervention were the use of explicit instructions and immediate and explicit feedback (Marinellie, 2010). Thus, students will become familiar with the content and form of formal definitions. In addition, through immediate and explicit feedback, they understand which parts of their definitions need improvement and why. Differentiated instruction also was part of the plan, since a class might consist of students with different linguistic profiles (Dosi & Dolaptsoglou, 2020). Thus, some of the activities could be differentiated. Regarding bilingual students, they will also be encouraged to use their second language in vocabulary enhancement activities and the production of definitions, since as previous studies suggest (Charkova, az 2004), the use of both languages improves speaker's

metalinguistic awareness and has a positive impact on formal definitions in their first language. Leveraging bilingual speakers' metalinguistic abilities, it was suggested to form mixed pairs/groups with monolingual and bilingual students to help each other. Thus, monolingual students will help bilinguals with the vocabulary and bilingual students will aid monolinguals in terms of metalinguistic abilities (i.e., how to form a definition). By this way of working, input and social interaction will be increased and their side effects will be the enhancement of language and cognitive abilities, as suggested by Robinson & Sorace (2018).

One important limitation should be acknowledged; the intervention plan has not been put into practice. Therefore, it will be subjected to modifications and enhancements. Summarizing, this paper aimed to present a 4-month educational intervention plan for classes with a mixed population of monolingual and bilingual elementary students. The main points of the plan were (a) the training of all four skills (listening, reading, speaking writing), (b) the implementation of differentiated instruction for monolingual and bilingual students, (c) the use of direct instruction and immediate explicit feedback and (d) the implementation of metalinguistic knowledge. The current intervention providing guidelines about how to teach formal definitions also encourages teachers to create their material, update and expand it to improve their students' school achievement and academic success in the long run.

Acknowledgments

This research is co-financed by Greece and the European Union (European Social Fund-ESF) through the Operational Programme «Human Resources Development, Education and Lifelong Learning» in the context of the project “Reinforcement of Postdoctoral Researchers-2nd Cycle” (MIS-5033021), implemented by the State Scholarships Foundation (IKY).

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