Background

Information encoded in relation to self is better remembered than information encoded about other people. This is the SELF-REFERENCE EFFECT (SRE).1

The SRE has been observed for adults and children2 but relatively few studies have reported effects outside of the laboratory.3,4 The current study aimed to apply the self-reference effect to children’s learning. Many children struggle with literacy learning5,6, creating long-term negative consequences7. The SRE might offer a strategy to help overcome this problem.

Can self-referential encoding be used to improve literacy skills?

Experiment 1 – Non-Words

47 primary school children (mean 8.5 years) divided into two groups. Presented with four green aliens and their hobbies (e.g., Winead is interested in art, and loves painting), and a fifth red alien called Splay.

Referent Encoding Task: Write a sentence for each alien.

Self Group: what YOU would do with each of them on a play date.

Other Group: what SPLAY would do with each of them on a play date.

Test: Spelling test carried out a few minutes after encoding was completed.

Measures: Mean number of words written per sentence and spelling accuracy.

Experiment 2 – Real Words

32 primary school children (mean 8.5 years) tested over two weeks in a repeated measure design.

Each week 10 real words to learn. Copy word three times.

Self: Write a sentence for each word that begins “I”.

Other: Write a sentence for each word that begins “Harry”. (Harry Potter)

Test: Spelling test carried out one week later for each list.

Measures: Mean number of words written per sentence and spelling accuracy.

Experiment 1 Results

More words written in self sentences

Better spelling accuracy for self group

Experiment 2 Results

More words written in self sentences

Better spelling accuracy in self condition

SRE improves accuracy (spelling performance) and output (number of words written) when employed in classroom spelling exercises.

Can this technique be employed at an earlier age?

What types of word learning might benefit more from SRE intervention (i.e., regular/irregular)?

Can we use self-referencing techniques to support learning in other subject areas (e.g., mathematics)?