

Supporting children’s oral narrative development through large-scale implementation of teacher-delivered tier 1 oral narrative instruction in New Zealand schools



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INTRODUCTION

Explicit and systematic oral narrative instruction can improve reading comprehension and written language abilities^{1,2} by strengthening children's understanding of story structure^{3,4,5}. The **Better Start Literacy Approach (BSLA)** is a structured literacy approach, with published effectiveness^{6,7}, being implemented at large scale in New Zealand primary schools. BSLA embeds explicit oral narrative instruction within daily structured literacy lessons, alongside explicit teaching of phonological awareness, phonics, and the application of these skills to reading and writing. Teachers monitor children’s responses to BSLA teaching through a suite of innovative online oral narrative and literacy tasks. In the oral narrative task⁸, children hear a story presented with pictures via a website (on a computer or tablet screen with audio recording capabilities). They answer five comprehension questions related to the story and then retell the story in their own words with the pictures as prompts. Automated transcription and scoring features provide teachers with quantitative data about children’s oral language and narrative comprehension skills. Teachers can then use a Story Quality Rubric⁹ to analyse qualitative aspects of children’s narrative retelling skills. This study analysed data collected at large scale from these oral language measures to investigate children’s oral language, narrative retelling and narrative comprehension growth in response to BSLA structured literacy teaching.

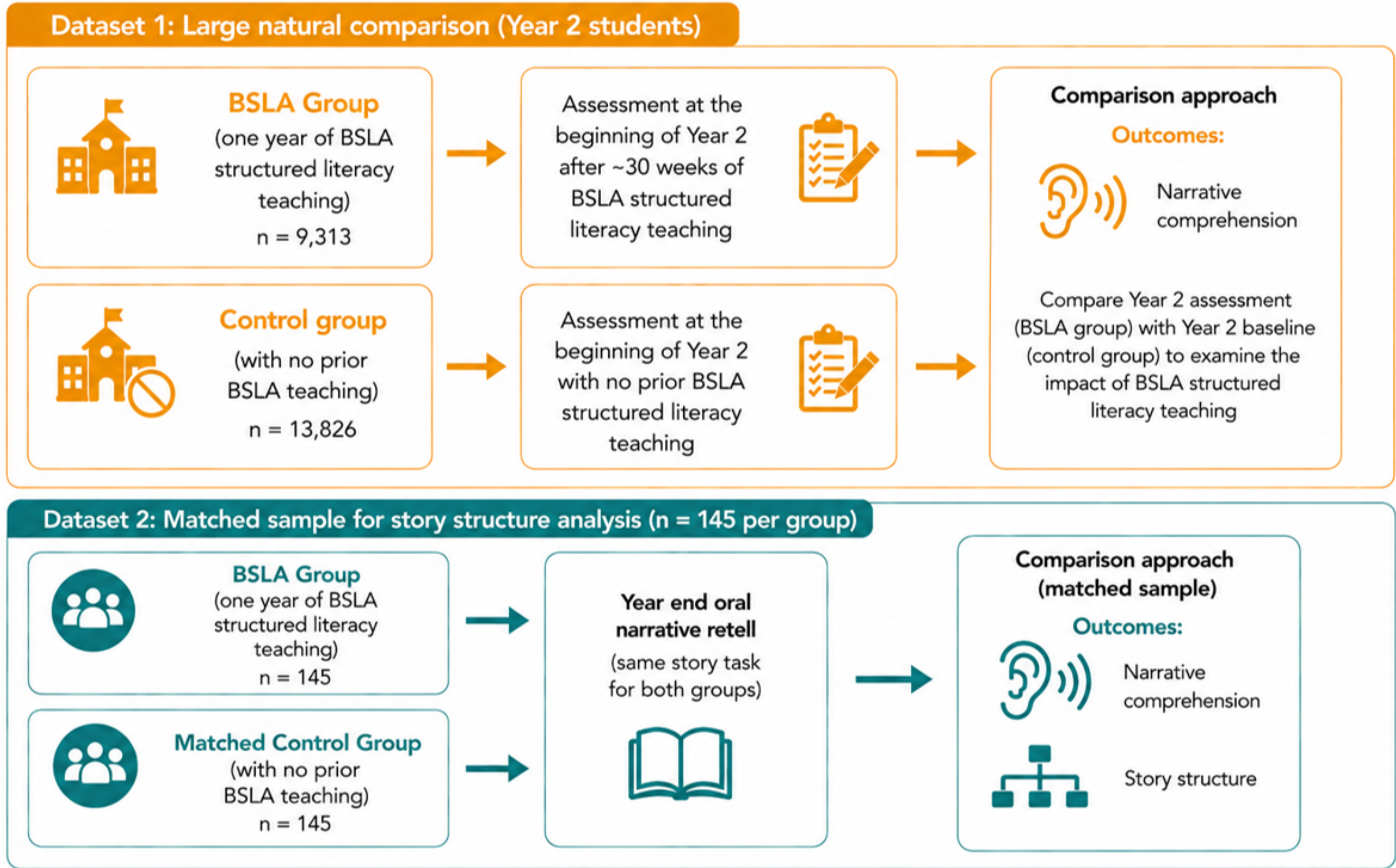
RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What is the **impact of one year of BSLA whole class structured literacy teaching** on children’s **oral narrative retelling skills** and **oral narrative comprehension**?
2. After one year of formal schooling, are there group differences for oral narrative retelling skills and oral narrative comprehension between:
 - a. Children who have, and **have not** received **BSLA whole class structured literacy teaching**?
 - b. Children from **low** vs. **high deprivation**?



METHOD

We used two different groups of children to answer the research questions. First, we used a natural comparison, where Year 2 students just starting BSLA acted as a control for those who had already received a year of BSLA structured literacy teaching, to determine the impact of this teaching on children’s **oral narrative comprehension** within a large sample. Then, we looked at **oral narrative comprehension** and **oral narrative quality (ONQ)** with a smaller matched sample where the year end story retells (Tama and the Playground) of the BSLA group (~one year of BSLA structured literacy teaching) were compared to the year end story retells of the control group (no prior BSLA structured literacy teaching). Story retells were analysed using a valid and reliable Story Quality Rubric⁹.



RESULTS: YEAR 2 COMPARISON

For **narrative comprehension**, comparison of the mean narrative comprehension scores at the beginning of Year 2 between the two groups was conducted using an analysis of covariance. Given that the two groups differed on English Language Learner (ELL) status, ethnicity and age; these were controlled for in the analyses. Students with prior BSLA structured literacy teaching achieved a mean score **significantly higher** ($p < .001$) than the control group, with a small effect (Cohen’s $d = 0.23$). **Narrative comprehension showed clear improvement with a significant effect of BSLA whole class structured literacy teaching.** These effects remained significant after adjusting for demographic differences between these two samples; therefore, with this sample, we see small but reliable gains in narrative comprehension as the result of whole class BSLA structured literacy teaching, inclusive of narrative teaching.

RESULTS: MATCHED SAMPLE

For **narrative comprehension** and **oral narrative quality (ONQ)**, paired t-tests were used to conduct a within-group comparison of performance between Time 1 (T1) (school entry) and Time 2 (T2) (end of school year) for the BSLA group. A between-group comparison used independent t-tests to compare the performance of the BSLA group and control group at T2 (end of school year).

For **narrative comprehension**, the BSLA group showed statistically significant gains over time (T1 to T2) with a small-medium effect size ($d = 0.47$) ($t(140) = 5.55, p < .001$). Whilst the BSLA group achieved a higher mean score than the control group, at T2 for narrative comprehension, this difference was not statistically significant [$t(284) = 0.48, p = .63, d = .06$].

For **oral narrative quality (ONQ)**, the BSLA group showed statistically significant gains over time (T1 to T2) with a large effect size ($t(144) = 9.96, p < .001, d = 0.83$). Whilst the BSLA group achieved higher mean scores for ONQ than the control group at T2; this difference was not statistically significant [$t(288) = 1.13, p = .26, d = .13$].

When focusing on students in **high deprivation contexts**, there was a **significant effect of BSLA structured literacy teaching** on latent ONQ ($b = 0.23, p = .04$); that is, in BSLA classrooms, students performed **similarly** for ONQ **regardless of deprivation** level whereas in **business-as-usual classrooms**, there was a **clear deprivation gradient** with higher deprivation scores associated with significantly lower oral narrative quality.

High deprivation students: ONQ		
	BSLA Group	Control Group
Low Deprivation	12.74 (0.83)	14.06 (1.11)
Mid Deprivation	12.75 (0.56)	12.56 (0.64)
High Deprivation	13.02 (0.64)	11.55 (0.58)
Table values represent Mean (Standard Error)		

CONCLUSIONS

BSLA children’s **ONQ** and **narrative comprehension** showed growth over their first year of schooling, with the strongest gains seen in ONQ. Whilst they they did not significantly outperform their business-as-usual peers, the **BSLA structured literacy teaching** appeared to **reduce inequities** associated with socioeconomic deprivation, whereby **ONQ** was **consistent across deprivation groups in BSLA** but there was a **clear deprivation gradient with business-as-usual classrooms**. **Teacher-delivered oral narrative teaching**, embedded within **structured literacy approaches** is **feasible** and might provide a **protective or equity-enhancing effect** for students at greater educational risk. Early teaching of oral narrative may be particularly important in high-deprivation school contexts with the potential to reduce inequities in children’s language and literacy development.



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