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COMPLEX SENTENCE COMPREHENSION WITHIN A SOUTH AFRICAN ADOLESCENT POPULATION

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2006-11-14T11:08:15Z
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/1683

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ABSTRACT
South African Speech-Language Pathologists are assessing and treating many adolescents with varying speech and language difficulties. This task is complicated by the fact that it is currently largely unknown what the language abilities of mainstream adolescents are. Some research has suggested declining language abilities, as well as significant effects of grade, gender and language background on cognitive academic language skills. As individuals grow older, the demands of the classroom environment become greater, forcing adolescents to use complex language skills in order to learn. This research paper aimed to assess the complex sentence comprehension abilities of a sample of South African adolescents, through the use of the Grammar/Listening subtest of the Test of Adolescent Language, developed by Hammill, Brown, Larsen, and Wiederholt (1980). Additionally, the effects of grade, gender, language, time spent reading for school and recreationally each week, number of television programmes watched per week, length of time spent playing computer or video games per day, preferred learning styles (group/alone and auditory/visual/both), most recent English and school report marks, and use of cellular telephones, were used to determine related factors and educational variables which might be linked to each other. Additionally, a working memory measure was included, in order to ascertain that this factor was not having a negative effect upon the comprehension scores. It was found that gender was an over-riding factor throughout the study. Females tended to do better on the complex sentence comprehension test, and also spent more time reading for school each week, obtained better English and school report marks, preferred to learn alone, and sent more sms's. Males were only inclined to play more computer or video games per week. In opposition to the initial hypothesis that these learners would perform poorly on the TOAL subtest, it was found that participants generally performed within the average limits of the test. Correlations, one-way ANOVA's, chi squared analyses and t-tests were performed for the secondary aims, in order to determine any relationships between the variables. Overall, though, gender was the key variable in the study, which is in line with other literature in the field. Home language and educational level had minimal effects. Further research has been recommended.
Key words:
- complex sentence comprehension
- adolescents
- academic language proficiency
- gender, language, grade