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DELVING INTO THE DEVELOPMENT OF ACADEMIC LANGUAGE BY FOUNDATION PHASE ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

Language competence is both the means and the end to educational achievement, and multilingualism in particular, has important cognitive, academic and societal advantages. The linguistic diversity in South Africa creates an ideal context to provide young children with educational opportunities that promote high levels of linguistic proficiency in their home and additional languages. Unfortunately, the education system has not delivered on the constitutional imperatives of promoting multilingualism and English continues to dominate as the preferred language of teaching and learning, at the expense and marginalisation of the African languages. This is regarded by many researchers as the primary reason for the disturbingly low achievement levels in numeracy and literacy by the majority of South African schoolchildren. However, the effects of language–in–education practices are not straightforward. There are a number of factors impacting on these practices. Of particular concern are the following: limited awareness of the psycholinguistic processes underlying academic language development leading to inadequate language–in–education practices irrespective of the medium of instruction; poor utilisation of appropriate language practitioners in the education system; inadequate support for the development and use of the African languages; and significant inequality in different contexts of education.

In addition, significant individual variation in the rate and process of additional language learning has been widely reported in the literature, but there has been little research on the cognitive processes contributing to the aptitude for language learning in children. One of the cognitive processes receiving increased attention is working memory.

Against this background, the aim of the present study was to describe the development of the psycholinguistic processes underlying the acquisition of academic language by English language learners in the critical first three grades of formal schooling. In a descriptive, longitudinal design, 134 children were assessed at the end of each academic year on the Developmental Evaluation of Language Variation-Criterion Referenced Edition (Seymour, Roeper and de Villiers, 2003). The selection of this measure was based on its strong theoretical foundations in psycholinguistics and its ability to tap the academic language skills required in the early stages of education. The study was conducted in two educational contexts where English serves as the medium of instruction from the first grade. In the first context (EAL only), all the children were learning in English as an additional language and were taught by teachers who were also English additional language speakers. In the second context (integrated), English additional language learners and English first language learners were taught by English-speaking teachers in integrated classes. The two groups of English additional language (EAL) learners were compared in order to assess the effects of certain anticipated contextual advantages and disadvantages on the acquisition of academic language. The two groups of EAL learners were also compared to English first language (L1) learners in the integrated context, who provided a comparative group of South African children in a similar education system. In order to determine the relationship between oral and literate measures of academic language, the reading accuracy and comprehension skills of the children were assessed in grades 2 and 3 and correlated to their language processing abilities.

The children's performance on the Automated Working Memory Assessment (AWMA) (Alloway, 2007) was correlated to their language and reading skills for two reasons. The first was to establish whether any aspects of working memory contributed to the aptitude for instructed additional language learning and the second was to assess the value of working memory measures in the assessment of EAL learners.

The longitudinal design of the study also allowed for the identification of seven children who consistently performed significantly below their peer groups on the language measures and may be

presenting with specific language impairment. Their performance on the language, reading and working memory measures was analysed in detail to describe the manifestations of language impairment in English as an additional language and to assess the extent to which children with language impairment have the capacity to learn in an additional language.

The results of the study showed significant development in all the language processes underlying academic language by all three groups of children over the three year period. On the measures assessing language skills addressed in the classroom (e.g. narratives and question answering), the three groups performed similarly by the end of grade 3. These findings were most encouraging and provided evidence for successful language learning in both instructional contexts. However, there were differences between the groups, and the L1 and EAL children in the integrated context performed significantly better than the EAL children in the first context (EAL only) on most measures by the end of grade 3. The latter group made no progress on reading comprehension from grades 2 to 3, which suggests that the protracted period of oral language development may have a negative impact on literacy acquisition. There were also some measures on which the L1 children performed significantly better than their EAL peers in the integrated context, suggesting that the EAL children in this context require support to develop these skills. The oral and literate measures of language proficiency were significantly correlated, confirming the important relationship between oral language skills and reading comprehension. The results have implications for teaching practices with EAL learners and raise questions concerning English as the medium of instruction, particularly when L1 peer and adult models are not available.

The results on the working memory measure were inconclusive, showing complex relationships between the level of language proficiency, the language skill assessed and specific working memory components. With the exception of the episodic buffer zone component of working memory capacity, assessed on a sentence repetition task, there was no evidence for any other component of working memory contributing to language learning aptitude. The working memory measure was not unbiased in assessing EAL learners since there were significant differences between the three groups on all the subtests of the AWMA, leading to the conclusion that working memory tests may be tapping nothing more than language processing. The sentence repetition test, which assesses the integration of short-term memory and language processing, was found to correlate significantly with most of the language and reading measures, and is therefore a potentially valuable measure is assessing EAL children.

An important finding was that children who may be at risk for language impairment could be identified as a subgroup within the larger group but only if they were compared with their respective peer groups. Within the EAL group in context 1(EAL only), the identification of language impairment was reliable only in grade 2, and should thus be delayed until response to instruction can be evaluated. The manifestations of language impairment in EAL children were both similar and different to those observed in monolingual language-impaired children. The results also showed that EAL children with language impairment are additionally disadvantaged in relation to their typically developing EAL peers and to monolingual children with language impairment and they demonstrate very slow development in the additional language.

In addition to theoretical implications, the study has significant implications for language-in-education practices in different teaching contexts, the role of the African languages in education and for the management of children with language impairment in a linguistically diverse society. The findings point to the need for collaboration between teachers and language practitioners in the educational arena and the potential contribution of speech-language therapists in mainstream schools is strongly implicated.

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis is my own, unaided, independent work. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination at this or any other academic institution, nor has it been published in any form.

_____

Heila Jordaan August 2011

7506037

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my husband, Johan and my children Wikus, Malette, Sybrandt and Nanette for their encouragement, unwavering support and love.

You are the centre of my world.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ADEA: Association for the Development of Education in Africa

AWMA: Automated Working Memory Assessment

DELV-CR: Developmental Evaluation of Language Variation

BICS: Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills

CALP: Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency

CLIL: Content and Language-Integrated Instruction

cont.: context

CUMSA: Curriculum Model for Education in South Africa

DET: Department of Education and Training

DOE: Department of Education

DST: Dynamic Systems Theory

EAL: English Additional Language

EAL-LI: English Additional Language children with Language Impairment

EAP: English for Academic Purposes

ESL: English Second Language

ESP: English for Specific Purposes

GDE: Gauteng Department of Education

GORT-4: Gray Oral Reading Test- 4th edition

Grd: Grade

L1: First Language

L2: Second Language

LANGTAG: Language Plan Task Group

LiEP: Language- in-Education Policy

NEPI: National Education Policy Investigation

NQF: National Qualifications Framework

OBE: Outcomes-based Education

PANSALB: Pan South African Language Board

Pr: Probability

RNCS: Revised National Curriculum Statement

SABC: South African Broadcasting Corporation

SES: Socio-economic Status

SLA: Second Language Acquisition

SLI: Specific Language Impairment

SLT: Speech-Language Therapist

Std.dev: Standard Deviation

TESOL: Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages

WM: Working Memory

WMC: Working Memory Capacity