Influence of language-promoting practices on oral syntactic development in French-speaking children aged 3 to 5 years

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Abstract

This study investigates the impact of language-promoting practices on the syntactic complexity and completeness of utterances among French-speaking children aged 3 to 5 years during dyadic interactions.

Acquiring code-related skills and oral language abilities, particularly complex syntactic skills, is crucial for literacy development (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). However, without adequate stimulation, these skills may not fully develop. To address this issue, language stimulation programmes have been developed (Walker et al., 2020) drawing from existing research emphasising the importance of input for language development (see Rowe & Snow, 2020, for a review). Some have highlighted the efficacy of prompts, characterized by a high level of obligation for children to respond, in fostering code-related skills compared to comments (Justice et al., 2002). Furthermore, wh-questions have been shown to facilitate vocabulary acquisition and verbal reasoning skills (Rowe et al., 2017). In regards to the early stages of syntactic development, questions foster an increase in mean utterance length (Deshmukh et al., 2019). However, the effects of comments and prompts on later stages of syntactic development, such as acquiring complex and complete utterances, remain unexplored.

Data for this study were collected within a language stimulation programme utilising shared book reading to promote syntax development. Teachers participating in the programme received training in scaffolding and language-promoting practices. The study involved 58 children (M_{age}= 4,69) and 20 teachers, with a total of 7101 speaking turns analysed. Two types of language-promoting practices were examined: prompts (including questions and requests) and comments. Sequential analyses were employed to determine the relationship between these practices and the syntactic composition of children's speech, assessing whether the presence of a language-promoting practice increased the probability of specific syntactic constructions.

The findings reveal that comments encourage the production of complex and complete utterances, while prompts tend to foster the production of simple or conjoined, often incomplete, utterances. In conclusion, comments appear to have a more significant impact than prompts on the development of oral syntactic skills. These results have implications for interventions aimed at children experiencing difficulties in acquiring complex syntactic skills, who are at greater risk of encountering challenges in developing literacy abilities.

References

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