Increasing awareness of “school talk”: A focused intervention for pre-kindergarten children who speak a non-mainstream English dialect

Jan Edwards, Peggy Rosin, Brittany Manning, Alissa Schneeberg, & Erica Kesin Richmond, University of Wisconsin-Madison

BACKGROUND

Rationale
- The achievement gap between African American (AA) and European American students persists (e.g., NCES, 2009).
- Dialect Mismatch between African American English (AAE) and the language of instruction, Mainstream American English (MAE), may contribute to this achievement gap.
- Morphosyntactic and phonological differences between AAE and MAE may interfere with comprehension for AAE-speaking children listening to SAE (e.g., Beyers & Kam, 2009; de Villiers & Johnson, 2007).
- Non-Mainstream American English (NMAE) is associated with lower language and literacy scores from kindergarten through second grade (e.g., Patton Terry & Comor, 2012; Patton Terry et al., 2012).
- Programs to teach NMAE-speaking children about MAE have been directed primarily at older children (Lock et al., 2009).

Purpose of this study
To develop an effective curricular supplement to teach pre-kindergarten children about the differences between MAE and AAE in the context of an emergent literacy curriculum.

METHODS

Participants and Classrooms
- 21 children from two Head Start classrooms.
- One classroom functioned as an active control.
- Experimental classroom: Received the TALK curriculum
- Control classroom: Received the Kindness curriculum (focusing on mindfulness and self-regulation) for the same amount of time.
- All children were attending kindergarten in the fall and were from low-socioeconomic status (SES) families.

Table 1. Demographic information on participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of boys/girls</th>
<th>Number of African-American children</th>
<th>Number of Spanish-speaking children</th>
<th>EVT-2 pretest standard score (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experimental classroom</td>
<td>6/7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control classroom</td>
<td>2/6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

PROGRAM EVALUATION

Pre- and post-testing included the following:
- Norm-referenced measures of sentence comprehension (EPS subtest of TACL-3) and expressive vocabulary (EVT-2)
- Morphological contrast: obligatory plural marking (e.g., toll/told)
- Two final consonant clusters/singletons (cold vs. coal)
- Word pairs with plural/singular (cats vs. cat)

No significant differences between pre- and post-testing between the Kindness and TALK programs.

RESULTS

- Significant increase in comprehension of MAE in children in TALK curriculum (Fig. 2).
- Significant increase in phonological awareness for children in TALK curriculum (Fig. 3).
- Very positive responses from parents, based on qualitative analysis of questionnaires.

DISCUSSION

- These results suggest that a relatively short-term program can enhance both comprehension of MAE as well as phonological awareness in African-American-speaking children from low-SES families.
- We are currently analyzing data from teacher questionnaires and school-based literacy assessments to evaluate whether these short-term gains carried over into the kindergarten year.
- We plan to modify the program so that it includes a teacher-training component.

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