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ABSTRACT

The exposure of linguistically different black kindergarten children to a special literature program was undertaken to test its efficacy as a preventive approach to reading failure. There were 94 subjects (45 in an experimental group and 49 in a control group) in four schools located in lower income urban areas. The program demonstrated a successful method of expanding their language repertoire to include standard English (as opposed to language substitution or subjugation of one dialect for another), allowing the experimental group to make gains exceeding those of the control group. (Author/DM)

Abstract

A PROGRAM FOR LINGISTICLLY DIFFERENT, BLACK CHILDREN

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The exposure of linguistically different, black, kindergarten children to a special literature program emphasizing related oral language activities was undertaken to test its efficacy as a preventive approach to reading failure. The program demonstrated a successful method of expanding the language of these children to include standard English in their language repertoires, and thereby compensate for the divergence between their natural dialect and the dialect in which they are taught reading and writing skills. The concept of language expansion i.e. the broadening of one's language stock as opposed to language substitution i.e. the subjugation of one dialect for another was confirmed. Ninety-four subjects in four schools located in lower socio-economic areas of two metropolitan communities participated. The study covered the period from November, 1969 to May, 1970.

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The "divergent speaker" is the term given by Kenneth Goodman to the child who speaks a dialect different from that which the school, text, or teacher treats as standard. Goodman puts forth the following hypothesis: "The more divergence there is between the dialect of the learner and the dialect of learning, the more difficult will be the task of learning to read." Language divergence or linguistic difference is currently being investigated by many linguists and educators as a causal factor in reading failure among black, economically disadvantaged children. This development, coupled with the need for a preventive approach to reading failure among these children, led to a kindergarten program designed to expand the subjects' language repertoire to include the dialect in which they are taught to read and write. The program attempted to answer the question: Would a special literature program emphasizing related oral language activities affect the oral language expansion and reading readiness of linguistically different, Black, kindergarten children?

The theoretical framework for this study was based on the following concepts:

1. Oral language acitivity is the primary facet of language learning; reading and writing are secondary.

2. The acquistion of oral language is achieved largely through the imitation of models.

3. The child from a low socioeconomic background is often handicapped by language models that are at great variance with the language necessary for success in school. The problems he encounters in attempting to learn standard English are very similar to those of an individual who is learning a new language.

4. Many opportunities for practice in English-as-a-second-language based listening and speaking activities through models provided at school should increase the oral language facility of the child with a linguistically different background.

5. Literature offers a diversity of models in various situations through which such activities can evolve.

6. The special program in children's literature should increase the ability of linguistically different, Black, kindergarten children to include standard English in their language repertoires.

Procedures

One hundred twenty subjects were randomly selected from eight kindergarten classes located in the lower socioeconmic areas of two metropolitan communities participating in the study. Due to attrition, the final number of subjects remaining at the end of the study was 94. Forty-five of these were in the experimental group, which had been exposed to a literature-based oral language program consisting of daily reading aloud from selected children's books followed by oral language activities such as creative dramatics, choral speaking, puppetry, and role-playing. Emphasis was placed on the imitation and repetition of language patterns as used in the teaching of English as a second language. All activities were designed to involve the children in active dialogue.

The remaining 49 subjects were in the control group. They were also exposed to daily reading aloud, however, it was followed by activities which did not seek oral language participation by the children.

Each sample classroom was provided with fifty books which met the criteria for literary merit indicated by the endorsement of authoritative organizations in the field and additional criteria pertinent to this study. The four teachers involved in the study attended

a series of workshops related to children's literature. The experimental teachers received additional training in the use of related oral language activities to effect language expansion. The experimental and control group teachers were provided with manuals containing suggestions for the type of activities they were expected to conduct.

In October and again in May, both the experimental and control groups were given the Education Study Center Bidialectal Task for Determining Language Proficiency in Economically Disadvantaged Negro Children. This procedure consists of having children repeat a number of tape recorded sentences after hearing them once. Each sentence was recorded in both standard English and nonstandard Negro dialect. Each child was tested individually and his repetitions tape recorded. The specific constructions tested were the following:

1. Standard structures; third person verb agreement, treatment of negation, If-did flip, possessive markers, plural markers, and first person verb agreement.

2. Nonstandard structures: absence of copula, possessive marker, third person verb agreement, treatment of negation, plural marker, if-did flip, use of be, and double subject.

A detailed record was made of the exact repetitions for all the standard and nonstandard sentences. The total number of correct repetitions was recorded separately for standard and nonstandard structures on appropriate tally sheets and became the raw scores for that subject.

The New York City Prereading Assessment was administered in May. This test consists of two parts, Language and Visual Discrimination.

Results

The pretest mean scores presented in Table I, Part A, are based on the raw scores of the experimental and control groups. A score of 19 was possible for standard structures and 20 for nonstandard structures. The mean score of 7.86 for the control group reflected a mean number of 1.57 more standard structures repeated correctly by that group than by the experimental group. Both groups showed a greater ability to repeat nonstandard structures correctly than standard ones during the pretest period, indicating a greater facility among all subjects with nonstandard dialect.

Table I

Pretest and Posttest Data: Mean Scores on Bidialectal Task
(N=94)

Part A
Pretest Data

	Standard Repetitions	Nonstandard Repetitions
Experimental	5.29	12.96
Control	7.86	12.53

Part B
Posttest Data

	Standard Repetitions		Nonstandard Repetitions	
	Unadjusted Means	Adjusted Means	Unadjusted Means	Adjusted Means
Experimental	10.20	11.63	11.67	11.63
Control	9.57	8.23	11.78	11.82

The posttest mean scores are presented in Table I, Part B. While both groups improved in their ability to repeat standard structures, the experimental group demonstrated greater growth. The posttest mean score of 10.20 showed an increase of 4.91 in the mean number of correct standard repetitions for the experimental group.

Table II presents the analysis of covariance source table for standard repetitions on the bidialectal task, using the pretest scores as the covariate. The analysis of covariance revealed a significant F ratio beyond the .01 level favoring the experimental group. The results of the analysis confirm the hypothesis that subjects exposed to the literature-language program implemented in this study did expand their language repetoires to include standard English to a greater extent than subjects not exposed to the program.

Table II

Analysis of Covariance Source Table for Experimental and Control Groups on the Bidialectal Task-- Standard Repetitions

Source of Variation	Degrees of Freedom	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F
Between Groups	1	228.80	228.80	48.37*
Within Groups	91	430.70	4.73	
Total	92	659.5		

* Significant beyond the .01 level.

Table III presents the analysis of covariance source table for nonstandard repetitions on the bidialectal task, using the pretest scores as the covariate. No significant difference was found between the two groups in ability to repeat nonstandard structures correctly. The combined results of the analysis of covariance on the standard scores which showed a significant difference between the two groups and the analysis of covariance on the nonstandard scores, which showed no significant difference between the groups, indicate that the language of linguistically different, Black, kindergarten children may be expanded to include standard English without negating their native dialect.

Table XII

Analysis of Covariance Source Table for Experimental and Control Groups on the Bidialectal Task -- Nonstandard Repetitions

Source of Variation	Degrees of Freedom	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F
Between Groups	1	36.10	36.10	3.37*
Within Groups	91	975.30	10.71	
Total	92	1011.40		

* Not significant.

Table IV gives the mean scores for Parts I and II of the Prereading Assessment. The possible number of correct items is 32 for Part I and 28 for Part II. The results of the analysis of variance for both parts revealed no significant difference between the two groups.

Table IV

Mean Scores on Prereading Assessment*
(N=94)

	Part I Language	Part II Visual Discrimination
Experimental	26.60	17.20
Control	25.47	15.45

* Based on raw scores.

Part I of the prereading assessment measures language skills such as vocabulary, concepts, and listening comprehension. Since all of these skills were an integral part of the literature based program which was similar in both experimental and control treatments, it is possible that the two groups benefitted equally with respect to them. Part II of the Prereading Assessment measures the visual perception needed to discriminate between letters and words. Since neither the experimental nor the control treatment was designed to develop this skill, the results were as expected. A special program of literature and related oral language activities did not result in a higher level of reading readiness on the part of those children who were exposed to it, as opposed to a comparable group of children who were exposed to a literature-based program and non-oral activities.

Discussion and Implications

The literature-language program implemented in this research demonstrated a successful method of expanding the language repertoire of linguistically different, Black, kindergarten children to include standard English. The concept of language expansion, i.e., the broadening of one's language stock as opposed to language substitution, i.e., the subjugation of one dialect for another, was confirmed. This would imply that the language habits of very young children may be altered

without the need to denigrate the native dialect by attempting to replace it. Any attempt to replace the child's native dialect with another may be construed by him to mean that the new dialect is considered superior by others.

The study has corroborated evidence that kindergarten children are at a propitious age for language growth. For, although the experimental group as a whole were initially less facile in their use of standard English, their exposure to the program offered in this study allowed them to make gains which exceeded those made by the control group.

The study offers evidence that common differences between standard English and the nonstandard Negro dialect which may cause interferences for the nonstandard speaker may be successfully identified and modified, consequently lessening the degree of interference. This implies that the classroom teacher may identify the specific interfering elements most prevalent in his group of students or in individuals and provide help based on the program developed in this study.

The formulation of a successful set of techinques for training teachers in the use of literature and methods of stimulating oral language among children is a valuable consequence of this research. Of additional value is the opportunity for the personnel involved to focus upon a problem which has generally been given little attention in the past. Discussions with the four participating teachers during the training sessions and throughout the duration of the study were open to other members of the staffs of each of the four schools. At least one first, second, and third grade teacher was included at all times. In some cases, principals and reading specialists also attended these meetings. These discussions revealed a long-standing desire on the part of the participants to d[illegible] distinct incongruity between the language [illegible]ch the ch[illegible]d that which he encounters as the

language of instruction.

Approaching these incongruities as language differences rather than language deficits, while recognizing the need for extension toward the widely used dialect, was a new concept for these teachers. Continued discussions revealed a genuine desire on the part of both Black and White teachers for an interchange of ideas concerning this often sensitive topic. Old ideas concerning the inherent superiority of one dialect over another were imperiled with the emergence of a greater appreciation for the fact that all children, no matter who they are, simply learn the language to which they are exposed. Ideas that hold the use of nonstandard dialect as synonoymous with carelessness, laziness, and automatic cognitive liability were gradually eroded as teachers dealt, for the first time, with a problem that causes them considerable frustration and irritation. Indeed, it is a problem for which many teachers expressed a feeling of total unpreparedness.

Thus, viewing the acquisition of standard English as a strictly utilitarian device to help equalize the child's chances for reaching his maximum potential in a society that is standard English oriented, is far different from the view that suggests that the nonstandard speaker utters an intrinsically inferior language of which he must rid himself at all costs and replace with another. Indeed, the primary goal of this study was to expand language. No attempt was made to diminish any aspect of it. A high regard for whatever language the child brings to school was a necessary component of the experimental treatment. Children were never asked to imitate the teachers's language, but to use the language of storybook characters. This was intended to reduce possible conflict of allegiance between home and school and allowed the children to participate in the activities more freely. Many of the oral language activities were designed to foster language stimulation in general and not necessarily geared to increase facility in a par-

ticular standard English structure.

A further important contribution of this study is that it offers effective results without requiring expensive or complicated equipment. An ample supply of picture books, which has long been considered to be an essential part of any kindergarten classroom, are the only materials necessary. Both experienced and inexperienced teachers can successfully implement the program after a relatively brief period of training and follow-up demonstrations. Since the treatment is based upon the kinds of activities which are known to be desirable to children, problems of motivation and timidity are more easily overcome than they might be in a more rigid or routinized language program.

No significant difference was found between the two groups in readiness to read. This may be attributed to equal exposure of both groups to the specific factors measured by the prereading assessment. Part I of the prereading assessment measures vocabulary, concepts, listening comprehension, and reasoning ability. All of these factors were components of the literature-based program included in both the experimental and control treatments. Had there been a third group included in the study which received neither the literature-based program coupled with oral language activities nor the literature-based program coupled with non oral activities, a measure of the treatments' affect upon the reading readiness factor in Part I of the prereading assessment may have resulted. Part II of the prereading assessment measures the visual perception needed to discriminate between letters and words. Since this factor was not dealt with in either the experimental or control treatments, the results of this analysis are what would be expected.

The study has sucessfully demonstrated the effect of a literature-language program on the language expansion of linguistically different, Black, kindergarten children. It offers a program which holds potential for extension to other grade levels and as a vehicle for the inservice training of teachers on the topic of dialect differences.

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