Going to school or a school of fish: do children with EAL struggle with homonyms and does this matter?

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Background

• Vocabulary is an important predictor of children’s language and literacy skill (e.g. Cain et al., 2004; Nation & Snowling, 2004).
• Practitioners have expressed concerns about EAL children’s vocabulary (Nancarrow, 2018), and research affirms the view that children with EAL tend to be lacking in English vocabulary (e.g. Bialystok et al., 2010).
• However, vocabulary is often thought of only in terms of attaching single meanings to single words. In reality, between 30-80% of words have multiple meanings.
• Little is known about knowledge of homonyms in children with EAL.

Aims

1. To create an age-appropriate test of vocabulary for homonyms with primary school pupils in key stage 1 and 2.
2. To compare children with EAL to native English speakers in terms of their knowledge of homonyms.
3. To determine whether knowledge of homonyms is related to children’s reading comprehension.

Method

Participants

• 112 Year 1 and Year 4 children from 5 schools in Oxfordshire (53% female).
• 37% had English as an additional language (defined as not having English as a first language). Children spoke 17 different languages.
• Average years learning English = 3.4 years (range 0-7)
• Average age of learning English = 3.9 years (range 2-8)

Measures

• Receptive homonym vocabulary: hear a word and choose two pictures that show different word meanings (RPVT)
• Homonym definitions: define homonyms given in a sentence context (LPT)
• General vocabulary: choose a picture to show a word meaning (RPVS)
• Reading comprehension: read two short passages followed by information and inference questions (WISC)
• Non-verbal IQ: identify the next image in a sequence (WISC, Matrix Reasoning)

Procedure

• Participants completed all measures over 3 sessions.
• The RPVT was completed on a touch-screen tablet twice, at least 1 week apart.

Example item in RPVT homonym vocabulary test for ‘school’.

Does knowledge of homonyms predict reading comprehension?

• Children who score higher on homonym vocabulary also tend to score higher on reading comprehension, and this relationship is strong.
• After taking into account a child’s age, EAL status, non-verbal IQ, time spent reading, and general vocabulary, homonym vocabulary was still related to reading comprehension.
• A child who scores 15% higher on the homonym vocabulary test would be expected to score 5% higher at reading comprehension.

Conclusions & Next Steps

• Children with EAL have a specific difficulty with homonym vocabulary compared to native English-speaking peers.
• This gap appears consistent in years 1 and 4, despite older children having on average 3 more years of schooling in English.
• Homonym vocabulary is related to reading comprehension over and above age, EAL status, and general vocabulary, suggesting its importance for literacy skills.
• The receptive homonym vocabulary test is a reliable and valid measure of children’s homonym knowledge which can be used in future research.
• In 2020, we will conduct a small-scale intervention with schools in Oxfordshire to address children’s understanding of homonyms in context.