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Are Linguistic Responses Similar in Adult Literacy Students and Third-Fifth Grade Children?

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Abstract: This roundtable discussion will focus on a study of adult learners and children who recognize words at the third-fifth grade levels. Their responses to different linguistic task items will be compared and analyzed. Theoretical and instructional implications will be discussed.

Introduction

The field of adult literacy suffers from a paucity of thorough and methodologically sound studies, and researchers have not studied the learning processes of adults nearly as extensively as those of children and adolescents. Therefore, we know very little about the reading processes of low literate adults. For example, results of a widespread assessment of the functional literacy skills of adults indicated that many native English-speaking adults performed poorly (Kirsch, Jenkins, & Kolstad, 1993). The assessments however, did not explore the underlying reading weaknesses that would explain why so many adults had difficulty performing daily adult literacy tasks (Snow & Strucker, 2000).

Understanding the underlying strengths and weaknesses of low reading adults is critical. Improved understanding could help to develop instructional approaches that could decrease the high attrition rates reported in many adult literacy programs (Dirkx & Jha, 1994). By looking at responses to test items, this study extended Greenberg, Ehri, & Perin's (1997) analysis of whether word-reading processes operate similarly in adults and elementary school students matched for reading grade level.

Method

Participants

Participants were native English speakers without any reported hearing or speech difficulties. They included 72 adults from adult literacy classes and 72 children from grades 3-5. There were 24 adults and 24 children at each reading grade level (third, fourth, and fifth), based on *Woodcock Reading Mastery Test-Revised* (Woodcock, 1987) scores. Children and adults were similar in gender and race. To qualify, children had to be reading within 6 months of their expected grade levels on the basis of grade placement. Overall, the mean age for the adults was 33.4 years.

Materials

Discussion at the roundtable will focus on responses by participants on the following tasks:

- Word Recognition: *Word Identification subtest of the Woodcock Reading Mastery Tests-Revised* (Woodcock, 1987).
- Nonword Decoding: *Word Attack subtest of the Woodcock Reading Mastery Tests-Revised* (Woodcock, 1987).
- Receptive Vocabulary: *Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test-Revised* (Dunn & Dunn, 1981).
- Sight Word Reading: 50 words that do not follow basic spelling-sound rules and are graduated in terms of difficulty (Adams & Huggins, 1985).
- Phonological Awareness: *Auditory Analysis Test* (Rosner & Simon, 1971).
- Spelling: An inventory designed to measure developmental orthographic knowledge (Bear, Truex, & Barone, 1989).
- Rhyme Word Reading: A listing of 212 word pairs that are manipulated in terms of their phonological and orthographic resemblances (Levinthal, Kostogiannis, & Richman, 1992).

Roundtable Discussion

After a brief introduction, the roundtable will begin with a brief exploration of the results reported by Greenberg, et al. (1997). Specifically, the comparison of mean performances revealed that adults were severely deficient on phonologically complex tasks. However, on orthographically complex tasks, adults revealed both strengths and weaknesses. Regression analyses indicated that individual differences in word and nonword reading abilities were explained by the same orthographic and phonological processes in adults and children, despite differences in their levels of performance.

The roundtable discussion will then proceed to analyzing in-depth the differences and similarities in the types of responses children and adults provided. Different strengths and weaknesses will be highlighted, with extra attention focused on the extent of the adult literacy students' phonological deficits.

The roundtable will close with a discussion on instructional implications, the importance of analyzing responses in reading research, the need for basic research in the field of adult literacy, the importance of phonological processes in reading, and the notion behind reading equivalency as it pertains to children and adults.

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