

Map, Assess and Intervene: A narrative summary of a UKRI-GCRF funded research programme and resources to enrich the infrastructure for child language research in India

S. Nag, M. Snowling, A. Oancea, A. Ntalli, S. Ma, Y. K. Aleghfelli (University of Oxford); G. Arulmani (The Promise Foundation); S. Tiwari, S. John (Manipal Academic of Higher Education); S. P. Arun (Indian Institute of Science); J. Mirković (York St. John University); K. Dulay (City University of London); J. McGrane; A. Agarwal; A. Singh; P. Joshi and A. Pydah



Supporting Oral Language Development

Introduction

Language development plays a foundational role in learning and literacy development. Children with a small vocabulary, for example, are at a disadvantage in all aspects of learning. With targeted support, children who start slow could catch up with their language-rich peers. It is a rich language environment at an early age that offers the opportunities needed to acquire high quality oral language skills. In an interpersonal and social world that gains from good communication skills, the importance of oral language is amplified. This poster summarises a series of studies that aim to map children’s language environments, assess component skills of language and examine effectiveness of interventions to boost language.



Methods and early results

A series of mapping studies have aimed to capture the diversity in language that children experience. The mapping in the first instance is based on bespoke child-directed print corpora that include picture books, single narratives, anthologies, theatre scripts, and government-prescribed textbooks for 3- to 10-year-olds. Several key aspects of the language encountered in children’s books are revealed in psycholinguistic analyses. For example:

- There is a remarkable richness of vocabulary across all parts-of-speech categories and the language grows in complexity in older books.
- Words with phonological and orthographic complexity are not strictly held in abeyance in younger books and morphological processing demands appear to outstrip current theorising.



These findings to some extent mirror oral language environments as reflected in subjective ratings of when teachers, parents and experts think a child first understands a word taken from the print corpus.

Other ongoing mapping analyses are related to examining children’s home language and literacy environments and teacher beliefs, practices, and challenges to supporting oral language in early childhood and primary school classrooms.

In parallel, a series of assessment studies have aimed to track learning levels and learning progress among 5- and 6-year-olds, many multilingual. This data has helped provide a characterisation of individual differences in narrative skills, language comprehension, vocabulary knowledge, phonological skills and emergent literacy with analyses throwing light on early morphosyntactic development and component skills in visual processing linked to emergent literacy. New data is also becoming available on implicit learning, for example, about macro-structures in narratives and micro-structures embedded in sentences. Insights from all the above will inform an intervention study.

Research resources

Research infrastructure refers to tools and processes that aid high quality replicable science. One useful tool for researchers, clinicians and educators alike is age-of-acquisition information—the time when a child first understands a word. A published age-of-acquisition resource is useful because it is generally thought to provide a reliable index of children’s language acquisition. For example, such a list shows positive correlations with children’s vocabulary knowledge and reading accuracy. Such a word list is useful for multiple purposes including screening and diagnostic testing, mounting experimental research, and for cross-linguistic comparisons of acquisition and development especially in understudied languages.

Another useful tool is an open access child-directed print corpus. We have used this to understand lexical diversity, morphological demands, and assumptions of early orthographic knowledge. But the resource can also be used for other research including the study of the learning, comprehension and production of language, reading and writing development, memory studies, and educational research related to language and literacy teaching, teacher education, and curriculum development. Additionally, this programme of research is producing child language corpora, assessment tools, and both qualitative and quantitative datasets that will, in time, be made available for further investigation by the academic and practitioner community.



Economic and Social Research Council

