

The Literacy Factor in Syntactic Judgement and Comprehension in Children

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Metalinguistic awareness has been defined as the ability of the child to reflect upon and manipulate the structural features of spoken language, treating language as an object of thought as opposed to simply using the language system to produce and comprehend sentences (Tunmer, Pratt and Herriman, 1984). Though there is agreement amongst researchers as to the meaning of metalinguistics there is a considerable amount of debate as to how and when metalinguistic awareness actually arises. Three basic theoretical conceptualizations exist.

- a. Metalinguistic awareness is a part of language development and occurs early in life.
- b. Metalinguistic awareness occurs due to a different kind of cognitive control and hence different linguistic processing in mid childhood.
- c. Metalinguistic awareness occurs as a result of formal schooling.

Research and literature has now well documented the fact that metalinguistic awareness does not appear until after 5 years of age. Pratt, Tunmer and Bowey (1984) wrote of accumulating evidence that children develop the ability to deal with language in a disembedded manner only by mid childhood.

The present study was undertaken with the goal of finding whether literacy affected the development of grammaticality judgement and syntactic comprehension in children and whether syntactic comprehension and grammaticality judgement show a developmental trend in both literates and illiterates.

50 subjects in each of the 2 sub categories literate and illiterate were selected in 5 age groups 6-7 years, 7-8 years, 8-9 years, 9-10 years and 10-11 years, with 10 subjects in each age group. The subjects were all from low socio-economic groups and were native Kannada speakers. The literate subjects had continuous schooling in Kannada for more than 1 year and the illiterate subjects had no formal schooling what-so-ever. Two tests were used; the syntax section of LPT (Karanth, 1980,1984) was used to assess the grammaticality judgement and the syntax section of the RRTC Test Battery (In press) was used to assess syntax comprehension and expression. The results were tabulated and subjected to statistical analysis.

The results showed that the literate children were better on the comprehension and expression tasks as well as the grammaticality judgement task. This showed that literacy does have a major role to play in the development of both syntactic comprehension and expression and grammaticality judgment.

A developmental trend is also evident with both the comprehension abilities and grammaticality judgement sharply rising at about 8 years age after which the increase is more gradual. The sharp increase in scores is evident more in the literate than in the illiterates. The literates performed better than the illiterates in all sub-categories at all age levels.

Hence one can conclude that the emergence of grammaticality judgement in children at around the age at which the child begins schooling is not just coincidental but that literacy has a definite role to play in the development of accurate judgement abilities and working in interaction with the developmental age trends it leads to a more abstract level of linguistic functioning in the child.