The Relationships Among Emotional Regulation, Conflict Management Style and Language Ability

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Introduction

Language is a necessary component of the human experience, as our interactions and behaviors depend upon our verbal capacities and affect every aspect of our lives. Language skills are fundamental for “self-reflection, verbal mediation, response inhibition and behavioral direction” (Gallagher, 1999), and thus may play a role in emotional regulation and conflict management. For example, language ability is involved in the regulation of emotions in social situations and goes hand in hand with the development of emotion in children. For instance, children go from toddlerhood to preschool age, temper tantrums occur less frequently as they start to cultivate some forms of self-regulation (Rohen, Cokel, & Armengol, 2009). As for conflict management, researchers found that greater verbal capacities allow children to discuss their feelings, interpret others’ emotional states and solve interpersonal problems (Dunn, Brown, & Beardsall, 1991). Previous studies investigated the connection between language ability, emotional regulation, and social competence in children, however, little is known regarding the emotional states and solving interpersonal problems (Dunn, Cokel, & Armengol, 2009). For conflict management style and language ability, r(27) = -.55, p < .002 (See Figure 1, Table 2).

Materials and Methods

A series of 3 assessments were administered to measure the language ability, social emotional functioning, and conflict management style of the participants. Participants were 37 undergraduate students from a Southeastern university who received course credit for their participation. The Kaufman Brief Intelligence Test, 2nd edition (KBIT-2) was used as a screening measure of non-verbal ability. Only participants with a standard score of 87 or above were included in the analyses. The Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test, 4th edition (PPVT-B; Dunn & Dunn, 2007) was used as a test of receptive language, and measured the language ability (more specifically vocabulary knowledge) of the participants.

Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ; Goodman, Meltzer, & Bailey, 1988)

This questionnaire measured the emotional regulation capabilities of the participants by addressing their behavior, emotion and relationships with other people. The Dutch Test for Conflict Management (DUTCH; Van & Vilert, 1997)

The DUTCH questionnaire assessed the conflict management ability of the participants by assessing their scores on five dimensions (avoiding, yielding, compromising, problem solving, and forcing).

Results

Multiple regression analyses were conducted with language ability (PPVT) and emotional regulation (SDQ) as predictors and the 5 conflict management styles defined by the DUTCH as outcome variables. When Forcing was used as the outcome variable, results revealed that the regression explained 33% of the variance and was a significant predictor of DUTCH Forcing (r² = .25, F (2,25) = 2.89, p = .045. PPVT scores significantly contributed to the model (r² = .27), but emotional symptoms, peer problems and prosocial ability did not. The final predictive model was: DUTCH Forcing = (.099*PPVT) + (.022*SDQ Emotional symptoms) + (.035*SDQ Peer problems) + (.033*SDQ Prosocial Ability) + 22.46.

By contrast, the regression models were not significant when avoiding, compromising, problem solving or yielding were used as outcome measures.

Discussion

Forcing and Language Ability

The results of this study indicated a role of language ability in predicting forcing in conflict situations. Those who scored high on forcing tended to have lower language skills. It is noteworthy to reexamine the definition of forcing in order to highlight why this relationship exists between language and forcing. DeDrue (2001) defined forcing as consisting of “threats and bluffs, persuasive arguments, and positional commitments.” Since language ability is directly related to social cognition, and emotional intelligence predicts a higher level of socio-cognitive competence (Jenkins & Astington, 1996), the use of threats and positional commitments in conflict management may be an indication of both language deficiencies and social incompetence. For example, children with language impairments may show difficulties understanding the negative consequences of utilizing threats and physical aggression in managing conflict (Gallagher, 1991).

Prosocial Behavior and Compromising

The relationship between prosocial behavior and compromising was not initially expected; however, it creates questions regarding the underlying mechanisms behind this relationship. One possibility is that prosocial ability is related to emotional intelligence. For example, Kolb and Wehrle (2001) designed a study to improve emotional intelligence by teaching pre-kindergarten children prosocial skills. They suggested that teaching children to be more emotionally intelligent may result in making them more socially competent and thus exhibit prosocial behaviors such as taking turns, sharing toys, and helping and comforting others. Empathy may also play a role in this relationship as there is ample evidence that empathy positively relates to prosocial behavior (Eisenberg, 1987). Wied, Branje, and Meeus (2007) more specifically addressed the role of empathetic tendencies in conflict management. These children who displayed higher levels of sympathy also reported higher levels of internalizing behaviors (i.e., the tendency for people to imagine and experience the feelings and experiences of others) was positively related to problem solving (closer to compromising).

Compromising and Language Ability

Even though the relationship between compromising and language ability is not quite significant, it becomes necessary to address an issue of concern regarding this relationship. Compromising and problem solving are strongly interrelated, r(27) = .59, p = .009. However, while compromising is trending towards significance with language ability, Algorithms, and is associated to language ability. There has been some debate regarding whether or not problem solving and compromising should be treated as the same or separate categories (DeDrue et al. 2001; Bao et al. 2019). However, while compromising was trending towards a significant correlation with language ability, problem solving was not, thus suggesting that these two conflict management styles depend on distinct cognitive factors.

Limitations and Future Direction

Some limitations to this study consist of sample size and type of language measure used. Only 37 participants were assessed and so in order to get a better picture of this relationship between conflict resolution and language ability, replications should be conducted with a larger sample size. For language, a receptive vocabulary test was utilized in order to measure the language abilities of the participants. The results not being entirely significant may indicate that the vocabulary test did not actually assess true language ability, only word knowledge. Future studies should expand on the type of language measure used, such as tests for language comprehension and expressive language.

Conclusion

This study set out to investigate whether language ability was related to emotional regulation and conflict resolution ability. Language ability was strongly correlated to the Forcing conflict management style and there was a trend towards a moderate correlation between language and the Compromising conflict management style. There was also a significant relationship between prosocial ability and compromising. While only the relationship between forcing and language and prosocial ability and compromising were truly significant, further research should be conducted to better analyze the role of language in different conflict management styles. It is imperative that this topic continue to be explored in order to determine the exact role of language in emotional regulation and conflict resolution ability to promote academic success for every student struggling with language.

References