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 are dependent 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, as children go from toddlerhood to preschool age, temper tantrums occur less frequently as they start to cultivate some forms of self-regulation (Roben, Cole, & Armstrong, 2013). 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 exact relationship between emotional regulation, conflict management style, and language ability in young adults.

Objectives

- Investigate the respective contributions of language ability and emotional regulation in each conflict management style (avoiding, yielding, compromising, problem solving, and forcing).
- Investigate whether language acts as a mediator between emotional regulation and conflict management style.

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.

Picture Peabody Vocabulary Test, 4th edition (PPVT-B; Dunn & Dunn, 2007)

The PPVT 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.

Dutch Test for Conflict Management (DUTCH; Van de Vliert, 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

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the participants (N = 28)

Measure	Mean	Standard Deviation
Age	19.32	2.08
Non-Verbal Abilities	99.11	11.45
Yielding	13.18	1.42
Compromising	15.75	2.07
Forcing	13.43	2.75
Problem Solving	16.89	1.77
Avoiding	12.93	3.13
Strengths and Difficulties	12.21	5.00
Vocabulary	102.50	15.68

Pearson correlations were computed to examine the relationship among all experimental measures (DUTCH, PPVT, and SDQ).

There was a significant relationship between the forcing conflict management style and language ability, $r(27)= -.55$ $p=.002$ (See Figure 1, Table 2).
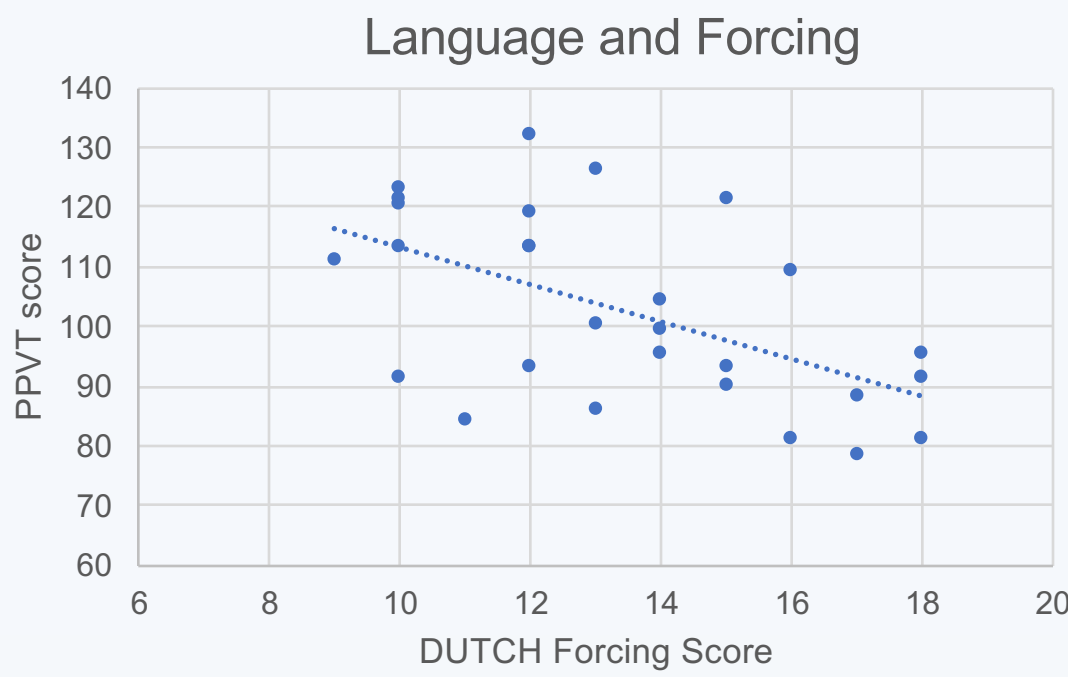

Figure 1. Correlation Between Language and Forcing

Interestingly though, there was a significant relationship between prosocial behavior and compromising, $r = .45$, $p = 0.016$ (See Figure 3, Table 2)
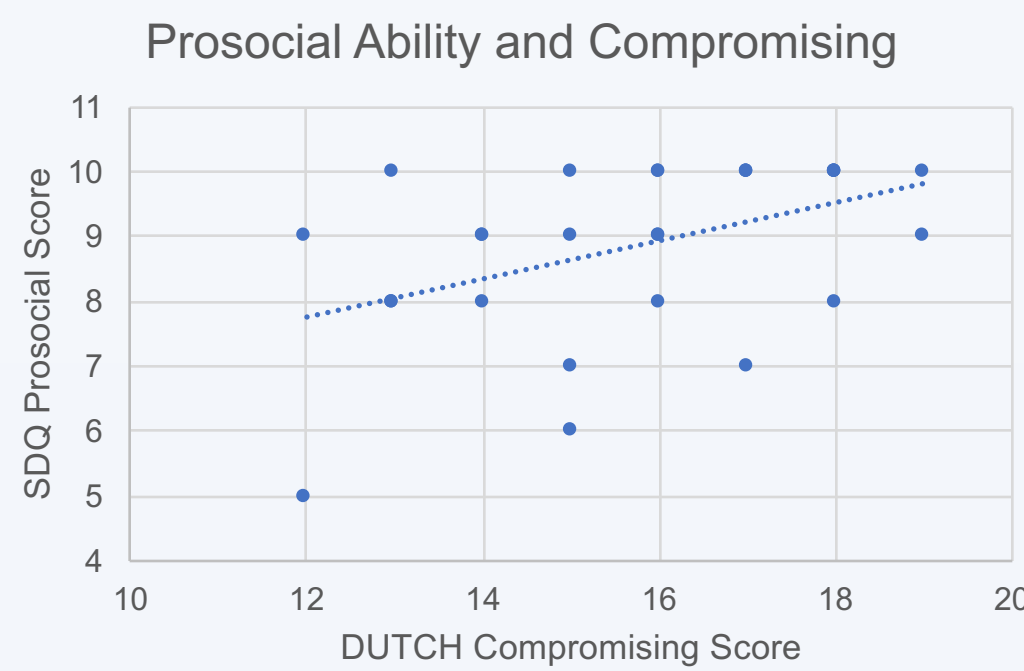

Figure 2. Correlation Between Prosocial Ability and Compromising

There was a trend towards a moderate positive correlation between compromising and language ($r = 0.32$, $p = 0.092$)
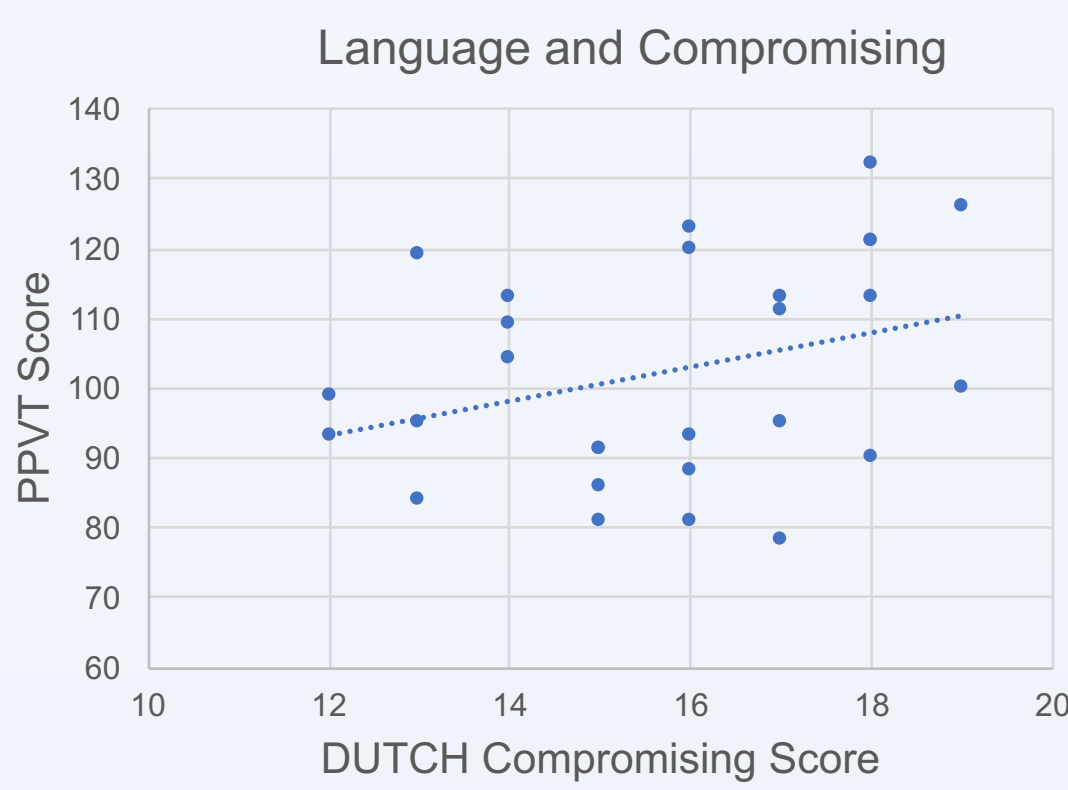

Figure 3. Correlation Between Compromising and Language

Table 2. Correlation Matrix

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1 DUTCH Yielding	—								
2 DUTCH Compromising	0.168	—							
3 DUTCH Forcing	-0.201	-0.104	—						
4 DUTCH Problem Solving	-0.110	0.590***	0.002	—					
5 DUTCH Avoiding	0.162	-0.313	0.081	0.059	—				
6 PPVT	0.191	0.324	-0.550**	0.082	-0.111	—			
7 SDQ Emotional Symptoms	0.087	0.027	-0.125	0.035	0.158	0.281	—		
8 SDQ Peer Problems	0.229	0.371	0.141	0.169	0.174	0.065	0.310	—	
9 SDQ Prosocial	0.207	0.450*	-0.172	0.303	-0.169	0.363	-0.215	0.058	—

* p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

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 model explained 33% of the variance and was a significant predictor of DUTCH Forcing ($r^2 = .25$, ($F_{(2,25)} = 2.89$, $p = 0.045$. PPVT scores significantly contributed to the model ($\beta = -.098$, $t(27) = -3.327$, $p = .003$, but emotional symptoms, peer problems and prosocial ability did not. The final predictive model was: DUTCH Forcing = (-0.099*PPVT) + (-0.022*SDQ Emotional symptoms) + (0.352*SDQ Peer problems) + (0.037*SDQ Prosocial Ability) + 22.463.

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 poorer 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, as better linguistic skills predict 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 Weebe (2001) designed a study to improve emotional intelligence by teaching pre-kinder garden children prosocial skills. They suggested that teaching children to be more emotionally intelligent will 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 & Miller, 1987). Wied, Branje, and Meeus (2007) more specifically addressed the role of empathetic tendencies in conflict management. They discovered that dispositional affective empathy (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 concerning this relationship. Compromising and problem solving are strongly inter correlated, $r(27) = .59$, $p=.0009$. However, while compromising is trending towards significance with language ability, problem solving appears to be unrelated 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 a 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 management style and there was a trend towards a moderate correlation between language and the Compromising 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.

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