

The Correlation between Communication and Social Skills among Early Schoolers in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Innumerable studies have shown that being able to express oneself clearly and understand with equal clarity what other people are saying to you are fundamental enabling skills of life. A proficiency at interpersonal communication is strongly linked to educational achievement and positive social behaviour. Socio-economic status (SES) has also been known for a long time to be a powerful predictor of children's development (e.g. Deutsch, 1973; Sameroff and Chandler, 1975; Scott-Jones, 1984). In this study, communication refers to oral language skills which include the development of narrative ability, as well as the use of talk and varied vocabulary usage (Dickinson and Tabors, 2001). Hence, the objective of this paper is to find out the communication and social skills of the pupils and to see whether there is a relationship between communication skills and social skills of early schoolers and their impact on school academic achievement. This study focused on Year 1 and Year 4 primary school children, and for this purpose, a descriptive correlational method was employed. It was carried out on 344 primary school pupils, of which 168 were from Year 1 and 176 were Year 4 pupils. The pupils in the sample were academically weak and they had undergone screening and diagnostic tests. The findings indicate that the social skills of Year 1 pupils were significantly and positively correlated with their communication skills ($r=.31, p<.05$) and language acquisition ($r=.33, p<.05$), whereas the social skills of Year 4 pupils were found to be significantly and positively correlated with their language acquisition ($r=.59, p<.05$), Mathematic acquisition ($r=.41, p<.05$), and their communication skills ($r=.50, p<.05$). There is also a positive and significant relationship between communication ($r=.81, p<.05$) and social skills ($r = .85, p<.05$) with family background. These findings show that social skills are very important as children enter primary school. The significant correlations between social skills and language acquisition, Mathematic acquisition and communication skills show that their performance can be negatively affected if they do not acquire the social skills.

Keywords: Communication skills, social skills, early schoolers

INTRODUCTION

Innumerable studies have shown that being able to express oneself clearly and understand with equal clarity what other people are saying to you are fundamental enabling skills of life. A proficiency at interpersonal communication is strongly linked to educational achievement and

positive social behaviour which are goal directed and learned behaviours that allow the child to interact and function effectively in a variety of social contexts (Sheriden and Walker, 1999). A child has to selectively choose appropriate behaviours when interacting with others. On top of that, the child must be able to relate in a way that is acceptable to others in a range of social

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situations. In order to relate effectively, language plays a central part in most social interactions. Some children with language limitations (communication skills) will find that their ability to interact effectively is hindered. According to Social Adaptation Model (SAM), poor communication abilities may influence social competence. Furthermore, SAM also argues that children with limited communication skills have social problems as a result of adjustments made in social situations which are due to their limited language skills. These children realize they have language difficulties and thus avoid social interactions where language is used, thus appearing to be withdrawn (Gertner *et al.*, 1994). Research has shown that children with poor communication skills have greater difficulty than typical developing peers in accessing an on-going interaction. Craig and Washington (1993) observed five 7-year old children with language limitations, four chronological age-matched (CA) typical developing peers, and four language age-matched (LA) typical peers. Each child attempted to enter an on-going dyadic interaction between two age-matched peers. Craig and Washington reported that all the CA and LA peers entered an on-going interaction easily and rather quickly. Nevertheless, three of the five children with limited language did not enter the interactions during the 20-minute observation period.

The authors suggested that since these children with limited language had failed to interact in this simple context, they would likely also fail when accessing more difficult situations. The findings by Craig and Washington (1993) are similar with those of other studies compared to typical age-matched peers, and children with poor communication have greater difficulty entering an ongoing activity (Brinton, Fujiki, Spencer and Robinson, 1997; Craig and Washington, 1993), negotiating solutions to a problem (Brinton, Fujiki and McKee, 1998), participating and interacting in groups (Brinton, Fujiki and Higbee, 1998; Brinton, Fujiki, Montague and Hanton, 2000), and sustaining interactions with

peers (Redmond and Rice, 1998). Gertner, Rice and Hadley (1994) stated that peer rejection for children with communication problems may begin as early as preschool, whereas Rubin, Bukowski and Parker (1998) suggested that these problems are often associated with, among others, academic achievement.

Besides, socio-economic status (SES) has also been known for a long time to be a powerful predictor of children's development (Deutsch, 1973; Sameroff and Chandler, 1975; Scott-Jones, 1984). They examined and concluded that SES are predictive of children's early cognitive and language functioning, academic achievement, and social competence. Studies of the child's home learning environment have also repeatedly shown that the language environment in the home and the quality of linguistic interaction and learning experiences with the parent have direct and significant associations with children's cognitive and language development (Dickinson and Tabors, 2001). Due to economic reasons, many parents from the low SES group may not have the time to be with their children, and coupled with financial constraints, they may not be able to provide books and other print materials in the home, and engage with them in appropriate language development.

A stimulating and linguistically enriched home environment, which supports children's language and communication skills, is also likely to have implications for children's social and behavioural functioning. Language competence in young children is associated with better social skills. Children, who are able to communicate their feelings and use language to direct their own and others' behaviours, are better able to negotiate social situations and regulate their own emotions (Brinton and Fujiki, 1993; Gallagher, 1993; Howes and Olenick, 1986). Hence, based on the above literature, the objective of this paper is to find out whether there is a relationship between communication skills and social skills of early schoolers and whether it has any impact on school performance.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

This study utilized the descriptive correlational method. It was carried out on 344 primary school pupils of which 168 were from Year 1 and 176 were from Year 4. The pupils in the sample were from 6 different schools (3 urban and 3 rural schools, respectively) which were randomly selected. In Malaysia, the number of classes for each year of study is between 5 to 6. The pupils in the samples taken from the six schools, who were academically weak, had to undergo screening and diagnostic tests. For Year 1 students, the weak ones were identified by the teachers based on their observations and their daily performances. As for Year 4 students, the last two classes were selected based on the school streaming practices, whereby the last two classes comprised of academically weak students.

Instrumentation

For the communication skills, the children were tested based on the reading text and performing actions based on oral directives. For example, they were asked to read on various topics, tell jokes and give information (speaking for various purposes). In addition, they were also encouraged to ask questions in complete sentences and express anything that was in their minds (speaking clearly and giving information effectively). Moreover, they were observed on whether they got themselves involved in speaking and discussing with their peers, whether they made use of new words and vocabulary and used standard spoken language. These categories in communication skills were adapted from the Maryland Model for School Readiness. For the social skills, the children were given sociometric test with questions enquiring whether they have friends, how many, do they play with their friends and whether they share things with their friends.

Findings

Table 1 shows the pupils' levels of communication skills based on a 3-point scale according to the communication skill categories. Most of the pupils were found to be weak in all the categories (between 50% - 75% for Year 1 pupils and between 45% - 67% for Year 4 pupils). However, there is a slight improvement in the communication skills for Year 4 pupils. The weakest categories for the two groups involved using of new words and vocabulary and communicating using standard language.

In terms of their social skills, the data presented in Table 2 show that these pupils were poor although the Year 4 pupils seemed to be better. Majority of the pupils stated that they had friends but mostly around 1-2 only, and this explained the higher percentage in sharing and playing with friends. Only a very small percentage (15% -17%) had 5 or more friends.

Therefore, in terms of correlations, the data given in Table 3 show that the social skills of Year 1 pupils were significantly and positively correlated with communication skills ($r=.31, p<.05$), and for Year 4, the correlation between their social and communication skills was found to be $r=.50, p<.05$. In summary, it could be said that if the pupils had good communication skills, they would also have good social skills. In this study, the pupils had weak communication skills, hence poor social skills as well.

Both social and communication skills have also been reported to be linked to academic achievement. In this study, two subjects were looked into; namely mathematics and language achievement. The results showed (Table 3) that for Year 1 pupils, there are positive correlations between social skills and achievement in Mathematics ($r=.22, p<.05$) as well as social skills and language achievement ($r=.33, p<.05$). For Year 4 pupils, the correlation between their social skills and Mathematics achievement is $r=.41, p<.05$, and for language achievement the correlation is $r=.59, p<.05$. Similarly, there are positive correlations (although weak) between communication skills with good achievement

TABLE 1
Levels of communication skills

Communication categories	Levels	Year 1	Year 4
Speaking for various purposes	Weak	51.4%	45.7%
	Average	45.8%	51.4%
	Good	2.8%	2.9%
Speaking clearly and giving information effectively	Weak	65.4%	59.4%
	Average	31.8%	37.1%
	Good	2.8%	3.4%
Got involved in speaking and discussing with their peers	Weak	66.9%	58.3%
	Average	29.8%	38.3%
	Good	3.4%	3.4%
Making use of new words and vocabulary	Weak	67.6%	61.1%
	Average	30.2%	37.7%
	Good	2.2%	1.1%
Using standard speaking language	Weak	74.2%	67.2%
	Average	24.2%	27.6%
	Good	1.7%	5.2%

TABLE 2
Social skills based on sociometric test

Sosiometric questions	Response	Year 1	Year 4
Do you have friends?	Yes	64%	74.4%
	No	36%	25.6%
How many friends do you have?	0-1	63.3%	60%
	2-5	19%	25%
	5 or more	17.7%	15%
Do you play with your friends?	Yes	83%	85%
	No	17%	15%
Do you share things with your friends?	Yes	79%	89%
	No	21%	11%

in Mathematics ($r=0.20$, $p < .05$) and language achievement ($r=0.22$, $p < .05$) for Year 1 pupils. For Year 4 pupils, the positive correlations (although weak) between communication skills and achievement in Mathematics is $r = 0.21$, $p < .05$ and $r=0.33$, $p < .05$ for their language achievement.

These findings indicate that both communication and social skills are very important as children enter primary school. The

positive correlations between communication and social skills with achievements in language and Mathematics among the Years 1 and 4 pupils showed that their performance could be negatively affected if they did not acquire these important skills. The findings also revealed that there are positive correlations (although weak) between social skills ($r= .21$, $p < .05$.) and communication skills ($r=.44$, $p < .05$) with the parental occupation for Year 1 pupils. As

TABLE 3
Relationship between social skills and communication skills with achievements in language and Mathematics

Social skills	Year 1	Year 4
Communication skills	r = 0.31, p< .05	r = 0.50, p< .05
Mathematics achievement	r = 0.22, p< .05	r = 0.31, p< .05
Language achievement	r = 0.33, p< .05	r = 0.59, p< .05
Parental occupation	r = .21, p< .05	r = .34, p< .05
Social skills	Year 1	Year 4
Communication skills	r = 0.31, p< .05	r = 0.50, p< .05
Mathematics achievement	r = 0.20, p< .05	r = 0.21, p< .05
Language achievement	r = 0.22, p< .05	r = 0.33, p< .05
Parental occupation	r = .44, p< .05	r = .56, p< .05

for Year 4 pupils, the correlations were also positive between their social ($r=.34$, p , .05) and communications ($r=.56$, p < .05) skills and parental occupation.

Based on the findings of this study, most Year 1 pupils' mothers were housewives (66.3%), while fathers were mostly self-employed (47.6%) where income was inconsistent. About 42.2% of Year 1 students came from families with around 5 -7 children. For Year 4 pupils, their fathers were mostly self-employed (37.9%) with inconsistent income or working in the private sectors (42.4%). They have considered to be in the lower income bracket. Most (75.4%) of their mothers were also housewives. Sixty nine percent (69%) of these students came from families with around 4-7 children. Therefore, it can be stated that there is a link between these children's communication and social skills with parental occupation and the size of their families. Families with lower income seemed to have larger family size.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The results gathered in this study showed that there were positive correlations between communication skills and social skills among early schoolers suggesting that if the communication skill is good, the social skill will also be good. In this study, the pupils who were generally weak in terms of their academic

performances were also found to be weak in their communication skills. They could not speak clearly or deliver information effectively. Hence, they could not involve themselves in group discussions with their peers. In Malaysia, children come from various cultural and racial background. It is unique in the sense that they have their own vernacular languages and dialects. Therefore, in order to be able to communicate effectively and participate in group activities, they have to be proficient in the usage of their standard language, be it English language or the national language - Bahasa Melayu. In this study, the pupils were found to be weak in the standard language. This particular problem further impacts and limits their social skills. Most of them were found to have very few friends. These conditions supported the findings of other researchers which stated that children with communication difficulties demonstrated particular problems in their social interactions, including accessing and participating in a group, initiating and maintaining conversation, verbal negotiations, and other social situations (Rubin *et al.*, 1998). In another study, Fujiki, Brinton, Isaacson *et al.* (2001) observed the behaviours of eight children with language difficulty and found that these children participated less in peer interactions. These findings also support the Social Adaptation Model (SAM) where poor communication abilities are suggested to influence social competence.

Therefore, in order to improve the social skills, the children's communication skills should be emphasized and this has to start from home. Parents could give their children the basic knowledge and good language skills by having good communication, starting from the moment the child is born. In addition, it is also very important for parents to be able to communicate openly and effectively with their children because good communication skills will benefit the children in their entire lives. Generally, traditional research has revealed that mothers who are highly educated have greater success in providing their children with the cognitive, language and communication skills that contribute to early success in school (Sticht and McDonald, 1990). It is also widely believed that the everyday experiences in relationships with their parents are fundamental to children's developing social skills (Cohn, Patterson and Christopoulos, 1991; Parke and Ladd, 1992). In particular, parental responsiveness and nurturance are considered to be the key factors in the development of children's social competence (Maccoby and Martin, 1983). The findings of this study, on the other hand, revealed that most of these children were from low SES homes with large families. Furthermore, the parents were more occupied with their work and had limited time with their children. Their educational levels were also low. Fielding, Kerr and Rosier (1998) found that adults who could not read well and became parents would not spare time or assist their children with significant reading problems. Parental involvement is crucial in enhancing children's social and communication skills. In his work, Auerbach (1989) also pointed out that among some of the indirect influencing factors are emotional climate of the homes, amount of time interacting with adults, level of financial stress and parental involvement on many aspects of reading and communicating. No matter how busy parents are, they must and have to spare time communicating with their children. The authorities, particularly in the education field, should plan appropriate programmes to help

create awareness among these parents about the importance of good communication skills as the skill is important for the continuation of social play. As for schools, it is important that teachers recognize the role of peer group in maintaining a child's level of social acceptance. Teachers should encourage social acceptance among peers by planning special activities and grouping children who lack social skills with those who are socially competent so that the latter will provide examples for learning effective skills.

The findings of this study also showed that pupils who were weak in their communication skills would consequently have poor social skills and they did not do well academically including language proficiency and Mathematics. As mentioned by Knapczyk and Rodes (2001), poor social skills not only make for unhappy and often lonely pupils, they have a measurable impact on their academic achievement. On the other hand, achievement will improve when social skills are improved. They are more likely to learn important cognitive skills when they are confident and engaging interactively with other children.

CONCLUSIONS

Apparently, communication skills are important in enhancing social skills. These basic skills have considerable impacts on academic performance. Hence, a strong foundation in language and a great exposure to activities are the keys to ensuring success in the social skills, as well as academic and personal success thereafter. Parents are responsible for their children's education, basic needs and school needs and they should have good communication with the teachers. Parents should also get to know their children's capacity and motivate them based on their interests, and let their children play games and participate in social activities. Similarly, teachers should know their students, use a variety of instructional strategies, be aware of individual differences, motivate students, and have good communication skills.

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