Oral language competence in community and custodial young offenders.

Pamela Snow and Martine Powell
Monash University & Deakin University AUSTRALIA

Background

It is well recognised that in young offenders there is an over-representation of learning and social skill deficits, however there is a paucity of research examining the oral language skills of this marginalised and high-risk group. Oral language competence (OLC) is the vehicle by which interpersonal relationships are formed and maintained, and underpins the transactions of everyday life, be they personal, social, educational, or commercial. OLC also underpins the transition to literacy in the early school years. This in turn is a significant protective factor and promotes the likelihood that marketable employment skills will be gained by the time this young person exits the education system.

Study 1: Community Youth Offenders

- **Participants**
  - n = 50 young males (13-19yrs) completing Community Based Orders, together with n = 50 community controls.
  - boys attending government high schools of similar SES standing (13–17yrs).

- **Age**
  - Young offenders: Mean = 15.8, SD = 1.2
  - Controls: Mean = 14.9, SD = 1.1

- **Years of Education**
  - Young offenders: Mean = 7.6, SD = 2.0
  - Controls: Mean = 7.8, SD = 1.0

- **Nonverbal IQ**: No difference b/w groups.

- **Measures**
  - Test of Language Competence – Expanded (TLC-E; Wig & Secord 1989); 2 subsites.
  - CELF-R Screen – Sentence Repetition (Semel & Secord, 1996).
  - Narrative Discourse task – Description of “The “Flowerpot Incident” (Snow & Powell, 2004).
  - Developmental History (self-report).
  - IAP-SF (Social Skills Ax) Gibbs et al., 1995.

- **Key Findings**
  - Young offenders scored significantly more poorly on all measures.
  - 52% of young offenders classified as Language Impaired.
  - Nonverbal IQ did not account for LI.
  - Offenders’ scores worse than those of a control group a year younger.
  - 62% of LI subgroup reported having received some form of intervention (e.g. Reading Recovery) in early school years.
  - Relationship between LI and violent offending remained unclear.

Study 2: Custodial* Youth Offenders

- **Participants**
  - N = 100 young males (aged 16-20 yrs) completing custodial sentences in the Youth Justice system.
  - Mean age = 19.6, SD = 8.5
  - Mean years education = 9.8 (SD = 1.6).
  - Nonverbal IQ Mean = 86.0 (SD = 16.4)

- **Measures**
  - TLC-E and Narrative Task as per Study 1 PLUS
  - CELF4 (Semel et al, 2003) Core Language Score
  - Comber-Lang Scale – for quantifying violent and nonviolent offence convictions (Quinsey et al., 1998).
  - Depression Anxiety & Stress Scale (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995).
  - Developmental History (self-report).

- **Key Findings**
  - 61% of young offenders were classified as Language Impaired (LI).
  - Of the 25 with extreme violent offending scores (C-L Score ≥ 75th percentile), 13 (52%) had a LI.
  - Of the 29 who had a history of Out of Home Care, 18 (62%) had a LI.
  - 46% of those with identified LI had received some form of early intervention (Vs 13% of those without identified LI).
  - LI subgroup did not differ from non-LI on measures of depression, anxiety or stress (DASS scores).
  - Of the 11 who had extremely high scores (>75th percentile) on both C-L offending scales, 7 had a LI, but none had a low nonverbal IQ (KBIT2 Matrices scaled score < 70).
  - There was no association between CELF4 Core Language Score and KBIT2 Matrices (nonverbal IQ) score in LI subgroup.

So What?

- Young male offenders are at high risk for previously undetected oral language deficits, and this risk seems to increase as severity of offending increases.
- Although some form of early intervention is frequently offered to these boys in the early school years, it is not sufficient to change their life trajectory towards early school detachment, offending, and social marginalisation.
- There are high rates of overlap between involvement in Child Protection Services and later engagement with Youth Justice services. Speech Language Pathology assessments (and interventions) should be made available to these high-risk children at a developmental stage where they are most likely to benefit from the intervention.
- Interventions delivered to young offenders (e.g. Cognitive Behaviour Therapy, Anger Management programs etc) are verbally mediated. These may need to be modified in order to be suitable for use with this population.
- Unrecognised oral language deficits may cause further disadvantages in interactions with the legal system. e.g. when being interviewed by police as a suspect, victim, or witness, or when testifying in court.

Our research

1. Is based on the notion that OLC has been largely ignored in the lives of young males who display both learning and behaviour difficulties in the early school years.
2. Seeks to position OLC as a public health issue with respect to the protective nature of academic achievement and school attachment.
3. Seeks to move beyond “accepted notions” that young offenders display learning and social skill deficits, and explore more closely the role played by OLC.
4. Seeks to explore relationships between OLC and patterns of offending, and links with other developmental markers of risk, e.g. engagement with Child Protection Services.
5. Seeks to inform early intervention policy and practice, as well as improving the passage of young people through the justice and welfare systems.

Key Findings

1. *In Australia, young people are much less likely to be incarcerated than in the USA. Custodial sentences are reserved for the most serious or recidivist patterns of offending. Young people aged 18-20 may on occasion, be sentenced into the Youth Justice system.

Publications


Further Information: pamela.snow@monash.edu.