META-AWARENESS OF DIALECT DIFFERENCE: IMPACTS ON EARLY LITERACY INTERVENTIONS

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Through recent experience as a classroom teacher, the first author found that the ability for young children to meet the rigorous requirements of New Zealand's "National Standards" has become of concern to most teachers. While it is recognised that children do enter school with varying degrees of 'readiness', an issue that stands out for teachers, particularly those in lower socioeconomic areas, is the disparity in oral language competencies for some children. While not officially speech impaired, these children speak a dialect of English that varies from the Standard English expected at school.

The present research investigated the potential link between low literacy acquisition levels and increasing children's meta-awareness of dialectal differences between their own 'non-standard' English as spoken by many children from lower socioeconomic schools in New Zealand in normal day-to-day conversation, and the Standard English used as the basis of literacy learning. The belief was that, once acknowledged, these differences between spoken language and literacy-language could be used to support children's understanding of the link between literacy and language.

The present research investigated through an experimental design, the possibility of a positive impact, by including meta-awareness of dialect difference with Phonological Awareness. Also, the impact of meta-awareness on its own as a form of intervention, by assessing improvements in literacy of approximately 80 students from three low socioeconomic schools in New Zealand who showed evidence of common use of non-standard English and low literacy levels.

Twenty students received two half hour small group sessions a week over an initial eight week period of literacy intervention that focused solely on Phonological Awareness. Twenty received an intervention involving Phonological Awareness and dialect meta-awareness, while a further 20 received dialect meta-awareness only. All three groups had a further eight weeks of phonological and meta-awareness tuition. One group of twenty students initially received no intervention and thus acted as a control group.

Despite all children in the study having shown poor progress in literacy over the previous two years of tuition, the present interventions showed greater than expected improvements between pre, mid and post intervention literacy measures of word reading, word spelling, phonemic awareness, whole text reading and writing. An interesting result was the changes that many participants made to their own speech (dialect) patterns.