The University of Southern Mississippi

Reading Ability of Third Grade Southern Dialect Speakers

by

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Preliminary Outline of Thesis

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Literacy is an important skill (National Assessment Governing Board, 2008; Tannenbaum, Torgesen, and Wagner, 2006). Literacy is crucial for successful participation in our culture. It is essential for children so that they can learn and be able to grasp and use the concepts that are presented in school. Research has made speech-language pathologists aware of how closely reading is tied to speech. The ability to repeat sounds, arrange them in patterns to form nonsense words, and ultimately say words that have meaning attached to them, are all part of learning how to speak.

Reading represents the visual component of speech. Learning how to read does not come naturally to everyone. It involves many processes that occur simultaneously. First, sounds are attached to letters, then letters and sounds are arranged together, and lastly, words are formed and read as an entity with meaning rather than as individual sounds. Without this fundamental knowledge of these basic steps, a person would be unable to read and understand sentences.

According to Tannenbaum, Torgesen, and Wagner (2006), third grade is a transitional period for children in the school setting. Third grade is the end of the period in which children develop the preliminary skills necessary for reading. Fourth graders are expected to begin the transition from learning to read to reading to acquire knowledge (Fiester, 2010; Lesnick, Goerge, Smithgall, and Gwynne, 2010). This transformation is difficult because not only does the style of reading change but the topics which children in the fourth grade read about are more abstract. Children read stories and learn things that are tangible at first, but as time progresses the subjects that they read about and discuss become more conceptual and theoretical. Therefore, it is imperative that during the span of third grade, children develop their vocabularies, and the ability
to read accurately and fluently so that they can interpret the meaning of written text. This adjustment can be confusing and challenging.

Every country has different dialects, or a particular variety of language used by people in a certain area (Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia, 2010). Furthermore, the term dialect encompasses the grammatical, phonetic, and lexical characteristics of a variety of language (Carver, 1987). The South is a well known region in the United States, not only for its food and cultural aspects but also for its dialect. Only in this region do the inhabitants say things like “y’all.” Carver (1987) stated, “The South, of course, has its own unique set of phonetic rules that affect the way its vocabulary is pronounced” (p. 106). It is this difference in pronunciation and grammar that make the area so distinct from others in the nation. Carver (1987) also noted that the people in this area seem to like to ignore the “standard” grammar rules that govern verb conjugation. This noticeable dialect has not always represented the South very well. Often, the South is perceived to consist of people who are not very educated based on the dialect that they speak (Goodman and Buck, 1997). Goodman and Buck (1997) have wondered if dialect has an effect on reading and writing abilities.

This thesis proposes to examine the literacy skills of third grade students who live in a rural setting in the Southeastern United States and speak Southern American English. Although the reading skills of children have been examined, few have looked closely at the reading abilities of third graders who live in the Southeastern region of the United States. A study by Jarmulowicz, Taran, and Hay (2007) examined third graders because the third grade is a vital year in reading and vocabulary development, but they also wanted to know if dialect would influence the results that they found if the study were to be repeated in a different area (Jarmulowicz, Taran, & Hay, 2007).
To accomplish the goals of this study, third graders from local elementary schools will be asked to read aloud and the researcher will conduct a miscue analysis (Goodman, Watson, and Burke, 2005). A miscue analysis is completed by having a student read aloud a short, meaningful text between 150 to 300 words in length. During this time the examiner will listen closely and record any miscues made by the student (Goodman, 1969). Goodman (1969) describes a miscue as when what an individual reads (the observed response) does not match what is written in the text (the expected response). These miscues may consist of but are not limited to many different combinations, such as: (a) inserting a word that is not in the text, (b) substituting a word of similar meaning, or (c) omitting a word. The data collected from these samples will then be compared to literature from the field about third grade students. The literature used will come from books and scholarly articles about third graders, reading, and southern dialect.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Literacy

Definition

The field of literacy has come to include many different terms and definitions. Experts continue to heatedly debate over what literacy actually includes. According to Roberts (1995), “Literacy is the ability to read and write” (p. 413). This is an ambiguous statement, Roberts (1995) continues, because the “Questions regarding what one reads and writes, and 'how much' ability in reading and/or writing is required in order to be considered literate, are left unanswered” (p. 413). Also, literacy is sometimes used interchangeably with the term “reading.” Borko, Davinroy, Bleim, and Cumbo (2000) used the term reading to mean “making meaning from text and all the language arts—reading, writing, listening, and speaking,” which includes the ability to “make meaning from what they read and perform higher levels of comprehension such as interpretation and evaluation” (p. 274).

Whitehurst and Lonigan (1998) discussed yet another aspect of literacy known as emergent literacy. The term emergent literacy can be defined as the awareness and development of the necessary skills and knowledge to be able to read and write. By using this term, emergent literacy, Whitehurst and Lonigan wanted to convey that literacy and the skills required to achieve literacy are part of an ongoing process that begins before formal schooling even starts.

Development

Cassidy, Valadez, and Garrett (2010) examined the “pillars of literacy”: (a) phonemic awareness, (b) phonics, (c) fluency, (d) vocabulary and (e) comprehension. These pillars came about after a group, known as the National Reading Panel, was established in response to Congress’ wish in 1997 to assess the ability of reading methods taught to children in schools.
These findings impacted the next few decades of reading strategies. The abovementioned authors closely examined the changing thought process throughout the decades as to which pillar was the most important or essential to teaching reading. The No Child Left Behind Act (2001) was also influenced by the pillars as the same five essential components came from the National Reading Panel survey (National Assessment Governing Board, 2008, p. 5).

Each of these pillars deals with a different aspect of reading. Cassidy, Valadez, and Garrett (2010) defined each of these in turn. Before phonemic awareness can be defined, one must understand what a phoneme entails. Phonemes are the “smallest units of sound which make up spoken language” (p. 647). The term phonemic awareness is defined as “the ability to focus on and manipulate phonemes in spoken words” (p. 647). The next pillar, phonics, references that each letter or group of letters in the alphabet has a certain sound that it produces. Cassidy, Valadez, and Garrett (2010) defined fluency as “efficient, effective word recognition skills that permit a reader to construct the meaning of text” (p. 651). Vocabulary, another integral part of literacy, has been linked to comprehension because without the knowledge of what a word means, it would be impossible to understand a text. Comprehension, or understanding what one has read, is the final pillar in literacy. It has been well documented in research that vocabulary knowledge and comprehension are closely related (National Assessment Governing Board, 2008; Tannenbaum, Torgesen, & Wagner, 2006).

According to Raban (1988), oral language development has also been cited as necessary for literacy to develop (p. 251). Although there is no direct correlation of oral language to reading, the importance of having a well developed oral language repertoire is certainly a factor. Importance
Literacy is a worldwide skill that is deemed necessary for success (Lesnick, Goerge, Smithgall, & Gwynne, 2010). Although there may not be a set language, the ability to read in a native language is assessed in all the developed nations around the world. The acquisition of the skills necessary to be literate commence at a very young age. Bennett et al. (2009) conducted a poll about the perception of early education. This poll examined the topic of early childhood literacy, which in general refers to “the pre-reading skills children under the age of 5 need to learn before they attend kindergarten” (Bennett et al., 2009, p. 1). In the assessment, the “pre-reading skills” examined were “alphabet and print knowledge, recognizing letter sounds, rhyming, developing a vocabulary, etc.” (p. 1). Bennett et al. (2009) revealed that 95% of Americans agree that literacy is an important issue (with 74% saying it is very important) and receives too little attention. Yet, they are also unaware as of when literacy starts and how severely the lack of literacy skills by a certain age in a child’s development can impact a child’s future (Bennett et al, 2009). For instance, “seventy-three percent of Americans wrongly believe that if children enter kindergarten unprepared, they will catch up in elementary school” (“Survey Reveals Americans Unaware” p. 1).

Statistics

The National Center for Education Statistics (2010) under the U.S. Department of Education recently released data examining the fourth grade reading achievement levels in 2009. These levels are in percentages and compare each state to the overall United States. Last year, the United States had fourth graders that ranked in various levels: (a) 34% are below basic, (b) 66% are at or above basic, (c) 68% are below proficient, and (d) only 32% are at or above proficient. In comparison, Mississippi has 45% of fourth grade students below basic, 55% at or above basic, 78% below proficient, and only 22% at or above proficient (National Center for
Education Statistics, 2010). The disheartening part is that Mississippi is not alone. Roughly half of the states lack a majority of the student population that has reached the level of basic (Fiester, 2010, p. 13).

The term “basic” refers to the following skills:

Being able to locate relevant information, make simple inferences, and use their understanding of the text to identify details that support a given interpretation or conclusion; students should also be able to interpret the meaning of a word as it is used in the text. (“The NAEP Reading Achievement Levels by Grade,” 2010, para. 4)

The description for “proficient” includes: “the ability to integrate and interpret texts and apply their understanding of the text to draw conclusions and make evaluations” (“The NAEP Reading Achievement Levels by Grade,” 2010, para. 4). Lastly, the term “advanced” is defined to include: “the ability to make complex inferences and construct and support their inferential understanding of the text; students should be able to apply their understanding of a text to make and support a judgment” (“The NAEP Reading Achievement Levels by Grade,” 2010, para. 4).

Third Grade

A Critical Time for Learning

Third grade has many different skills and concepts that are taught and introduced. An article written by Rathbun and West (2004) discussed the skills that a third grader should have acquired at the end of the school year. Among the skills they list “identifying ending sounds, sight words, and words in context” (p. 17). They continue to list other skills that some children were able to perform: “mak[ing] literal inferences based on clues stated in text, us[ing]
identifying clues to derive meaning in text, and demonstrate[ing] the ability to make interpretations beyond text” (p. 17).

Third grade is a time of transition because the way that material is presented in fourth grade and thereafter changes (Lesnick, Goerge, Smithgall, & Gwynne, 2010). The Final Report from Carnegie Corporation of New York’s Council on Advancing Adolescent Literacy introduced an agenda for advancing adolescent literacy for college and career success, titled “Time to Act” (2010). The plan discussed how “literacy demands change and intensify quickly for young learners after fourth grade” (p. 10). Fiester (2010) agreed with the change in literacy style:

Up until the end of third grade, most children are learning to read. Beginning in the fourth grade, however, they are reading to learn, using their skills to gain more information in subjects such as math and science, to solve problems, think critically about what they are learning, and to act upon and share that knowledge in the world around them. (p. 9)

This change comes about quickly, but the outcomes are ever lasting.

Importance of Reading Well

Third grade is such an important time for children as readers. Tannenbaum, Torgesen, and Wagner (2006) reported that “the end of third grade is widely regarded as the end point for the development of early reading skills” (p. 384). If a child is missing out on the basics, then their reading skills will not improve. Fiester (2010), states

Millions of American children reach 4th grade without learning to read proficiently. The shortfall is especially pronounced among low-income children: of the 4th graders who took the National Assessment of Educational Progress
(NAEP) reading test in 2009, 83% of children from low-income families—and 85% of low-income students who attend high-poverty schools—failed to reach the “proficient” level in reading. (p. 27)

Third grade is an important time in a child’s life. If they do not read well in third grade, it is a bad indicator for the future, namely in the areas of graduation and college attendance (Lesnick, Goerge, Smithgall, & Gwynne, 2010). Education Digest (2010) summed up the importance of third grade in their article “Early Warning: Why Reading by the End of Third Grade Matters,” by stating that “reading proficiently by the end of 3rd grade is a crucial marker in a child’s educational development. Failure to read proficiently is linked to higher rates of school dropout…” (p. 27). This increased rate of high school dropout also has an effect on the economy and that nation at large. Fiester (2010) further expounds on this statement, stating, “Every student who does not complete high school costs our society an estimated $260,000 in lost earnings, taxes, and productivity” (p. 5).

Lesnick, Goerge, Smithgall, and Gwynne (2010) added that “students who are not reading at grade level by third grade begin having difficulty comprehending the written material that is a central part of the educational process in the grades that follow” (p. 1). They also reported that 75% of students that had problems with reading in the third grade will still have an issue with reading in the ninth grade, which indicates how vital learning to read at the appropriate time is so that problems will not arise later. Furthermore, third graders with poor word identification skills probably will not improve by the end of eighth grade (Lesnick, Goerge, Smithgall, & Gwynne, 2010). Problems that start in the third grade will follow a student for the rest of their educational path if not corrected.

**Dialect**
Definition

The United States is a large place and as the country developed, people spread across the nation away from the metropolitan areas on the east coast in different waves (Carver, 1987). The most prominent wave was the westward expansion movement. Carver (1987) stated that immigrants settled in areas that had roughly the same climate as their native homeland. Each of these immigrants brought their dialect and language to the area. These dialects define each region as we know them today and give them the unique characteristics for which they have become known.

Before dialect can even be discussed, one must understand the term “register”.

According to Purnell, Raimy, and Salmons (2009), register means “language used in a particular situation for a particular purpose and often associated with formality” (p. 333). Dialect is a reflection of the region from which one originates, the history behind the family and the region in which one grew up, how one is perceived from an educational standpoint, and social perceptions (Purnell, Raimy, & Salmons, 2009).

The Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia (2010) defined dialect in the following way:

*Dialect*, variety of a language used by a group of speakers within a particular speech community; every individual speaks a variety of his language, termed an idiolect. *Dialects* are groups of idiolects with a common core of similarities in pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. (p. 1)

Southern Dialect

The southern dialect is the most studied regional dialect of the United States (Kretzschmar, 2003). This dialect has been studied as far back as 1896 by a man named Hempl, followed by a man identified as Hans Kurath, and lastly a more recent scholar, William Labov,
all of whom have been considered to be notable researchers in the field of dialects (Kretzschmar, 2003). Wolfram (2003) explained what present-day states are included in the southern region:

Geographically, the South includes from 11 to 17 states, including the confederate states of the “Old South”—Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Arkansas, and Texas—as well as parts of Kentucky, West Virginia, Oklahoma, Maryland, Delaware, and the District of Columbia. (p. 123)

Different authors include some of these states in other regions in the United States.

Often, it has been said in the general public that there is something different about the way that Southerners speak. Jacewicz, Fox, and Salmons (2006) gave some proof to this statement. In the article “Vowel Duration in Three American English Dialects” the authors stated that other studies have “suggest[ed] a durational difference between Northern and Southern varieties of English, usually supporting the view that Southern speech is slower” (p. 369). Carver (1987) wrote in his book, American Regional Dialects, that the south is predominantly a rural area, and because of this, it is less prone to change rapidly. This means that the dialects already present are less likely to change and are more likely to be highly concentrated in some areas more than others. Carver (1987) also noted that the influence of black speech must be considered when looking at Southern speech.

Relation to Reading

Goodman and Buck (1997) alluded to the “indisputable fact that speakers of low-status dialects of English have much higher rates of reading failure than high status dialect readers.” This statement led to “analyses of contrasts between high and low status dialects suggest that the problem in reading acquisition could be due to mismatches between the dialect of the learner and
that of the writer” (p. 455). Carver (1987) also noted that “the South, of course, has its own unique set of phonetic rules that affect the way its vocabulary is pronounced” (p. 106). This unique pronunciation could affect the way a child in the South reads.

**Conclusion**

Third grade may not be the year that the style of reading changes, but if the necessary skills are not present at this level the effects follow the children through the rest of their lives. Good reading skills are important at every level and it is important that educators and citizens alike realize the impact that these skills have on a child’s life. As previously mentioned, dialect may also influence how a child reads. Through this research, I hope to gain some insight into the reading abilities of third graders in a rural setting in the south. Research in this area is critical given the importance of reading and the knowledge that Mississippi is second to last in the nation in the overall reading scores for fourth graders.
Chapter 3: Methodology

Overview and Predictions

This research project hopes to gain some insight into the world of education as it pertains to reading. The researcher will examine the reading skills of third grade students at an elementary school in a rural area of Southeastern Mississippi. As the research has shown, fourth grade is a time of great change for students (Lesnick, Goerge, Smithgall, and Gwynne, 2010). During this time, the reading style changes from *learning to read* to *reading to learn* (Fiester, 2010). The dialect in the south is different than most other dialects in the United States in that sometimes the spoken pronunciation is different than the written pronunciation (Carver, 1987). The participants in this study will be native to a rural area of Southeastern Mississippi, and thus be speakers of a rural Southern dialect. This project will describe the reading abilities of third grade rural dialect speakers, in terms of their miscues. The findings will then be discussed in terms of what the literature in the field says is necessary to be successful in the fourth grade.

Participants

As previously mentioned, the participants in this research project will consist of third graders at an elementary school. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) consent forms will be submitted and the school of choice, along with the necessary school administration, will be contacted once approval is given to the researcher. The third grade students will be given a letter to take home to their parents or legal guardians asking for their permission to let their child participate in the research project. All project goals will be listed and the overall purpose will be given in the letter to the parents. The first three to five children who give their assent to participate in this research project and return their parental consent forms, will be selected as
participants. To be eligible for participation in this study, the individual must meet the following criteria:

1. The individual must be a third grade student in regular education.
2. The individual must be native to a southeastern rural area of the United States.
3. The individual must be willing to participate in the study.

Should a parent decide to allow their child to participate and assent be given by a child, a further survey will be sent home for the parent to complete. This additional survey will ask general questions about the child’s reading abilities and the parent’s involvement with reading at home. This survey will allow the researcher to get an informed view of the child’s reading habits and the parent’s view on reading. The survey will also help to determine how much the child reads outside of the classroom.

**Instruments**

The children that choose to participate will be asked to read a text aloud while the researcher performs a miscue analysis. A miscue analysis consists of a text of roughly 150-300 words in length. The student will read the text aloud and the researcher will mark any miscues that the student may make on a guide. Jeanne Gunther (n.d.) states “a miscue is any unexpected calling of a word or section of text.” The researcher will subsequently review these guides and analyze them regarding type of miscue, number of miscue, etc. The patterns found, if any, will be noted and interpretations made.

**Potential Problems**

There may be some potential problems that could surface during the course of this research project. These problems could be simple issues like not having enough children to adequately survey and perform a miscue analysis on to establish a pattern. Secondly, the time
frame in which to complete this project is somewhat limited to the normal operational hours (8 am to 3 pm) of the school. Schools will not be in session over the summer and so the researcher must begin immediately when the IRB committee gives consent. Lastly, school, parent and student participation may influence the outcome of this research project.
References


