The University of Hong Kong
Department of Psychology

Departmental Seminar

The role of oral language skills to beginning reading development among young Chinese children

Date: November 18, 2013 (Monday)

Time: 11:30 a.m. – 12:30 p.m.

Venue: Room 813, 8/F, The Jockey Club Tower, Centennial Campus, HKU

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Three studies were conducted to examine whether and how do different aspects of oral language skills have important contribution for the development of reading comprehension among young Chinese children. In Study 1, a three-wave longitudinal study (from K2 to P1) was conducted with 91 Chinese children, to whom measures of oral language (vocabulary, grammar and narrative discourse), word-level skills (phonological, orthographic, and morphological skills), and word reading were administered at all three time points, and reading comprehension at K3 and P1. This study found that K2 oral language skills explained considerable variance in subsequent word reading and reading comprehension two years later, and their longitudinal contribution appeared to be more important than that of K2 word-level skills. Moreover, it was found that the first-graders showed rudimentary abilities in some higher-order text comprehension skills in spoken language (e.g., sentential ambiguity detection and monitoring of textual coherence), and these language skills were highly associated with children's reading comprehension. Results of multiple regression analyses showed that these skills had unique contribution to reading comprehension at P1 over and above that

of word reading, word-level skills, and general oral language skills (i.e., vocabulary, grammatical and narrative discourse skills). The longitudinal data further demonstrated the unique prediction of sentential ambiguity detection over time. Overall, SEM analyses revealed that although the role of word reading ability was prominent to beginning reading comprehension, children's early oral language skills at preschool was found to make an independent path to later reading comprehension through facilitating the later development of higher-order comprehension skills.

Since Study 1 demonstrated the important role of sentential ambiguity detection to reading comprehension, Study 2 focused on examining the emerging development of this skill in Chinese children from K2 to P1. A phase model was proposed which hypothesized that children gradually acquired the three sub-skills of sentential ambiguity detection (i.e., homophone detection, lexical ambiguity detection in sentence, and structural ambiguity detection in sentence) through successive phases. Study 2 further demonstrated the contribution of vocabulary, grammatical, and lexical compounding skills for the early acquisition of ambiguity detection in Chinese children.

In Study 3, one of its aims was to determine the extent to which different kinds of preschool cognitive skills significantly predicted later word reading difficulties at the end of first grade. The results highlighted the important predicting role of meaning-related cognitive skills (i.e., vocabulary, lexical compounding, and homophone detection skills) in addition to that of phonological and orthographic skills. Apart from focusing on children's word reading problems, Study 3 further used K-mean cluster analysis to identify a group of children at first grade, whose reading comprehension fall short of their average or good word reading ability. It was found that these "poor comprehenders" showed weaknesses in skills that are specifically related to text comprehension: sentential ambiguity detection, comprehension monitoring, and working memory. The practical implications for early literacy instructional approaches and early identification of children with reading difficulties were discussed.

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