Oral language competence, young offenders, and the law

Pamela Snow

August 23, 2012
AIJA Conference
Brisbane

© Pamela Snow
In this presentation

- Oral language competence - what it is and why it is important in its own right and for the transition to literacy
- Vulnerable young people: A developmental perspective on the risk pathway to offending (and by definition, to educational disengagement)
- Language competence and the social gradient
- Research on the language skills of young offenders
- Implications for the youth justice sector
- “Sentence Trouble” Resource
Acknowledgements

- Funding bodies –
  - Australian Research Council
  - Criminology Research Council
- Professor Martine Powell, Deakin University
- Research Assistants
  - Margaret Kent
  - Rita Cauchi
- Department of Human Services
- The young people themselves
ORAL LANGUAGE?

Everyday **talking** (expressive) and **listening** (receptive / comprehension) skills
Oral language competence

- The means by which we negotiate the business of everyday life
- One of the strongest clues as to “who we are” – it is both socially determined and deterministic
- Reflects a wide range of developmental factors / experiences, esp early secure attachment and degree of language enrichment
- Closely tied to social cognition
- With ↑ development, requires ↑ sophistication and subtlety with respect to social, cultural, and contextual aspects of communication
- Requires comprehension and use of linguistic devices such as metaphor, sarcasm, analogy, figures of speech – in which literal meaning says little about intended meaning
- Closely tied to and underpins literary competence
Surface and hidden meanings

- Similes
- Metaphor
- Idiom
- Jokes
- Sarcasm
- Analogy
- Irony
Language is used to.....

- Tell
- Ask
- Inform
- Instruct
- Narrate
- Request
- Confer
- Suggest
- Inquire
- Persuade
- Cajole
- Imply
- Admonish
- Concur
- Complain
- Refute
- Question
- .....etc
- Talking to peers
- Talking to teachers
- Talking to elderly relatives
- Talking to shop-keepers
- Talking to the boss
- Talking to police
- Talking to a help-desk
- Barracking at a football match

Are these all the same?
Not all social cues are easy to read
The transition to literacy....

- Is not biologically ‘natural’ – requires specific and prolonged instruction;
- Builds directly on psycholinguistic competencies acquired before school entry;
- Snowling & Hulme (2011) *Literacy is parasitic on language*
- Promotes
  - academic achievement,
  - school attachment and retention,
  - positive self esteem
- An important *Protective Factor*;
- *Learning to Read Vs Reading to Learn*;
- The Matthew Effect....
The "Matthew Effect"

Matthew Effects in Reading

- With foundational skills
- Without foundational skills

Grade

Achievement
Oral language competence as a solid foundation

- Academic achievement; social engagement
- Transition to Literacy
- Development of Prosocial Skills
Hart & Risley (1995)

- Children of parents on welfare benefits – 616 words per hour
- Children of working class parents – 1,251 words per hour
- Children of professional parents – 2,153 words per hour

- Children of parents on welfare benefits - 616 words per hour
- Children of working class parents - 1,251 words per hour
- Children of professional parents - 2,153 words per hour
WHAT DOES ALL OF THIS HAVE TO DO WITH HIGH-RISK YOUNG PEOPLE?
The pathway to offending

- Male:Female ratio of 5:1 (Higher in custodial settings)

- Over-representation of
  - Single-parent households – absent fathers
  - Dysfunctional communication / parenting
  - Parental mental health problems
  - Involvement with child protection services
  - History of behaviour / conduct disturbance
  - Low educational attachment / attainment
  - School exclusion
  - Developmental disability (diagnosed or not)
  - Low SES
  - Intergenerational un/under-employment in parents
  - Early initiation into substance use / abuse
  - Early death

- But – young people in the justice system were not always offenders……
Implications for language development?

- Male:Female ratio of 5:1 (Higher in custodial settings)
- **Over-representation of**
  - Single-parent households – absent fathers
  - Dysfunctional communication / parenting
  - Parental mental health problems
  - Involvement with child protection services
  - **History of behaviour / conduct disturbance**
  - Low educational attachment / attainment
  - School exclusion
  - Developmental disability (diagnosed or not)
  - Low SES
  - Intergenerational un/under-employment in parents
  - Early initiation into substance use / abuse
  - Early death
Research on the language skills of young offenders

- Has been growing internationally in the last 10-15 years, with activity in the UK, USA and Australia and growing interest in NZ

- Moves beyond well-established evidence from forensic and social psychology that young offenders have poor academic achievement and social skill deficits – because poor oral language skills may be an explanatory factor for both

- Identifies some 50 - 60% of young offenders as having clinically significant, yet previously unidentified language impairments on standardised language measures, e.g. the CELF4
Youth Justice in Victoria

- Active diversion of youth offenders from custodial sentences
- “Dual Track” system for 17-20 year-olds
- Lowest rate of youth supervision or detention nationally (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2006)
- Fewer indigenous offenders than other States
Our most recent research study (Snow & Powell, 2011)

- Built on three earlier studies of community based samples
- n=100 young males completing custodial sentences
- All relevant ethics approvals
- Mean age = 19.03;
- Mean Yrs education = 9.8
Study approach

• Cross-sectional design
• Standardised measures of spoken and receptive language
• A measure of nonverbal IQ
• Data about convictions (violent Vs nonviolent - quantified) - CLCI
• Mental Health measure – to examine links b/w language and MH, in particular depression and anxiety - DASS
• Child Protection Hx – Out of Home Care Placement
• No exclusions, but all had to have completed the majority of their schooling in an English-speaking country
• No participants identified as being of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin
Measures of

- Comprehension of figurative / abstract language
- Narrative discourse (story telling) production
- Information processing
- Sentence repetition
- Social skill – across three conditions
- Nonverbal IQ
What we found

- Around 50% of young offenders have a clinically significant language impairment on formal testing.

- Deficits existed across the spectrum of language skills – expressive and receptive, narrative language, using and understanding figurative language etc.

- Language problems were not accounted for by low IQ.

- The majority of those with a LI had been identified as needing special services in the early school years, many received Reading Recovery, but early school departure was the norm.

- While in an earlier Community sample, the relationship between LI and offending pattern was unclear, in the Custodial sample, there was a significant association between presence of a LI and violent offending.

....cont
What we found….cont

- Rates of LI were higher in those who had been in Out of Home Care placement.
- Language problems could not be accounted for by mental health problems such as anxiety or depression.
- Overwhelming majority left school around Yrs 8-10.
- Marketable employment skills were virtually absent.
Violent Offending and LI

- History of violence present in 87% of cases
- Quantified using CLCI
- Two subgroups created based on severity median split on CLCI Scales 1 & 2
  - ‘High’ Offending n = 26
  - ‘Not-High’ Offending n = 74

*These subgroups differed on years of education but not on nonverbal IQ*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>High Offending Scores on CLCI Scales 1&amp;2 (n=26)</th>
<th>Not High offending Scores on CLCI Scales 1&amp;2 (n=74)</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p*</th>
<th>d</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TLC-E Subtest 1, Ambiguous Sentences Standardised Score</td>
<td><strong>4.2</strong> 1.9</td>
<td><strong>4.8</strong> 2.5</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TLC-E Subtest 2, Listening Comprehension Standardised Score</td>
<td><strong>4.9</strong> 2.6</td>
<td><strong>5.2</strong> 2.5</td>
<td>.48</td>
<td>.31</td>
<td>.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TLC-E Subtest 4, Figurative Language Standardised Score</td>
<td><strong>4.2</strong> 2.1</td>
<td><strong>5.6</strong> 2.8</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CELF4, Recalling Sentences</td>
<td><strong>4.7</strong> 2.9</td>
<td><strong>5.4</strong> 3.2</td>
<td>.97</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CELF4, Formulating Sentences</td>
<td><strong>3.8</strong> 3.3</td>
<td><strong>5.6</strong> 3.4</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>.012</td>
<td>.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CELF4, Word Classes (Receptive)</td>
<td><strong>4.0</strong> 2.6</td>
<td><strong>6.3</strong> 3.1</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CELF4, Word Definitions</td>
<td><strong>5.0</strong> 3.8</td>
<td><strong>6.5</strong> 4.0</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>.055</td>
<td>.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CELF4, Core Language Score</td>
<td><strong>63.7</strong> 19.9</td>
<td><strong>74.1</strong> 19.1</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Limitations

- Non-random sample
- Cross-sectional
- No participants from ATSI backgrounds
- Scale and scope of language testing
- Limited data on Child Protection involvement
- Reliance on self-report for biographical data
- Males only
Implications?

- Early intervention for “high-risk boys”, esp where behaviour disturbance + learning difficulties are present
- Forensic Interviewing / Understanding the court process, bail conditions, formal cautions etc
- Restorative Justice conferencing
- Interventions for young offenders
  - Counselling
  - Specific programs – anger management, sex offender treatment
  - Literacy programmes
Language problems are invisible
Language Impairment may masquerade as

- Rudeness
- Indifference / lack of concern
- Poor motivation to cooperate
- “Yep, nup, dunno, maybe”... and other minimalist responses
- Suggestibility / acquiescence in forensic interviews, whether as suspects, witnesses or victims
- Behaviour disturbance
- Low IQ
- No language problem at all
At least 60% of young people in the youth justice system have communication needs.

That could mean that over half of the young people you work with do not understand what people say to them or find it difficult to get their message across.

Use this website to:

- Find out what communication needs are
- View examples of what these needs may look like
- Gain advice to support you in your work
- Download resources
- Share information and ideas in our forum

http://www.sentencetrouble.info/film
Preventing this trajectory is everybody’s business
Some recent publications


Further information: pamela.snow@monash.edu