



Shyness–anxiousness and receptive language skills development in Spanish- and English-speaking preschoolers

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ABSTRACT

The present study utilized a short-term longitudinal research design to model the relationship between shyness–anxiousness and receptive language skills. Hypotheses regarding the direction of the causal relationship, mediation, and moderation were evaluated. Subjects included 340 Head Start attendees from primarily English- and Spanish-speaking homes. Results suggest that a unidirectional relationship between shyness–anxiousness and receptive language skills emerges in preschool. Shyness–anxiousness impacted receptive language skills and this relationship was mediated by communication competence. Neither gender nor native language moderated the indirect relationship from shyness–anxiousness to receptive language through communication competence. These results are discussed with respect to elucidating the nature of the bidirectional relationship between shyness–anxiousness and language skills and identifying intervention targets to improve language outcomes for shy–anxious preschoolers.

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Children who exhibit behavior characterized as shy, withdrawn, socially anxious, inhibited, or reticent are outperformed by peers on measures of receptive and expressive language skills (Evans, 2010). With respect to expressive language, shy–anxious children speak less, make fewer requests for action, have verbal expressions that are less complex, illustrate lower levels of verbal fluency, and have longer latency times between the offset of a speaking partner and the onset of their own speech (Asendorpf & Meier, 1993; Evans, 1996; Landon & Sommers, 1979; Spere & Evans, 2009; Spere, Evans, Hendry, & Mansell, 2008; Spere, Schmidt, Theall-Honey, & Martin-Chang, 2004; cf., Coplan & Armer, 2005). With respect to receptive language, shy–anxious children do less well on tests of verbal IQ and measures of receptive vocabulary and phonemic awareness (Asendorpf, 1994; Crozier & Hostettler, 2003; Engfer, 1993; Evans, 1996; Masten, Morison, & Pellegrini, 1985; Rubin, 1982; Spere & Evans, 2009; cf., Spere et al., 2008). For both language domains the performance of shy–anxious children is not necessarily below average or clinically impaired, but it is low with respect to normative and control group comparisons (Spere et al., 2004; Evans, 1993).

Reviews of the research on the relationship between shyness–anxiousness and language skills suggest that expressive and receptive language deficits may stem from different processes (Evans, 1993; Kagan, 1994; Spere et al., 2004). Expressive language deficits are apparently direct reflections of the underlying shyness–anxiousness

construct. Support for this notion derives from evidence that poor performance on tasks measuring verbal expression skills are most pronounced for shy–anxious individuals when the situation or speaking partner are unfamiliar. The apparent expressive skills deficits vanish or are greatly diminished when familiarity with the situation and the speaking partner is increased (Asendorpf & Meier, 1993; Evans, 1993; cf., Spere et al., 2008) or when children are tested in anonymous group settings as compared to face to face settings (Crozier & Hostettler, 2003). This pattern of results is consistent with the notion that the shortcomings of shy–anxious individuals with respect to expressive language skills are not truly deficits in verbal ability, *per se*; rather they reflect the difficulties shy–anxious individuals experience in novel social circumstances.

Deficits in receptive language, on the other hand, appear not to be a direct reflection of the shyness–anxiousness construct but rather are true reflections of verbal ability deficits. This conclusion derives from the fact that observed differences in receptive language skills, which reveal poorer performance by shy–anxious children, cannot be explained in terms of the demand characteristics of the testing situation. That is, unlike tests of expressive language, several of the tests employed to measure receptive language skills require no verbal response or only single word answers. This has led to the conclusion that “the observed differences in verbal fluency and social competence may not be artifactual but at least partly real, and a true reflection of less well developed verbal knowledge and communication skill” (Evans, 1993, p. 203). Another source of evidence that receptive language deficits are not a primary component of the shy–anxious construct derives from explorations of how these variables

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relate to one another over time. Asendorpf (1994) found that verbal IQ was unrelated to ratings of in-class and stranger inhibition for children ages 4, 5, and 6 years, but that a significant relationship was evident for these variables for these same children at ages 7 and 10 year. Moreover, Spere and Evans (2009) found that shyness in Junior Kindergarten predicted receptive language skills in Senior Kindergarten. These data suggest that shy-anxious behavior may influence receptive language skills.

In addition to speculating about how shyness-anxiousness may impact subsequent verbal development, theorists also postulate that early verbal abilities may impact the emergence of shyness-anxiousness (Asendorpf, 2010; Evans, 1993, 2010; Gallagher, 1993). That is, the causal arrow between social and linguistic development is bidirectional. This has been suggested by studies illustrating that vocabulary, pragmatic language skills, and verbal intelligence may moderate against the development of shyness-anxiousness (Asendorpf, 1994; Coplan & Armer, 2005; Coplan & Weeks, 2009; Crozier & Badawood, 2009). These findings are supportive of a bidirectional model of the development of shyness-anxiousness and language skill development.

Questions have also been raised about possible mediators and moderators of the relationship between the development of shyness-anxiousness and receptive language skills. Some researchers suggest that a third variable is responsible for observed bivariate relationships. Specifically, both temperament researchers and language development researchers argue that the effect of one variable on the other (regardless of direction) is ultimately determined by the relationship between that variable and an individual's *communication competence* (Bishop, 1997; Coplan & Weeks, 2009; Evans, 1993, 2010; Leary & Buckley, 2000). According to this view, "poorer communicative competence handicaps the child in readily and effectively conversing with others" (Evans, 1993, p. 205). Therefore, it is the impact of shyness-anxiousness on one's social communications that is responsible for receptive language skill deficits. This is in contrast to the idea that emotional processes such as sadness, worry, or depressed affect-independent of their impact on social behavior or social outcomes—are the source of impaired receptive language skill development.

Several testable hypotheses derive from these empirically-based speculations. First, the strength of the correlation between shyness-anxiousness and receptive language skills is not necessarily constant over the life course; rather it emerges or grows in strength as a function of communicative experiences. As such, well timed longitudinal analyses should show that a measure of shyness-anxiousness predicts *change* in receptive language skills or shyness, even if at earlier ages these variables are unrelated to one another. Second, not only should these variables show time-dependent relationships, but also those relationships should be mediated by communication competence. This begs the question of the nature of the predicted mediation effect. Complete mediation, as opposed to partial mediation, would suggest that both the social and the emotional elements of the broad construct, shyness-anxiousness, have their effects on receptive language skill development via social behavior and social outcomes. Partial mediation, on the other hand, would suggest that receptive language skills development is perhaps affected by elements of shyness-anxiousness that are independent of their social communication implications.

In addition to speculations about developmental onset and mediation, pertinent literature suggests that the path models described above may be moderated by participant characteristics (Asendorpf, 1994; Burgess, Rubin, Chea, & Nelson, 2001; Coplan & Weeks, 2009; Spere & Evans, 2009). In the present study, we explore how path models may differ for children identified by their teachers as native Spanish or native English speakers. The link between shyness-anxiousness and receptive language skills may differ for these children (Chen, 2010; Cho, 2000). Recent research, for instance,

suggests that Spanish-speaking Latino children have higher rates of internalizing disorders, including shyness-anxiousness, than do English-speaking Latinos and non-minority children (Polo & López, 2009). It is unclear, however, how these differences relate to the dynamic between shyness-anxiousness and receptive language skills. Is shyness-anxiousness a similar predictor of receptive language skills for preschoolers from different language backgrounds? Does communication competence mediate the relationship in similar ways for the two language groups? It could be that these two language groups differ with respect to the role played by communication competence as a mediator of the relationship between shyness-anxiousness and the emergence of receptive language skills.

Another issue that has implications for evaluating the relationship between shyness-anxiousness and receptive language concerns the measurement of receptive language skills for non-native language learners. For native Spanish-speakers learning English, for example, one could assess both English- and Spanish-language receptive language skills. This would allow for exploring the differential effect of shyness-anxiousness on the development of both the native- and the non-native languages. Although such an arrangement would be ideal, the present study explored English-language receptive language skills only. Therefore, the present study allowed for examining the time-dependent, unidirectional and bidirectional relationships between shyness-anxiousness and English-language receptive language skills for native (English) and non-native (Spanish) speakers.

Identifying the directionality of the relationship between shyness-anxiousness and receptive language skills requires a longitudinal research design in which repeated assessments of those constructs are obtained. Exploring communication competence as a mediator of these time-dependent relationships requires an assessment of this variable at a point in time that is intermediate to the repeated assessments of shyness-anxiousness and receptive language skills. Finally, exploring differential-developmental change (i.e., moderation) with respect to native language requires a sample that includes native and non-native speakers. The present study employs such a design with a sample of educationally at-risk preschoolers from primarily English- and Spanish-speaking homes. It utilizes correlational and structural equation modeling methods to explore if: (a) the relationship between shyness-anxiousness and receptive language skills is best characterized as unidirectional or bidirectional; (b) that relationship is mediated by communication competence; and (c) the direct and mediated relationships differ with respect to child native language.

It is advantageous to investigate these relationships with a sample of preschool children because both shyness-anxiousness and communication competence are relatively stable and readily observable during this developmental epoch, and because it is a time of rapid growth in receptive language skills (Bishop & Baird, 2001; Kagan, Sidman, & Arcus, 1998; Pfeifer, Goldsmith, Davidson, & Rickman, 2002; Strand, Cerna, & Downs, 2008; Williams & Wang, 1997).

Method

Participants

The participants for this study included 340 children (195 boys and 145 girls) who were educationally at-risk due primarily to poverty, and attending Head Start in a medium-sized community in the Pacific Northwest. Thirty-seven percent of the children were European American, 56% Latino/a, and 7% Other (with the highest percentage being Southeast Asian). The dominant language of the children was either English (54%) or Spanish (46%). The average age of the children was 51.65 months ($SD = 6.63$, range = 37–62) upon initial assessment and 58.24 months ($SD = 6.60$; range = 43–68) at the final assessment.

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