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Shyness as a risk factor for second language acquisition of immigrant preschoolers

Karin Keller*, Larissa M. Troesch, Alexander Grob

Missionsstrasse 60, Department of Psychology, University of Basel, 4055 Basel, Switzerland



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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to examine whether shyness is a risk factor for second language acquisition in immigrant preschoolers. Results from studies on first language acquisition indicate that shy children show less favorable language development; however, it remains unclear how shyness affects second language acquisition. As second language skills are often acquired in interactions outside the family where shyness is more evident, we postulate that shyness has a strong negative effect on second language acquisition. This hypothesis was examined using standardized tests and parental ratings in a sample of 330 immigrant preschoolers cross-sectionally and with 130 immigrant preschoolers longitudinally. The analyses revealed lower second language competence as well as slower language development in shy immigrant children compared to their non-shy counterparts. The present study highlights that not only contextual but also personality factors need to be considered for a comprehensive understanding of second language acquisition in immigrant children.

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Although shyness is quite common and a manifestation of normal variations in temperament and personality, inhibited children can face unique challenges, such as increased risk of developing internalizing difficulties (Asendorpf, Denissen, & van Aken, 2008; Karevold, Røysamb, Ystrom, & Mathiesen, 2009; Letcher, Smart, Sanson, & Toumbourou, 2009; Leve, Kim, & Pears, 2005; Prior, Smart, Sanson, & Oberklaid, 2000) and problems with peers (Coplan & Weeks, 2009; Gazelle & Ladd, 2003; Gazelle & Spangler, 2007), as compared with their more outgoing peers. One particularly important risk associated with shyness is language acquisition delay, as it impacts other areas of life and may increase behavioral inhibition over time. Research indicates that shy children perform worse than their non-shy peers on a variety of language tests in their native tongue; however, shyness may be an even more important factor in second language acquisition than in first language acquisition, as second language learners must rely on native speaking peers and adults much more than on familiar parents (Hoff, 2006; Place & Hoff, 2011; Scheele, Leseman, & Mayo, 2010) with whom they are less inhibited.

Thus, the present study examines the influence of shyness on the second language competence of immigrant children, whose language development and academic success are already at increased risk as a result of social and familial disadvantages (Magnuson, Lahaie, & Waldfogel, 2006; OECD, 2006).

Shyness and first language

Shyness is a form of social withdrawal. *Social withdrawal* represents an umbrella term for a behavior characterized by fewer social interactions and more frequent individual activities. The motives for the described behavior vary. The term *social disinterest* is used if social withdrawal is motivated by a preference for being alone. In contrast, if social withdrawal is associated with a desire for more social interactions, the behavior is termed *shyness* (Rubin & Coplan, 2004). Shy children yearn for social contact but experience anxiety in social and social-evaluative situations (Rubin, Coplan, & Bowker, 2009). Although they may feel the need for social interaction, their motivation toward social approach is inhibited by their social anxiety among peers and adults, their social desires constantly being caught up in an approach–avoidance conflict (Asendorpf, 1990).

Linguistically restrained behavior and limited participation in conversations are central features of shyness (Coplan & Rubin, 2010). Indeed, previous studies investigating interactional situations revealed that shy children show reduced frequency and duration of talking. Shy children make more speech pauses, produce sentences of lower complexity, and ask fewer questions compared with their non-shy peers (Asendorpf & Meier, 1993; Crozier & Perkins, 2002; Evans, 1987; Reynolds & Evans, 2009; Spere, Evans, Hendry, & Mansell, 2008).

Beyond differences in communicative behavior, differences have also been found on the level of linguistic competence using standardized tests, although findings have been somewhat mixed. Particularly evident were findings related to expressive language skills (Evans,

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: karin.keller@unibas.ch (K. Keller), larissa.troesch@unibas.ch (L.M. Troesch), alexander.grob@unibas.ch (A. Grob).

2010). At toddler and preschool ages, differences have been shown in vocabulary (Prior et al., 2008; Spere & Evans, 2009), pragmatic language (Coplan & Weeks, 2009; Crozier & Perkins, 2002; Evans, 1996), syntax and morphology (Evans, 1996; Landon & Sommers, 1979), and phonemic awareness (Spere, Schmidt, Theall-Honey, & Martin-Chang, 2004). Even at the early ages of four and nine months, inhibited children have been found to vocalize less than non-inhibited children (Rezendes, Snidman, Kagan, & Gibbons, 1993), suggesting that the origins of the association between shyness and language abilities may emerge quite early. Other studies have found no association between shyness and language skills (Coplan & Armer, 2005; Noel, Peterson, & Jesso, 2008) or associations that were restricted to specific age groups (Prior et al., 2008).

With regard to the association between shyness and receptive language skills (i.e., comprehension), the findings have been even less consistent. Similar to expressive language, some studies have reported a significant association between shyness and receptive language skills (Crozier & Badawood, 2009; Crozier & Perkins, 2002; Spere & Evans, 2009), or differences between shy and non-shy children (Spere et al., 2004). In general, these studies have revealed that the effects often are of small size. Other studies have been unable to replicate significant findings (Blankson, O'Brien, Leerkes, Marcovitch, & Calkins, 2011; Coplan, Gavinski-Molina, Lagacé-Séguin, & Wichmann, 2001; Evans, 1996; Kemple, David, & Wang, 1996; Noel et al., 2008). In sum, research points to some association between shyness and expressive and receptive first language skills; however, this association is inconsistent across studies and may be stronger for expressive than receptive skills.

Explanatory approaches for the shyness–language link

Potential associations between shyness and language may be interpreted in multiple ways. One potential factor that has been discussed is the effect of the measurement method. Crozier and Hostettler (2003), for example, postulated that shy children show lower performance due to their stronger stress reactions in test situations. This assumption was supported by studies investigating shyness in test settings varying in their level of familiarity. These studies showed that greater familiarity produces a more robust performance in shy children; that is, the association between shyness and language is stronger when children are assessed by an unknown person than during an observation session at home, recorded on video (Asendorpf & Meier, 1993; Evans, 1993), or in anonymous group settings (Crozier & Hostettler, 2003). In short, this interpretation assumes no language acquisition differences for shy children but, rather, situational impairment.

Another interpretation focuses on real differences in language and explains the association between shyness and language by a lack of social interactions. It is assumed that the lower language competence of shy children results from a failure to make use of communicative opportunities due to their emotional arousal in social situations. Differences in the social approach of others may then start a bidirectional feedback loop that in turn affects the communicative context of shy and non-shy children. For example, educators respond differently to shy than to non-shy children, offering less communication to and asking fewer questions of shy children as compared to non-shy children (Evans, 1987, 1992; Rudasill & Rimm-Kaufman, 2009). Thus, delayed language development may also reinforce withdrawal behavior in the child as teachers and peers withdraw from the shy child (Evans, 1996). Being unable to verbalize and communicate thoughts at a high level might make shy children feel more anxious in social situations and as a consequence seek to avoid them. On the other hand, children who successfully overcome the challenge of social situations by communicating might develop the confidence to engage in these situations more often (Coplan & Weeks, 2009). In spite of this interesting research and speculation about the direction of effects, it is still uncertain whether language delay is a cause, a consequence, or a correlate of shyness (Spere et al., 2004).

Language development of shy and non-shy children

To date, only a few studies have addressed the question of directionality of the association between shyness and language skills. Strand, Pula, Parks, and Cerna (2011) examined shyness and receptive language in a sample of 5-year-old children using a cross-lagged design. Contrary to expectation, there was no concurrent association between receptive vocabulary and shyness in either wave; however, shyness measured at the first wave predicted receptive vocabulary six months later. The opposite effect of receptive language skills predicting shyness was not evident.

A different picture emerges from an Australian longitudinal study by Prior et al. (2008). In a sample of 1760 children, the authors found a significant, but small cross-sectional correlation at age 24 months ($R^2_{\text{partial}} = 0.32$); however, shyness assessed when the children were 12 months predicted neither communicative competence nor expressive vocabulary when they were 24 months. In a similar vein, Evans (1996), Dixon and Smith (2000) and Von Grünigen, Kochenderfer-Ladd, Perren, and Alsaker (2012) found no longitudinal effects of shyness on language abilities. Up to now, the research examining longitudinal effects of shyness and language has been sparse and produced mixed results. Moreover, it is not clear whether these findings can be generalized to different components of language, to immigrant children, and to different age groups.

Shyness and second language

Shyness as a risk factor for second language acquisition has rarely been investigated, although the effects may be even stronger for second than for first language acquisition. Second language acquisition in immigrant children is often not accomplished within the secure well-known family context, but rather requires extrafamilial contact and interaction with native educators and peers (Hoff, 2006; Place & Hoff, 2011) that produces more anxiety than contact within the family.

To the authors' knowledge, only two studies have examined the effect of shyness on early second language acquisition. Tong, Ting, and McBride-Chang (2011) found that in a sample of kindergarten children living in Hong Kong, shyness was associated with receptive, but not with expressive language skills in English. The explained variance of 10% in receptive language skills can be interpreted as of medium size. In a similar vein, Strand et al. (2011) examined receptive vocabulary in a sample of preschoolers of Spanish-speaking heritage at two waves. No concurrent associations between shyness and receptive vocabulary in English were found either at Wave 1 or at Wave 2; however, shyness at age 52 months predicted receptive vocabulary six months later.

Despite the paucity of evidence to date of a relationship between shyness and second language acquisition, it is likely that similar mechanisms underlie first and second language acquisition. The question remains as to whether and in what way knowledge about the effect of shyness on first language acquisition can be applied to second language acquisition in general and to second language skills of immigrant children in particular. Furthermore, it remains unclear as to how shyness affects specific linguistic components. Finally, previous studies have concentrated on English as a second or foreign language, whereas knowledge about the effect of shyness on other second languages and other immigrant backgrounds is non-existent.

The present study

In the present study, three hypotheses were tested. First, we investigated whether shy and non-shy immigrant preschoolers differ in their second language skills. Drawing upon previous research on first language acquisition (Evans, 2010), we hypothesized that shy children perform worse than non-shy children on tests of receptive and

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