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Quality of language intervention provided to primary-grade students with language impairment

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ABSTRACT

This study had two aims: (a) to describe the quality of language intervention provided by school-based speech-language pathologists (SLPs) to children with language impairment in the primary grades with respect to the quality of emotional support, instructional support, and proactive management during SLP–child interactions, and (b) to determine if key characteristics of the SLPs are predictors of variance in intervention quality. Participants were 174 children nested within 40 SLPs' caseloads from various districts in two Midwestern states involved in a larger study of speech-language therapy practices in the public schools. A total of 208 videotaped language intervention sessions were coded for emotional support, instructional support, and proactive management using the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS; Pianta, La Paro, & Hamre, 2008). The quality of language intervention varied widely and was generally mid-range to high with respect to emotional support and proactive management, and low to mid-range in terms of instructional support. The quality of interactions varied and a large percentage of the observed variance in quality was attributed to SLPs. Time pressure was a strong predictor of the quality of emotional support, instructional support, and proactive management, and job satisfaction was a significant predictor of instructional support and proactive management. This descriptive information about school-based language intervention highlights the impact of the individual SLP in terms of the quality of the interactions taking place and the potential need to ease job pressures and promote job satisfaction.

Learning outcomes: Readers will be able to: (1) identify and define three aspects of SLP–child interaction quality during intervention as framed in this study using the CLASS observation tool (Pianta, La Paro, et al., 2008); (2) discuss the relevance of those three aspects of quality to children with LI; and (3) identify SLP-level factors that significantly predict SLP–student interaction quality during intervention for children with LI.

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1. Introduction

In the United States, there are presently more than 130,000 certified speech-language pathologists (SLPs), of which an estimated 28,000 provide services within elementary schools (ASHA, 2010; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). A prevalent

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component of the school-based SLPs' caseload is providing direct treatment to students with language impairment (LI; ASHA, 2010). The importance of this clinical service is well documented, as students with LI are prone not only to having problems with language skills, but also are susceptible to difficulties in literacy (Cabell et al., 2010; Catts, Fey, Tomblin, & Zhang, 2002), academic performance (Conti-Ramsden, Simkin, Knox, & Durkin, 2009), and socio-emotional functioning (Botting & Conti-Ramsden, 2000; Sundheim & Voeller, 2004). Nonetheless, there is little research to date that empirically characterizes the quality of language intervention as provided by SLPs to students in educational settings. While there is a substantial body of literature (e.g., Fey, Cleave, Long, Hughes, 1993; Fey, Finestack, Gajewski, Popescu, & Lewine, 2010; Girolametto, Weitzman, & Greenberg, 2012; Haley, Camarata, & Nelson, 1994; Leonard, Camarata, Brown, & Camarata, 2004; Petersen, Gillam, Spencer, & Gillam, 2010; Wolter & Green, 2013) describing empirically validated intervention approaches that SLPs may choose to use, particularly as tied to the framework of evidence-based practice, few studies have sought to describe the quality of SLP–child interactions during business-as-usual (BAU) intervention as it is currently received in schools by students with LI.

Indeed, the field of speech-language pathology does not currently have a common framework that establishes what factors affect quality of language intervention. Considering that school-based SLPs play a central role in improving the linguistic and academic outcomes for children with LI, it is possible that specific SLP-level factors contribute to the quality of language intervention. It is the aim of the present study to examine SLP-level factors as possible predictors of quality of language intervention with a goal of advancing the field toward establishing a framework for thinking about intervention quality. This is an important omission in the literature, particularly relative to the considerably large research literature regarding BAU practices employed by other school-based professionals, including teachers along the continua of schooling (i.e., preschool to secondary school; see Guo, Piasta, Justice, & Kaderavek, 2010; Justice, Mashburn, Hamre, & Pianta, 2008; Pianta, Belsky, Houts, & Morrison, 2007; Stuhlman & Pianta, 2009). Such research has been very important for identifying specific features during the normal course of classroom instruction that contribute directly and/or indirectly to children's language growth over time (e.g., Bowers & Vasilyeva, 2011; Christ & Wang, 2012; Mashburn et al., 2008).

In recent years, a robust literature on features of classroom instruction that influence children's learning has increasingly emphasized high-quality teaching as predominantly a function of the nature of teacher–child interactions that take place within the classroom (Mashburn et al., 2008; La Paro et al., 2009; Pianta et al., 2005; NICHD ECCRN, 2002a, 2002b, 2004). Specifically, interactions between teachers and children are considered the *mechanism* through which instructional experiences affect children (Paro, Pianta, & Stuhlman, 2004). Observational tools that capture the quality of teacher–child interactions are able to document significant predictive relations between teaching quality and children's gains in language, reading, and other areas of achievement during the preschool and primary grades (Girolametto et al., 2012; La Paro et al., 2009; Mashburn et al., 2008; Pianta et al., 2005). Drawing from such literature, the purpose of the present study was to examine the quality of language intervention provided to primary-grade students with LI, focusing on BAU treatment delivered by 40 SLPs providing services to 174 children in the public schools. Intervention quality was informed by classroom-quality research that characterizes high-quality instruction as a function of the quality of teacher–child interactions (e.g., Mashburn et al., 2008; Pianta et al., 2007). A key premise of the present work is that exposure to and participation in high-quality language intervention is important to students' outcomes relevant to therapy, although this premise has not directly been studied in the language intervention literature (but see Bowers & Vasilyeva, 2011, for an exemplar from the educational literature). In addition, we examine the extent to which SLP-level factors may help to explain variance in intervention quality. Specific aims were twofold: (a) to characterize the quality of SLP–child interactions during school-based language intervention provided to children with LI with respect to emotional support, instructional support, and proactive management, and (b) to determine the extent to which characteristics of the SLP predict variance in the quality of intervention.

1.1. Describing and measuring intervention quality

Language intervention is a multidimensional construct and is often discussed in terms of such variables as treatment targets, dosage/intensity, and techniques used (Swanson, Fey, & Mills, 2005; Wolfe & Heilmann, 2010; Yoder, Fey, & Warren, 2012). For instance, treatment principles for implementation of grammar facilitation with children with LI include careful selection of treatment targets, manipulation of the treatment context to provide children with exposure to those targets, and specific techniques that may be used to evoke children's expression of specific grammatical forms (Fey, Long, & Finestack, 2003). High-quality intervention employing grammar facilitation likely would include adherence to these principles, such that intervention quality would be largely conceptualized as fidelity of implementation (see Guo et al., 2010).

A separate, albeit complementary, way to conceive of language intervention quality concerns going beyond specific treatment techniques and examining the nature of the interactions that take place within the therapy session, as these SLP–child interactions are likely a key mechanism through which therapy experiences affect the child's language skills. As derived from studies of the quality of classroom teaching (see Mashburn et al., 2008), referenced previously, SLP–child interactions as a potential index of quality may be conceived to reflect three inter-related domains – emotional support, instructional support, and proactive management – which collectively capture the quality of the interactions between SLPs and students (each of these three domains is explained in greater detail shortly). Importantly, there is evidence to suggest that each of these interaction domains, as captured for teachers within the classroom context, has either direct or indirect effects on children's language skills and academic growth (Downer, Sabol, & Hamre, 2010). That is, numerous studies indicate that

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