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Fostering elementary school children's public speaking skills: A randomized controlled trial

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ABSTRACT

Mastering public speaking is a competence which is already required in elementary school. Surprisingly, however, systematic research on the promotion of public speaking competence among elementary school children is scarce. In order to address this gap, we developed and evaluated a public speaking training for elementary school children. The training, an extracurricular enrichment program, consisted of 12 units covering speech anxiety, nonverbal communication, and comprehensibility. A randomized controlled trial with repeated measures (N = 65 elementary school children) was used to investigate the training effects on public speaking skills and speech anxiety. The dependent variables were assessed via self-ratings (extent of public speaking skills, speech anxiety) and video ratings of a public speech (appropriateness of public speaking skills). Findings revealed positive training effects on public speaking skills overall: Participating in the training elicited more appropriate speeches in terms of nonverbal and organizational skills but did not influence speech anxiety.

1. Introduction

The capability to communicate competently is essential for personal contentment, academic achievement, and professional career success (Morreale & Pearson, 2008). In the context of school and work, competent speakers are more successful in conveying their knowledge, ideas, and opinions. Further, being able to communicate competently can enhance relationships with peers, parents, and teachers (e.g., Hunt, Wright, & Simonds, 2014; Morreale & Pearson, 2008).

One important communicational task is giving an informative public speech, i.e., presenting content to an audience (Schreiber, 2011). Mastering public speeches is acknowledged as a core competence for well-educated students (van Ginkel, Gulikers, Biemans, & Mulder, 2015), and it has been integrated into the educational standards of several countries such as Germany (Kultusministerkonferenz, 2005) or the United States (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010). Correspondingly, researchers have called for an early promotion of public speaking skills. Even elementary school children need to give informative public speeches, but the promotion of public speaking skills of this age group has been neglected in research and practice (Hunt et al., 2014). Specifically, the development of a competence model for public speaking in elementary schools is in the beginning stages (Morreale, Cooper, & Perry, 2000; The Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education [EDK], 2010), and only very few teaching materials or interventions to foster public speaking skills in this age group are available. Further, the effectiveness of the existing interventions has been investigated only sporadically, and the conducted investigations often chose study designs which might make it challenging to draw causal inferences on their effectiveness.

In the light of the importance of informative public speaking skills even among elementary school children and the lack of available, evaluated interventions, we developed and evaluated a pertinent enrichment program. Specifically, we developed a program that aimed at fostering elementary school children's informative public speaking skills and we evaluated the program via both self-reports and video ratings using a randomized controlled trial with repeated measurements.

1.1. Defining public speaking competence

Scholars in fields such as communication studies, psychology, rhetoric, and speech science have researched public speaking competence (Backlund & Morreale, 2015). Across different approaches, a speaker is perceived as competent if her or his public speech is effective and appropriate. A speech is considered to be effective when the communicational intention, for example, informing an audience, is

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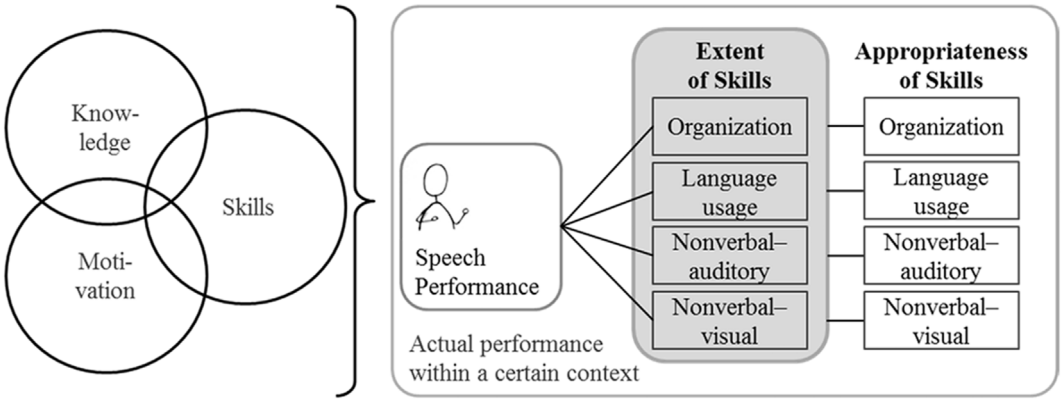

Fig. 1. The three dimensions knowledge, motivation, and skills form the basis for the public speaking competence. Each speech is realized within a certain context. The context is defined by the specific situation, the target audience, the communicational intention, and the topic, and implies certain norms and standards. The speech performance is composed of micro-level skills which can be subdivided into four dimensions: nonverbal behavior–visual, nonverbal behavior–auditory, language usage, and organization. The finally perceived competence of a speaker derives of the shown extent of skills and whether or not a speaker appropriately addresses the context. The figure is based on, e.g., De Grez and Valcke (2010), EDK (2010), Morreale et al. (2013), and Schreiber et al. (2012).

reached. A speech is considered to be appropriate when the speaking behavior is adequate to the specific context (Morreale, Moore, Surges-Tatum, & Webster, 2007). Thus, the appraisal of public speaking competence depends on the speaker's actual demonstrated performance within a specific speaking context.

Although there are several definitions of public speaking competence (Backlund & Morreale, 2015), the construct is often considered to encompass three underlying dimensions: knowledge, motivation, and skills (Morreale et al., 2007). It is suggested that whether or not a person is able to give a public speech competently does not depend on a single dimension, but rather on their combination (Backlund & Morreale, 2015; De Grez & Valcke, 2010). In order to summarize and integrate theoretical and practical approaches from different fields (e.g., De Grez & Valcke, 2010; EDK, 2010; Morreale, Spitzberg, & Barge, 2013; Schreiber, Paul, & Shibley, 2012), a conceptual framework of the underlying mechanisms that influence public speaking competence was derived (Fig. 1). The individual dimensions and their interplay are described in the following text.

Knowledge represents the theoretical background deployed in planning and delivering a speech. It includes knowledge about public speaking skills and their specific utilization (Morreale et al., 2013), e.g., knowing how to structure a speech, using nonverbal communication, and taking the characteristics of a specific audience into account. However, knowledge on how to plan and deliver a speech does not inevitably result in competent behavior (Backlund & Morreale, 2015). This is why public speaking competence is seldom assessed by tests of content (Morreale & Backlund, 2007). *Motivation* represents the willingness to communicate, i.e., the readiness to speak in a specific situation. Several variables underlie and influence motivation, in particular self-perceived communication competence, communication apprehension, and speech anxiety. Whereas self-perceived communication competence is positively correlated with the willingness to communicate, communication apprehension and speech anxiety can result in avoiding certain communicational situations or can generally limit a speaker's ability to show competent public speaking (Croucher, 2013).

Finally, a repertoire of public speaking *skills* is necessary. Descriptions of public speaking skills encompass both macro- and micro-behaviors (Morreale et al., 2007). These behaviors are hierarchically organized. On the micro-level, the particular public speaking skills can be categorized into four dimensions, namely (i) nonverbal behavior–visual impression (including eye contact, gestures, mimics, posture, proxemics i.e., spatial behavior, usage of notes), (ii) nonverbal behavior–auditory impression (including accentuation, articulation, breaks, intonation, volume, pitch, speech fluency, speech rate, speech respiration i.e., respiration used when speaking, voice), (iii) language usage (including activation of the listener, linguistic expression, personal address, usage of rhetorical devices), and (iv) organization (including amount of information, intention of communication, length of speech, length of introduction, length of conclusion, reference to listener, structure of the speech, visualization; based e.g., on De Grez & Valcke, 2010; EDK, 2010; Pabst-Weinschenk, 2005; Schreiber et al., 2012). Macro-level skills are formed by combinations of micro-behaviors such as eye contact, gestures, and speech rate (Morreale et al., 2013). Examples of macro-level skills are the perceived empathy or credibility of a speaker.

In summary, the perceived public speaking competence of a speaker depends on the effectiveness and appropriateness of her/his speech, which arises from actual demonstrated public speaking behavior within a certain context. The context is defined by the specific situation, the target audience, the communicational intention, the topic, norms, and standards. The manifestation of the behavior and whether or not effectiveness and appropriateness are reached depends on the knowledge, motivation, and skills of the speaker (Backlund & Morreale, 2015; van Ginkel et al., 2015). To exhibit competent behavior, a speaker needs a broad repertoire of public speaking skills to choose from. Furthermore, a speaker needs to be willing and able to actually apply and adapt these skills in a way that is guided by the speaker's knowledge and motivation (Backlund & Morreale, 2015). Regarding the development of public speaking competence, a distinction is made between basic and advanced levels. Having gained a certain skills repertoire and being able to apply these skills in a specific way when giving a public speech reflects the basic level of public speaking competence (Rubin & Morreale, 1996). This is mirrored by the extent of skills demonstrated when speaking. Being further able to choose and adapt one's skills in order to tailor one's public speaking performance to the specific speaking context reflects the more advanced level (Staton & Tomlinson, 2001). Thus, the promotion of a skills repertoire and the application of certain skills needs to be followed by the promotion of adequate skills usage to reach an advanced level of competence.

1.2. Public speaking in elementary school

The most frequent public speaking tasks in elementary school are narrating and informing (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010; Pabst-Weinschenk, 2005). The task of giving a narration is already quite familiar to elementary school children (Schick & Melzi, 2010), and corresponding interventions have been established (Pesco & Gagné, 2015). By contrast, the task of giving informative speeches is rather new for elementary school children (EDK, 2010). For this age

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