

The language of young children on entry to school as measured by baseline assessments. Why ignore the evidence from research?

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From 2016, the Department for Education will require all children in reception class in England to be tested on a baseline assessment, conducted in English, and within six weeks of starting school. The assessment must use one of the three commercial baseline assessments identified by DfE that remain as from June 2015, Early Excellence, CEM and NFER; these are currently being tried out in schools. CEM is a 15-20 minute programme; NFER focuses on maths, literacy and communication and language; Early Excellence is based on observation, rather than tests. A single score based on the baseline assessment chosen will be used to calculate how much progress the child has made by the end of primary school when compared with others with the same starting point, and to hold schools accountable. Many professionals have recorded their opposition to this policy.

I am currently undertaking research in the West Midlands on baseline assessment. We will interview head teachers and reception class teachers, analyze the results of this year's scores on baseline assessment measures and test selected children individually on the Preschool Language Assessment Instrument devised by Marion Blank. PLA12 yields not only a score for the young children's understanding of questions of different levels of complexity, but also diagnostic information from their incorrect responses.

This article, the first of a series on baseline assessment, provides a brief outline of selected research findings, which although they took place in the 1970s and 1980s should provide insights for contemporary policy on the assessment of young children's language, in particular the effect of the context and the adult on young children's score. Yet such findings are being ignored. In *Understanding Research in Early Education* (Clark, 2005) there are more details and a critique of these researches and others. Here relevant findings from four researches, those by Tough, Wells, Tizard and Hughes and the present writer are summarized. Other aspects in assessment of young children by tests that should provoke disquiet are identified. In each study, not only the sample, but any groups excluded needs to be considered; this is indicated here. For example, none of the three studies by Tough, Wells or Tizard and Hughes had any children whose home language was other than English.

The Development of Meaning: Joan Tough

Tough's study is one of those referred to in *A Language for Life* (DES, 1975: 53-54). To quote: "there is a range of uses which children from 'educating' homes seem to have developed more extensively than children without these home advantages"; it is stressed that such abilities are important for learning in the school situation.

Tough's study was a longitudinal investigation of 64 children, samples of whose language in 'contrived' situations were tape recorded and analyzed at the ages of 3, 5+ and 7+ years. There were two groups, referred to as the 'advantaged' and 'disadvantaged' groups, within each of which was a group who attended nursery school or class and a group not attending. Excluded from the sample were: children whose IQ was below 105; from a family of more than six children; who showed evidence of known or suspected rejection or emotional stress; whose mother did not speak English as her first language; who were West Indian, because of problems with use of non-standard English; were shy, withdrawn or hostile to the observer; in the nursery if they were not happily settled in school; did not speak clearly enough for transcriptions to be made of what they said. Consider both the relevance of these findings, and the extent to which these omissions limit their generalizability.

At 5 years and 7 years of age there were striking differences in the groups in the complexity with which they expressed interpretations of a picture. The disadvantaged children tended to give short responses which treated the picture as a series of objects, and thus it is argued that, "the children were orientated to examine the situations differently" and so used "different strategies of language". (Tough 1977: 103). Even in such a highly selected group of 'disadvantaged' children, response to such commonly used materials as pictures, unless supported and encouraged, may lead only to labelling of unrelated objects. Tough makes crucial points for understanding the language knowledge and use of young children (based on the evidence from the children at 7+ years of age). It should be noted that when retelling a story the disadvantaged children had a mean length of utterance almost twice as high as in other situations. They showed they were able to remember sequences and reproduce the story line with much of the detail. Note: the story was repeated to a companion in a meaningful context.

Tough stresses that all the children produced long, complex utterances at times. When retested at 7 years of age the disadvantaged group were inclined, for some types of items, to respond with 'I don't know', or otherwise avoid answering the question. Thus tests may be an underestimate of their knowledge and understanding. However, frequently when pressed further the disadvantaged children 'moved towards the answer given spontaneously by the children in the advantaged groups' (Tough 1977: 170). Clearly in many situations in school, children are likely to be judged by the more limited responses and this may in turn lead to lowered expectations.

In her research there were children who were attending a preschool setting and even at three years of age there were already some statistically significant differences between the nursery and non-nursery disadvantaged groups. This could have important implications for baseline assessment in reception class where children who have had experience of preschool education, particularly in that school, might reveal to the teacher, even without probing, greater apparent competence in language situations in the classroom. The situation, and whether there were probes, influenced the children's language differentially. However, there was considerable overlap between the groups. The experimental work of Donaldson was only beginning to appear when Tough's researches were published. Donaldson was able to show that, even in experiments such as those on which Piagetian evidence was based, the precise context will influence the child's apparent competence (see *Children's Minds*, Donaldson 1978). Tough's research reveals the danger of making generalizations about habitual use of language from speech samples in one limited situation.

Studies of Language at Home and at School: Gordon Wells

Wells in his critique of Joan Tough's research, commented that what seems important for sustaining dialogue is, 'the presence or absence of genuine reciprocity and collaboration'. The studies by Wells, and related studies by co-workers, were extensively funded between 1972 and 1984 (See Clark 2005 chapter 3). Wells' study began as an investigation of language development and it was also hoped to describe the children's conversational experience and to investigate the relationship between preschool experience and success in school. The sample excluded: children of multiple births; with known handicaps; whose parents were not native speakers of English; who were in institutions or full-time day care; likely to move soon; who had siblings already in the study.

The sample was 128 children from a larger randomly drawn sample in Bristol of children representative in sex, month of birth and family background. A sample of 32 children from the younger group was followed into school and over their first 2 years in primary school. A further assessment was made when the children were aged 10 years 3 months.

Wells found that although the 'route' of the children's language development was similar the quality and quantity of the conversational experience was the best predictor of the child's oral language at entry to primary school. He states that one of the most important features found in the homes of children whose success could have been predicted early was 'the sharing of stories'. This he suggests, in relation to literacy development, is more important than any early introduction to features of print. He claims that "stories have a role in education that goes far beyond their contribution to the acquisition of literacy" (Wells 1986: 194). Tough had also found that retelling stories in a meaningful context was a rich source of language interaction in young children.

Language at Home and at Preschool: Barbara Tizard and Martin Hughes

This study was funded by SSRC in the later years of the 1970s. The evidence cited here is from articles in academic journals. *Young Children Learning* (Tizard and Hughes 1984, second edition 2002), does not give sufficient detail to allow a critical evaluation of the research (See Clark, 2005, chapter 3).

The research by Tizard and Hughes is based on recordings with a radio microphone of naturally occurring dialogue of girls with staff at preschool in the morning and at home with their mothers in the afternoon. The study was of 30 girls of about 4 years of age. Half the girls were working-class and half were middle-class. The other selection criteria were that the children should attend nursery school or class in the morning, and spend the afternoon at home with their mothers. The research involved recording, in the presence of an observer at home in the afternoons as well as recording in the nursery school. Children's talk with other children at school was recorded but not analyzed.

Excluded from the sample were: boys; children not attending part-time preschool education; children not at home with their mothers in the afternoon (thus any whose mothers worked full-time); children whose father was at home in the afternoon; children who came from families with more than three children; children in homes where the main language spoken was not English.

The children were to quote Tizard et al, probably typical of the majority of working-class children who attend half-day nursery school, and who are nevertheless seen by their teachers as in need of language enrichment (Tizard et al. 1980: 52).

Tizard and Hughes, in their much quoted book, seldom make reference to the fact that their sample was all girls, using the word children in the title *Young Children Learning*, and on almost every occasion in the book (Tizard and Hughes 1984). Some people who have read about the research only in that book have admitted to failing to appreciate that the sample was of girls only; yet there might have been rather different findings for young boys. Tizard and Hughes indicate how similar to the findings of Wells theirs are in showing extended and complex conversations in the homes. Taken together these studies gave new insights into the contribution of the home to the language development of young children. Both may undervalue the contribution of fathers to their children's language development.

No social class differences were found in the number and length of adult-child conversations; but there were fewer at school than at home. The majority of school conversations concerned play activity whereas at home a number were on a range of topics, including past and future events. Much the longest conversations both at home and at school concerned books that the adult was reading aloud or had just read aloud and/or when engaged in a joint activity. Children asked many questions at home, few at school, with no social class difference. The number was highest in relation to books and past and future events. An important observation was that a child who talked a lot or asked a lot of questions at home, or who tended to initiate conversation, was not necessarily likely to do so at school.

All the above points are taken from one of the articles by Tizard et al. (1980: 55-68). The findings of Tizard and Hughes raise the possibility that the level of language competence of 'working-class' children may well be underestimated in formal test situations. This may result in adults providing less-challenging dialogue with some children than they have potential to sustain, and may indeed show in more naturalistic settings.

The assumption in the early 1970s of deprivation of language and deficiencies in 'working class' homes and the incompetence of parents, are views still apparent in many current discussions on the role of parents in their children's language development.

Assessment of young children's language on entry to primary school: Clark, Barr and Dewhurst

The discussion will focus only on the part of the research concerned with assessment of the young children's language shortly after entry to school. For details of the other aspects of the study see *Understanding Research in Early Education* (Clark, 2005, chapters 8 and 9).

The research investigated similarities and differences in the classroom environments within which children spent their first year in primary school, the range of competence of the children and the extent to which this appeared to vary in different contexts and over time. The research was undertaken in five primary schools in The West Midlands with varied proportions of children from different ethnic backgrounds, for some of whom English was not their mother tongue. The children who were studied were the 247 who entered reception class during 1982/3. Most children entered reception class having attended

some form of preschool unit, though few attended playgroup or day nursery. We had observed some of the children and recorded their language in the preschool unit before the funded research commenced.

The children's language was assessed in a variety of settings, by test, observation and recording, with peers and with their teachers. All the children in the reception classes were tested individually in English, and children whose mother tongue was Punjabi were also tested in their mother tongue. The assessment used was the Preschool Language Assessment Instrument (PLAI) (Blank, 1985). We had used this test with the children with special needs and their controls in an earlier study. A revised version is now available PLAI2 which we plan to use in our new study.

PLAI was devised specifically for children about this age, at the point of entry to school, and consists of 15 questions at each of four levels of complexity, chosen to reflect the type of questions faced in the classroom. The levels involve: matching perception; selective analysis of perceptions; reordering perception; reasoning about perception. Most questions require only pointing or a few words for an adequate response, even for higher levels of questions. Valuable diagnostic information can be obtained not only from a study of the children's scores for each level of questions, but also from an analysis of their errors.

A number of the low-scoring children on the test were among the youngest in the sample. It is important to stress that in each of these schools there were some children entering reception class who had impressive abilities and who understood and responded to questions of high levels of complexity and perceptual distance. There were other children in each school who were able only to respond appropriately to simple questions tied closely to perception. Furthermore, even when assessed in English, there were within each ethnic group children who were able to answer appropriately questions on all four levels of difficulty. Likewise, there were children from each ethnic background with very limited understanding of anything beyond simple labelling questions. There were some young children who had impressive competence in both English and Punjabi. This we were able to show not only on test performance, but also in the dialogue between peers that we recorded.

Teachers' judgements of the children's language were also measured by questions paralleling the levels of complexity on PLAI. The reception class teachers were asked to make a judgement on which of their children they would expect to answer each question successfully. Teacher-child dialogue was also recorded using radio microphones. Some teachers were concerned when they realized the style they had adopted and its effects. Some discovered that had they adopted a different strategy and a more conversational style they could have developed a more interesting dialogue with a number of the children. The fact that children's language was assessed and recorded in a variety of settings, and over time, made it possible to appreciate the influence of a number of these variables, and not least how dangerous it is to assess a child's communicative competence from only one sample of language, or even one type of setting.

Group discussions between young children were recorded with and without an adult present. This aspect included 44 of the 215 children who had been assessed on PLAI, and as many children as possible for whom samples of language in other settings were available. The competence of these young children to engage in dialogue with peers when provided with sufficiently challenging and stimulating materials was revealed, children around five years of age (See Clark 2005 chapter 8).

Conclusions

The findings cited here make the proposal to use a single baseline assessment, limited contexts and a one score the basis for judging the competence of young children on entry to primary school a disturbing development. The following are important:

- The context in which any assessment is conducted.
- The adult conducting the assessment, their training and how familiar the child is with them.
- The child's home language and how competent they are in understanding and responding in the language of assessment, English being the language proposed for baseline assessments.
- The danger in using a single score as a measure of the child's competence.
- The problems in comparing the scores on different baseline assessments.
- The precise age of the child, as this will influence their attainment differentially.
- Whether or not the child has attended nursery class prior to entry to reception class as this will influence their score, since they may be more or less familiar in interacting with strange adults.

In our research on baseline assessments we plan in addition to interviewing teachers on their experience with baseline assessment, to analyze the scores on baseline assessment by sex, by age, by whether the children attended a nursery class in that school and whether or not their home language is English. Assessment of target children on PLA12 will add an additional dimension to the study.

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