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Avoidance strategies in an exceptional child during unsuccessful reading performances

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Abstract

Employing an interactional analysis and focusing on the complexity of meaning making, this study investigates the uses of several types of avoidance strategies generated by a language-disordered boy who is struggling with literacy. The results suggest that these avoidance strategies may function as compensatory adaptations that assist him in overcoming his literacy limitations so that he can still sustain effective social action even within contexts where his literacy difficulties are highlighted. There are both theoretical and practical implications for these findings.

Keywords: *Literacy, avoidance, qualitative, reading, strategies*

Introduction

Over the last decade, clinical linguists and speech-language pathologists have become more aware of the complexity of the meaning-making process in oral language functioning and the various ways that language is employed in academic, social, and occupational contexts (e.g. Ahlsén, 2005; Armstrong, 2005; Damico & Damico, 1997; Dobbinson, Perkins, & Boucher, 2003; Müller, 2003; Salameh, Håkansson, & Nettelbladt, 2004; Szymanski, 2002). These professionals have started accounting for the complexity of language and meaning making rather than ignoring it and the results have been beneficial. Because of the focus on complexity, researchers and clinicians are better able to describe the variables that impact language performance and are recognizing many of the behaviors noted in problematic language functioning as specific kinds of strategic emergent behaviors; what Perkins (1998; 2001; 2005) has called compensatory adaptations.

The recognition of this complexity as revealed by compensatory adaptations is important; such knowledge can better prepare the clinician, teacher, and researcher to document and understand the unique constellation of emergent behaviors that create the social and communicative manifestations that we note in problematic communicators and learners (e.g. Damico, Müller & Ball, 2004; Perkins, 2002). This knowledge and awareness, in turn, should help generate a greater understanding and appreciation of

disordered language and communicative systems (i.e. exceptional systems) and assist in designing better research, assessment, and treatment for clinical populations. Indeed, a focus at this level of detail should be expected within the discipline of clinical linguistics.

Given the importance of compensatory adaptation as an explanatory mechanism, this report provides additional evidence regarding the complexity of language and provides data on how individuals employ their meaning-making systems to negotiate social action – even when their attempts at meaning making are less than successful. Specifically, this report discusses the extent to which a young boy identified as having a language disorder and exhibiting reading difficulties has created a set of compensatory adaptations in response to his history of reading failure. The adaptations identified and discussed involve the various ways that he effectively avoids reading even within a dyad that expects his literacy contribution.

Experiences and rationale for this Study

In previous research by Nelson (2004), it was noted that children with literacy difficulties often employ avoidance strategies in the literacy context rather than attempt to read on request. Since they have experienced multiple failures when asked to read, these individuals tend to circumvent the reading process; they no longer view themselves as competent readers and so they try to "opt out" (e.g. Damico & Damico, 1997; Five, 1995; McDermott, 1993; Taylor, 1991). Consequently, they often create strategies (i.e. compensatory adaptations) to avoid reading even in those social dyads where their reading is expected. While Nelson observed and documented many avoidance behaviors, he did not systematically investigate this phenomenon nor did he employ an emergent description of these behaviors.

Given the focus that we have established recently within our own research regarding compensatory adaptations (e.g. Damico & Nelson, 2005), the occurrence of these avoidance strategies is quite intriguing. We believe that these strategies may present evidence that even when one cannot perform a specific meaning-making task like reading, there is still the recognition by the individual that he/she has interactional obligations within the social contexts that must be fulfilled. To meet the social and interactive obligations despite any linguistic limitations, various kinds of strategic adaptations may be created. That is, when an individual's task demands exceed the available meaning making capacity, specific and systematic adaptive behaviors are often developed to overcome not the linguistic limitations but, rather, the social and interactional "trouble spots" that may occur as a result of the linguistic limitations. Upon reflection, therefore, a methodical study of this emergent phenomenon was undertaken.

The study

In an attempt to document and understand avoidance behaviors as compensatory adaptations, the following questions were posed:
1. Are the avoidance behaviors that are often observed in literacy instructional dyads involving exceptional struggling readers systematic in nature?
2. If so, how do the exceptional readers employ avoidance as strategic adaptations when reading difficulties occur within this social dyad?

By focusing on these two questions, we can determine the reality of avoidance strategies as compensatory adaptations. First, if the avoidance behaviors are actually strategic in

nature, we should be able to note systematic applications and patterns of usage. To be considered a strategy, there should be stable and predictable occurrence marshaled to accomplish particular objectives (e.g. overcoming potential interactional ''trouble spots'' that result from poor literacy skills). Second, if these avoidance behaviors are systematic and strategic, we should be able to describe the actual strategies and note aspects of their application. Description of these strategies will provide us with a deeper understanding of the significance of this phenomenon.

   While there are many ways that these questions may be investigated, we chose a qualitative research design and focused the investigation on only one individual. This decision was based upon two factors. First, given the potential complexity of the avoidance phenomenon, the qualitative research tradition is well suited to describe and ''tease out'' that complexity. Qualitative research was developed for just such a purpose (Damico, Simmons-Mackie, Oelschlaeger, Elman, & Armstrong, 1999). Second, the detailed analysis of one individual to address complex linguistic and interactive questions has a long history of success in the social sciences and can enable us to focus on the potential emergent phenomenon rather than the individual (e.g. Duranti & Goodwin, 1992; Jefferson, 1973; Simmons-Mackie & Damico, 2003).

The participant

The participant in this study was a 9-year old boy formally diagnosed with language and learning disabilities who was placed in the Summer Language and Literacy Project at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. He was considered a very poor reader and was retained in the second grade due to his lack of reading ability. Even though he had a long history of intervention and instruction that employed a phonics-based and explicit approach to literacy instruction, the boy had made virtually no progress in his reading abilities over a three-year period. He was referred to Project because of the success that we have had in overcoming literacy problems in these types of children through the applications of meaning-based literacy interventions.

Operational definition of avoidance

Since it is the focus of our investigation, it is appropriate to provide the operational definition of avoidance that was employed within this research context. Avoidance was defined as those instances when the participant through direct or implied invitation was expected to read a passage and did not. Rather, he employed other behaviors to shift the burden of reading from himself to another individual.

Research methodology

To understand avoidance behaviors in a literacy dyad, the qualitative investigation utilized routine techniques from interactional analysis to detail and describe the interactional and social behaviors exhibited by the participant. Specifically, we investigated the ways that avoidance is actively employed in a recurrent literacy dyad between an impaired individual with reading problems and a more competent reading adult who served as an interventionist. By concentrating on the behaviors produced by the participant and by employing the sequential organization of interaction when instances of avoidance occurred, it was expected that we could determine how participant resources and strategies were

employed to shift the burden of reading from the struggling reader to the adult within the instructional dyad.

The interactional analysis employed was a variation of conversation analysis in that we operated within the constraints and limits of that tradition of inquiry (Goodwin & Heritage, 1990; Psathas, 1995) but focused on verbal and nonverbal behaviors that did not necessarily involve conversation alone. Rather, any aspect of interaction was open to discovery and analysis. The current researchers have effectively employed this hybrid approach in previous investigations (e.g. Damico & Damico, 1997; Madden, Oelschlaeger, & Damico, 2002; Simmons-Mackie, Damico & Damico, 1999).

Consistent with principles of interactional analysis, three 30-minute reading sessions within two weeks of the beginning of the participant's intervention period at the university's Summer Language and Literacy Project were collected via videotape and transcribed. This process resulted in making available for analysis 143 exchange sequences within the reading sessions when the participant had an opportunity or invitation to read. Once transcription occurred, the videotapes were reviewed repeatedly to identify the interactional turn sequences of interest to the investigators – the opportunities to read and the instances of avoidance. For each identified instance, the specific strategies employed within these turn sequences were described and analyzed to determine how the participant reacted to the opportunities to read and, if he engaged in avoidance, what strategies were employed.

Results

Based on the interactional analyses conducted of the three reading sessions, a number of findings regarding the application of avoidance strategies during invitations to read were generated. While a complete discussion of the current research findings is beyond the scope of this report, some of the results relevant to the two questions asked will be briefly detailed.

The systematicity of avoidance

Based on the analyses, the participant did exhibit a large number of avoidance behaviors and they appeared to be systematic in nature. In terms of the pervasiveness of avoidance, within the 143 opportunities or invitations to read over the three sessions, the participant employed avoidance behaviors on 105 occasions or 73.4% of the time. That is, rather than take up the invitation to read, he avoided his expected role (i.e. to read) a majority of the time. This frequency of avoidance suggests a conscious attempt to forestall reading on his part.

In terms of the systematicity of these avoidance behaviors, six findings support the strategic application of avoidance. First, he used a very limited set of avoidance behaviors. In fact, he exhibited only six types of avoidance with two of these behaviors accounting for approximately 62% of his avoidance attempts. The pervasiveness of these two suggests a stable pattern of avoidance and a preference for these two avoidance types. Second, it appears that his avoidance behaviors were triggered by a lack of reading ability. While he did exhibit avoidance 105 times in the three sessions, he did attempt to participate as a reader the other 38 times. However, when he did attempt to read, he was unsuccessful in 27 of the 38 attempts. This means that approximately 71% of his actual reading attempts resulted in a failure to read the requested section. In those 27 attempts, he read no more than 5 words and he was typically very non-fluent. Based upon the analysis of his actual attempts, therefore, the participant appears to have had a very good reason to avoid the

invitation to read. Third, even though he avoided reading, in five of the types of avoidance behaviors (97% of the occasions) he did take an interactive turn. That is, even though he did not want to attempt reading, he recognized that he had a turn obligation and his avoidance behaviors were structured in such a way that he could hold up his interactive turn while avoiding the reading actual requirement. In effect, he accomplished some social action even if he did not fulfill his literacy obligation. In the next section, two of the ways that this was accomplished will be detailed. Fourth, on a number of occasions his avoidance behavior <u>anticipated</u> an invitation to read. On these occasions, before he was asked or his turn occurred, he suspected that he would be given an opportunity or an invitation and he employed an avoidance behavior to preempt this possibility. Again, this suggests organized and intentional behavior suggestive of a strategic application of avoidance. Finally, the fifth and six findings also suggest organized application. Although it is hard to clearly differentiate, his pattern of avoidance versus the 38 attempts to read seemed to be dependent on a combination of ease or familiarity of the passages that he attempted to read combined with a tendency for avoidance after an unsuccessful attempt no matter how easy the material was. Stated differently, while more detailed analysis is needed, there appeared to be a pattern of attempts organized according to perceived ease of the passage and recent indications of success.

Based on these six analytic findings, it does appear that the six behavioral types employed by the participant as avoidance behaviors were operating as strategies; they were systematically and tactically employed to achieve specific objectives within the literacy instructional dyad. Consequently, we will now consider these six avoidance behavior types avoidance strategies.

The six avoidance strategies

During the detailed analyses conducted across the three sessions, the participant employed six different avoidance strategies. In order of frequency of occurrence they were:

1. Interjection of off-topic comments or behaviors when the invitation to read was anticipated or when it was issued.
2. Picture description or a reasonable extension of the story segment just read to him rather than reading the text.
3. Direct repetition of the text just read by the adult rather than reading new text.
4. Initiation of reading with discontinuance to ask a question about a particular word or relevant topic within the first five words read.
5. Interjection of on-topic comments about the story rather than attempt reading.
6. Direct refusal to read by verbal or nonverbal means.

Each of these strategies is quite complex and very systematic in their usage. Detailed analysis of each one reveals potentially significant information that may have theoretical or practical implications. For the teacher or for the clinician, a close analysis and reflection on any of these strategies might yield important information. While the nature of this report is too limited to discuss each strategy, the next section will briefly detail the two most frequently occurring strategies and discuss some of the practical implications of these behaviors.

A brief analysis of two avoidance strategies

To illustrate both the power of qualitative analysis and the importance of analyzing the avoidance strategies to appreciate the complexity of these social behaviors, this section will briefly present the two most frequently occurring strategies. In each instance, an example of

the strategy taken from one of the literacy instructional dyadic sessions will be presented and then some analyses will be presented.

Avoidance strategy one: interjection of off-topic comments

The most frequently occurring avoidance strategy (approximately 35% of the time) occurred when the participant interjected off-topic comments or behaviors when the invitation to read was anticipated or when it was issued. An illustration of this avoidance strategy may be seen in Example One (actual book passage is in italics):

EXAMPLE ONE:

Adult: (Reading) ''*We'll have no story hour today, said Miss Swamp*''
   ''*Keep your mouths shut! Said Miss Swamp*''
   ''*Sit perfectly still! Said* ___ (She points to the page for the child to read using this cloze technique)
Child: (Shoving a chair with his foot at the time she pauses) ''Why are you moving the chair''?
Adult: ''I don't think I'm moving it. I think you're moving it, huh?''
Child: ''No''
Adult: ''*Said Miss Swamp…*'' (continues reading)

When reviewing this strategy, it is not surprising that this was the most frequent avoidance strategy employed across the three sessions. In effect, the participant wanted to preempt the invitation to read since he is a poor reader. Due to the demands of the social dyad, however, a flat refusal would be less acceptable. To his mind, it might be better to forestall the invitation. With this avoidance strategy, therefore, the participant often anticipated when his turn would come and he then used this strategy before an expectation or invitation was issued.

Upon reflection and after reviewing the reports on this individual, this avoidance strategy appears to be somewhat paradoxical; while it suggests that the child was highly aware of the situation and could anticipate a forthcoming invitation to read, his preemptive off-task strategy could just as easily be perceived as an indication of distractibility when, in reality, he was very attentive – so much so that he was making accurate predictions about when his turn would arrive. In fact, in one of the school-based reports about this child, it was stated that he could not attend during reading group. That is, while the teacher who observed him and supplied the comment for the report felt that he was not attending and was distractible, it is likely that he was attending but that this ''pre-emptive off-task behavior'' was actually the cause of that perception of inattentiveness.

With regard to intervention effort, it is interesting to note that due to this avoidance strategy in the three sessions; a great deal of time was spent trying to engage this participant in reading. In fact, the time spent getting him back ''on-task'' far exceeded the time spent in reading. However, if we understand the function of this avoidance strategy and address the underlying causal factor and not just the behavior, it is possible that the intervention sessions can become more effective and efficient.

Finally, it should be noted that from the perspective of the participant, the avoidance strategy was successful in this instance. This is because the burden of reading was shifted away from the participant and the clinician eventually started reading again without the participant's contribution. However, from a pedagogical perspective the response of the clinician here is excellent. Rather than spend time trying to get him back on task or forcing

him to read, the clinician goes ahead and provides a reading model for the participant by picking up the meaning making burden of the reading task herself. This makes good pedagogical sense in that the child's anxiety is relieved, he gets a strong reading model, and he can take his time to acquire abilities before performing. In effect, the clinician provides a kind of "silent period" for the child while he is still negotiating the reading process.

Avoidance strategy two: reasonable extension via contextual information

The second most frequently occurring strategy (27% of the avoidance strategies) occurred when the participant described the pictures on the page being read or provided a reasonable extension of the story just read to him rather than read the text. An illustration follows in Example Two:

EXAMPLE TWO:

Adult: "*Where's Miss Nelson asked the kids. Never mind that snapped Miss Swamp. Open those arithmetic books. Miss Nelson's kids did as they were told.*" You wanna start here?
Child: "All the kids say. What else would I do? What else would I do?" (the book actually says "*They could see that Miss Swamp was a real witch. She meant business*")

In this example, the participant employs the picture on the page and a likely scenario in which the students in the story are confused and powerless. He then provides these assumptions as the "text" that he pretends to read. In this second most frequency employed avoidance strategy, we note the influence of the social dyad. While the most frequently employed avoidance strategy tried to preempt the invitation to read with off-topic or off-task distractions, the participant now appears to comply but, rather than reading, he avoids the text by constructing a likely scene or dialogue. This is similar to what Elizabeth Sulzby (1985) has found in young pre-school children who were not yet readers. They employed the cues they had available to them to try and construct meaning. The difference here, of course, is that this child can do some reading – he just prefers not to do so since he is so poor at it.

Conclusions

When reviewing the results of this investigation, the data reveal a complex interplay between the language and literacy requirements that appear to be (currently) beyond the capabilities of this nine year-old language disordered boy and his need to establish or maintain some degree of social action and interactional proficiency. He is placed in a circumstance that creates a conflict. In such instances, we may more readily see the emergence of the strategic capacity of meaning making to accomplish social action. In such a circumstance he employs a kind of compensatory adaptation to create a number of systematic and complex ways to avoid a task that he could not perform well. Above all, this investigation of avoidance in a reading dyad provides a snapshot of complexity as strategic application of compensatory adaptation. This demonstration lends theoretical support to Perkins' concept of adaptive compensation.

There are also practical implications. For example, the fact that this participant employs a pattern of strategic adaptation should not be viewed negatively. Given his abilities at this initial point in the investigation, any adaptations to solve problems reveal both awareness of the problem and a desire to overcome that problem. This is encouraging. Further, as his ability to negotiate meaning from the text increases, it is likely that there will be a consistent

development and use of more effective reading and interactional strategies and, as his ability to meaningfully interact with the text increases, less effective strategies or strategies that masked the ability to construct meaning will reduced and, in some instances, eliminated. Implications may be that as the meaning-making skill (reading) improves it is accompanied by complex interactional changes that suggest proficiency and affective changes. Given that compensatory adaptations are actually emergent epiphenomena that are what would be expected (Perkins, 2002; 2005).

Taking one student and following him during an authentic meaning-making task involving his reading performance, we documented and described the interactional strategies that he developed and employed to create necessary social action.

This demonstration supplies evidence for the interaction between language performance and its impact on social action; as individuals experience failure in their meaning making efforts, they create various types of compensatory adaptations to assist them in maintaining some social effectiveness in the face of this meaning making failure. Seeing this process occur during reading and noting the kinds of emergent behaviors that have been constructed by this individual as he tries to create meaning within his social contexts, clinicians can better appreciate the complexity of the process. Further, they can employ this appreciation to account for the compensatory adaptations in both assessment and intervention activities.

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