

Summary

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When four-year-olds enter early childhood education, they enter a new world of peers. From that moment on, meaningful contacts with peers start to become essential for children's future social-cognitive development. Through peer interactions, children learn to play with others, to abide by the social norms, and to solve conflicts in an acceptable manner. However, there are children who are being shut out from positive interactions with peers. Those children are usually victims of peer rejection. Decades of research into childhood peer relationships has convincingly demonstrated the detrimental effects of being rejected by peers. This has led to an impressive amount of research conducted into possible factors that are related to peer rejection, showing that a complex network of cognitive, emotional, and behavioural mechanisms is involved. Building on Vygotsky's theory, the studies presented in this dissertation were driven by the expectation that oral communicative competence is part of this complex network. Empirical evidence to support this conjecture has been limited. The aim of this dissertation was therefore to investigate the relation between oral communicative competence and peer rejection in early childhood education. The following overarching research question was formulated: How and to what extent is children's level of oral communicative competence related to the degree to which they are rejected by peers? This question was divided into four sub-questions: (1) What is the relation between oral communicative competence and peer rejection? (2) Does this relation depend on gender? (3) What is the role of receptive vocabulary knowledge in this relation? (4) Does the level of oral communicative competence differ between children from different sociometric groups?

The first study described in this dissertation concerned a systematic review of previous studies into the relation between oral communicative competence and sociometric status. Several electronic databases were searched in order to identify relevant research. After carefully considering the studies that were obtained in this first search of the literature, a total of 12 studies were selected for inclusion. Instead of performing a statistical meta-analysis, these studies were described and synthesized in the form of a narrative review as this would allow for the inclusion of potential small-scale, descriptive studies. In addition, it was expected that this would provide a more detailed overview of their characteristics and findings. Outcomes of the reviewed studies generally pointed to a significant relation between oral communicative competence and sociometric status. However, the included studies appeared to suffer from several limitations which resulted in five recommendations for future research. First, the variety in the conceptualization and operationalization of oral communicative competence indicates that future research should adopt a more uniform approach by, for example, using similar measures. Second, future research into children's sociometric status should not only focus on the single dimensions of acceptance and rejection, but should combine these dimensions. Third, as the majority of researches were small-scale explorative studies, future research should include larger samples in order to generalize the findings outside the sample. Fourth, the cross-sectional designs of the studies

included in this review did not allow for conclusions regarding the direction of the relation of interest. Longitudinal and (quasi-)experimental research is needed in order to investigate whether children's level of oral communicative competence affects their sociometric status or whether it is the other way around (or both). Finally, as previous research showed that the interactional context and gender might influence the relation between oral communicative competence and sociometric status, future studies could take both factors into account.

The second study reported in this dissertation was an explorative study into the relation between oral communicative competence and peer rejection. The aim was to investigate this relation in a small sample (i.e., $N = 54$ preschoolers) by using standardized and validated measures. The Nijmegen Test for Pragmatics was used to measure children's level of oral communicative competence. This test was individually administered and required children to verbally respond to a story that was told by the test assistant. For each child, the number of correct responses was counted which resulted in a total score on the test and indicated the level of oral communicative competence. The degree to which children were rejected by peers was measured by means of the frequently used peer nomination procedure. Children participated in this procedure individually and were asked to nominate classmates with whom they liked to play (positive nominations) and classmates with whom they did not like to play (negative nominations). The number of received positive nominations was counted for each child to indicate his or her level of peer acceptance whereas the number of negative nominations was used to assess the extent to which children were rejected. Outcomes of correlation analyses indicated a non-significant relation between oral communicative competence and peer rejection. However, a significant positive relation was found between oral communicative competence and peer acceptance (although only for boys). So for boys, a higher level of oral communicative competence was associated with a higher level of peer acceptance. This finding was explained by suggesting that boys generally have a higher tendency of exhibiting aggressive behaviour and that well-developed oral communicative abilities could help them to inhibit this tendency which, in turn, helps them to gain acceptance from their peers. However, limitations of this study were that (1) no pictures of children's peers were used during the peer nomination procedure whereas it is recommended to do so in research with young children and (2) this study merely focused on the dimensions of acceptance and rejection whereas it has been recommended to combine these dimensions to measure the relative degree of (dis)likability. These limitations led to some adjustments in the measurement and operationalization of peer rejection in the subsequent studies.

The third study described in this dissertation concerned a follow-up on the second study. As in the previous study, the main aim was to investigate the relation between oral communicative competence and peer rejection in early childhood education. This relation was now investigated in a large and heterogeneous sample of $N = 447$ children. Moreover, although the same Nijmegen Test for Pragmatics was used in order to measure children's level of oral communicative competence, some adjustments were made in the measurement

and operationalization of peer rejection. To be more specific, before asking children to nominate their classmates, children were first asked to nominate the types of food they did and did not like by pointing to pictures of different types of food. This activity was included in the procedure to familiarize children with the procedure of nominating. Next, children were asked to nominate classmates positively ('with whom do you like to play?') and negatively ('with whom do you not like to play?'). Children did not need to know all the names of their classmates, but could point to their pictures in order to nominate them. Finally, children were asked to nominate types of toys they did and did not like to play with. The purpose of this final activity was to distract children from nominating their peers and prevent that they would discuss their peer nominations as soon as they returned to their classroom. The degree of peer rejection was measured by subtracting the number of positive nominations a child received from the number of received negative nominations. Compared to the previous study, the large sample size of this study allowed for more advanced statistical analyses. Outcomes of hierarchical regression analyses demonstrated that, after controlling for gender, age, and socioeconomic status, oral communicative competence explained unique variance in peer rejection and was negatively related to it: Children with poor oral communicative competence were more often rejected by their peer group. This finding indicated that oral communicative competence plays an important role in the context of peer rejection. Differences between findings of this study and those of the previous one could be explained by differences in the measurement and operationalization of peer rejection.

The fourth study reported in this dissertation not only investigated the relation between oral communicative competence and peer rejection, but also included the role of receptive vocabulary knowledge. The purpose of this study was to examine the potential uniqueness of the role of oral communicative competence in the context of peer rejection by investigating it simultaneously with the role of receptive vocabulary knowledge in a sample of $N = 135$ children. It was expected that receptive vocabulary knowledge would be directly related to peer rejection as well as indirectly, namely through oral communicative competence. In order to measure children's level of oral communicative competence and peer rejection, the same measures were used as in the previous study. In addition, the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test was administered to assess children's word knowledge. During this test administration, children were asked to point to one out of four pictures that represented the word that was read aloud by the test assistant. The amount of words a child was able to identify correctly reflected his or her level of receptive vocabulary knowledge. The direct and indirect relations between receptive vocabulary knowledge, oral communicative competence, and peer rejection were analyzed using mediation analyses. Findings showed that oral communicative competence was directly and negatively related to peer rejection. Receptive vocabulary knowledge was only indirectly related to peer rejection, through oral communicative competence. The relations between oral communicative competence, receptive vocabulary knowledge, and peer rejection did not depend on gender. Findings of this study indicated that both receptive vocabulary knowledge and oral communicative competence are involved in

the context of peer rejection. As receptive vocabulary knowledge was only indirectly related to peer rejection and it has been suggested that teachers already pay a lot of attention to children's vocabulary learning, it was recommended that teachers pay more explicit attention to the promotion of their pupils' oral communicative competence.

In the final study of this dissertation, the relation between oral communicative competence and peer rejection was investigated in more depth by distinguishing between different sociometric groups. This study combined the data from the previous two studies which resulted in a total sample of $N = 570$ children. Again, oral communicative competence was measured with the Nijmegen Test for Pragmatics and the previously described peer nomination procedure was used to obtain peer nominations. In this final study, children's received number of positive and negative nominations were used to assign them to one of the following sociometric groups: (1) popular (generally well-liked), (2) rejected (generally disliked), (3) neglected (low visibility and neither liked nor disliked), (4) controversial (high visibility and both liked and disliked), and (5) average (at or about the mean on both likability and visibility). It was expected that this study could add to previous findings regarding the relation between oral communicative competence and peer rejection by performing more fine-grained analyses. Outcomes of multi-level analyses indicated that, even after controlling for the effects of age, gender, and home language (i.e., whether Dutch was the main language spoken at home or not), there were significant sociometric group differences in the level of oral communicative competence. Post hoc analyses revealed that both rejected and neglected children showed lower levels of oral communicative competence than average children. These outcomes indicated that not only rejected children showed poor oral communicative competence, but so did neglected children. Findings were explained by considering both directions of the relation of interest. On the one hand, being rejected or neglected by the peer group could diminish children's opportunities to develop their oral communicative competence. On the other hand, exhibiting poor oral communicative abilities could place children at risk for peer rejection. Regardless of the exact nature of the relation between oral communicative competence and peer rejection, the findings of this study indicated that future research should not merely focus on the dimensions of acceptance and/or rejection, but should take multiple sociometric groups (including neglected children) into account.

The present dissertation reported five studies in which the relation between oral communicative competence and peer rejection was investigated in different samples, using different procedures and analyses, and taking different additional variables into account. Nevertheless, they all came to the same major conclusion, namely that oral communicative competence plays a significant role in the context of peer rejection. There were, however, several limitations that needed to be taken into account, which resulted in some recommendations for future studies in this field of research. First, although it was not the aim of this dissertation to demonstrate causality, due to the cross-sectional designs of the reported studies it remained unclear whether a low level of oral communicative competence

places a child at risk for being rejected by peers or whether peer rejection prevents a child from developing the ability to communicate effectively (or both). Future studies should investigate the relation between oral communicative competence and peer rejection with a longitudinal and experimental design to clarify the nature of this relation. Second, a considerable amount of variance in peer rejection remained unexplained, indicating that additional factors are involved. Future studies could expand the studies reported in this dissertation by taking those into account. Third, the studies described in this dissertation only included gender as a possible moderator of the relation between oral communicative competence and peer rejection. It was therefore unclear whether this relation depends on, for example, children's interactions with their parents. It would be interesting to investigate such potential moderators in future studies. Fourth, children's level of oral communicative competence was measured using only one test which was administered in a rather artificial situation instead of a real life (classroom) setting. Future research could complement the use of such a test with natural observations of children's interactions. Finally, the peer nomination procedure that was used to indicate children's degree of peer rejection could have made children feel a little uncomfortable. Future research should therefore consider alternatives for assessing peer rejection in early childhood.

What were the practical implications of the findings of this dissertation? Although the studies in this dissertation could not demonstrate causality, they did indicate that oral communicative competence is involved in the extent to which children are rejected by their peers. It was therefore recommended that early childhood teachers pay more explicit attention to the promotion of children's oral communicative competence. In addition, the lack of effectiveness of interventions that are merely directed at children who are rejected by peers has indicated that teachers who try to prevent or reduce peer rejection in their classrooms should not only focus on individual children, but should take the entire peer group into account. The use of collaborative group activities in promoting children's oral communicative competence might therefore be a promising approach.

