



Elementary school students' perceptions of stuttering: A mixed model approach



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 25 February 2015

Received in revised form 11 June 2015

Accepted 14 June 2015

Available online 28 June 2015

Keywords:

Stuttering
Elementary
Students
Perceptions

ABSTRACT

Purpose: Past research studies have focused on perceptions of stuttering by various age groups and only a few have examined how children react to a peer who stutters. All of these studies used a quantitative analysis but only one included a qualitative analysis of elementary school age children's responses to stuttering. The aim of this study was to further explore the perceptions of elementary school students toward a peer who stutters using both quantitative and qualitative analyses of three levels of stuttering.

Methods: Participants included 88 elementary school children between 8 and 12 years of age. Each participant viewed one of four audiovisual samples of a peer producing fluent speech and mild, moderate, and severe simulated stuttering. Each participant then rated five Likert statements and answered three open-ended questions.

Results: Quantitative and qualitative results indicated that negative ratings and the percentage of negative comments increased as the frequency of stuttering increased. However, the children in this study indicated that they were comfortable listening to stuttering and would be comfortable making friends with the peer who stutters.

Conclusion: The findings of this study together with past research in this area should help clinicians and their clients appreciate the range of social and emotional reactions peers have of a child who stutters.

Educational objectives: After reading this article, the reader will be able to: (a) discuss past research regarding children's perceptions of stuttering; (b) summarize the need to explore the perceptions of elementary-aged children toward a peer who stutters; (c) describe the major quantitative and qualitative findings of children's perceptions of stuttering; and (d) discuss the need for disseminating more information about stuttering to children and teachers.

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1. Introduction

For approximately half a century, researchers have been interested in how school aged children react to stuttering. Knowing how children react to stuttering has important clinical implications about how children who stutter might be

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treated by their peers in and outside of the school setting as well as how they manage social relationships involving teasing and bullying (Langevin & Hagler, 2004). Unfortunately, there are only a few empirical studies on this topic. Giolas and Williams (1958) conducted the first study in this area to determine how a total of 120 five- and eight-year-old children reacted to audio samples of three adult speakers producing fluent and imitated stuttered speech as judged by three trained speech-language pathologists. They discovered that children as young as five years-of-age showed awareness of disfluent speech and reacted negatively when hearing part-word repetitions in the adult's speech. The authors reported that the group of eight year-old children used the label "stuttering" when they heard an adult producing 10% part-word repetitions during the speech sample. Five-year-old children in the study did not use the word stuttering after hearing the disfluent speech.

Culatta and Sloan conducted a similar study in 1977 and asked sixty children in the first through fourth grades (six to nine years-of-age) to listen to audio samples of stuttering and fluent speech produced by an adult speaker. The method by which the stuttering samples were created was not specified. The children were divided into two groups of 30: (1) first and second graders, and (2) third and fourth graders. As expected, both age groups preferred the fluent speech sample over the one that contained the stuttering. They also found that the first and second grade children did not use the term "stuttering" to refer to the disfluent speech but "stuttering" was used by about 37% of the third and fourth graders.

Ambrose and Yairi (1994) examined perceptions of stuttering of 20 normally fluent and 20 disfluent children between the ages of two and five by asking them to choose between two types of speech produced by puppets; one who spoke fluently and the other who stuttered. The children who stuttered had to meet specific criteria set forth by the authors for inclusion in the study. The disfluent children who were three years of age identified closely with the puppet who stuttered while the fluent speaking three-year-olds selected the fluent puppet as the one that resembled how they spoke. This study showed that the awareness of stuttering begins at an early age and preschoolers are capable of differentiating between fluent and stuttered speech. These findings were replicated by Ezrati-Vinacour, Platzky, and Yairi (2001) who also noted that the term "stuttering" was not used by children under five years of age. Only a few of the seven year-old children labeled the disfluent speech as "stuttering."

Several reports have indicated that older children (9–14 years) respond with more negative reactions to stuttered speech. Franck, Jackson, Pimentel, and Greenwood (2003) had 75 9- to 11-year-old children listen to one fluent speech sample and one containing moderate stuttering from an adult who stuttered. The speakers' stuttering severity level was determined through a Stuttering Severity Instrument -3 (Riley, 1994) rating from three experienced speech-language pathologists. Using a series of adjective pairs related to personality (outgoing–shy) and intelligence (intelligent–stupid), one group of children rated the fluent speaker and another group rated the speaker who stuttered. The results showed that fourth- and fifth-grade children had more negative perceptions of an adult who stuttered than the adult who did not stutter.

Hartford and Leahy (2007) selected 80 children between six and 13 years-of-age and asked them to evaluate an audio sample of an adult speaker who produced fluent as well as moderate to severe pseudostuttering. The severity level of the pseudostuttering was determined by 22 speech-language pathology students. Using quantitative and qualitative measures, the researchers found that the six to eight year-old-children made fewer negative comments about the disfluent speaker than did children 9–13 years-of-age. Nonetheless, many of the children commented that the person who stuttered appeared "nervous," "shy," and "wouldn't have many friends."

The consistent finding that elementary school-age children harbor negative perceptions of an adult who stutters provides evidence that children tend to react negatively toward a disfluent speaker at an early age. Langevin and Hagler (2004) were the first to study children's perception of a disfluent peer relative to their beliefs, feelings, and attitudes toward a child who stutters. The major intent of their study was to create a scale to measure peer attitudes toward children who stutter. A sample of 267 elementary school children aged 8–13 years (grades four to six) were asked to rate 40 statements on a scale of 1–5 about a nine-year-old boy and an eight-year-old girl who stuttered. The boy stuttered on 16.5% and the girl stuttered on 43% of syllables produced in the sample. Each child also exhibited a variety of secondary coping behaviors such as head movements, broken eye contact, and rapid jaw jerking. Participants viewed one-minute samples of the boy and girl who stuttered and then rated statements relative to their affective (e.g., I would like having a kid who stutters live next door to me), behavioral (e.g., I would walk in the hall with a kid who stutters), and cognitive (e.g., kids who stutter are like normal kids) intentions toward children who stutter. The results of their study showed that fifth and sixth graders tended to have more positive perceptions of the two peers who stuttered than the fourth graders. They also found no differences in listeners' ratings between the boy and girl who stuttered or between the boys and girls who served as participants. Additional results from the study focused on verifying the reliability and validity of the scale they had developed.

Continued research into children's and adolescents' perceptions of stuttering was conducted by Evans, Healey, Kawai, and Rowland (2008). They examined the reactions and perceptions of 64 students between the ages of 10 and 14 toward a 16 year-old male peer who exhibited a very mild stuttering severity but was able to simulate a variety of stuttering types with a high level of control. The students were divided into four groups. Each group only listened to one type of video sample of the male peer speaking fluently or with simulated mild, moderate, or severe stuttering. All listeners were asked to rate 11 Likert statements using a five-point scale about the speaker shown in the video. The results of this study were similar to past studies involving children who rated adult speech samples in that, perceptual ratings of a person who stutters become increasingly more negative as the stuttering frequency increases. Additionally, the majority of the listeners reacted negatively even to mild stuttering although some students reported they were comfortable listening to and interacting with a peer who stuttered mildly. This finding implies that a peer with mild stuttering would be more likely to "fit in" at school than a peer who had moderate to severe stuttering.

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