

Emotional Literacy among School Children

Saori Fujino, Hosei University, Japan
Yayoi Watanabe, Hosei University, Japan

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to reveal the development of emotional literacy, especially the understanding emotions and expressions of emotions. In particular, we focused on how children express emotions. Subjects were 513 students aged 6-12 years (250 boys, 257 girls) in two elementary schools in Japan. They were shown a questionnaire including three different vignettes depicting the interpersonal contexts in their daily lives that could trigger positive and negative feelings of character. They were asked to predict characters' feelings and how they judged their feelings. The results showed that there was a difference regarding emotional expressions according to the grade. The first-graders tended to use emotional terms like happy, sad, angry, compared to other expression. However, there was not an increase in the numbers of emotional terms in later grade. Instead, older children tended to ask some questions about the contexts and the characters' intentions, and to express the character's requests or desires. These findings highlight and discuss the development of emotional literacy.

Keywords: emotional literacy, emotional expression, development

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Introduction

Emotional literacy is the knowledge of how to express and understand emotions (Steiner, C., & Perry, P, 1971; Watanabe, 2011). To encourage expression and understanding of emotions, studies on emotional terms have been conducted. Naka (2010) examined the emotional expressions used by children from preschools to elementary schools and revealed that terms such as *happy*, *good*, and *disgust* are used by preschoolers, and expressions of negative emotions are diversified with age. Furthermore, the use of terms referring to behavior and status of others increases with age. However, there are only few developmental studies that examine how children express emotions. The purpose of this study is to examine how children express emotions in interpersonal situations in their daily lives. We collected data from preschoolers and elementary school children, but only data from the elementary school children were analyzed this time.

Method

Participants

513 children who live in Kanto, Japan participated in this study. They were selected from two elementary schools. Among them, the 510 children with complete data were included in the analysis (First-graders: 42 boys, 43 girls; Second-graders: 42 boys, 54 girls; Third-graders: 35 boys, 34 girls; Fourth-graders: 46 boys, 47 girls; Fifth-graders: 38 boys, 42 girls; Sixth-graders: 44 boys, 37 girls; All children: 247 boys, 257 girls, 6 children unknown).

Materials

Three pictures showing interpersonal scenes in daily living (playing with friends, cleaning, and eating a snack) were used (Figure 1). Each picture portrayed two children representing a negative and a positive emotion, respectively. In order to avoid affecting the children's responses by showing an expression, the faces of the target children were not drawn.

Procedure

The data were collected through a questionnaire that was distributed by the teacher in each class. The pictures were shown, and the children were asked, "How does this child feel?" If they gave an answer, they were asked, "Why do you think so?" The same procedure was followed for the other target child in the picture (Figure 1).



Figure 1. The pictures used in this study.

Results

In order to examine the emotional expressions of the child, the collected data were categorized into 4 groups (Table 1).

Table 1

The data categorized into 4 groups

Group	Sample responses
Emotional terms	happy, sad, mad, and disgust
References to behavior or situation	He is alone. She is playing with friends.
Request and desire	I want to eat more snacks. Please let me join you.
Wonder and question	Why should we clean up? Why did he rob me of my snack?

Differences in the Number of Expressions

A 2-way ANOVA of age gender revealed a highly significant main effect of age and gender in all category groups. However, the interaction between age and gender had no significant effect. First, fifth-graders were less likely to use emotion words as compared to the fourth- and sixth-grades ($F(5, 492) = 2.86, p < .05$; Figure 2). In terms of numbers of expressions about references to behavior or situation and expressions of requests and desires, first-graders used fewer expressions compared to students in the other grades ($F(5, 492) = 4.94, p < .001$; $F(5, 492) = 7.98, p < .001$; Figure 3 and 4). In numbers of expressions for wonder and question, fifth-graders were less likely to use these expressions compared to students in other grades, and fourth-graders more use these expressions than first graders ($F(5, 492) = 8.61, p < .001$; Figure 4). These results showed that the variety of emotional expression spread with age. On the other hand, we revealed that references to emotion do not necessarily increase with age. In all categories, girls talked about more emotions than boys did (Emotional terms: $F(1, 492) = 4.94, p < .05$; References to behavior or situation: $F(1, 492) = 9.95, p < .01$; Request and desire: $F(1, 492) = 10.73, p < .01$; Wonder and question: $F(1, 492) = 3.14, p < .10$).

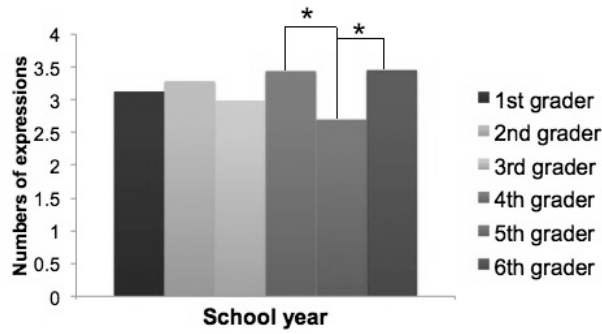


Figure 2. Numbers of expressions about emotional terms

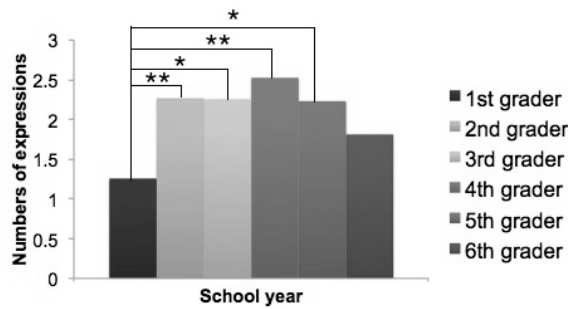


Figure 3. Numbers of expressions about references to behavior or scene

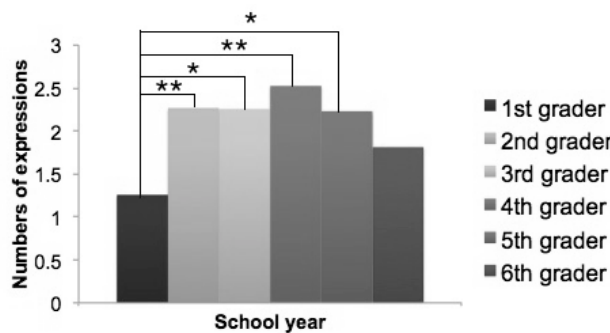


Figure 4. Numbers of expressions about requests and desires

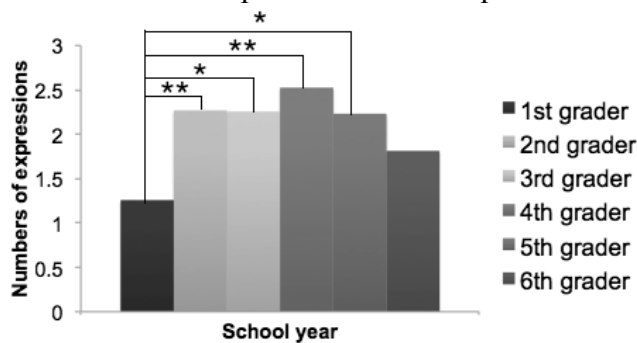


Figure 5. Numbers of expressions about wonder and question

Differences in the Number of Children Who Used Each Expression by Emotional Context.

A chi-square test was conducted to examine whether there was a difference in the number of children using emotional expressions between gender and age.

The results showed that the first graders used more emotional terms significantly in the negative situations ($\chi^2 = 15.20, df = 5, p < .01$), but they used significantly fewer emotional terms in the positive situations ($\chi^2 = 11.39, df = 5, p < .05$). The third and sixth graders expressed requests and desires significantly more in the negative situations, but the first graders did so significantly less often in the negative situations ($\chi^2 = 43.83, df = 5, p < .001$).

Conclusion

The findings showed that the number of references to behaviors or situation, requests or desires increased with age. However, their use of emotional terms did not increase. The younger children tended to frequently use limited emotional terms such as *happy*, *sad*, *angry*, and *surprised*. However, the sixth graders used more various expressions and with greater frequency.

Although when the first graders perceived negative emotions they could express them using emotional terms, it seemed difficult for them to make requests or demands of others. This suggested that if they could receive help from people around them in using emotional terms, it might be unnecessary to make a request or demand because adults especially will help children without their saying anything. We should investigate the development of emotional literacy in other contexts in the future.

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Contact email: s.fujino.528@gmail.com