

Identifying Specific Language Impairment (SLI) across Different Bilingual Populations: A German Sentence Repetition Task (SRT)

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Recent research in language impairment has focused on the problem of identifying SLI in bilingual populations. This is indeed a problem since difficulties in the acquisition of a second language (L2) or of two first languages (2L1) may concern the same linguistic structures as those difficult for monolingual children with SLI (Mo-SLI). Bilingual children are therefore often misdiagnosed as language impaired. This study reports on the successful identification of SLI in bilinguals by a German-SRT (Hamann et al. 2013) including object-questions, finite-complement-clauses, as well as subject and object relative clauses on the one hand, and subject-verb-agreement and topicalization as typical for German on the other hand. In the cross-linguistic part, different factors of syntactic complexity are involved: Wh-movement, subordination and intervention. We focus on the scoring measure target-structure-met, excluding lexical and systematic case errors.

We investigate 13 Mo-SLIs, 10 monolingual typically developing children (Mo-TD), 11 bilingual children with SLI (Bi-SLI) and 44 Bi-TDs with Arabic/Turkish/Portuguese as L1 (5;6-9;4). Clinical status was verified using a battery of norm-referenced L1/L2 tests.

Results show that our SRT clearly distinguishes Mo-SLI from Mo-TD, and also Bi-SLI from Bi-TD. However, different from earlier reports on subgroups of children, we found a significant difference between Bi-TDs and Mo-TDs. Interestingly, Arabic/German Bi-TDs are not significantly different from the Mo-TDs whereas Portuguese/German and Turkish/German Bi-TDs are. This is partly due to the extraordinary difficulties that Turkish/German and Portuguese/German children have with both types of object relatives and with topicalization. Contrasting this performance with mastery of object Wh-questions excludes an explanation involving difficulties with non-canonical word order. No correlation was found between LoE and performance on SRT, whereas current L2 exposure seems to explain the poor performance of Bi-TD-Ts who were primarily L1 dominant. In contrast, Mo-SLIs and Bi-SLIs show difficulties specifically with embedding, such CompFin, Srs and ORs.