ADVANCES IN DIAGNOSTIC PROTOCOLS FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS:
An exploratory study

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Background
The population of school age children who speak a language other than English at home has increased dramatically in the last two decades.
- 5.5 million children in the U.S. public schools were considered English Language Learners (ELLs).
- In some areas this group comprises more than 30% of the total school population.

Despite the evident need for valid assessments tools to evaluate language performance in this population, to date, there are no standard protocols to assess ELLs.

Several studies have attempted to characterize expressive language markers in ELLs.

Many clinicians have adopted alternative assessment protocols (i.e. dynamic assessment, using standardized tests the child’s native language, using informal language measures) in an attempt to reduce biases when assessing language skills in culturally and linguistically diverse children

There are still major gaps in our knowledge about expressive language markers that differentiate typical development vs. language impairment in ELLs.

Purpose of the study
- To identify expressive language characteristics that typically developing (TD) children exhibit in the process of acquiring English as a second language;
- To identify valid diagnostic measures to differentiate language difference from language disorder in ELLs.

Participants
- N=11 sequential bilinguals
  - Group 1: 3 TD US-born; Group 2: 5 TD Non-US born*; Group 3: SLI Non-US born*
  - Age range: 5:3-9:3
  - Native speakers of Spanish
  - Months of exposure to English: 6-33 months
  - K-BIT 2 Scores within 1SD of mean (matrices subtest)
*Groups 1 and 2 were combined for the analyses given similarities in pattern of acquisition and TD status. No significant differences were found between groups 1 and 2 in terms of age, MLU, or any other language performance measure analyzed in this study.

Procedures
Non standardized Measures:
- Semi-structured Language Sample
- Parent Interview

Standardized Measures:
- Test of Early Grammatical Impairment (TEGI)
  - Phonological probe
  - Third person singular probe
  - Past tense probe
- Strong Narrative Assessment Procedure (SNAP)
Analyses

- Semi-structured language samples and narrative samples from the SNAP were analyzed using the Systematic Analysis for Language Transcripts (SALT) (Miller and Chapman, 1991)
- TD sequential bilinguals were compared to their SLI counterparts and to TD monolingual English speaking children for the SALT databases.

Summary of results

**TD Sequential bilinguals**
- Produce fewer grammatical morphemes per sample than TD-monolingual children
- Do not differ significantly from TD monolingual children on percentage omitted bound morphemes
- Demonstrate greater knowledge of tense marking in obligatory contexts
- TD children’s TEGI scores may fall within clinical population

**Sequential bilinguals with SLI**
- Omit more grammatical morphemes in obligatory contexts than TD sequential bilinguals
- Omit significantly more bound morphemes than TD sequential bilinguals and TD monolinguals (Lang sample and SNAP)
- Demonstrate less knowledge of tense marking in obligatory contexts
- SLI children’s TEGI scores fell within clinical range 100% of the time

Clinical Implications

- Standardized language tests available lack specificity for ELL population
- Scores from standardized tests should not be considered as sole criterion for diagnosis of SLI in sequential bilinguals
- Production of tense bearing morphemes appears to be a likely marker for SLI in sequential bilinguals
- Narrative sample analysis is a potentially valid measure as an alternative to language Sample analysis

Suggestions for assessment of language performance in ELLs

- Develop local norms for specific linguistic categories
  - Grammatical morphology, understanding of wh-questions, narrative skills
- Use non-standardized assessment tools to chart progress over time
  - Dynamic assessment, criterion referenced measures
- Avoid modifications of standardized tests normed on monolingual children
- Assess performance on a variety of linguistic concepts
  - Grammatical morphology, pronoun use, understanding of wh-questions, narrative
- Be aware of variability!
References


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