Invented Rule with Young English Language Learners

Valerie Boyer & Kathryn Martin

Contact Information: Valerie Boyer at valboyer@siu.edu or Kathryn Martin at kittym@siu.edu

Purpose: Explore use of invented rule task with young English Language Learners to address the following research questions:

1. Are there differences in performance on a novel morpheme task when task is administered in L1 compared with L2?
2. Are there differences in performance on a novel morpheme task based on age of child?
3. Is ability to master novel morpheme task correlated with teacher reports of strong and weak language learners?

• What is an invented rule? Nonsense morpheme added as a suffix to indicate “part of” an object. Each child taught invented rule with explicit description followed by clinician modeling

Participants: 3, 4, & 5 year old children of Mexican descent attended Head Start. All 29 participants were English Language Learners with L1 (Spanish) and L2 (English).

Procedures: Pretest-Teach-Posttest framework. In pretest, participants named 10 pictures. In teach, participants were explicitly informed that he/she would learn a novel morpheme consisting of suffix schwa in English condition or /beI/ in Spanish condition. Clinicians modeled 20 examples of the contrast between the label with the suffix and the label without the suffix. In the Spanish condition, an interpreter modeled the contrast in Spanish. Participant was required to expressively use the suffix in the posttest condition with the initial ten pictures from pretest condition.

Research Design: Within Subjects Design, each participant completed task in English and in Spanish. Order or presentation counterbalanced and two weeks separated each condition.

Results: 5 year old participants performed significantly better than either 3 or 4 year old participants in Spanish (p = .003) and English (p = .005). No significant differences based on language of administration (p=.627). The rate of false negatives (10% of the population tested) in this investigation is consistent with the rate reported by Roseberry and Connell (1991) in their initial work.

Implications: Lack of difference between L1 and L2 suggest learning the invented rule analyzes language processing independent of past language experience.