

Nonword repetition, vocabulary and narrative skills in Arabic/Swedish and Turkish/Swedish-speaking children with and without a diagnosis of DLD

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Abstract

Baseline data concerning the linguistic development of bilingual children in Sweden have hitherto been lacking, as have suitable methods for identifying developmental language disorder (DLD) in bilinguals. We report reference data for 207 bilingual typically-developing (TD) children aged 4;0–8;1 from mixed socioeconomic (SES) backgrounds whose home language is Turkish (N=108) or Arabic (N=99) and who are schooled in the majority language Swedish. The TD data is compared to 17 age- matched bilinguals with a DLD diagnosis.

The children were tested in both their languages on a range of tasks from the LITMUS battery, developed specifically for the assessment of bilinguals (COST Action IS0804, <https://www.bi-sli.org>). We included three types of nonword repetition (NWR) tasks (quasi-universal, cross-linguistic, and language-specific NWR, Abou Melhem et al. 2011, Chiat 2015, Radeborg et al. 2006), measures of receptive and expressive vocabulary (Cross-Linguistic Lexical Tasks, CLT, Haman et al. 2015), and narrative macrostructure comprehension and production (Multilingual Assessment Instrument for Narratives, MAIN, Gagarina et al. 2019). We investigated task performance in relation to age, language exposure, SES, and –for NWR and narratives– in relation to vocabulary.

For the Arabic/Swedish and Turkish/Swedish groups, we found a positive development with age for all tasks, no effects of SES, whilst effects of language exposure and vocabulary differed between tasks. Comparing the bilingual DLD children to their TD peers, there was substantial DLD/TD overlap on every LITMUS task we used, though more so for the production tasks than the comprehension tasks. Surprisingly, diagnostic accuracy was particularly poor for NWR (both language-specific and language-independent tasks). This finding is not in accord with studies that promote NWR as a clinically useful tool for differentiating DLD and TD in bilinguals. For our Turkish/Swedish and Arabic/Swedish children, performance on the comprehension tasks in the minority language (receptive vocabulary, narrative comprehension) turned out to be more informative, but still, diagnostic accuracy was at best suggestive.

Case studies of the DLD children underscore the importance of interpreting language scores in relation to exposure history, and the need for more emphasis on functional language skills as reported by parents and teachers for correctly identifying DLD in bilingual children.

References

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