

Crosslinguistic nonword repetition: Evidence across diverse language communities

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Abstract

Nonword repetition (NWR) is widely taken to be a measure of phonological memory and a potential marker of DLD that is relatively free of language experience, lending it a particular advantage for assessment of children from diverse backgrounds. However, there is extensive evidence that NWR performance, and hence phonological memory, are significantly influenced by knowledge of lexical phonology in the language of testing. Language-specific NWR tests may therefore disadvantage children with reduced or no experience of the language. The aim of the Crosslinguistic Nonword Repetition test (CL-NWR, Chiat, 2015) was to provide a test that was maximally free of language-specific features and might help to identify DLD regardless of language background and experience.

The CL-NWR was administered to geographically, culturally and linguistically diverse samples of Slovak-speaking children aged 3-7 years in Slovakia (N=230), Urdu-speaking children aged 6-10 years in Hong Kong and Pakistan (N=76), and Cantonese-speaking children aged 8-11 years in Hong Kong (N=57). In the younger, Slovak-speaking sample, whole-item scoring found no significant difference between the monolingual group and a mixed-bilingual group, but both gained significantly higher scores than a group of bilingual, socioeconomically disadvantaged and culturally marginalised Roma children. Monolingual children with DLD, however, scored significantly below all three comparator groups including the lower-scoring Roma children. In the older, Urdu- and Cantonese-speaking samples, syllable-level scoring found no significant difference between L1 and L2 typically-developing (TD) groups in Cantonese and between L1-as-majority-language and L1-as-minority-language TD groups in Urdu, and again, L1 groups with DLD scored significantly below both their TD comparator groups.

Results indicate the applicability of the CL-NWR and its potential as a tool for identifying DLD in sociolinguistically disparate communities, and invite further investigation of informativeness across age, scoring methods and language backgrounds, including marginalised groups.