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Using and Online version of the Sentence Repetition Task to Assess Learning of Verb Number Agreement.

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Abstract

Children must understand the distinction between 3s present tense (she plays) and 3p (they play). It is well known that children seem to acquire verb number agreement very early in their development, although errors consisting in the omission of the /-s/ in third singular verbs is well attested in English. This pattern of errors has received different types of explanations, ranging from syntax-based causes (Belth et al., 2021; Wexler, 1998) to constructivist approaches highlighting the lack of productivity during initial stages of development (Pine et al., 2023). However, empirical evidence based on experimental designs is limited for this language. Knowing more about the potential factors affecting these omission errors is important because children with developmental language disorder (DLD) typically find these morphological markers difficult (Bishop, Snowling, & Thompson et al., 2016). The present study includes a 2x3 design, manipulating number agreement (singular/plural) and sentence length with three conditions: 1) shorter subjects and predicates ("The girl jumps a wall"); 2) longer subjects ("The boys with a ball jump a wall"); and 3) long predicates (The boys jump a wall with a rope). Sentences have also been selected with verbs with varying level of frequencies in colloquial English. Although results are still preliminary, the tool shows promising effects. Omission errors (dropping -s in verbs) are not rare, particularly with longer subjects, followed by longer predicates, and finally shorter sentences. The frequency of verbs plays an important role in ability to process items successfully. There are also other methodological aspects to remark. These types or designs are particularly valid for testing 4-6-year-old children, but they are not effective with 2-3 year-old-children. It also shows that the training phase of the experiment constitutes a key factor to achieve successful results. These results open the door for testing the proportion of errors committed by typically developing children and DLD-diagnosed ones matched for MLU. Ideally this design will also allow for collecting matched samples of data for other languages with a much richer complexity in the use of verbs, like Spanish, where plural agreement instead of singular requires adding a suffix (/-n/).