

Evaluating narrative skills in two languages of Singaporean bilingual children

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Abstract

Response to changing demographics around the world, particularly the increase in bilingual speakers, is necessary. The prevalence of language disorders in bilingual children is similar to that of monolingual children but speech pathologists often do not have sufficient information about the language profiles of bilingual children, nor the tools specific to this population of children, resulting in over- and under-diagnoses. Narratives are effective diagnostic tools across cultures to assess children's language abilities. Most research on narrative skills is based on monolingual children, with very limited data on bilingual children. When this necessary information is not yet identified, clinicians face difficulties conducting assessments that truly reflect bilingual children's abilities.

This study investigates narrative language skills of Singaporean English-Mandarin Chinese bilingual children. 36 Singaporean bilingual kindergarten children were sampled and assigned to one of two language dominance groups, English-dominant (EL1-CL2) and balanced (EL-CL), based on parental reports of their language proficiencies and performance on a receptive and expressive vocabulary task in both languages. Audio samples were elicited from retell and recall tasks based on wordless picture books 'Frog Goes to Dinner' and 'One Frog Too Many' and analysed with Computerised Language ANalysis (CLAN) software. Outcome measures included macrostructure and microstructure elements such as story grammar elements, mean length of utterance, lexical diversity, and specific grammatical markers in both languages. The outcome measures were analysed quantitatively with qualitative analysis of errors.

Preliminary findings suggest some convergence between language dominance groups, with both groups producing more complex narratives with more complex utterances in English than Mandarin, indicating an overall shift towards English dominance in Singaporean children and implies a changing linguistic landscape. The study also found nuanced differences between productions from both groups, including the type of errors produced, reflecting the intricate interplay between language dominance, proficiency, and narrative development in bilingual contexts.

This study has direct implication on clinical practice as it informs clinicians about narrative-level skills in Singaporean bilingual children; there is currently no relevant information for this population. Implications also extend to educational practices and bilingual language policies, advocating for earlier and more comprehensive support to facilitate development of both languages.