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Identify Patterns of First and Second Language Use before Evaluating Children's Language Learning

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Commentary

How can clinicians evaluate language learning in bilingual children when they have different levels of proficiency in each language? Wood and colleagues (2020) address this question in "Contributions of Nonverbal Cognitive Skills on Bilingual Children's Grammatical Performance: Influence of Exposure, Task Type, and Language of Assessment." Identifying bilingual children's current pattern of first and second language use is necessary for sensitive and specific measurement of morphosyntactic performance, a clinical marker of development language disorder. Knowing relative language exposure allows education interventionists to 1) accurately interpret a child's morphosyntactic knowledge, 2) identify the relative cognitive demands of evaluation tasks, and 3) inform evidence-based language assessment in diverse education settings.

Patterns of exposure to first and second language input has consequences for language performance. Wood and colleagues found that children's increased exposure to their second language was negatively associated with performance on morphosyntax in their first language. Children may additionally demonstrate mixed dominance depending on manner of elicitation. In this study, findings indicated that 35% of the children scored better in Spanish or English when a cloze task was used and in the opposite language on a narrative task. These results suggest that the task selected to measure morphosyntactic knowledge influences observations of morphosyntactic behavior.

Both elicitation task and the language of administration influenced the contribution of nonverbal cognition to morphosyntactic accuracy, after controlling for language learning experience. Language tasks commonly used in educational settings vary on a continuum from contextualized (e.g., narrative) to decontextualized (e.g., cloze task). In the contextualized narrative task, where children were asked to tell stories about pictures, second language morphosyntactic accuracy was predicted by nonverbal processing speed. Performance on the decontextualized cloze task, where children were asked to produce the morphosyntactic construction needed to complete a sentence, was predicted by both nonverbal processing speed and working memory in the children's second language. Nonverbal cognition did not significantly contribute to accurate first language morphosyntactic accuracy in either task after controlling for age and language exposure. These findings demonstrate second language morphosyntactic performance was more cognitively taxing than producing equivalent knowledge in their first language using identical elicitation paradigms. When comparing children's stronger and weaker languages, only decontextualized morphosyntactic performance in the weaker language was supported by nonverbal informational processing.

This study reaffirms that bilingual children must be evaluated in both their first and second languages to rule out language learning differences when attempting to identify language-based learning disorders. Collection of information about first and second language exposure supports accurate interpretation of language performance patterns. Contextualized language tasks, such as narratives assessment, can be used when evaluating children in their second or weaker language. Decontextualized assessments, such as standardized testing, may be more informative in the child's first or stronger language. Being cognizant of intersecting environmental, inter- and intra-personal factors can lead to more appropriate evaluation for bilingual children. Considering bilingual children's language exposure, as well as the contextual support of the task, can result in more sensitive and specific language assessment for Spanish-speaking English-language learners. Such precision will better allow us to equitably evaluate language learning for bilingual children.

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