

Title: Child L2 learning and Specific Language Impairment: superficially similar but linguistically different

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It is known that bilingual or early second language (EL2) speakers, both children and adults, perform more poorly than monolinguals in some specific language domains, such as vocabulary, lexical access and morphosyntax (Bialystok 2008, 2010, Gollan and Kroll, 2001, Serratrice et al. 2004, Sorace 2011). The attested presence of lexical and morphosyntactic difficulties in bilingual and EL2 children may induce to draw a parallel with children suffering from Specific Language Impairment (SLI) who typically exhibit deficits in the lexical and in the morphosyntactic domain. The presence of these similarities between bilingual and SLI children can have an impact on the identification of SLI in L2 children, resulting in both the over-diagnosing and the under-diagnosing of the impairment. This difficulty is mainly due to the absence of diagnostic tools expressly designed for the identification of language impairments in bilinguals/EL2 learners and to the limited normative data concerning the trajectory of EL2 acquisition (Bedore & Peña 2008).

One way to address the problem is to examine the proficiency of bilingual/EL2 children in those areas that are vulnerable for Italian children with SLI, namely the production of direct object clitic pronouns and the repetition of nonwords (Casalini et al. 2007, Dispaldro et al. 2011, Leonard et al. 2013).

The aim of our study is to provide further insights in this discussion, analyzing the performance of EL2 children in these two areas, which are considered two of the most sensitive clinical markers for SLI in Italian (Bortolini et al. 2002, 2006, Arosio et al. 2014).

An experimental protocol was administered to 120 preschool Italian EL2 children coming from three different L1 (Albanian, Arabic, Romanian), the three more representative language communities in Trentino and a control group of 40 age-matched monolingual Italian children.

All bilingual children had at least one year exposure to Italian; detailed information about their exposure to Italian were collected administering a version of the questionnaire Utrecht Bilingual Language Exposure Calculator (Unsworth et al. 2012) adapted to Italian.

In order to guarantee a homogeneous measure of their nonverbal cognitive ability, all participants were tested in the standardized Raven's Coloured Progressive Matrices test (Raven et al. 1998); subjects who scored 1.5 SD below the mean score for their age were excluded from the sample.

The protocol administered to the children consisted of a nonword repetition task (Cornoldi et al. 2009) and a sentence production task to elicit clitic pronouns. As reported in the literature, Italian SLI children are severely impaired in both tasks.

Results show that, similarly to SLI children, EL2 learners underperform compared to their monolingual peers in the production of clitic pronouns, although they show a different error pattern: the most frequent error displayed by EL2 children is the production of an incorrect clitic, which involves agreement errors, whereas SLI preschool children typically omit the pronoun. With respect to nonword repetition no significant differences have been found between monolingual and EL2 children.

To conclude, our research reveals that EL2 children present a linguistic profile which is qualitatively and quantitatively different from that typically shown by SLI children both in clitic production and in nonword repetition. This suggests that despite the superficial similarities it is possible to discriminate properly between the two populations.

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