

The acquisition of complex syntax by English L2 children with and without SLI

Johanne Paradis

There has been much recent research on morphological acquisition in bilingual/L2 children, with typical development (TD) and with SLI. Much less research has examined syntactic acquisition in these populations and existing studies have focused on comprehension rather than production. Accordingly, this talk reports two corpus-based studies of English L2 children's acquisition of complex sentences in production¹.

Study 1: The goal of this study was to determine 1) similarities/dissimilarities between child L2 and L1 acquisition of complex sentences and 2) the factors predicting individual differences L2 children's acquisition of complex sentences. We analysed language samples (narratives and spontaneous speech) from 187 English L2 children with diverse L1s (Age = 5;10; English exposure = 17 months). L2 children had a greater proportion and diversity of sentences that were complex (18%) within a few months of L2 exposure than what is reported for L1 children aged 2;0-4;0, revealing an advantage for an older age of acquisition. Mixed logistic regression modelling revealed that longer exposure to English in school, richer English environments outside school, larger L2 vocabulary, superior verbal memory and visual analytic reasoning contributed to greater use of complex sentences. L1 typology did not impact complex sentence use in the L2. It is concluded that complex syntax is a relative strength in child L2 learners, in comparison to morphological acquisition; however, the same cognitive and input factors predict morphological and syntactic acquisition (cf. Paradis, 2011; Paradis et al., 2016).

Study 2: The goal of this study was to determine 1) whether production of complex sentences differentiated L2 children with TD from those with SLI and 2) whether the same factors predicted each group's acquisition of complex sentences. Language samples from 42 L2-TD and 21 L2-SLI were analysed using the same methods as Study 1. L2-TD and L2-SLI were matched for age (5;7), and exposure to English (23 months). Mixed logistic modelling showed that L2-TD used significantly more complex sentences than L2-SLI. For both groups, use of complex sentences increased with longer exposure to English; however, older age predicted greater complex sentence use for the L2-SLI but not the L2-TD group. It is concluded that complex syntax, like morphology, shows promise for differentiating L2 children with SLI from their peers with TD, even though complex syntax is a relative strength for child L2 learners. In addition, this study suggests that mechanisms underlying language learning, such as age/cognitive maturation and input quantity, might operate in distinct ways for children with SLI than for their TD peers, consistent with Blom & Paradis (2015).

Bilingual assessment – the road forward (with specific reference to Boerma, 2017)

Jan de Jong

Within COST Action IS0804, a number of assessment tools to be used with bilingual children were developed - together titled LITMUS: Language Impairment Testing in Multilingual Settings ((Armon-Lotem et al, 2015). These tools were designed for application in clinical as

¹ Complex sentences are sentences with more than one clause, e.g., sentences with sentential complements, adverbial clauses, relative clauses or coordinated sentences.

well as research settings. Boerma (2017) included two of the tools for language assessment, non-word repetition and narrative analysis, in her research.

In my contribution, I will explore the current state of these linguistic tools, also including the task for sentence repetition (SRep). I will use Boerma's study to illustrate the added value of these tasks for research purposes, while also highlighting their applicability in diagnostic practice. The LITMUS tools have universal features (meaning they can be applied across languages) as well as language-specific ingredients (respecting the typological differences). Both aspects will be illustrated.

Enhancing Learning of Multilingual Children from a Linguistic Minority: A Randomised Controlled Trial in Portuguese-Speaking Children from Luxembourg.

Pascale Engel de Abreu

Luxembourg has three official languages (Luxembourgish, German and French). Portuguese immigrant children represent 22% of Luxembourg's school population and are the most vulnerable group in terms of language and reading proficiency. They present language weaknesses in their school languages as well as their mother tongue Portuguese. Research suggests that children who start school with a well-established mother tongue are likely to develop strong abilities in their second languages.

The aim of this project is to develop and evaluate the effectiveness of a mother tongue-based preschool language intervention on oral language and literacy outcomes of Portuguese language-minority children. Within a randomised controlled study design, a 30-weeks long intervention was developed to target both oral language and phonological awareness skills. 186 Portuguese-speaking children from 16 preschools across Luxembourg were assessed in Portuguese and Luxembourgish and were randomly assigned to the intervention group or an active control condition. The question of how to implement a mother tongue oral language programme given existing socio-political and educational contexts will be discussed and preliminary data from the first 20 weeks of the intervention will be presented.