

Assessing bilingual children in both languages: vocabulary, grammar and narrative abilities in Welsh-English school-aged bilingual children

Vicky Chondrogianni
University of Edinburgh

Bilingual children are frequently found to underperform on language assessments developed for monolingual (L1) children and to show performance rates similar to those of children with language impairment (see Paradis, 2010 for an overview). At the same time, studies have shown that performance in the L2 can be mediated by the linguistic domain being examined (Chondrogianni & Marinis, 2011). The present study investigates how bilingual children with typical development (TD) perform in both of their languages across three different domains: vocabulary, grammar and narrative abilities.

23 school-aged (6-8 years) sequential bilingual L1-Welsh L2-English TD children were tested on the comprehension of single word vocabulary in both Welsh (*Prawf Geirfa*, Gathercole & Thomas, 2007) and in English (*BPVS*, Dunn et al., 2008), and on four tasks developed within the COST Action IS0804 “Language Impairment in a Multilingual Society: Linguistic Patterns and the Road to Assessment”: the COST-MAIN tasks for English (Gagarina et al., 2012) and for Welsh (Chondrogianni, Davies, Thomas, 2013), and the SASIT-32 for English (Marinis & Armon-Lotem, 2014) and its Welsh version (Chondrogianni et al., 2013). A group of 20 monolingual (L1) age-matched controls also participated in the study. All children were matched on SES.

Results from the vocabulary tasks showed that the bilingual children were dominant in Welsh, as their higher vocabulary scores in Welsh compared to English, and their lower vocabulary scores compared to their L1 English counterparts demonstrated. The children’s dominance in Welsh was confirmed by their performance on the sentence repetition task. The Welsh-English bilingual children had higher performance on the Welsh than on the English version of the task, and they differed from their L1 counterparts on the English task. The bilingual children also demonstrated different performance patterns compared to that of other bilingual children reported in the literature (Komeili & Marshall, 2013), exhibiting higher error rates and different error profiles.

However, in terms of narrative abilities, the bilingual children performed similarly across their two languages both in terms of macrostructure, as measured by story structure, structural complexity and mental state terms, as well as on microstructure, measured by Mean Length of Utterance (MLU), total number of words and type/token ratio. Comprehension of narratives across the two languages was the same for both English and Welsh. Across languages, performance was improved on the retelling condition compared to the telling condition, and in some cases, gains were greater in the L2 (English) than in the L1 (Welsh).

These results raise important implications for the assessment of bilingual children across different tasks. We conclude by discussing the implications for assessing the language abilities of children with and without language impairment and we present a preliminary study for assessing language impairment in Welsh-English bilingual children.