The Acquisition of the Syntax and Morphology of the English Spoken in Singapore: Evidence from preschool speakers of Singapore Colloquial English

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Abstract

The language environment in Singapore is complex. Consequently, assessment of children's language skills is challenging. Singapore has four official languages (English, Mandarin, Malay, Tamil) and many unofficial languages (e.g. Chinese/Indian dialects). There are two distinct forms of English: Singapore Standard English (SStdE) and Singapore Colloquial English (SCE). SStdE is the medium of education, but SCE is most likely to be spoken with young children. Despite this complexity, in Singapore there is little information on acquisition of the local languages and few locally standardised assessments. This study seeks to address this lack of information because such information is needed to enable differential diagnosis between language impairment (LI) and language difference in multilingual children.

The initial component of this study investigated whether modifying the Renfrew Action Picture Test (RAPT) to make it more culturally and linguistically appropriate for assessing the language of Chinese Singaporean preschoolers would allow them to produce better samples of their English expressive language abilities.

One hundred and six English-Mandarin bilingual children aged 4-5 years were tested using the modified assessment (Singapore English Action Picture Test, SEAPT), the original RAPT and, as there was a change from colour pictures to line drawings, a line-drawn version of the RAPT (LRAPT). The results showed that the SEAPT elicited more representative samples of expressive vocabulary and grammar in English than the original RAPT and LRAPT.

Interesting differences were observed between the English spoken by children who spoke mainly English in the home (EL1) and mainly Mandarin in the home (ML1). The second component of this study investigated the emergence of morphosyntax characteristic of SCE and SStdE in the expressive language samples of English-Mandarin bilingual Chinese Singaporean preschoolers. The study considered specific characteristics of language that are clinically useful for Speech Pathologists in the assessment and diagnosis of LI, rather than a comprehensive linguistic description of the English spoken in Singapore by these children.

Expressive language samples in English were collected from 481 children aged between 3;9 years and 6;8 years (236 EL1, 245 ML1) using the SEAPT. The data were analysed to determine differences between main language groups across ages in patterns of use and errors in use of morphosyntax.

The results showed differences in order and acquisition of many aspects of syntax and morphology between the two language groups. The EL1 group acquire both SCE and SStdE, but with differences in rate of acquisition of morphosyntax in comparison with Standard English (StdE) spoken around the world. The ML1 participants' development of English differs significantly to the patterns of development shown by the EL1 children, as well as to monolingual StdE speaking children, with these children acquiring only SCE in their preschool years.

The results from each language group are discussed with reference to the diagnosis of LI in bilingual/multilingual children, including implications for education.

Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text

Signed C M Brebner

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Dedication

To my boys Phil, Alec and Cullen.