

How early L2 children perform on Italian clinical markers of SLI: A study of clitic production and nonword repetition

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ABSTRACT

Early second language (EL2) learners generally perform more poorly than monolinguals in specific language domains, presenting similarities with children affected by specific language impairment (SLI). As a consequence, it can be difficult to correctly diagnose this disorder in EL2 children. The current study investigated the performance of 120 EL2 and 40 age-matched monolingual children in object clitic production and nonword repetition, which are two sensitive clinical markers of SLI in Italian. Results show that EL2 children underperform in comparison to monolinguals in the clitic task. However, in contrast to what is reported on Italian-speaking children with SLI, EL2 children tend not to omit clitics but instead produce the incorrect form, committing agreement errors. No differences are found between EL2 and monolingual children on nonword repetition. These results suggest that, at least in Italian, EL2 children only superficially resemble children with SLI and, on closer inspection, present a qualitatively and quantitatively different linguistic profile.

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Introduction

One of the most interesting challenges posed by bilingualism concerns the identification of language impairments in bilingual children and early second language learners (EL2). In fact, bilingual and EL2 children often perform more poorly in comparison to their monolingual peers in specific language domains. A number of studies have shown that bilinguals have a smaller vocabulary in both languages than monolinguals and underperform in standardized receptive vocabulary tests (Bialystok, Luk, Peets, & Yang, 2010; Oller, Pearson, & Cobo-Lewis, 2007). Moreover, weaknesses have been found in the domain of morphosyntax, especially in those tasks, which impose high processing costs (Serratrice, Sorace, & Paoli, 2004; Sorace, Serratrice, Filiaci, & Baldo, 2009). The attested presence of lexical and morphosyntactic difficulties in bilingual and EL2 children may invite to draw a parallel with children suffering from specific language impairment (SLI). Furthermore, the increased attention to the recognition of disabilities and of the importance of providing prompt services to affected children are leading communities to seek information about how to identify SLI in bilingual environments.

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