

## **Critical Review: Do Expressive Language Characteristics Distinguish Children with Language Impairment from Children with English as a Second Language?**

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This critical review examines whether expressive language characteristics are able to distinguish children with Specific Language Impairment from children who are learning English as a Second Language. Overall, the research suggests that there is significant overlap between the two groups in the amount and types of errors made on expressive language tasks such as use of tense and morphology. However, tasks less dependent on previous language such as non-word repetition can provide informative results in assessment, but is still limited in its utility as a diagnostic tool.

### ***Introduction***

Children identified as having Specific Language Impairment (SLI) show significant limitations in language skills that cannot be attributed to problems of hearing, neurological status, nonverbal intelligence or other known factors (Leonard, 1997). SLI identification is based on both inclusion and exclusion criteria including language test scores of at least 1.25 standard deviations below the mean language ability of a child's peers, and age-appropriate nonverbal intelligence. A list of criteria can become complex when having to distinguish SLI from other conditions involving similar language deficits. Children learning English as a Second Language (ESL) may show below-average linguistic abilities that mimic those of children with SLI (Paradis, 2005). Problems may manifest regarding over-identification and under-identification of SLI in children who are culturally and linguistically diverse.

The Canadian population is exponentially growing in multicultural diversity with 21.4% of children aged 0-14 being of linguistic minority, that is, have neither English nor French as their first language (Statistics Canada, 2006). This statistic implies that potentially one fifth of speech-language pathologists' caseloads will be ESL children. The amount of research available

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This study provided level II experimental evidence, one level below the most ideal, „gold standard“ of experimental design. The researcher had more than one hypothesis, and not all were supported. A comparison group of SLI children tested concurrently with the ESL children would have yielded stronger, more clinically relevant results to provide more compelling evidence. A design strategy that included a comparison group may rule out possible extraneous effects of the testing procedure or environment. Despite this weakness, a clinician may consider this study's results during the language assessment process. There was a significant overlap in morphological patterns and scores obtained in a standardized assessment setting, and this should be taken into consideration during language assessments of ESL children in clinical practice.

An extensive cohort study was conducted by Paradis, Rice, Crago and Marquis (2008) that examined the pattern of acquisition of tense morphology in 24 typically developing monolingual children, 24 typically developing ESL children with various first language backgrounds and 20 children with SLI. This highly theoretical study sought to document the extent of similarities and dissimilarities between typically developing monolingual (TDL1), ESL, and SLI tense morpheme acquisition in English. The researchers wanted to determine whether English as a second language acquisition was similar to one of two hypothesized patterns. Although the study does not directly answer the research question posed by this critical review, the data yielded from the study provides important information that may be used to support this review's findings. Each group was tested at a single point in time and morphology was compared thorough statistical analysis. Observations of ESL children and children with SLI and are the focus of this review, and the number of similarities between the two populations was close to the number of differences.

Equivalence among all groups of children was determined by selecting children within the same mean length of utterance in morphemes (MLUM) range of the ESL group. Elicitation probes from the TEGI were given to all groups, followed by the TEGI grammatical judgement task administered to the ESL group and SLI group only, as the L1 group was too young to participate. Spontaneous speech samples were also taken.

Several measures were taken in effort to control extraneous variables from affecting the results. A within-groups analysis for the ESL data was conducted to see if months exposure to English (MOE) and if background in native language skewed the results. Pearson correlations were performed between each of the outcome variables for elicitation and grammatical judgement. MOE was not revealed to be influential enough to skew the results for this group. The ESL

children were then divided by the presence of tense versus nontense in their native language. The Mann-Whitney U nonparametric unpaired group test was used to compare tense and nontense groups for each of the outcome variables. The researchers sought to find whether there was a pre-existing relationship between each of the outcome variables and the presence or absence of tense in a native language. None were significant at  $p < .05$  level, and therefore presence or absence of tense was not deemed influential.

Level II evidence was obtained from this study. It was well designed in its efforts to control for many extraneous factors that could have potentially influenced the results by correlating MOE, and presence of tense in the native language to the outcome measures. Selection of subjects within a specific MLUM range also strengthened this study to ensure MLUM was not a factor skewing the quality of speech samples obtained. A potential limitation is that there was no mention of whether the researchers were blinded to the subjects when administering the tests or when obtaining spontaneous language samples. Through complex statistical analysis, the authors appropriately sought to fit the morphological profiles of each group into a hypothesized pattern of acquisition. In turn, the comparisons made between ESL children and children with SLI provided information for the research question presented in this review. Overlap is seen among the data yielded from expressive language testing. This overlap further blurs the line of distinction between expressive language characteristics of children with SLI and that of ESL children. Expressive language characteristics such as morphology may not have the ability to provide a robust distinction between ESL children and children with SLI, and assessment test results spawned from these measures should be

of the PLI group in which their language impairment was documented. With regards to PLI and BI performance specifically, the two groups performed equivocally during the word recognition language tasks.



The evidence provided by the studies included in this critical review was not strong enough to advocate a change in clinical practice. However, the overlap seen in expressive language characteristics implies that there is a potential for misidentification. ESL children may be over-identified as having SLI should the clinician see their expressive language errors as part of second language learning, not the language impairment. Conversely, ESL children who have SLI may be under-identified should their errors due to language impairment be attributed to the process of second language learning. Since a definite distinction between the two groups was not seen, it is recommended that clinicians strive to complete the most thorough and comprehensive assessment possible to give the most

