
The comprehension of nouns and verbs in Maltese-English bilingual children: using cross-linguistic tasks to explore typical trends and clinical performance

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Abstract

There is a paucity of research addressing the lexical skills of Maltese school-aged children. For the clinical population, the only available standardised assessment that addresses lexical skills, alongside morphosyntactic and narrative abilities, derives naturalistic measures from a story re-tell task (Grech, Franklin and Dodd, 2011). Although clinically useful, the procedure involved is laborious and time-consuming. Assessment tools for Maltese children that specifically address vocabulary size through a structured approach are not available. This paper reports on the comprehension and expression of nouns and verbs in 56 typically-developing Maltese children aged between 5;0 and 5;6 years who were attending their first year of primary schooling. Depending on their bilingual status, each participant was assigned to one of three sub-cohorts, a Maltese-dominant sequential bilingual group (N = 20), an English-dominant sequential bilingual group (N = 15) and a simultaneous bilingual group (N = 21). Bilingual status was determined on the basis of preliminary parental opinion at the consent stage. Further information on the children's developmental and language background was gathered using the Questionnaire for Parents of Bilingual Children (PaBiQ) (COST IS0804, 2011). Maltese and British English Cross-Linguistic Lexical Tasks, designed within COST Action IS0804 (Haman, Luniewska & Pomiechowska, 2015), were administered to the participants, so that their comprehension and production of nouns and verbs in each of their two languages could be gauged. Means and standard deviations of receptive and expressive scores for nouns and verbs in both languages were derived for each bilingual group. Data were analysed for differences in language performance within each group. Receptive and expressive measures were also examined for differences across language groups. Findings will be discussed in terms of trends observed in the lexical skills of the typically-developing participants. The paper also reports on a follow-up study in which a Maltese-dominant boy with language impairment, aged 6;2 years, was assessed using the same tasks. Despite the age difference, his scores were compared to the data obtained from the typically-developing Maltese-dominant group, the latter providing important preliminary reference measures against which to evaluate the clinical data. The potential of joint use of the Maltese and British English Cross-Linguistic Lexical Tasks in assisting the evaluation and diagnosis of vocabulary skills in language-impaired Maltese children will be discussed.

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References

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