
Using MAIN as a tool for the elicitation and the access of grammatical knowledge of Swedish-Russian bilingual children attending Russian mother tongue instruction

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Abstract

The purpose of this presentation is to show how MAIN (Gagarina et al. 2012) can be used for testing grammatical knowledge of young bilingual children who attend mother tongue instruction in Sweden, with special focus on identifying bilingual features in the children's morphosyntax. It is important for mother tongue teachers to be aware of the underlying problems of the children's language abilities in order to guide intervention process and give these children adequate and effective assistance during one hour of language instruction per week as is provided to them by the Swedish municipality. It is also important to have an instrument that can (if needed) screen the children in both languages in order to identify children at risk for SLI. A well-designed narrative task is crucial for eliciting valid linguistic material from the child in order to give teachers an idea about the child's linguistic abilities. 12 Swedish-Russian bilingual children, aged between 6-9 years and living in the Stockholm area, were the subjects of this study. Russian children in Sweden are a rare and under-investigated population. However, they can provide interesting new data that will enable us to gain fundamentally new insights into the process of bilingual language acquisition where one language is the dominant and stronger one whereas the other is the weaker one which deserves therefore as much support as possible.

Method: Parental questionnaires were collected for every child in order to receive the background information needed about each child. The narrative data were collected both in Russian and in Swedish and analyzed in terms of macro- and microstructure. Yet, this presentation will focus on the microstructure of the child's narratives, since it was in microstructure that the most differences between the children's languages were found. The studies of microstructure features in bilingual children are still very few, especially when it comes to studies examining both of a child's languages (see Gagarina et al. 2012). Usually only one of the languages (L2) is studied.

The results have shown that the children's mistakes were not homogenous but totally different ranging from (1) those mistakes that are typical for monolingual TD children, to (2) those mistakes that were characteristic of children with SLA, and finally (3) those mistakes also to be found in an SLI population. The main focus of the present analysis has been laid on case and gender errors in the weaker language (Russian). The mistakes detected as well as the differences between the children will be discussed on the background of the amount

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of input the children received (as reported by the parents). Agreement and case errors have been identified as clinical markers of SLI (Rothweiler, Chilla & Babur 2010). Yet, in our data they were present in a weaker language of TD children as well.

References:

Gagarina, N., Klop D., Kunnari S., Tantele K., V'álimaa T., Balciuniene, I., Bonacker U., Walters J. (2012). MAIN: Multilingual Assessment Instrument for Narratives. ZASPiL 56.

Rothweiler, M., Chilla, S., & Babur E. (2010). Specific Language Impairment in Turkish: Evidence from case morphology in German – Turkish successive bilinguals. *Clinical Linguistics & Phonetics*, 24 (7), 540 – 555.