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# Language assessment at age 4 for bilingual learners of German – How many norms do we need?

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## Abstract

A fair assessment of children's language abilities requires taking into account whether a child is multilingual or monolingual (Bedore/Peña 2008). While early second language (eL2) learners (AoO 2;0- 4;0 years, Meisel, 2009) have been shown to often perform below monolingual (MON) children in standardized tasks (Paradis, 2005), findings on simultaneous bilingual children (2L1) are less clear. Many acquisition studies have found that 2L1 largely equals MON acquisition (e.g., Genessee/Nicoladis, 2007, Paradis, Genessee & Crago 2011 for overviews). These studies mostly focused on children's developmental pattern for a single phenomenon across time and less on specific language abilities at a certain age, as required in typical language assessments. Moreover, these studies did not directly compare language abilities of 2L1 learners to those of same-aged MON and eL2 peers across a range of different linguistic tasks, as is the case in typical assessment contexts. Our study aimed at filling this gap by analyzing the language abilities of 2L1, MON and eL2 children regarding production and comprehension of a range of core morpho-syntactic and semantic properties. We focused on children aged 4-5 years, as this is a typical age of institutional language assessment in many countries.

Research question: How do 2L1 children perform in comparison to their monolingual age-peers and to their eL2 age-peers across different linguistic tasks?

Sample: Three groups of children were tested: 2L1 children (n=22; mean age 4;1 years; AoO: 0 years), eL2 learners of German (n=47; mean age: 4;1 years; mean AoO: 35 months; mean LoE: 16 months), MON German children (n=37; mean age: 4;1 years). The 2L1 and eL2 children had different L1s (mostly Turkish, Arabic and Slavic languages). All children showed age-appropriate nonverbal IQ (assessed via K-ABC), were not assigned to speech-language intervention and had no indication of hearing deficits (assessed via parental questionnaire).

Method: Children's language abilities in German were measured via the standardized test Lise-DaZ (XX 2011). Using a picture-with-question-design, LiSe-DaZ assesses comprehension skills in three sub-scales: Verb meaning, Wh-questions, Negation. Production abilities were assessed via an elicited production task using a picture book. Analyses included eight sub-scales: Word classes (Conjunctions, Prepositions, Focus particles, Main verbs, Auxiliary and modal verbs), Case, Sentence structure, and Subject-verb agreement. These phenomena have been shown to be indicative of SLI in German (Clahsen, 1988; XXX 2012).

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Results: Group differences (2L1, eL2, MON) were examined via Kruskal-Wallis-Tests. Significant group differences were followed by Sheffé Post Hoc comparisons. Significant group differences were found for 9/11 subscales (n.s.: Focus particles and Auxiliaries/modal verbs). Post-hoc analyses comparing 2L1 and MON children showed significantly lower performances of the 2L1 group in the comprehension subscales Wh-questions and Negation, and in the production subscales Sentence structure and Case (all  $p$ 's < .02). Post hoc comparisons of 2L1 and eL2 learners showed significantly better performances of the 2L1 group in the production subscales Conjunctions, Prepositions, and Subject-verb agreement (all  $p$ 's < .02).

Discussion & conclusion: The present study is the first one comparing 2L1, MON, and eL2 learners across the same battery of language tasks. 2L1 children's language abilities at age 4 resembled neither the monolingual nor the eL2 group. In contrast to previous acquisition research that emphasized parallels to monolingual children, our study revealed that when assessing language abilities across different tasks, preschool-aged 2L1 children exhibit a unique profile. When treated like monolingual children, they are likely to be overdiagnosed; when grouped with the eL2 learners they are likely to be underdiagnosed. We conclude that 2L1 learners at age 4-5 need a separate norm in language assessment tools aimed at detecting language impairment.

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