**BI-SLI 2015**

ANONYMOUS ABSTRACT SUBMISSION FORM

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**Title of presentation:**

**The impact of language experience on sentence repetition: How do children in immersion education compare to simultaneous bilinguals?**

**Abstract proposal for** (EITHER delete as appropriate OR leave both, if you are willing to present either, and rank order them):

1. **Oral presentation**
2. **Poster**

**Anonymous abstract (up to 2 pages – 800 words maximum, references included)**

# The impact of language experience on sentence repetition: How do children in immersion education compare to simultaneous bilinguals?

Variation in language performance across bilingual children is often attributed to factors such as age and quality and quantity of exposure. This variability contributes to the challenge of distinguishing between typically developing bilinguals (Bi-TD) and bilinguals with SLI (Bi-SLI). As part of the LITMUS tools developed within the Cost Action IS0804, sentence repetition (SR) tasks were designed to elicit different performance patterns from Bi-TD and Bi-SLI. The aim of the current study is to see how a group of Bi-TD children with little exposure to French perform on the French SR task (Prévost et al., 2012).

Prior work on monolingual children with SLI (Mo-SLI) has demonstrated that SR tasks are an effective assessment tool (Conti-Ramsden et al., 2001). Moreover, clausal embedding (e.g., Tuller et al., 2012) and certain types of wh-movement (e.g., Friedmann & Novogrodsky, 2011) have been shown to create difficulties for children with SLI. The SR tasks were therefore designed to vary in terms of embedding and wh-movement and were controlled for length and word frequency (Marinis & Armon-Lotem, to appear). Using the French SR task, Fleckstein et al. (2013) found that identical repetition distinguished between the Bi-TD and children with SLI. However, the Bi-TD were simultaneous bilinguals growing up in France. It is unclear how bilinguals with less exposure would perform on such a task. It may be that SR tasks present biases against bilinguals with limited exposure to the L2 (Thordardottir & Brandeker, 2013), thereby underestimating their abilities.

The present paper addresses this issue by using the French SR task (Table 1) with children learning French in an immersion school (Bi-IMRS) in St. John's, Newfoundland, an English-speaking community. These children receive instruction in French, but do not speak it outside of school or with their peers. While most research on Bi-SLI focuses on bilinguals acquiring a majority L2 in school, the inclusion of the Bi-IMRS allows for examination of age-matched learners with less daily exposure to the L2. Although the identification of SLI in this context is much less challenging because of clear L1 dominance and widely available clinical resources in the L1, immersion teachers may be slower to identify children with SLI when all instruction occurs in the L2.

Data collection is ongoing, but preliminary results include 10 first graders, who also completed kindergarten in the same immersion program. In these grades, (European) French is the exclusive language of instruction. These children were tested at about 18 months after their onset of exposure to French, but their cumulative exposure is about 4 months, following Unsworth (2013). The Bi-IMRS (mean age: 6;10, *SD*: 0;3) are compared to Fleckstein et al.'s French-English Bi-TD (mean age: 6;9, SD: 1;1), Mo-SLI (mean age: 7;8, *SD*: 0;9) and TD monolingual (Mo-TD, mean age: 6;0, *SD*: 0;4) groups (Table 2).

Results reveal that the Bi-IMRS patterned more closely with the Mo-SLI than the Bi-TD for identical repetition (Table 2). All groups performed weakest on complement and relative clauses. Despite overlap in overall performance, the Bi-IMRS made more substitution than omission errors (Figure 1), whereas the opposite was true for the Mo-SLI.

These results suggest that while the identical repetition measure is appropriate for bilinguals with sufficient exposure to the target language, it may penalize other types of TD bilinguals. The discussion focuses on scoring schemas that may better tease apart the effects of limited language exposure and atypical development on language performance in bilinguals.

## References


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Table 1. Details of the Sentence Repetition (SR) Task (30 total test items)

| Target structure | Number | Length: Mean # of syllables |
|---|---|---|
| Monoclausal (present tense) | 6 | 6.7 |
| Monoclausal (past tense) | 6 | 8.7 |
| Root Wh-question | 6 | 7.0 |
| Complement Clause | 6 | 11.8 |
| Relative Clause | 6 | 11.3 |

Table 2. Group Performance on the SR Task

| | Identical Repetition (/30 total)[a] | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Group** | **Mean number correct** | **SD** | **Min** | **Max** |
| Bi-IMRS (n = 10) | 10.1 (34%) | 3.8 | 4 | 15 |
| Bi-TD (n = 11) | 24.2 (81%) | 8.3 | 3 | 30 |
| Mo-SLI (n = 9) | 15.6 (52%) | 7.7 | 0 | 25 |
| Mo-TD (n = 17) | 26.4 (88%) | 3.4 | 18 | 30 |

[a] An exact repetition of the test sentence.

Figure 1. Error Types in the Bi-IMRS compared to Mo-SLI