



# Assessing the narrative abilities of Spanish-speaking preschool children: A Spanish adaptation of the narrative assessment protocol



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 30 May 2015

Received in revised form

28 December 2015

Accepted 29 December 2015

Available online 4 February 2016

### Keywords:

Assessment

Progress monitoring

Narrative language

Preschool

Spanish

## ABSTRACT

Driven by the need for valid progress monitoring tools of language and early literacy for Spanish-speaking preschool children, we investigated the utility of a Spanish-language adaptation of a tool designed to evaluate and monitor preschoolers' language growth in a narrative context. Participants included sixty Spanish-speaking children between the ages of three and four enrolled in community-based preschool classrooms. Child narrative retells were collected both in the fall and spring. Following coding procedures of the original English protocol, narratives were transcribed and scored according to 27 features within five categories: sentence structure, phrase structure, modifiers, nouns, and verbs. Nine additional features appropriate to Spanish were included in the analysis. Analysis of construct, concurrent, and predictive validity supported the utility of both long and short versions of the Spanish adaptation. Several differences between the original English version and Spanish adaptation emerged. In particular, the inclusion of features related to number-gender agreement and regular imperfect verb tense benefited the tool. Spanish-speaking participants produced more tier-two verbs than tier-two nouns. In conclusion, the tool holds promise as an efficient way to monitor Spanish-speaking preschoolers' progress in language development in a narrative context.

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## 1. Introduction

Young children's language development is an important predictor of later literacy and language skills and, subsequently, school achievement (Baker, Simmons, & Kame'enui, 1998; Cunningham and Stanovich, 1997; National Early Literacy Panel [NELP], 2008). Children's language development is particularly important for reading achievement through its relation with children's reading comprehension skills, with children with stronger language skills being better prepared for the academic discourse found in classrooms (Gough and Tunmer, 1986; Ricketts, Nation, & Bishop, 2007; Snow, 2010). The importance of children's early language ability to later academic success and the rapid rate at which children acquire language during the preschool years highlight the importance of early childhood programs to children's later achievement (Beck and McKeown, 2007; McMurray, 2007). High-quality early childhood experiences can promote children's language development in ways that contribute to future achievement (Li, Farkaas,

Duncan, Burchinal, & Vandell, 2013), particularly for children who are dual language learners (Buysse, Eisner-Feinberg, Paez, Hammer, & Knowles, 2014; Yazejian, Bryant, Freel, & Burchinal, 2015).

The accurate and valid assessment of children's language development is necessary to implement programming that supports high-quality instructional practices, early identification, and remediation for children. In particular, progress monitoring assessments are important for enhancing and differentiating instruction to meet individual children's needs. Unfortunately, relatively little information is available about how to monitor children's growth in language skills, despite extant research indicating that numerous language-based skills such as vocabulary, complex sentence production, narrative knowledge, and reading comprehension are important for language and literacy instruction (Boulinea, Fore, Hagan-Burke, & Burke, 2004; Gillam and Justice, 2010; Montgomery and Kahn, 2003; Nathanson, Crank, Saywitz, & Ruegg, 2007). Moreover, the majority of standardized assessments used to measure young children's language ability are norm-referenced and designed to compare children's performance with their same-age peers at one point in time, rather than criterion-referenced or curriculum-based to evaluate progress over time (Compton, 2000). The ways that many standardized language achievement tests are

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developed make them less valuable for classroom teachers and provide a narrow assessment of their general language skill.

Not surprisingly, concerns associated with the quantity and quality of progress monitoring assessments are even more perplexing for culturally and linguistically diverse learners. In particular, young Dual Language Learners (DLLs) present an urgent yet complicated population for educators to serve effectively in early learning environments (Garcia and Jensen, 2009). Numerous studies have found evidence that supports Cummins (1979) linguistic interdependence hypothesis, which predicts that children with strong language and literacy skills in their first language are more likely to develop strong skills in their second language (Anthony et al., 2009; Dickinson, McCabe, Clark-Chiarelli, & Wolf, 2004; Durgunoglu, Nagy, & Hancin-Bhatt, 1993; Goodrich, Lonigan, & Farver, 2013; Gorman, 2012). Such findings support the benefit of monitoring Spanish-speaking children's development in Spanish. Although a growing body of research has contributed to our understanding of the language and learning needs of DLLs, more research is needed to enhance our understanding of how best to monitor their development of critical language skills (Gutiérrez, Zepeda, & Castro, 2010; Tabors and Snow, 2001). Thus, this study investigated the utility of a progress-monitoring tool for Spanish-speaking children in a language context that is particularly important in preschool curricula: narration.

### 1.1. Linguistic diversity in early childhood contexts

The native tongue of approximately one in five children in the United States over the age of five is a language other than English, with Spanish being the second most common language after English (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). Latino American children constitute the largest and fastest growing ethnic group in the U.S., and the second largest group of children enrolled in public schools after European American children (Castro, Mendez, Garcia, & Westerberg, 2012). At the preschool level, Latino children represent 36% of the enrollment in Head Start programs (Administration for Children, Youth, and Families, 2013). Children from low-income homes, such as those enrolled in Head Start, who participate in high quality preschool programs are more likely to develop foundational social-emotional, language, and literacy skills for later successful language and literacy achievement than their peers who do not attend preschool programs or are enrolled in lower-quality programs (Bowman, Donovan, & Burns, 2001; Currie and Thomas, 1999; Henry, Gordon, Mashburn, & Ponder, 2001; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

Importantly, a large percentage of Hispanic/Latino children speak and/or hear Spanish spoken in the home (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Building children's language and literacy skills in preschool and prekindergarten appears tantamount to ensuring school success and may be key to reducing the achievement gap between DLL children and their monolingual peers (August and Shanahan, 2006). Given the growing number of Latino children in early childhood contexts, effective language progress monitoring measures are urgently needed for children who speak Spanish.

### 1.2. Language assessment for young Spanish DLLs

Early childhood is a critical time to monitor and build the language skills of DLLs (Hammer, Jia, & Uchikoshi, 2011; Hoff, 2013). Despite a recent surge in calls for additional research emphasizing DLL children, measures of language development and growth for Spanish-speaking children are currently inadequate for the appropriate monitoring and assessment of children's language skills (Hammer et al., 2011). The majority of existing measures are standardized, norm-referenced tests designed to document language ability at one point in time (Compton, 2000). In addition, the format

of many of these assessments present challenges to preschoolers from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. For example, children may be less comfortable with the testing context of being asked questions to which the examiner already knows the answer (for a review, see Peña and Halle, 2011).

### 1.3. Narrative assessments for young children

Increasingly, researchers have conveyed concern not only about the availability of appropriate language assessments for young children, but also about how to assess the wide array of language skills that may contribute to more advanced reading comprehension skills and later reading achievement. Assessment of young children's oral narratives is one method that has recently gained attention as a reliable measure of children's developing complex language skills (Justice, Bowles, Pence, & Gosse, 2010; Paris and Paris, 2003; Pearson, 2002). Because young children are often exposed to narrative stories at home and in early schooling, oral narratives appear to be an authentic and useful task for assessing children's developing language skills (Dickinson and Snow, 1987; Paris and Paris, 2003). Although children's narratives have been assessed in many ways, the measure typically consists of the child recounting or retelling a real or fictional story and evaluating the story at the macrostructure or microstructure level (Justice et al., 2010; Terry, Mills, Bingham, Mansour, & Marencin, 2013). Narrative macrostructure includes more global characteristics of story grammar and typically involves judging the quality of specific elements of the story (e.g., characters, mental states, plot, resolution). Conversely, narrative microstructure includes the internal linguistic structure of the story and typically involves judging the use of specific language forms and vocabulary (e.g., use of grammatical and syntactic structures, decontextualized language, cohesive devices).

Importantly, with regard to evaluating young children's language ability, assessments of children's narrative microstructure document their use of syntactic, morphological, and lexical structures in an authentic context. Recently, Justice et al. developed a measure of young children's narrative microstructure in a story retell context: the Narrative Assessment Protocol (NAP; Justice et al., 2010). The NAP assesses 18 skills in the following dimensions: sentence structure, phrase structure, modifiers, nouns, and verbs. Psychometric analyses of the tool indicate strong interrater reliability across dimensions and across coding format (i.e., coded from either transcripts or online videos). Moreover, construct and criterion-related validity was established within a relatively large sample ( $n = 262$ ) assessed in the fall and spring of the school year. The investigators conducted factor analyses on all 18 items of the NAP long form to examine the factorial structure of children's NAP scores, collected in the fall and spring. Based on examination of the scree plot and eigenvalues, they found that a single factor emerged for both fall and spring scores. Six NAP items did not meet the .4 factor loading cutoff at both time points; because these items did not impact the factor structure, they removed these items to create a more easily utilized NAP short form. Significant correlations were observed between performance on the *Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals-Preschool, 2nd Edition* (Wiig, Secord, & Semel, 2004) and the NAP. Moreover, children who were receiving special education services performed significantly less well on both measures. Overall, the results support the utility of the NAP as a progress monitoring tool and also as a potential diagnostic tool for identification of language impairment in English-speaking preschoolers.

As promising as the NAP and other narrative measures, comparable reliable and valid measures for Spanish-speaking preschool children are unavailable. Researchers have investigated the microstructure of DLLs' narratives as a means to document language growth and to predict later performance. For example,

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