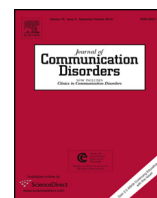




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# Assessing successive bilinguals in two languages: A longitudinal look at English-speaking children in France



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## ABSTRACT

This study examines longitudinal standardized test scores in both languages of a group of successive bilinguals with L1 English acquiring L2 French. Participants included 22 native English-speaking children living in France. French was evaluated using a standardized receptive vocabulary test, as well as tests of phonology and morphosyntax. English was evaluated using the Core Language Score subtests from the CELF-4-UK. The children varied in age (6;9–12;7) and length of exposure (0;11–3;9) to French and were tested twice at 12-month intervals. At T1, 7 children scored below norms in both languages, while only 3 did so at T2. Two out of these 3 were arguably not typically developing children. Length of exposure to French emerged as an important factor only at T1, when a number of children were in early stages of acquisition ( $\leq 18$  months of exposure). English scores varied by age and weekly use of English. In successive bilingual children, language performance on L2 standardized tests can be expected to be (well) below norms during the first 18 months of exposure. English scores revealed that weak L1 performance is part of typical development in this bilingual context, but that L1 retention is also a possibility.

*Learning outcomes:* The reader will be able to: (1) describe challenges associated with language assessment of successive bilingual children, (2) describe the impact that age and length of exposure can have on language performance in bilinguals, and (3) understand how assessing successive bilinguals using monolingual norms can lead to underestimation of language abilities.

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## 1. Introduction

Much of the work done on standardized test results in (successive) bilingual children has focused on cross-sectional analyses of children acquiring English as a second language (L2) in North America or in the United Kingdom. The present study seeks to contribute to the understanding of typical versus atypical development in successive bilinguals through the longitudinal examination of English-speaking children acquiring French as an L2 in France. These children were at least 4;0 before contact with French began (henceforth, L2 children) and therefore began L2 acquisition after major components of the

*Abbreviations:* TD, typically developing; SLP, speech-language pathologists; Sentence Compl, sentence completion task; AoO, age of onset; LoE, length of exposure; WEU, weekly English use; DS, digit span; Matrices, Raven's Progressive matrices; Word Rep, word repetition task; Vocab, picture-pointing task of receptive vocabulary; Core Lg. Subtests, Core Language Subtests from the CELF.

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L1 had already been acquired (Schwartz, 2004). We focus on standardized test scores in both languages, the tools used by speech-language pathologists (SLP), which were collected twice at 12-month intervals. Standardized scores from bilinguals are notoriously difficult to interpret, in part because appropriate norm-referencing populations for these learners are rarely available. Furthermore, the inherent variability in language performance across typically developing (TD) bilinguals contributes to the challenge of identifying (a)typical development in these children. Several language experience factors are thought to contribute to this heterogeneity. We focus here on age, quantity of language exposure, and cognitive factors (digit span and analytic reasoning) in a group of 22 successive bilingual children, none of whom had a diagnosis of language impairment.

## 2. Performance of bilingual children as measured by standardized tests

The difficulty in interpreting language scores in child bilinguals for the purpose of identifying language impairment is well known (Armon-Lotem, 2012; Bedore & Peña, 2008; Kohnert, 2010; Paradis, Genesee, & Crago, 2011; Thordardottir, 2015). There is a general consensus that standardized assessments based on monolingual norm-referencing samples are not appropriate for the assessment of bilingual children, especially when they are carried out in only one of the child's languages. Comparing bilinguals to monolinguals tends to underestimate bilingual children's abilities. One common explanation for this concerns the distributed nature of these learners' language knowledge. Vocabulary in particular has been shown to be shared across two languages; testing one language represents only part of the child's overall capabilities (e.g., Pearson, Fernández, & Oller, 1993). Clinical recommendations therefore highlight the need to assess both languages in order to obtain a more complete picture (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, 2004). Yet, even when both languages are tested, results can still be difficult to interpret when they are compared to monolingual norms. Indeed, TD successive bilinguals also tend to have lower scores in their L1 compared to monolinguals because of changes in language dominance, protracted development, L1 attrition or incomplete L1 acquisition (Anderson, 2004; Kohnert & Bates, 2002; Montrul, 2008). Kohnert and Bates (2002) studied lexical access in English- and Spanish-speaking bilinguals in the US. Those bilinguals who were aged 11–13 and who had an average of 6.9 years of formal education in English showed stronger performance in English relative to Spanish. L2 influence on the L1 has also been shown to occur in very early stages of L2 acquisition. In Kaufman and Aronoff's (1991) case study of a L1 Hebrew/L2 English child in the US, an L1 attrition stage was observed at 2;9, after only 3 months following initial contact with English. More recent work on L2 adults suggests that access to the L1 can be limited during initial stages of L2 immersion. Linck, Kroll, and Sunderman (2009) compared English-speaking college students who were participating in Spanish immersion programs in Spain to English-speaking students learning Spanish in classrooms in the US on translation-recognition and verbal-fluency tasks. They concluded that students in immersion had reduced access to the L1 as a result of having to inhibit this language in the immersion context. It is therefore likely that L1 performance could potentially be affected, even in early stages of L2 acquisition, due to demands on learners to adapt to their bilingual context. Given the various ways in which the L1 can be affected by exposure to the L2 and given that these effects can be observed even from early stages of L2 exposure, it is not surprising that successive bilinguals have weak scores in the L1, while at the same time having low performance in the L2. While low scores in both languages are not necessarily a sign of language impairment, a typically developing (TD) bilingual child who displays weak performance in both languages compared to age-matched L1 peers risks being misidentified as an atypical learner.

It is therefore clear that arriving at appropriate expectations for language performance in bilingual children requires more research on bilinguals in different learning contexts and with different language combinations. Considerable heterogeneity in the language performance of bilingual children is well-documented. This variability is generally attributed to differences in language experience variables, such as, but not limited to, chronological age (Age), age of L2 onset (AoO), quantity of exposure, family socio-economic status (SES), majority/minority language status, and properties of the L1 and L2. These differences have led to the assertion that the only valid reference population for bilinguals is a larger group of children in similar language-learning and sociolinguistic contexts (Bedore & Peña, 2008; Paradis, Genesee et al., 2011). However, seeing as tests based on bilingual norms are rare, clinicians often rely on standardized tests that are based on monolingual norm-referencing samples. It has therefore been suggested that there is a need for more research to be carried out on bilingual children, *as measured by standardized tests* (Thordardottir, 2011, 2015).

## 3. Accounting for variation in language performance in bilingual children

Moreover, the impact of language experience variables on bilingual developmental trajectories needs to be better understood. With respect to quantity of exposure, a growing number of studies have revealed significant correlations between exposure and various language measures. However, whether a significant correlation is found seems to depend on the nature of the language test (e.g., expressive vs. receptive) and on the language domain under evaluation. For example, vocabulary has been consistently shown to be linked to language exposure (Golberg, Paradis, & Crago, 2008; Hammer et al., 2012; Hoff et al., 2012; Pearson et al., 1993; Thordardottir, Rothenberg, Rivard, & Naves, 2006). Performance on comprehensive standardized assessments of morphosyntax has also been linked to exposure (e.g., Chondrogianni & Marinis, 2011 for L1 Turkish/L2 English children in the UK; Hoff, Welsh, Place, & Ribot, 2014 for Spanish-English bilinguals in the US), although some have found relatively weaker links between exposure and other overall standardized evaluations of morphosyntax (Chondrogianni & Marinis, 2011; Hammer et al., 2012 for Spanish-English bilinguals in the US). Furthermore,

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