



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Implementing evidence based practice with limited evidence: The case of language intervention with bilingual children



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Abstract Evidence based practice calls for clinical decisions to be based on a combination of research evidence, clinical expertise and client perspectives. A relatively small proportion of the research evidence on language intervention efficacy has focused specifically on bilingual children. This article reviews early research as well as recent findings on language intervention with bilingual children. Main questions targeted by this research include the choice of language of intervention, whether intervention effects transfer from one language to the other, and whether language skills can be improved indirectly by enhancing underlying language processing and memory skills. Given the relative lack of intervention research on bilingual children, it is appropriate to consider the extent to which findings from the larger available evidence base on monolingual children can be applied. This may vary depending on the clinical question being asked and on the types of monolingual and bilingual environments involved. Given that monolingual and bilingual children are similar in a number of key characteristics that impact their ability to benefit from language treatment, it is proposed that clinicians use their experience and expertise to carefully consider the applicability to bilingual populations of research conducted with monolingual children. New directions in bilingual intervention that research is starting to address are reviewed, which will in time, lead to more sophisticated intervention choices tailored to the individual needs of children, both monolingual and bilingual.

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PALABRAS CLAVE

Deficiencias del lenguaje;
Bilingüe;
Intervención;

Introducción de prácticas basadas en la evidencia: caso de intervención en el lenguaje con niños bilingües

Resumen La práctica basada en la evidencia requiere decisiones clínicas basadas en una combinación de evidencia de la investigación, experiencia clínica y perspectivas clientelares.

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Eficacia;
Práctica basada en la
evidencia

Una proporción relativamente pequeña de la evidencia de la investigación sobre la eficacia de la intervención en el lenguaje se ha centrado específicamente en los niños bilingües. Este artículo revisa la investigación precoz, así como los hallazgos recientes sobre la intervención en el lenguaje con niños bilingües. Muchas de las cuestiones focalizadas por esta investigación incluyen la elección del lenguaje de intervención, mientras que los efectos de la intervención se transfieren de una lengua a otra, así como si pueden mejorarse las técnicas del lenguaje indirectamente al acrecentar el procesamiento del lenguaje subyacente y las habilidades de memoria. Dada la falta de investigación sobre intervención en los niños bilingües, es apropiado considerar el alcance de la aplicación de los hallazgos de la más amplia base de evidencia disponible en los niños monolingües. Ello puede variar dependiendo de la cuestión clínica a plantear y de los tipos de entornos monolingües y bilingües implicados. Dado que los niños monolingües y bilingües son similares en cuanto a una serie de características clave que impactan en su capacidad para beneficiarse del tratamiento del lenguaje, se propone que los clínicos utilicen su experiencia y competencia para considerar minuciosamente la aplicabilidad a las poblaciones bilingües de la investigación realizada con los niños monolingües. Se revisan las nuevas direcciones sobre intervención bilingüe que, en un momento dado, darán lugar a opciones de intervención más sofisticadas adaptadas a las necesidades individuales de los niños, tanto monolingües como bilingües.

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How do clinicians choose from the many available treatment methods of language intervention the one they will use with a particular client, how the intervention will be organized and for how long it will be provided? Increasingly, it is required that clinical decisions such as these be based on the framework of evidence based practice (EBP) (ASHA, 2005; Dollaghan, 2007; Sackett, Richardson, Rosenberg, & Haynes, 1997). Within the EBP framework, clinical decisions should be guided by the best available research evidence coupled with clinical knowledge and experience, and client perspectives. The “best” research evidence in EBP is generally defined in terms of the scientific rigor of the available studies. In intervention research, Randomized Control Trials (RCTs), Systematic Reviews and Meta-analyses are viewed as stronger evidence than quasi-experimental studies, single subject designs, theoretical evidence and expert knowledge, although some difference of opinion has been expressed regarding the strict application of such a hierarchy developed for medicine to studies in Speech-Language Pathology. It has been pointed out, for example, that single subject studies are in many ways more suitable for language intervention studies and that they provide unique information on the performance of individual children (e.g. Bernstein Ratner, 2006). Various practical issues including the availability and access to research evidence and various resource limitations can make the clinical application of EBP difficult. However, in an ideal application of EBP, rigorous research evidence is brought to bear on all clinical decisions; in language intervention, this includes which domains of language or specific language skills to target, which intervention method to use, how to schedule the intervention in terms of length and number of sessions, when to make changes to the intervention in light of actual versus expected outcomes, and when to terminate the intervention. Intervention efficacy research seeks to systematically

evaluate the effects of clinical intervention and establish cause and effect relationships. This article is concerned with the provision of language intervention to bilingual children. Relatively few intervention efficacy studies have been published to date that focus specifically on bilingual children. How do clinicians engage in EBP when the research literature appears to offer few firm answers to the specific clinical questions they face? This article reviews the findings of early intervention studies focusing on language intervention with bilingual children as well as those of more recent larger scale studies and discusses the answers these studies offer to some major questions that this research has addressed. Further, the article points out some of the gaps in our current knowledge, future research directions that are starting to emerge, and discusses how clinicians might proceed at the present time in spite of the paucity of research in this area.

Does research on monolingual children apply to bilingual children?

A fairly large and growing body of research has examined the efficacy of various language intervention methods, however overwhelmingly in studies including monolingual participants. Intervention research has addressed questions as diverse as the benefits of using recasts (Fey, Cleave, Long, & Hughes, 1993), different approaches to target grammatical morphology (Finestack & Fey, 2009), methods to target children’s ability to follow directions (Gill, Klecan-Aker, Roberts, & Fredenburg, 2003), methods to improve social communication (O’Handley, Radley, & Lum, 2016), and the effects of variability in the presentation of target forms (Plante et al., 2014). This research has also addressed service delivery variables including the effects of intensity of intervention (Fey, Yoder, Warren, & Bradin-Oja, 2013)

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