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A reexamination of the receptive–expressive language gap in individuals with Down syndrome

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KEYWORDS

Down syndrome;
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Abstract Research that focuses on the expressive–receptive language gap in individuals with Down syndrome has consistently found that receptive language skills are more advanced than expressive language skills. Although this research has been limited to children, the assumption has been made that the relationship between receptive and expressive language skills does not change over the lifespan. The current research focuses on the receptive–expressive language gap in adults with Down syndrome (DS). The first phase of the study used a survey to explore the perceived difficulty of receptive and expressive language tasks by adults with DS. Findings were that the adults perceive receptive language tasks (following instructions) to be more difficult than expressive language tasks (speaking to others at work). The second phase of the study was designed as a follow-up to the survey results to explore the receptive–expressive language gap in greater depth in ten adults with Down syndrome. Formal language testing, surveys and interviews were used. Formal testing indicated that the relationship between receptive and expressive language skills was more individualized in the adults. Survey and interview results indicated that participants perceived receptive skills to be more difficult than expressive skills in employment settings and daily living. Discussion considers reasons for the between subject variation and ramifications for IEP (Individualized Education Program) and transition planning. Conclusion is that the assumption cannot be made that the receptive–expressive language gap is the same at different ages and that there is a need to individually assess receptive and expressive language skills at all ages.

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PALABRAS CLAVE

Síndrome de Down;
Lenguaje receptivo;
Lenguaje expresivo;
Comunicación;
Empleo

Reevaluación de la brecha del lenguaje receptivo-expresivo en individuos con Síndrome de Down Syndrome

Resumen La investigación centrada en la brecha del lenguaje expresivo-receptivo en personas con síndrome de Down ha comprobado de modo consistente que las técnicas del lenguaje receptivo están más avanzadas que las del lenguaje expresivo. Aunque este estudio se ha limitado a los niños, se ha estimado que la relación entre las técnicas de los lenguajes receptivo y

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expresivo no varía a lo largo de la vida. La investigación actual se centra en la brecha del lenguaje receptivo-expresivo en adultos con Síndrome de Down (SD). La primera fase del estudio utilizó una encuesta para explorar la dificultad percibida de las tareas de los lenguajes receptivo y expresivo en adultos con SD. Los hallazgos concluyeron que los adultos perciben más dificultad en las tareas del lenguaje receptivo (seguimiento de instrucciones) que en las del lenguaje expresivo (hablar con los demás en el trabajo). La segunda fase del estudio se diseñó como un seguimiento de los resultados de la encuesta, para explorar en mayor profundidad la brecha del lenguaje receptivo-expresivo en diez adultos con Síndrome de Down. Se utilizaron pruebas de lenguaje formal, encuestas y entrevistas. Las pruebas formales indicaron que la relación entre las técnicas de los lenguajes receptivo y expresivo era más individualizada en los adultos. Los resultados de la encuesta y la entrevista indicaron que los participantes percibieron más dificultad en las técnicas receptivas que en las expresivas en los centros de trabajo y en la vida diaria. La discusión considera los motivos de la variación entre sujetos y las ramificaciones del PEI (Programa de educación individualizado) y de la planificación de la transición. La conclusión es que no puede conjeturarse que la brecha del lenguaje receptivo-expresivo es igual para las diferentes edades, y que existe una necesidad de evaluar individualmente las técnicas de los lenguajes receptivo y expresivo en todas las edades.

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Introduction

It has been widely documented in the research literature that children with Down syndrome (DS) comprehend more than they can say. Research using formal testing and clinical observation has consistently found that receptive language skills (e.g. comprehension, understanding, following instructions) are more advanced than expressive language skills (e.g. formulation and speaking).^{1–16} Miller^{10,12} found that more than 75 percent of his subjects demonstrated deficits in language production when compared to language comprehension and cognitive skills, and that the expressive language difficulties increased over time. This is known as the receptive–expressive language gap. The research literature has generally been limited to children, and has consistently documented that children with Down syndrome understand more than they can express. It has been assumed that the relationship between expressive and receptive language skills does not change as children develop into adults. The limited research literature on language in adolescents has generally focused on difficulties with expressive language and speech intelligibility, but has not compared receptive and expressive language skills.^{17–19} In recent discussions by the author with adults with Down syndrome, there has been anecdotal evidence that some adults perceive the receptive language demands at work as more difficult than the expressive communication demands. This is in direct contrast to the research and clinical findings in children and is worthy of further investigation.

Method

To begin to investigate the relationship between receptive and expressive language skills in adults, a survey that

examined the perception of adults with Down syndrome relating to their difficulty with understanding language and speaking in workplace settings was developed. Survey questions relating to communication can be found in [Appendix A](#). Participation was invited through postings on the message boards of the National Down syndrome Congress and the National Down Syndrome Society, and mailings through national parent support networks in the United States. Five hundred eleven survey responses were received. Respondents ranged in age from ages 18 years to 61 years. The majority of the respondents (72%) were in the 18–30 year age group. Surveys were received from 37 states. The gender of the respondents were 53.2% male and 46.8% female. The survey forms were completed by parents 78.8% of the time, 4.5% were completed by adults with Down syndrome on their own, 8.8% by adults with their parents, and 7.8% by others including siblings and support people. The survey results documented that the respondents perceived greater difficulty with receptive language skills, specifically comprehending and following instructions at work. In response to the results of phase one, a second phase of the study was designed to examine receptive and expressive language skills in ten adults in greater detail. The hypothesis was that the receptive and expressive language demands of the workplace are different from the demands of school and childhood, and also different from expressive and receptive skills probed in formal language testing. Measures used included a more in-depth survey, an individual interview about speech and language in the workplace, and formal language testing. Participation was requested through local parent group message boards. Since individual live interviews and formal individual testing were used, all participants were from the local Baltimore–Washington area.

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