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USU Research Identifies Language Impairments in Bilingual Children



Ron Gillam

A recent study from Utah State University suggests that tests administered exclusively in English can diagnose specific language impairment (SLI) in bilingual children who are learning English as a second language.

It is published in the December issue of the *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, a journal of the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association.

The findings will enable schools to more accurately serve a group of children who have typically been over- or under-identified with SLI. The method is also more cost-effective than conducting bilingual assessments in the student's first and second language, which is the currently preferred SLI testing methodology.

Properly differentiating between bilingual children with true SLI and children who make language errors that are a normal consequence of being in the early stages of second-language learning is especially problematic. Researchers recognized this pattern of language development often led to over-identification of SLI in bilingual children and the provision of unnecessary services, or, alternately, led clinicians to withhold or delay necessary services in an attempt to not over-identify impairments.

Ron Gillam, the study's lead author, is a professor in the Communicative Disorders and Deaf Education department in the Emma Eccles Jones College of Education.

“There are more than 300 different languages spoken by children in public schools across the United States, many of which have no existing bilingual

testing protocols. This makes the traditional bilingual assessment method extremely difficult,” Gillam said. “As the usefulness of bilingual assessment is limited by the combination of numerous languages being spoken in school settings, few bilingual speech language pathologists, and many other factors, our study offers a much-needed alternative method for appropriately identifying SLI in children learning English as a second language.”

The research was designed to derive empirically supported cutoff scores for identifying SLI in bilingual children.

The study observed children from 12 elementary schools within three school districts — two in central Texas and one in northern Utah — that served a large proportion of bilingual Latino children. Students were given standardized tests in English and Spanish. After analyzing and comparing data, researchers created an equation to predict the probability of SLI given a child’s scores on just the English composites including vocabulary, narrative, grammar, comprehension and production skills.

Clinicians and researchers can use the new equation to create a spreadsheet that yields a probability value and enter in calculations for a student’s expressive, comprehension, vocabulary, grammatical and narrative composite scores from testing in English. The equation automatically generates a predicted probability value, which can identify SLI in bilingual students with classification accuracy similar to testing methods used with native English speakers. The study notes that accuracy is limited to testing in students who have been enrolled in school for at least one academic year and are listening to and speaking English at least 30 percent of the day.

“There are millions of students struggling with speech and language impairments across the United States, and speech pathologists and educators work tirelessly to provide the right services to those students,” said Beth Foley, dean of the Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services. “This study has the potential to improve the education experience for bilingual students throughout the nation.”

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