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Vocabulary assessment in grade 1 Afrikaans-English bilinguals

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Abstract

Purpose: There is a need to develop and refine assessment measures on bilingual children, since language measures used on monolingual individuals cannot and should not be directly applied to the bilingual population (Hoff et al., 2012; O'Brien, 2015). The occurrence of Afrikaans-English bilinguals in South Africa provides a rewarding area of investigation for the Speech-Language Therapist (SLT) (Penn & Jordaan, 2016), as the Afrikaans language is well-researched and many individuals from this population are considered to be more balanced bilinguals than other bilingual groups (Coetzee-Van Rooyen, 2013).The assessment of vocabulary in bilingual children has received particular attention because limited vocabulary is one of the first signs of language impairment (Ellis & Thal, 2008). This research aimed to determine how Grade 1 Afrikaans-English bilingual children perform on a bilingual vocabulary assessment.

Design: A quantitative, descriptive, cross-sectional and comparative design was used in this study.

Method: The Expressive One-Word Picture Vocabulary Test 4 (EOWPVT-4) (Martin & Brownell, 2011a) and the Receptive One-Word Picture Vocabulary Test 4 (ROWPVT-4) (Martin & Brownell, 2011b) were used to assess 30 grade 1 English-speaking monolinguals. In addition an adapted Afrikaans expressive one word vocabulary test based on the EOWPVT-4 and an adapted Afrikaans receptive one word vocabulary test based on the ROWPVT-4 were used to assess 30 grade 1 Afrikaans-English bilinguals. Permission from the schools involved, informed consent from the parent/s or guardian/s as well as child assent were obtained. The data gathered from testing was tabulated, interpreted with the use of mean scores and standard deviations (SD) and analysed using within- and between -group statistical

comparisons. Mean raw scores were converted to percentages for ease of comparison between receptive and expressive scores.

Results: Within-language comparisons revealed that on the English test, receptive and expressive scores within both the English monolingual and bilingual groups were significantly correlated. Expressive scores could therefore be predicted from receptive scores or vice versa in both the English monolingual and bilingual groups. However, the receptive and expressive score on the Afrikaans tests were not significantly correlated. In the bilingual group, the receptive score in Afrikaans was significantly higher than the expressive score suggesting that although the bilingual participants had good knowledge of Afrikaans vocabulary they could not always express this in a naming test. They frequently used the English word. Afrikaans is possibly being used less in the home and school environments so that the English words are more familiar. Nonetheless, both the monolingual and bilingual participants had significantly higher scores on the receptive vocabulary assessment than on the expressive vocabulary assessments in both English and Afrikaans.

Between-group comparison revealed that the differences between the scores of the English monolingual and Afrikaans-English bilingual learners were not significant on either the receptive or expressive vocabulary measure in English. The bilingual group performed as well as the English participants on the English tests, suggesting that they are not disadvantaged in the language of instruction. The norms used in the EOWPVT and the ROWPVT were applicable to both the monolingual and bilingual groups' scores for the age range of the participants and highlighted that these tests were suitable in assessing an English monolingual and Afrikaans-English bilingual child in South Africa. When composite scoring was used the bilinguals scored significantly better than their monolingual peers on both the receptive and expressive measures,

which confirmed the premise behind this study- that composite scoring should be used to gain an accurate assessment of a bilingual child's vocabulary.

Adaptation of the English tests into Afrikaans, as opposed to O'Brien's study (2015), which adapted English tests into isiZulu, may have positively affected the results as all English words had direct translation equivalents in Afrikaans, which was not the case in isiZulu. The comparison between simultaneous and sequential bilinguals within the bilingual group demonstrated that the simultaneous bilinguals' mean receptive and expressive scores surpassed those obtained by the sequential bilingual participants. A significant difference was identified between simultaneous and sequential bilinguals' composite receptive scores and Afrikaans expressive scores. Finally, only one monolingual participant scored below the peer group mean on both the receptive and expressive vocabulary tests, indicating low proficiency in English and risk of language impairment; however no bilingual participants were found to be language impaired when composite scoring was used.

Conclusion: Bilingualism remains a rewarding area of investigation in South Africa. Afrikaans-English bilingual children performed significantly better than O'Brien's (2015) isiZulu-English participants on a translated, originally English vocabulary test. Throughout this study the refinement of valid assessment tools for accurate description of bilingual children's vocabulary was highlighted. The well-researched technique of composite scoring has proven to be valuable in avoiding overdiagnosis in South African bilingual children.

Keywords: *Afrikaans-English bilinguals; language impairment; potential implications vocabulary*