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SLI or 'slow' to develop English additional language (EAL) learners - how do we know? : an in depth investigation of English additional language learners in the foundation phase with suspected specific language impairment.

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ABSTRACT

Background: This study formed part of a larger longitudinal research study by Jordaan (2009), who tracked the development of language for academic purposes in grade 1- 3 English Additional Language (EAL) and English First Language (EFL) learners attending English only programmes in Gauteng over a period of three years. These learners attended schools in two different educational contexts where there is a marked heterogeneity in the linguistic backgrounds of both the learners and teachers investigated. Results from Jordaan's (2009) study revealed that some EAL and EFL learners appeared to be slow in the development of their academic language abilities (as no progress was evident over the period of three years), relative to their peers, and thus these learners may have a language impairment.

Purpose: This study investigated in detail, these "slow to learn" EAL and EFL learners in the foundation phase, in order to determine whether they have a language impairment and to determine how the language impairment manifests in these learners.

Participants: Sixteen learners (5 EFL learners and 16 EAL learners) who demonstrated no improvement in their academic language abilities from grade one to grade two as determined by their performance on the Diagnostic Evaluation of Language Variation Criterion Referenced (DELV-CR) test were the participants of this study.

Method: The participants were assessed on the Automated Working Memory Assessment (AWMA) test, a Non Word Repetition test (Dollaghan & Campbell, 1998), a Sentence Repetition test (Redmond, 2005) and the Gray Oral Reading Test (GORT-4). Educators were also asked to rate these learners' oral language, written language and reading comprehension abilities on a scale of 0- 5. The research design utilized was a non experimental, descriptive quantitative design, involving both correlational and comparative components. The data obtained was then analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to establish whether there was a relationship between the cognitive processing and the language proficiency measures as well as the teacher ratings in order to provide information regarding these tests as assessment tools for EAL learners as well as to further enhance the validity of this study. Independent sample t-tests were also conducted to determine whether there were any significant differences between the EFL and EAL learners' performance in the two different educational contexts, so as to establish whether bilingual learners with

language impairment are more severely impaired than monolingual learners with language impairment.

Results: Based on the analysis of these learners' performance on the DELV-CR test, results indicated that all sixteen participants presented with SLI and were not just "slow to learn". The EAL-SLI learners in both contexts performed poorly on the reading comprehension test and were rated lower than their aged matched peers on the teacher rating scales. Furthermore, when comparing these EAL-SLI learners' performance on the DELV-CR test to the performance of the EFL-SLI learners, the EAL-SLI learners as a group appeared to have performed more poorly than the EFL-SLI learners on all three subtests. As significant differences were found between the EAL and EFL learners' performance on the DELV-CR test, the results suggested that bilingual learners with SLI, who acquire a second language sequentially, are more impaired than monolingual learners with SLI. The EAL-SLI learners also presented with visuo-spatial short term and working memory deficits and even though a large majority of the learners presented with verbal short term and working memory difficulties, not all the learners presented with cognitive processing difficulties. This finding has implications for the theories of SLI. However, the sentence repetition task was found to be a useful tool in differentiating between the "slow to learn" EAL learners and EAL-SLI learners and furthermore this test also positively correlated with various sections of the DELV-CR test which adds to the value of this test as an assessment tool in EAL learners. Positive correlations were also found between the teacher ratings of the EAL-SLI learners and the subtests of the DELV-CR test which indicates that teachers have the ability to correctly identify learners with language learning difficulties. Positive correlations were also found between the digit repetition subtest, the non word repetition test and the sentence repetition test which adds to the validity of this study.

Conclusion: The results obtained from this study demonstrated that bilingual learners with SLI who acquire a second language sequentially are additionally disadvantaged compared to their EFL-SLI peers in the acquisition of certain aspects of academic language. Furthermore, although research has shown that cognitive processing measures are less biased in the assessment of linguistically diverse learners, results indicated that the DELV-CR test identified more accurately, learners with language impairment whereas the cognitive processing measures provided contradictory and biased results with the verbal working memory subtest over identifying learners "at risk" for language impairment. Finally, the use of sentence repetition

tasks in the differentiation between “slow to learn” and language impaired EAL learners proves to be promising.

Key Words: Specific Language Impairment (SLI), English Additional Language (EAL), bilingualism, working memory, phonological memory, DELV, Foundation Phase, South Africa