

**THE IDENTIFICATION OF LANGUAGE IMPAIRMENT IN  
ENGLISH ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE LEARNERS**

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## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this report is my own, unaided, independent work. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination at this or any other academic institution, nor has it been published in any form.

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Currently, the majority of learners within the South African education system speak English as an additional language. Many of these children are therefore learning the language of instruction *through* the language of instruction. Of particular concern for speech-language therapists (SLTs) are those children who have language impairment. In addition, it is important for SLTs to be able to distinguish between the learners who have language impairment, and those who are merely in the process of acquiring English. Additionally, the identification of language impairment among learners who speak English as an additional language is difficult as there are no overt manifestations of language learning difficulties, and, unfortunately, these learners are easily over-looked during the pre-school and school-age years. Furthermore, specifically within the South African context, there are limited tools available that can be used to screen for, and/or diagnose language impairment among EAL learners.

**Purpose:** The main aim of this study was to explore the use of sentence repetition as a screening tool for the identification of language impairment in learners who speak English as an additional language.

**Method:** The research design of this study was non-experimental, quantitative, descriptive and cross-sectional in nature, with comparative and correlational components.

One hundred and seven grade 2 EAL learners from a mainstream school in Gauteng participated in the study. The learners were evaluated on two sentence repetition tests; the Redmond (2005) Sentence Repetition Test and the Recalling Sentences subtest from the Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals-4 (CELF-4) (Semel, Wiig & Secord, 2003). The learners were also evaluated on the Gray Oral Reading Test-4 (GORT-4) (Wiederholt & Bryant, 2001). The results obtained from these measures were correlated in order to determine the internal validity of the two sentence repetition measures, as well as to investigate the extent to which sentence repetition can be used to predict academic literacy. Learners who were identified as being at-risk for language impairment, namely those who fell 1 standard deviation (SD) below the peer group mean on the Redmond (2005) Sentence Repetition test were further evaluated using the Diagnostic Evaluation of Language Variation-Criterion Referenced edition (DELV-CR) (Seymour, Roeper & de Villiers, 2003), to diagnose language impairment, avoid misdiagnosis, and describe the manifestations of language impairment in the second language.

**Results and Implications:** The results of the Redmond (2005) Sentence Repetition test proved to be a valid measure to identify learners who were at-risk for language impairment, provided that the peer group mean was used as a standard of comparison. Twelve of the 107 (11.2%) learners from the study were identified as being at-risk for language impairment. However, after analysis of the results and using a peer group mean from Jordaan's (2011) study, only 9/12 (7.5%) of the participants were diagnosed with language impairment. This finding highlights the fact that EAL learners are often over-identified as having language impairment and further assessment is necessary to minimise the risk of misdiagnosis of language impairment. The findings from the DELV-CR (Seymour, Roeper & de Villiers,

2003), in terms of the manifestations of language impairment in the second language, were consistent with the EAL language impaired learners from Jordaan's (2011) study, as well as the literature. This finding indicates that sentence repetition is a valid screening tool for the identification of language impairment in EAL learners. Furthermore, 11 of the 12 of the at-risk learners scored below the peer group mean on the reading comprehension measure. Thus, it is evident that, in addition to not being able to use language effectively for academic purposes, most children with language impairment are further disadvantaged by poor reading comprehension skills.

An implication for future research would be to explore whether the development of a sentence repetition measure in an African language (e.g. Zulu) would yield similar results as the current study. In this way, EAL learners could be identified in their home language.

A secondary finding of the current study was that the grade 2 educators were not able to identify learners who required additional language support within the classroom. This finding has implications for the role of SLTs in mainstream education and the need to support educators in their ability to identify learners with SLI and whose academic language development is not on par with that of their peers.

**Key Words:** *English additional language learners, sentence repetition, language impairment.*

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