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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Monolingual and Bilingual Children With and Without Primary Language Impairment: Core Vocabulary Comparison

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Abstract

Core vocabulary is an important component of augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) systems for school-aged children who have complex communication needs. One method of identifying core vocabulary for these individuals is to study the vocabulary of speaking children. To date, the use of core vocabulary by speaking bilingual children has not been well documented. The present study compared the core vocabulary used by children who are monolingual (French), and bilingual (French–English; English–French). We also gathered and compared language samples from French-speaking children identified as having primary language impairment (PLI), with the goal of better understanding the language differences demonstrated by children with this disability. Language samples were collected from a total of 57 children within a school setting, in a region where French is a minority language. Contrary to the hypothesis, the analysis of language transcripts revealed that there were no important differences between the core words from the groups studied.

Keywords: *Augmentative and alternative communication (AAC); Core vocabulary; Bilingualism; Primary language impairment; Children*

Introduction

Vocabulary selection is an important aspect of successful augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) intervention (Beukelman, McGinnis, & Morrow, 1991; Fallon, Light, & Paige, 2001; Fried-Oken & More, 1992). The identification of appropriate vocabulary is an important first step in the development of effective and efficient AAC systems (Fallon et al., 2001). Numerous studies have stated the importance of including frequently used vocabulary in AAC systems (e.g., Beukelman et al., 1991; Fallon et al., 2001; Trembath, Balandin, & Togher, 2007). In fact, research has demonstrated that approximately 200–250 words represent 80% of what speaking children say (e.g., Beukelman, Jones, & Rowan, 1989; Fallon et al., 2001; Fried-Oken & More, 1992; Trembath et al., 2007). These words, which make up a large percentage of what we say and are frequently used by a large percentage of individuals, are sometimes referred to as core vocabulary. It has been suggested that with a few hundred of these core words, a child who uses AAC could express the majority of the most frequently used words (Vanderheiden & Kelso, 1987).

To date, most research on vocabulary use has occurred with monolingual speaking children; however many children grow up in bilingual (or even trilingual) environments. Since children who require the use of AAC strategies to communicate may live in a bilingual community, empirical data is needed to determine whether or not bilingual children make use of vocabulary in a way similar to monolingual children. We also were interested in the use of language by speaking children with and without language impairment. The purpose of this study, therefore, was to examine frequently used vocabulary items as used by monolingual children, bilingual children, and children with primary language impairment, with the goal of informing vocabulary selection for children with complex communication needs who are growing up in bilingual communities.

Vocabulary and AAC

Speaking children typically demonstrate a large and diverse expressive vocabulary as they enter school: approximately 2,100 words by the age of 5 years old and 2, 600 words by the age of 6 (Stahl, 1999). However, trying to provide all of these words in an AAC system