

What linguistic behaviours are characteristic of French-speaking preschoolers who have specific language impairment?

childhood
disability
LINK



Glossary of terms

- Inflection: How words in certain languages change to show grammatical relations, such as number (singular vs. plural), tense (present, vs, past or future), and certain other relations such as mood and aspect. For example, the word dog, inflected for numbers would have the plural affix 's' added to the end, becoming dogs. It is important to note for this study that different languages vary in the extent to which grammatical inflections are used, and that those languages that don't have many inflections have other ways of indicating these same grammatical relations, for example, by using a very strict word order.
- Specific language impairment: A language impairment that is not related to or caused by other developmental disorders, hearing loss or acquired brain injury.

Summary

Understanding the characteristic language behaviors associated with specific language impairment (SLI) helps clinicians accurately identify this condition as well as plan effective interventions. For many years, research on SLI has focused heavily on the analysis of grammatical errors, particularly those related to verb inflection. Indeed, such errors are prominent in the speech of young English-speaking children with SLI. However, research on SLI in several languages other than English has shown grammatical errors to be both less frequent than in English and also of a different nature. This research was motivated by an earlier study on the normal development of French-speaking children, which found that young French-speaking children with normal language development used grammatical inflections with a high degree of accuracy in their spontaneous speech. Given that linguistic patterns in SLI are usually found to mirror the language of younger children speaking the same language, this study predicted that SLI in young French-speaking children would not be characterized by a prominence of such errors. This prediction was confirmed. The spontaneous language of four-year-old French-speaking children with SLI was characterized by a significant delay across

domains of language, including vocabulary and grammar, but with no specific problem noted in grammatical inflection. The results highlight the fact that SLI manifests in different ways across languages and show that grammatical errors are not an accurate clinical marker of SLI in French in the preschool period.

What families and practitioners should know

This study shows that, unlike their English-speaking counterparts, French-speaking preschoolers with SLI do not encounter particular difficulty in the use of grammatical inflections. Therefore, an absence of grammatical errors does not rule out the presence of SLI in French-speaking preschoolers.

Appropriate indicators of SLI in French-speaking preschoolers include comparison to appropriate norms for children of the same age on measures of linguistic development in various domains of language such as vocabulary, sentence structure, and diversity of grammatical inflections used.

The study results highlight the need to use caution in the application of particular linguistic patterns as diagnostic indicators of SLI unless their applicability to the language in question has been verified.

Reference

Elin Thordardottir, & Namazi, M. (2007). Specific language impairment in French-speaking children: Beyond grammatical morphology. *Journal of Speech, Language and Hearing Research*, 50, 698-715.