Language assessment at age 4 for bilingual learners of German: How many norms do we need?

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Background

This study compares language abilities of simultaneous bilinguals (2L1) to monolingual (MON) and early second language learners (eL2) of German in a standardized test. eL2 learners (AoO 2;0-4;0 years) have been shown to typically perform below MON children in standardized tasks (Paradis 2005) and to master developmental milestones later than their MON peers (Tracy & Thoma 2009, for German). Studies on 2L1 children (AoO 0-1;11 years) have generally found more parallels than differences between 2L1 and MON acquisition (e.g., Genessee & Nicoladis 2007, Paradis et al. 2011). However, most studies focused on children's longitudinal development regarding a specific phenomenon. Less is known about 2L1 learner's language abilities across different tasks at a specific age, i.e. in language assessment situations. To our knowledge, no study has compared language abilities of 2L1 learners to the abilities of same-aged MON and eL2 peers across a range of linguistic tasks (but see e.g., Schaerlaekens et al. 1995 for lexical abilities). Our study aimed at filling this gap by analyzing language abilities of 2L1, MON and eL2 children regarding production and comprehension of different morpho-syntactic and semantic tasks. Considering children aged 4 to 5, we focused on the age in which official language assessments are administered in most countries.

Research question

How do 2L1 children perform in different linguistic tasks, compared to their MON and to their eL2 same-age-peers?

Participants*

|	MON	BIL	eL2
N	49 (21 girls)	41 (18 girls)	70 (43 girls)
Age in months	52.2 (1.9)	52.9 (5.3)	52.2 (4.6)
LoE in months		49.9 (9.2)	16.5 (6.4)
AoO in months		3.0 (6.7)	35.5 (4.2)

2L1 and eL2 learners acquire 32 different first languages
(*data from Projects MILA and cammino, University of Frankfurt)

Task

☐ Standardized Language Test Lise-DaZ (Schulz & Tracy 2011)
☐ Module *Comprehension*: Subscales Verb meaning (12 items), Wh-questions (10 items), Negation (12 items); Methods: TVJ, Question-with-picture
☐ Module *Production*: Subscales Focus particles, Main verbs, Auxiliaries and modal verbs, Prepositions, Conjunctions, Case, Sentence structure, Subject-verb-agreement; Method: Elicited production

Results

Module Comprehension
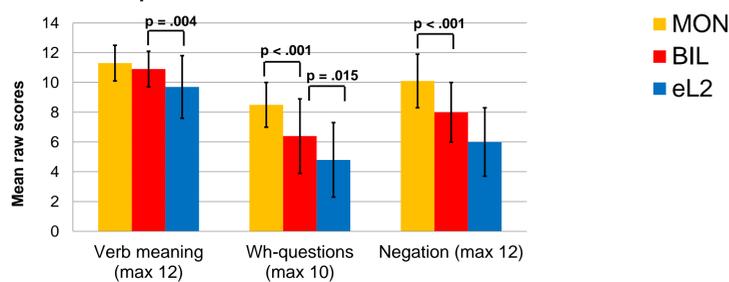
Module Production
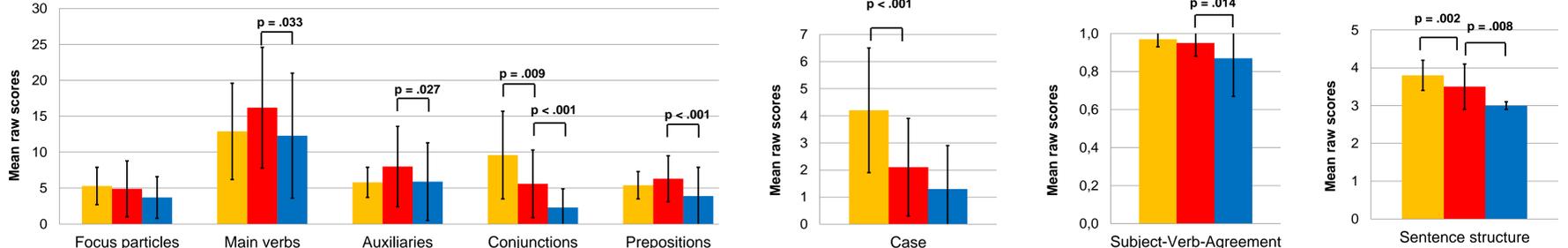
Analysis

☐ Module Comprehension: correct responses
☐ Module Production: correct tokens (word classes), correct case marking, ratio SVA (SVA correct/SVA total), most complex sentence structure type (max = 4, i.e. complex sentence)
☐ Group comparisons: Kruskall-Wallis-Test, post-hoc comparisons: Mann-Withney-U-Test; α-corrected p-values

Summary and conclusion

This study is the first to compare comprehension and production skills of 2L1, MON and eL2 children across a standardized test battery. While previous acquisition studies mostly reported parallels between MON and 2L1 children in the developmental trajectories and error patterns, our cross-sectional data points to a unique profile of language skills of 2L1 children, resembling neither MON children nor eL2 learners. Our findings indicate that, when diagnosed with monolingual norms, 2L1 children are likely to be overdiagnosed. Likewise, when grouped with eL2 learners, 2L1 learners are likely to be underdiagnosed. We conclude that separate norms are required if language abilities of 2L1 learners at age 4 to 5 are assessed via standardized tests.

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