



Current Research Review:

The Receptive-Expressive Gap in English Narratives of Spanish-English Bilingual Children With and Without Language Impairment

Gibson, T. A., Peña, E. D., & Bedore, L. M. (2018)

Background: Historically, a receptive-expressive language gap was seen as a feature of Primary Language Impairment (PLI), especially in monolingual speakers. Research has shown that narratives develop similarly across languages and narrative tasks are useful for assessing language and cognitive skills such as working memory, comprehension, and connecting ideas within a story. However, narrative development in bilinguals with both PLI and typical development (TD) has not been as well studied or fully understood.

Hypothesis: The first objective of this article was to determine if a receptive-expressive gap also existed in the L2 (English) narratives of bilingual children and if there was a difference between children with PLI versus TD. The second objective was to explore whether the type of contextual support presented influenced receptive and expressive performance in a bilingual child's L2.

Methodology and Participants: Forty Spanish-English bilingual children with PLI (n=20) and with TD (n=20) participated from kindergarten to first grade. Participants were identified as having PLI by three experienced Spanish-English bilingual SLPs using a variety of assessment tools. Children with PLI were matched with children with TD based on sex, age, non-verbal IQ score, and language exposure. The participants were administered the Test of Narrative Language (TNL) in English first in kindergarten, then in 1st grade and receptive and expressive scores were compared.

Conclusion: Overall scores were lower for bilingual children when compared to the norm in kindergarten, but they had caught up by 1st grade. A receptive-expressive gap was found for bilingual children with PLI in kindergarten but that had disappeared by 1st grade. Meanwhile, bilingual children with TD were not found to have a receptive-expressive gap at either point. The authors found that when testing a bilingual child in kindergarten or first grade, the use of a single picture (as opposed to many pictures or no pictures) may be the most advantageous contextual support, because it reduces the receptive-expressive gap by supporting memory without taxing other cognitive functions.

Relevance to the field: The identification of a receptive-expressive gap in narrative skills for bilingual children with PLI further supports its use as a diagnostic tool. However, as noted, this gap tends to disappear by 1st grade indicating further study is needed to fully understand this feature as a diagnostic marker. It's important to keep in mind that even bilingual children with



TD performed worse when their scores were compared to the overall norm. This should be taken into account when using standardized assessments with bilingual children.

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