

Screening test for Specific language impairment in French preschoolers and first graders

Specific language impairment (SLI) is characterized by persistent difficulties affecting language abilities in otherwise normally developing children (Leonard, 2014). It remains difficult to identify young children affected by SLI in French (Thordardottir & Namazi, 2005). In English, Rice and Wexler (1996) have demonstrated that children with SLI have difficulties producing tense markers. In French, Royle's study (2007) has shown that the correct production of *passé composé* (perfect past) was related to the conjugation group (regular vs irregular verbs). However, in that study, participants were very young (aged from 2;11 to 4;6 years old), showing floor responses, and verbs were not controlled for their morphophonological properties to which typical children are sensitive (Marquis et al, 2012).

We tested oral production of *passé composé* in 11 children with SLI, aged from 5;6 to 7;4 years old ($M = 6;3$, $SD = 0;6$), either in preschool or first grade. They were all evolving in a French context, but with different linguistic backgrounds. We used an Android application, *Jeu de verbes* (Marquis et al, 2012), with 6 verbs in each of four past participle categories (ending in $-\acute{e}$, $-i$, $-u$, and Other irregulars). We compared their results and the error types to those of control children (from Marquis, 2012-2015) matched for gender, age, languages spoken at home and parental education. Results show significant effects both of linguistic group, $F(1,20) = 10.7$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .35$, (SLI < control), and of verb group, $F(3, 60) = 13.8$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .41$ ($\acute{e} = i = u > \text{Other}$) on the children's scores to the task, as well as an interaction between these factors, $F(3, 60) = 3.89$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .16$. Children with SLI's performances did not vary according to the verb conjugation groups ($\acute{e} = i = u = \text{O}$), reflecting a lack of sensitivity to inflection rules, whereas control children had better scores for the verbs in $-\acute{e}$, in $-i$, and in $-u$, than Other verbs ($\acute{e} = i = u > \text{O}$, all $ps < .05$). Children with SLI also showed different production strategies as compared to controls, with more use of the present tense, $U = 9.50$, $z = 3.49$, $p < .001$, in contexts requiring the *passé composé*. We conclude that children with SLI do not master the *passé composé* in the same way typical French children do, at later ages than has previously been shown. This task shows potential for oral language screening in French-speaking first graders, independently of language background, in the kindergarten and first grade.

424 words

Keywords: *SLI, verbs, conjugation group, elicitation, French*

References

- Leonard, L. B. (2014). Specific Language Impairment Across Languages. *Child development perspectives*, 8(1), 1–5. doi:10.1111/cdep.12053
- Marquis, A., Royle, P., Gonnerman, L., & Rvachew, S. (2012). La conjugaison du verbe en début de scolarisation. *TIPA - Travaux interdisciplinaires sur la parole et le langage*, 28. doi:10.4000/tipa.201
- Rice, M., & Wexler, K. (1996). Toward Tense as a Clinical Marker of Specific Language Impairment in English-Speaking Children. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, 39(6), 1239–1257. doi:10.1044/jshr.3906.1239
- Royle, P. (2007). Variable effects of morphology and frequency on inflection patterns of French preschoolers. *The Mental Lexicon Journal*, 2(1), 103–125.
- Thordardottir, E. T., & Namazi, M. (2007). Specific language impairment in French-speaking children: beyond grammatical morphology. *Journal of speech, language, and hearing research : JSLHR*, 50(3), 698–715. doi:10.1044/1092-4388(2007/049)