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Effects of an Intervention Focusing on Gender Acquisition in Bilingual Children with Specific Language Impairment

Background

Difficulties in correct gender marking in German are characteristic of children with specific language impairment (SLI) as well as bilingual children (Thelen 2014). Positive effects of language therapies with mono- and bilingual children with SLI suggest that a systematic intervention regarding gender marking problems might be successful (Penner & Schmid 2005; Berg & Motsch 2006; Glaser et al. 2012). The ‘Patholinguistic Approach’ (Siegmüller & Kauschke 2006), which focuses on a developmental intervention and in which an enriched input plays an important role, has not yet been investigated within gender marking difficulties nor bilingual children.

Research Question

Can bilingual children with SLI, who are treated with an intervention based on the ‘Patholinguistic Approach’, achieve significant improvements in the use of correct gender marking in German?

Design and participants

Four Turkish-German speaking children between 5;0 and 7;6 years with diagnosed SLI participated in the study. All children had learned to use the article (‘rule of article insertion’), but assigned wrong gender on nouns. Within six weeks the children received 12 therapy sessions, 45 minutes at a time. Gender marking was trained on an individually determined number of nouns (between 42 and 88 items), of which half were practiced during therapy and half served as non-practiced control. The children’s ability in gender marking was tested on a wordlist of 120 items and spontaneous speech recordings pre- and post-therapy. Six weeks after the intervention a follow-up test was performed to detect sustained effects of learning and generalization.

Method & Procedure

On one-third of basic vocabulary of German the assignment of gender is rule governed. Certain regularities can be found on nouns containing a certain phonological or morphological pattern, or belonging to a particular semantic field. 70 percent of the items used in the therapy contained regularities in order to facilitate the gender acquisition process. Following the principles of the ‘Patholinguistic Approach’ an intensified and adapted input (‘input stories’) was provided at the beginning of intervention. After sensitization for grammatical gender its functions and use were worked on mainly by implementing metalanguage.

Results

Three of four participants benefited from the intervention by showing significant higher amounts of correct gender marking on a wordlist after therapy. Three participants were able to generalize the ability of correct gender marking on untrained items. More correct gender

marking was also measured in the spontaneous speech of two of the participants. Beyond that three participants showed lasting improvements in the ability to mark gender correctly.

Conclusion

Several indications were found for the efficacy of the intervention focusing on correct gender assignment in bilingual children with SLI. The Analysis and discussion of the main findings reveal implications for clinical practice: Correct gender use of bilingual children is feasible when children are sensitized to gender functions and its occurrence in daily life situations. Secure gender marking is an important requirement for further grammatical language development in monolingual and bilingual children.

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