

Complex Syntactic Abilities of French Monolingual and English-French Bilingual Adolescents in Conversational and Expository Discourse

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Introduction

In English monolinguals, complex syntactic abilities grow beyond adolescence, and expository discourse yields more complex syntax than conversation^{1,2}. For bilingual children, syntactic abilities in spontaneous language increase with L2 exposure (Paradis et al., 2017). However, studies are lacking on bilingual adolescents' complex syntactic abilities and that look at both languages.

Aim: This study investigated the long-term proficiency of monolingual and bilingual adolescents in French and English complex syntactic abilities and how those abilities vary according to production context.

Methods

Participants:

Two groups of adolescents age 12 to 17.

- 1) French L1 Speakers (FL1, n=14)
- 2) English-French Bilinguals (EFbil, n=27)

Data collection:

- 1) A questionnaire documenting language exposure³
- 2) 4-minute oral language samples in conversation and expository discourse in French and English.

Transcription and coding:

Samples transcribed and entered in SALT Software⁴. Detailed coding for types and number of subordinates in both languages.

Syntactic measures

- MEAN LENGTH OF T-UNITS (MLTU): total number of words divided by number of T-Units
- CLAUSAL DENSITY (CD): total T-Units + total subordinates/by total main
- SUBORDINATE CLAUSE DIVERSITY (SCD): total number of different subordinates

Results

Group comparisons on syntactic measures in French

Both groups produced more complex syntax in expository discourse than conversation. Groups differed only on the measure of SCD.

■ EFbil ■ FL1

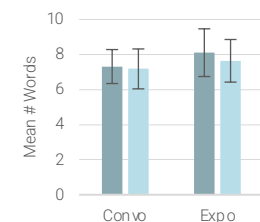


Fig 1. French MLTU

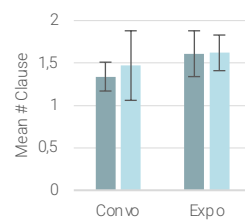


Fig 2. French CD

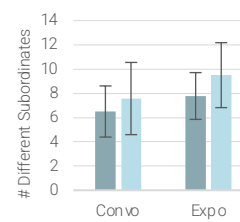


Fig 3. French SCD

French and English productions of Bilinguals on syntactic measures

MLTU and CD yielded significant differences in favor of English and only in conversation

■ French ■ English

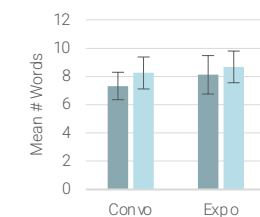


Fig 4. FR and EN MLTU

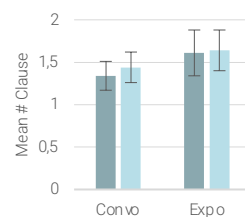


Fig 5. FR and EN CD

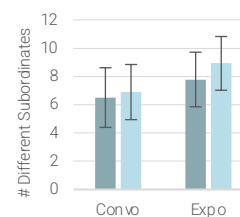


Fig 6. FR and EN SCD

Discussion/Conclusion

These results show that exposure is still influencing L2 development until the end of adolescence in the domain of syntax. Significant differences in complex syntactic abilities detected between monolinguals and bilinguals inform clinicians that they should use the measure of diversity as an indicator of complex syntax proficiency in addition to length and clausal density. In addition, even though expository discourse is conducive to more complex syntax, conversation skills should not be dismissed. Bilingual adolescents with good syntactic abilities will demonstrate their knowledge through conversation skills.

Acknowledgment

SSHRC CRSH

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