Communication impairments are one of the most prominent problems affecting children. In fact, bilingual children are often misdiagnosed as having a primary language impairment (PLI). However, there is little research that has focused on the identification of French children with PLI. Fewer studies have looked at these children within a linguistic minority setting.

In this study, we wanted to determine if children identified as having PLI by school board speech and language pathologists were also identified by a pre-selected battery of linguistic and cognitive tests. At the same time, determining which particular tests more precisely identified children was also of interest.

The aim of this study was to verify the following hypotheses:

Monolingual Francophone children who have PLI should identify poor results compared to children who are developing typically, according to the tools that evaluate language skills and information processing.

The results obtained in both languages for bilingual children who have PLI should vary depending on the components of each language (morphosyntax, vocabulary, narration, etc.).

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

This study focused on Canada’s two official languages. First, we undertook a study with French monolingual children. We then compared two groups of bilingual children. The first group Francophone children in Northern Ontario in this context, Francophones are defined as individuals whose first language (L1) is French but who often speak English (L2) at home (F-EN). These learners therefore belonged to the minority language group in Ontario: Francophones in a French school setting, within an official language minority community. We then focused on children whose first language (L1) was English and who were learning English as a second language (L2) within a French school. These learners therefore belonged to the majority language group in Ontario: Anglophones learning French in a French school setting, within an official language minority community. An audiometry screening was completed. Nonverbal cognition was also evaluated using the Brief IQ subscales of the Letter International Performance Scale - Revised (2000 and 2007). The children attended eight different French language schools within the City of Greater Sudbury.

In summary, the French-language tests used with monolingual children and F-EB children allowed us to confirm the presence of PLI. In some cases, bilingual children with PLI experienced difficulties in all the linguistic components of one language; in other cases, difficulties in only one or a few components of a language were observed.

RESULTS

Results showed that the monolingual children with PLI had difficulties in all areas. However, the best PLI markers for the French monolingual children and French-English bilingual (F-EB) children were:

- **Table 2. Mean scores for linguistic and cognitive skills in French for participants with PLI**

- **Table 3. Mean scores for linguistic and cognitive skills in English for participants with PLI**

These results concur with previous studies. The best PLI markers for the French-English bilingual (F-EB) children were CED and RS subtests.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the French-language tests used with monolingual children and F-EB children allowed us to confirm the presence of PLI. In some cases, bilingual children with PLI experienced difficulties in all the linguistic components of one language; in other cases, difficulties in only one or a few components of a language were observed.

We noted that the difficulties were not the same from one language to another. However, we observed that when a bilingual child obtained scores below the mean on one or more subtest, a closer examination was merits in order not to overlook instances of impairment.

The solution: An exhaustive evaluation of bilingual children is recommended, using a battery of tests that covers many skills, both linguistic and cognitive. More precisely, the following tasks are recommended when assessing monolingual and bilingual children of this age group, residing in a linguistic minority context: comprehension of concepts, following directions, non-word repetition, recalling sentences, comprehension of complex phrases and sentences, use of story grammar and the analysis of the macrostructure of narratives. This study further supports the importance of using verbal working memory tasks to better identify children with PLI in both languages. This type of evaluation is more conducive to an exact identification of PLI, compared to the selective use of a few specific linguistic-based tools.

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