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Enhancing children's speech using international evidence-based resources

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Introduction

In order to undertake evidence-based practice that supports children's communication, speech and language therapists/speech-language pathologists (SLTs) need ready access to evidence-based resources. This paper outlines multilingual resources that are freely available on five topics: speech acquisition, speech assessment and analysis, speech intervention, service delivery, and advocacy.

1. Multilingual speech acquisition

There are many resources to support SLPs' knowledge about cross-linguistic and multilingual children's speech acquisition (Goldstein & McLeod, 2012; McLeod, 2007;

McLeod & Baker, 2017). For example, the Multilingual Children's Speech website contains summaries and details of over 200 studies of monolingual and multilingual children's speech acquisition in more than 50 languages. Information from this website is summarized in a broad explanation of speech acquisition that includes an age-based summary of speech acquisition research (McLeod, 2022). Across these resources, there is evidence to demonstrate that by 4 to 5 years of age children are excellent communicators in their home languages, can be understood by everyone (even strangers) and can correctly pronounce (almost) every consonant, vowel, and tone (even in polysyllabic words). Over 60 of these studies were reviewed and summarized by McLeod and Crowe (2018) who found that across 27 languages, 4- to 5-year-old children can produce almost every consonant, vowel and tone in their own language(s) and produce 93% of consonants correctly (15 studies of 12 languages) and 98% of vowels correctly (7 studies of 5 languages). McLeod and Crowe (2018) also included case studies of English, Spanish, Japanese and Korean consonant acquisition. Crowe and McLeod (2020) then analysed data using only studies from the USA and found that in 12 studies of 16,159 children learning English in the US, 5-year-old children could produce almost all consonants correctly. The four English consonants not acquired by 4;11 were: /r/, /ʒ/, /θ/, and /ð/. They concluded that children in the USA produce most consonants at exactly the same age as children around the world (Crowe & McLeod, 2020). Multiple studies published since the McLeod and Crowe (2018) review have confirmed the finding that 4- to 5-year-old children are able to produce almost all consonants in their home language(s). These include studies from Iceland (Másdóttir et al., 2021), Vietnam (Le et al., 2022; Phạm et al., 2019) and Fiji (McAlister et al., 2022). It is important to note that children's speech acquisition is broader than just consonant acquisition and this is highlighted in many books, chapters, journal articles and websites. Soon, a book will be published containing research evidence about children's acquisition of European Portuguese

(Freitas et al., forthcoming) and Brazilian Portuguese (Ceron et al., forthcoming) as well as more than 70 additional languages and dialects (McLeod, forthcoming). Authors from each chapter presented information about children's speech development in their language/dialect that can be accessed on the Multilingual Children's Speech YouTube channel.

Resources

Charles Sturt University Multilingual Children's Speech website

- Multilingual children's speech YouTube channel
https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLRXcSAI_dA7arRMrE0qdxLuzGChY1LgY2
- Summary of speech acquisition <http://www.csu.edu.au/research/multilingual-speech/speech-acquisition>
- Multilingual speech acquisition studies <http://www.csu.edu.au/research/multilingual-speech/speech-acq-studies>
- English acquisition charts: <https://www.csu.edu.au/research/multilingual-speech/speech-acquisition>
- English-speaking children's speech acquisition (organised by ages):
https://cdn.csu.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/227652/Speech-acquisition-summary.pdf

2. Multilingual speech assessment and analysis

Undertaking speech assessment and analysis typically involves undertaking a case history and assessment of children's speech production. Screening children's hearing, speech perception, language and communication skills, fluency, voice, and oromotor structure and function is also necessary (McLeod et al., 2017). It is important to listen to children and families to understand their strengths and communicative capacity to participate fully within their environment. A summary written for Portuguese SLPs is provided by McLeod, Verdon and McGill (2022). SLPs can locate speech assessments in a range of languages on the

Multilingual Children's Speech website. A review of 30 speech assessments in 19 languages other than English identified that most assessments elicited single words and were created and normed for use with monolingual populations (McLeod & Verdon, 2014). The Multilingual Children's Speech website also includes two free assessments: Intelligibility in Context Scale and Speech Participation and Activity Assessment of Children.

Intelligibility in Context Scale (ICS) (McLeod et al., 2012) is a quick parent-report screening measure that is available for free in 60+ languages. The ICS was originally validated with 120 preschool-aged children and was found to have high internal reliability ($\alpha = .93$), sensitivity, and construct validity. Criterion validity was established through significant correlations between the ICS and Diagnostic Evaluation of Articulation and Phonology (DEAP) percentage of consonants correct PCC ($r = .54$). Children's speech was reported to be most intelligible to parents, family members, friends, teachers, then strangers. Next the ICS was normed with 803 children aged 4;0-5;5 years and the average ICS score was found to be 4.4/5 ($SD = 0.7$), meaning that 4;0-5;5-year-old children were usually to always intelligible to their communicative partners, including strangers. Extensive research provides support for the ICS as a primary screening tool across a range of languages. Cross-linguistic evidence regarding the validity and reliability of the ICS has been reported in 18 studies of over 4,235 children from 14 countries speaking 14 languages (including Portuguese) (McLeod, 2020). For multilingual children, SLPs can use the ICS to evaluate intelligibility in each language that the child speaks.

Speech Participation and Activity Assessment of Children (SPAA-C) (McLeod, 2004) enables SLPs to consider children's perspectives on their communication and participation as well as to gather insights from family, friends, teachers and significant others. The SPAA-C is a free online tool and has been used in assessment and to discuss the outcome of intervention

(e.g., McLeod et al., 2017; 2023). The SPAA-C has been translated into a number of languages and has been used in research and practice in different countries.

Children Draw Talking (McCormack et al., 2022; McLeod et al., 2024) Children Draw Talking uses an arts-based technique to allow children to express their perspectives about their talking. Two protocols have been developed to describe how children's drawings and their interpretations can be elicited and analyzed. The Early Childhood Voices Drawing Protocol was used to elicit online 200 children's drawings from 24 countries and examples can be seen in the Early Childhood Voices 2022 Global Online Gallery (McLeod et al., 2024). The Sound Effects Study Drawing Protocol was used in a face-to-face study with 124 Australian children aged 4–5 years with speech sound disorders (SSD) (McCormack et al., 2022), most children's drawings displayed a positive attitude about talking. There was a significant relationship between speech accuracy and children's attitudes toward talking parents' perceptions of intelligibility and participation. No significant relationship between children's attitudes and parents' perceptions (McCormack et al., 2019).

Resources

Charles Sturt University Multilingual Children's Speech website

- Summary of speech assessments <http://www.csu.edu.au/research/multilingual-speech/speech-assessments>
- Intelligibility in Context Scale (ICS) <http://www.csu.edu.au/research/multilingual-speech/ics>
- Speech Participation and Activity Assessment of Children (SPAA-C) <http://www.csu.edu.au/research/multilingual-speech/spaa-c>
- Children Draw Talking Global Online Gallery <https://earlychildhoodresearch.csu.domains/early-childhood-voices-conference-2022/children-draw-talking-gallery-1-the-world/>

3. Multilingual speech intervention

Many speech interventions have been developed and tested with monolingual children, however there are few speech intervention resources for working with multilingual children. Often, multilingual children only receive speech-language pathology intervention in the societal language (not their home language) (Jordaan, 2008).

VietSpeech SuperSpeech. The VietSpeech research team at Charles Sturt University in Australia worked with Vietnamese-Australian children and their families to strengthen children's speech production in Vietnamese and English, encourage home language maintenance, and develop resources for English-speaking SLPs to use when working with Vietnamese-English-speaking children (McLeod et al., 2023). SuperSpeech, a bilingual Vietnamese-English speech and home language maintenance intervention was developed and tested using a case-control design (McLeod et al., 2022). SuperSpeech comprised 8 weekly group intervention sessions conducted online via Zoom. Fourteen Vietnamese-English-speaking children aged 3-6 and their families participated in the one-hour intervention sessions. Each session targeted: (1) sound superpowers: speech sound goals such as understanding similarities and differences between specific Vietnamese and English sounds; (2) word superpowers: language goals such as learning Vietnamese and English vocabulary during cooking activities; and (3) parent training in home language maintenance strategies. The intervention group ($n = 14$) and control group ($n = 16$) completed pre- and post-testing to explore the outcomes of SuperSpeech. Children in the intervention group demonstrated significant increases to their English intelligibility, and their parents significantly increased their encouragement for their children to use Vietnamese at home. Children in the control group showed faster growth of their Vietnamese vocabulary. Three VietSpeech resources are freely available online for SLPs to use when working with Vietnamese-English-speaking children. *VietSpeech Multilingual Children* (Verdon et al., 2021) provides information for

families on multilingualism and strategies for supporting home language maintenance. *SuperSpeech - VietSpeech Superhero Workbook* (Margetson et al., 2023) is a bilingual intervention resource book that includes every speech and home language maintenance activity used in SuperSpeech. *VietSpeech SuperSpeech Cards* (McLeod et al., 2020) are free printable bilingual Vietnamese-English vocabulary cards that can be used during Vietnamese-English speech-language pathology intervention.

Supporting and Understanding Speech Sound Disorder (SuSSD) provides an evidence-based overview of assessment, intervention, and intensity for children with phonological impairment. SuSSD includes a clinical decision-making tool to support appropriate selection of interventions for children with consistent phonological impairment. SLPs are given guidance and resources regarding the use of conventional minimal pairs (Weiner 1981), multiple oppositions (Williams 2000), and the complexity approach (Gierut 1989, Gierut & Champion 2001). The website was developed using research evidence from the United Kingdom (Hegarty et al., 2018; 2020).

Resources

- Charles Sturt University VietSpeech website
<https://www.csu.edu.au/research/vietspeech/overview>
- VietSpeech Multilingual Children
https://cdn.csu.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0010/3949156/VietSpeech-Multilingual-Children.pdf SuperSpeech - VietSpeech Superhero Workbook
https://cdn.csu.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/4203949/VietSpeech-family-workbook.pdf
- VietSpeech SuperSpeech Cards
https://cdn.csu.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0009/4174146/VietSpeech-super-speech-cards.pdf

- University of Ulster Supporting and Understanding Speech Sound Disorder (SuSSD) website <https://www.ulster.ac.uk/research/topic/nursing-and-health/caring-for-people-with-complex-needs/research-themes/neurodevelopmental/ssd>

4. Service delivery

In many countries there can be delays for children to access speech-language pathology services. A website has been developed to support families on speech-language pathology waiting lists. The website was developed using an extensive consultation and review process (McGill & McLeod, 2019). It was then tested in two randomized controlled trials (McGill et al., 2021; McLeod et al., 2020). The website was found to be not as effective as face-to-face intervention with an SLP (unsurprisingly). While the Waiting for Speech Pathology website was developed in English, some pages have been translated into a range of languages (see below).

Resources

- NSW Health's Waiting for Speech Pathology website <https://wnswlhd.health.nsw.gov.au/our-services/speech-pathology>
 - Visiting a speech-language pathologist: What to expect? Available in:
 - Farsi فارسی
 - Burmese ဗမာ
 - Swahili Kiswahili
 - Arabic العربية
 - Dari داری
 - Nepali नेपाली
 - Learning about books and print. Available in:
 - English

- Farsi فارسی
- Burmese ဗမာ
- Swahili Kiswahili
- Arabic العربية
- Dari داری
- Tamil தமிழ்
- Nepali नेपाली)

5. Advocacy - Communication rights

SLPs provide assessment and intervention that supports the realisation of communication rights for people with communication difficulties. All people, regardless of their age, status, ability or communicative capacity have the right to communicate. Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers” (United Nations, 1948).

Communication rights and the Sustainable Development Goals. Two free special issues of the International Journal of Speech-Language Pathology provide a broader understanding of communication rights and how communication is central to accomplishing sustainable development at both a global and individual level. McLeod (2018) provides an introduction and profiles articles from the 31 that are in the free special issue celebrating the 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and elaborated in McLeod, Verdon and Crowe (2023). McLeod and Marshall (2023) introduce the special issue celebrating Communication, Swallowing and the Sustainable Development Goals that contains 36 free articles from authors across the globe.

Intelligibility Enhancement Assessment and Intervention Protocols. SLPs may be approached by multilingual speakers wishing to improve their intelligibility in a language other than their home language in order to realise their communication rights and facilitate their participation. The Intelligibility Enhancement Assessment and Intervention Protocols (see Blake, McLeod, & Verdon, 2019) describe how SLPs can work with multilingual speakers to improve the intelligibility and acceptability of consonants, vowels and prosody.

Resources

- Communication is a human right: Celebrating the 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights - Special issue of International Journal of Speech-Language Pathology, Volume 20(1), 2018 (all 31 papers are free to access):
<https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/iasl20/20/1>
- Communication, Swallowing and the Sustainable Development Goals- Special issue of International Journal of Speech-Language Pathology, Volume 25(1), 2023 (all 36 papers are free to access): <https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/iasl20/25/1>
- Intelligibility Enhancement Assessment and Intervention Protocols (Blake, 2019).
Retrieved from
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/suppl/10.1080/02699206.2019.1608470?scroll=top>

These (mostly free) evidence-based resources regarding speech acquisition, speech assessment and analysis, speech intervention, service delivery, and advocacy can be used to support children's communication across the world.

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