Book Review

Bilingual Language Development and Disorders in Spanish-English Speakers, edited by B. A. Goldstein (Baltimore, Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co., 2004) [Pp. 354]. Pbk ISBN 1-55766-687-3. $35.00.

Francis Bacon (1624) proclaimed that “Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested”. This is one of those books to be chewed and digested. This book is a must for speech-language pathologists and teachers working with Spanish-English bilingual children. The chapters provide the evidence practitioners need to make decisions about assessment and intervention with bilingual Spanish-English children. Professionals and parents ask many questions about the best way to assess and teach bilingual children. And professionals give many suggestions, but these suggestions are generally opinions, lacking evidence. The authors of the chapters in this book are all actively engaged in research on Spanish-English bilingual language development—they represent the cutting edge of theory and practice. Several of the authors have been involved in the development of an assessment tool for Spanish-English bilingual children funded by the National Institutes of Health and other authors have had NIH research funding to explore language processing, language development, and cultural influences on language socialization in Spanish-English bilingual children.

The book focuses primarily on bilingual children between 4 and 7 years because the most data is available on children in that age range. It provides state of the art information on speech and language development of bilingual children being reared in the United States and then applies this information to best practices in assessment and intervention. The book is a coherent whole; not a collection of unrelated independent chapters. The chapters flow in a logical manner, moving from language processing, to lexical, morphosyntactic, discourse, and phonological development and disorders, and fluency and stuttering in bilingual children. Finally, the last chapter integrates research findings across all areas of speech and language in recommendations for intervention.

The similar organization across the chapters promotes cohesion. Each chapter provides:

- specific developmental data on monolingual Spanish speakers;
- developmental data on speech or language acquisition in bilingual speakers;
- research findings related to speech or language disorders in bilingual speakers;
- appropriate assessment information within each language area based on the developmental data and research findings;
- information on best practices for intervention in that domain.

Data reported throughout the book indicate that the processes of first and second language acquisition are interrelated but may be expressed in different ways by bilingual children as compared with monolingual children in either language. The authors make clear that “Acquiring more than one language is a life-long, complex task with great individual variation and a developmental trajectory that is not uniform” (Goldstein, p. 7). All the authors convey the belief that identifying language disorders in bilingual children requires examining the child’s language skills in each language, then determining how the languages interact with each other.
The book is organized into four sections. Goldstein begins by presenting the themes and organization for the book. Next, Hammer, Miccio, and Rodríguez describe the ways that parents’ beliefs about language development, attitudes toward bilingualism and perceived roles in the educational system influence children’s language development. They note how a family’s degree of acculturation, education, and resources affect these beliefs and attitudes. They recommend that assessment of bilingual children include semi-structured, conversational interviews with family members to gain an understanding of their goals for their children, their approach to raising their child, and the child’s communication partners and the contexts in which interactions occur.

The second section focuses on the development of meaning and vocabulary. Kohnert provides unique information on processing in early sequential bilinguals by considering bilingual individuals’ speed and accuracy of comprehending and producing the names of common objects in English, Spanish, or in conditions in which they alternated between English and Spanish. From 5 to 22 years, bilingual individuals improved on speed and accuracy in both languages and gradually English emerged as the stronger language. Their speed and accuracy on the two monolingual and the bilingual comprehension and production tasks were not always the same and changed over time. For example, 5–7 year-old children were more efficient on the Spanish production task, but showed no difference on the English and Spanish comprehension tasks. Eight to 10 year-olds were more accurate in Spanish production, but faster in English production. These splits in lexical processing across tasks challenge the concept of a clear language dominance in which one language is uniformly stronger than another.

Patterson, Pearson, Peña, and Kester describe the semantic development of young bilingual children. They show that total vocabulary is distributed across both languages in bilingual children. Consequently when evaluating the vocabulary skills of bilingual children, one must determine the child’s total conceptual vocabulary (the number of words in Spanish + the number of words in English – the number of words that appear in both languages. For many language domains, learning in one language enhances similar learning in the other language. This is not the case, however for vocabulary learning. For example, vocabulary size in Spanish was related to joint book reading in Spanish and not frequency of book reading in English, and vocabulary size in English was related to joint book reading in English, but not Spanish. Peña and Kester also noted that bilingual children’s performance on a variety of semantic tasks (e.g., analogies, function, linguistic concepts) differed in Spanish and English; they performed some semantic tasks better in Spanish and others better in English. This provides further evidence that there cannot be a simple notion of language dominance.

The third section addresses the development of grammar and discourse. Spanish is a more inflected, morphologically rich language than English. Jackson-Maldonado describes the similarities and differences in verb morphology of monolingual and bilingual children and argues for the need for speech-language pathologists to evaluate a child’s ability to produce markers on a variety of types of verbs. Bedore notes that practitioners need to be aware of the various Spanish dialects when evaluating a child’s patterns of morphological use. Restrepo and Gutiérrez-Clellen caution that bilingual children do not necessarily exhibit the same types of grammatical difficulties in both languages. English-speaking children with specific language impairment (SLI) often experience difficulty with verb tense markers. In contrast, Spanish-speaking children seldom exhibit difficulty with tense markers; they are more likely to have difficulties with article agreement and clitic pronouns.
Speech-language pathologists are often faced with the task of determining if a child’s poor skills in L1 represent a language learning disability or language loss. Anderson presents a discussion of the sociolinguistic factors that affect L1 skill and describes patterns of language loss and language attrition. She notes that the status of a minority language in a community influences whether or not it is lost. Lexical loss, particularly loss of nouns, occurs in the earliest stages of language loss. Then children show loss of article and adjective gender agreement with nouns and verb person and number.

The fourth section addresses phonological and fluency components of bilingual development. Goldstein describes the ways that the phonological systems of bilingual children are both similar and different from those of monolingual Spanish or English speakers. Consequently one cannot simply use normative data from either one of the two languages when assessing the bilingual child. Furthermore, one must also be aware of the dialect variations that exist in both languages.

Finally, Kohnert and Derr provide support for the need to develop bilingual children’s ability to communicate in both English and Spanish because they function in environments where both languages are necessary. Their recommendations are based on the research evidence on bilingual language development and disorders. Kohnert and Derr argue against the persistent notion that a single language is best for children with language impairment, reporting that there is no support for the belief that a child with a language impairment who received input in two languages will be worse off than a monolingual child with a similar impairment. Maintaining a first language for children of immigrant families is critical for maintaining intergenerational communication. Furthermore, there is evidence that supports greater and faster gains in L2 when L1 is intact. Although professionals sometimes recommend treating in the child’s dominant language, the authors in this book have shown that language dominance is not a simple manner. Kohnert and Derr make the analogy that one requires two hands to do many tasks. Most persons have a dominant hand which is used to write, eat, or screw in light bulbs. For some tasks, however, the nondominant hand serves important functions such as holding the phone receiver as you write a note or steadying a needle as the dominant hand threads it. One would not argue that the nondominant hand is unimportant, so why do professionals sometimes appear to consider the nondominant language unimportant.

The meal served in *Bilingual Language Development and Disorders in Spanish-English Speakers* is too large to do it justice in this review. This book provides many morsels to be savoured and offers the ingredients that can be measured in assessments and put together for nutritious interventions that develop healthy children.

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