Language assessment tools for Arabic speaking refugee children

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Due to the civil war in Syria, many families with school-age children have arrived in Germany. Even if language support is available, it is difficult to assess the progress in the acquisition of German in these children because assessment procedures for such groups are practically nonexistent: there are only very few assessment tools with bilingual norms and these norms are based on populations of simultaneous or early successive bilinguals with first systematic contact to German at Kindergarten age; the recommendation for norm adjustments (Thordardottir 2015) also seem to work best with simultaneous or early successive bilinguals. These difficulties are not only due to the language structures used but often also to the fact that the children had no schooling for a considerable period of time. Our paper compares 11 new-arrivals of Syrian origin at school age (7;7-11;6), with 11 younger heritage speakers (5;10-8;11), i.e. simultaneous or early successive bilingual children with Arabic as L1. We establish that these children show typical language development by assessing their skills in their home-language and then investigate their performance in German by administering standardized tests for morphosyntax and vocabulary and two repetition tasks, the German LITMUS (Language Impairment Testing in Multilingual Settings, COST Action IS0804, see Armon-Lotem et al. 2015) sentence-repetition and non-word repetition task. Comparisons to the groups of heritage children show that scores are comparable only for nonword repetition, whereas sentence repetition and other tests involving morphosyntax and vocabulary show poor performance even after 24 months of exposure. Questionnaire background data allows exploring whether variables such as age-of-exposure, length-of exposure, current L2 use or socio-economic-status influence performance in the LITMUS tasks. We also discuss our results in the light of official educational policies in Germany assuming that 12 months of systematic exposure and support will suffice for integrating a child into a regular classroom.

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