The Multilingual Mind: lecture series on multilingualism across disciplines

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Properties of the L2 lexicon in refugee children: Evidence from a word association task in Greek

Abstract

Vocabulary knowledge can be characterised by three dimensions: size, depth, and organisation (Meara, 1996). The present study mainly focuses on the investigation of the lexicon on an organisational level, namely on connections between words. The comparison between L2 and L1 lexicon based on word association patterns has drawn great research attention, with previous empirical findings revealing similarities and differences between L2 and L1 speakers (e.g., Fitzpatrick, 2006). However, there has been restricted focus on primary school age children while the exploration of L2 learners with a refugee background is also greatly unexplored. Therefore, the aim of the present study is to bridge this gap in the literature.

Fifty-two L1 Arabic-, Farsi-, and Kurdish-speaking children (23 females) with a refugee background participated in the current study. They were between the ages of approximately 7 to 13 ($M = 10.2$, $SD = 1.6$) and were all attending Greek reception classes in primary schools in the region of Thessaloniki (Greece) for 8.5 months on average ($SD = 5.4$). The pupils completed an off-line word association task that was orally administered. Every time the child was presented with a stimulus word, they needed to provide one or more words that came to their mind in connection to the former. Although the researcher pronounced the stimulus word in Greek, the child could respond not only in Greek but also in their L1 or in English. The task included 48 stimulus words in total. Besides the main above-presented task, a background questionnaire as well as background tasks addressing cognitive and L2 linguistic abilities were also administered.

The word association responses were categorised based on Fitzpatrick (2006), Fitzpatrick et al. (2015), Fitzpatrick & Izura (2011), Doró (2009), as well as based on the responses elicited in our study. Descriptively- and statistically-based findings will be presented also in relation to previous relevant studies in the field. Moreover, the performance of the L2 students with a refugee background will be discussed in comparison to that of a control group of 51 age matched L1 Greek children (23 females).

References

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