

Core vocabulary used by young children receiving Maltese-dominant exposure

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Core vocabulary lists are made up of words that typically-developing children use across all communicative environments (Banajee, Dicarlo & Buras Stricklin, 2003). Typically, these high frequency words are verbs, demonstratives and prepositions that do not change across contexts of language use (Banajee et al., 2003; Stubbs, 1986). The identification of core vocabularies in children exposed to specific languages or language pairs has important implications for language intervention. For Maltese typically-developing children, who are exposed to varying proportions of Maltese and English, frequency of word usage in either language is relatively unknown. The identification of a core vocabulary list for sub-groups of the Maltese childhood population, the latter determined on the basis of the type of bilingual exposure received, is clinically relevant as it can form an evidence-based foundation for therapeutic intervention. Indeed, vocabulary selection has been posited as central to treatment directed at young children with primary language delay (e.g., Ellis Weismer, Murray Branch, & Miller, 1993; Girolametto, Pearce, & Weitzman, 1996; Wolfe & Heilman, 2010; Robillard, Mayer-Crittenden, Minor-Corriveau, & Bélanger, 2014). The reported investigation aimed to identify a core vocabulary list for typically-developing children who were predominantly exposed to the Maltese language in their homes.

Method

Vocabulary data were gathered longitudinally from two groups of children. The younger cohort ($N = 9$) was followed between 12 and 24 months of age. Data for the older group ($N = 7$) were gathered at 18-30 months. Data were collected in the children's homes at 4-month intervals. Each child's language use was audio-recorded during 20 minutes of free play with the mother and transcribed orthographically. For every cohort, an inventory of all the true words that children produced spontaneously was drawn up. Each word was analysed for commonality, i.e. the number of children producing each word, as well as frequency, i.e. the number of times each word was produced.

Results

Commonality scores identified the words used by more than half of the participants in each group. The more commonly used words increased in number with age. This was particularly evident in the older group. Function words were generally predominant among the more common words used. English words showed a minimal presence. Word production frequencies were divided by the total number of words used (tokens) at each age point and the resulting figure compared to the value of 0.5 per 1000 words typically used to identify frequently used words (see e.g. Robillard et al., 2014).

Discussion

Core vocabulary lists typically draw on words that are commonly and frequently used by young children. The present findings highlight a number of vocabulary items that were commonly used by the participants. These results are however preliminary, given the small sample sizes as well as the short sampling periods. The latter might have also contributed to frequency of use not being sufficiently high for qualification of the items produced as high-frequency words. Nonetheless, the specific words identified suggest that vocabulary-based intervention programmes for children with language delay may focus on commonly-used function words, alongside or prior to widely addressed noun targets.

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