

A receptive-expressive gap for Spanish-English HL and L2 bilingual children?

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Adult heritage language (HL) and second language (L2) bilinguals often demonstrate a disparity between comprehension and production for vocabulary and grammar, termed the receptive-expressive gap (Gibson et al. 2012; Montrul 2016; Putnam & Sánchez 2013). This gap and other variability associated with HL speakers have contributed to a terminological debate on the nature of bilingual grammars, hinging on the label “incomplete” (Bayram et al. 2019; Domínguez et al. 2019). Turning to children and using Spanish verb morphology, we investigate the potential gap in HL speakers and L2 learners in a dual immersion educational setting, which has been shown to mitigate attrition in HL (Montrul & Potowski 2007), thanks to increased exposure and literacy training.

Previous research on adult HL and L2 users has documented variable inflectional morphology (Montrul 2016; Polinsky 2018), with production more affected than comprehension; however, little research has been done on developing HL and L2 grammars of children. By age 10, children in a majority Spanish environment show full receptive-expressive mastery of present tense regular and irregular morphology, but HL Spanish children show variable verb inflection (Silva Corvalán 2014), as do L2 learners. Using data from a bilingual Spanish-English immersion program setting, the current study looks at present tense verb morphology. Given a possible discrepancy between the two competencies, we tested oral comprehension and written production to determine whether accuracy of comprehension and production of Spanish present tense is the same or different for HL and L2 children.

Participants were 62 Spanish-English bilingual children (21 HL, 41 L2), ages 9-10, from two public schools that followed a 50:50 two-way immersion program. For the oral comprehension task (OCT), students viewed 20 pairs of photographs showing one or two persons performing an action. Children had to choose the correct photograph based on whether the verb they heard was singular (1) or plural (2). There were two production tasks, one a form-focused task (FFPT) that tested children’s written production of 10 verbs in singular-plural in response to photo cues similar to the OCT (3). The second was an open task, focused on meaning (MFPT), an email to a new pen-pal.

The HL group showed high levels of accuracy on number morphology in all three tasks, (94% OCT, 92% FFPT, 96% MFPT). Differences between the first two tasks were not significant (Wilcoxon signed rank tests. $V = 94$, $p = .717$), which means for HL speakers oral comprehension of third person singular versus plural simple present tense did not exceed written production ability. L2 learners had 82% OCT, 73% FFPT, and 91% MFPT; differences between OCT and FFPT were not significant ($V = 442.5$, $p = .084$). However, L2s were significantly less accurate than HL children in the FFPT ($W = 586$, $p = .016$) and OCT ($W = 601$, $p = .008$). In other words, HL and L2 speakers showed

