

How language contact affects dual language learners' phonological development

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More than one language is used in the Hong Kong preschool setting. Apart from acquiring Cantonese which is the majority language of the Hong Kong population, Hong Kong preschoolers are exposed to English regularly through stories, songs and games in the classroom setting. Given the vast differences between Cantonese and English phonology, we were interested in how young children handle simultaneously two different phonological systems, and whether the language contact in question influences these young dual language learners' phonological development in either or both of the languages. To address these issues, we first administered to 96 four-year-old Hong Kong children the sound-in-word subtest of the Goldman-Fristoe Test of Articulation (GFTA) which required the child to say a list of English words, in which the target sound/cluster of sounds appears in a word-initial, -medial or -final position. Doing this allowed us to examine the extent to which the English consonant errors made by Hong Kong preschoolers learning English as a second language (ESL) are different from those made by their English monolingual peers (with reference to the published monolingual speech norms for English). Using the 85% criterion (i.e., a sound is considered difficult, when less than 85% of the children in a particular age group cannot produce the target sound/cluster of sounds), we found that whilst fricatives are difficult for all children (monolingual and ESL children alike), the ESL children have unique difficulties with the consonant /n/ which is an early-acquired sound in the GFTA speech norms. This difficulty with /n/ probably stems from an ongoing language change in the children's first language—the neutralization between /n/ and /l/ in adult Cantonese. In other words, the children's first language has left a mark on the children's second language phonology. Next, we were interested in whether the reverse of the above process is possible, namely the learning of English influences the children's phonological development in Cantonese, their first language. A few children exhibited traces of English phonology in their Cantonese. For example, they released word-final consonants in Cantonese (which is not permitted in standard Cantonese). Together these findings suggest that language contact arising from school instructions influences children's phonological development in the languages concerned. In addition, it is not necessary that only one of the languages is affected. In our case, there appeared to be reverse influence from second language to first language among a small group of children. Implications of the findings will be discussed.