

Predicting children's language development

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We depend on a barrage of standardized tests to assess everything from aptitude to intelligence. But do they provide an accurate forecast when it comes to something as complex as language? A study by Diane Pesco, an assistant professor in Concordia's Department of Education, and co-author Daniela O'Neill, published earlier this year in the *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, shows that the Language Use Inventory (LUI) does.

Developed by O'Neill at the University of Waterloo, the LUI assesses the language of children 18 to 47 months old. In answering a series of questions, parents reveal how their children use language in various situations, including interacting with others, playing, and communicating about the world around them. Children's scores can then be compared to those of hundreds of other children the same age from across Canada. In fact, the test is currently used in eight provinces in Canada, 30 states in the U.S., as well as in the U.K., Ireland, Australia, and New Zealand.

When Pesco and O'Neill began their study, O'Neill had already established that the LUI can accurately assess a child's current [language ability](#), but the measure's relative novelty meant that its ability to accurately predict how toddlers would fare as they blossomed into youngsters could not be assessed until now.

Pesco, who is also a certified speech-language pathologist, was eager to see if the LUI results would hold down the line and perhaps result in fewer false positives than other measures of young children's language.

"False positives," Pesco explains, "means that a measure identifies a child as having a [language delay](#) or problem when, in fact, he or she does not. That's a problem, since services for children with true delays are already overtaxed and have long waiting lists. False positives can also lead parents to worry unnecessarily and to incur expenses for private services, and can cause stress for children. At the same time, we don't want to miss children who have and may continue to have difficulties."

Finding a measure that can accurately identify children with language issues and that can predict who will continue to have difficulties later in childhood has therefore become a common goal for researchers, speech pathologists, pediatricians and parents who want to ensure that their kids develop strong language skills.

In response to this challenge, Pesco and O'Neill analyzed data from 348 five- to six-year-olds whose parents had completed the LUI when their child was a toddler or preschooler. The two researchers examined the relationship between the children's scores on the LUI and on later language measures.

The results were promising. Children who had scored low on the LUI as toddlers were far more likely to have low scores on language measures when they hit five or six. These same children were also likely to be identified with a language impairment by the time they hit school age.

According to the study's findings, therefore, the LUI can both identify kids who are struggling with language now and provide insight into their future facility with words. Early identification of language delays permits parents to seek help before problems set in, potentially resulting in a brighter future for those [children](#) whose [language](#) skills need a boost.

More information: [jshlr.asha.org/cgi/content/abs ...
-4388_2011_10-0273v1](https://jshlr.asha.org/cgi/content/abs...-4388_2011_10-0273v1)

Provided by Concordia University

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