

Kids' oral language skills can predict future writing difficulties

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Credit: Robert Kraft/public domain

Children's future writing difficulties can be identified before they even learn how to begin writing, according to a new study by Professor Phaedra Royle and Postdoctoral fellow Alexandra Marquis of the University of Montreal's School of Speech Language Pathology and Audiology.

The researchers are interested in oral language skills and their impact on grammar and spelling learning. Their work shows that oral language is a good predictor of writing difficulties. "The more [children](#) are able to use verb tense in [spoken language](#), the more easily they can learn written language," explained Professor Royle. On a different note, the research data also contradicts the popular belief that bilingualism at an early age can be detrimental to oral and written language learning.

71 children aged six to nine years participated in Marquis and Royle's study on the relationship between oral and written language skills (e.g., children's ability to orally conjugate verbs in the past tense or to use auxiliaries and other grammatical elements in writing). Of these children, 38 were unilingual French-speaking and 33 were multilingual, with French being their second or third language. All attended French-language schools. They were initially evaluated in first grade, by having their oral ability in verb conjugation measured. Then, at the end of second grade, the children's written skills were tested – they were given a multiple choice morphosyntactic task (e.g., asking them to chose the right spelling between a, à and as in a sentence such as Paul a une amie 'Paul has a friend') and underwent a standardized dictation test. Morphosyntax is a linguistic term related to word grammar

Results of Royle and Marquis' study indicate that first grade oral skills were predictive of second grade writing skills one year later. More specifically, morphological awareness in spoken language (in which the child is able to manipulate the parts of a word and understand the rules of word formation) can predict possible spelling and grammar difficulties in written language. Morphology refers to the individual pieces of a word, or morphemes, that have meaning. For example, the two morphemes "dog" and "-s" in "dogs" mean more than one dog. Syntax refers to the way we construct whole sentences.."Our data reveal links between oral and written morphosyntactic skills for both groups of children," Royle said. "Our findings also show that unilingual French-

speaking children have an advantage in terms of spoken language because they constantly use French. But in terms of written language, the two groups showed no significant differences."

This is the first study in French in which children's morphosyntactic abilities were measured before they were able to write. "Language difficulties must identified early on in school to develop appropriate pedagogical approaches and prevent students from having to cope with failure," Marquis said.

Testing in Quebec French Marquis' postdoctoral research focuses at knowledge of French verb morphology from birth to school age. "Babies are sensitive to speech sounds at an early age," she explained. "They can even recognize verb endings at 11 months!" Few studies have focused on pre-school children's sensitivity to the morphological structure of oral language and its predictive nature for written language. In fact, only one study was found in the scientific literature on the subject – it looked at learning Hebrew. "Researchers focus more on phoneme, syllable, and semantic knowledge... These skills are essential for reading and writing learning. However, emphasizing morphology and its relationship to [written language](#) may optimize the development of skills related to spelling and grammar in children," Marquis said. The approach seems especially suitable for children who have problems with the internal structure of words, as is the case with dysphasia or aphasia.

Marquis and Royle's work could have significant impact in education and intervention for children with language disorders. It is already part of an oral language test specific to Quebec French for detecting spelling difficulties in children which was developed by Drs Rvachew, Gonnerman and Royle (Prédiction des habiletés orthographiques par des habiletés de langage oral (PHOPHLO), from McGill University and the Université de Montréal.

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