



Research

Understanding the Language Difficulties of Children With Specific Language Impairments: Does Verbal Working Memory Matter?

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Many children with specific language impairment (SLI) demonstrate deficits in both verbal working memory (VWM) and language. Among child language researchers, the debate continues whether these two deficits are related. In this article, I take the position that there is indeed a connection between SLI and VWM. I review evidence suggesting that the lexical/morphological learning and sentence comprehension problems of many of these

children are associated with deficient VWM abilities. Evidence is also reviewed for the possibility that deficient VWM provides a clinical marker of SLI. I end by offering various assessment and intervention techniques that may prove useful in SLI.

Key Words: children, specific language impairment, verbal working memory, language learning, comprehension

Clinicians and researchers alike have long recognized the heterogeneity of those children regarded as having specific language impairment (SLI). These are children who, although showing normal-range hearing sensitivity and nonverbal intelligence and the absence of developmental disability, demonstrate marked receptive and/or expressive language-learning/performance difficulties. Despite these children's ability to perform within the normal limits on most standardized nonverbal intelligence tests, they nonetheless exhibit an array of linguistic and nonlinguistic information-processing inefficiencies across a wide range of experimental tasks. One of these inefficient processes relates to verbal working memory (VWM). Though some researchers argue that the relation between poor VWM and language abilities in children with SLI is less than definitive (e.g., van der Lely & Howard, 1994), others point to a growing body of converging evidence for just such a relation (Dollaghan & Campbell, 1998; Ellis Weismer et al., 2000; Gathercole & Baddeley, 1990a; Montgomery, 1995a, 2000a, 2000b). In this article, I review what is known about the association between VWM and certain language difficulties in children with SLI and offer suggestions on how understanding these children's VWM inefficiencies has important implications for language assessment and intervention.

It is important to point out that although the architecture of the VWM system might be divided up into different components, the functional reality is that a child's language knowledge and VWM system operate in a bidirectional and interactive fashion. There are children with poor

VWM skills who may have difficulty learning new language material, or even comprehending familiar language, because they cannot remember the input or process it quickly enough. In this instance, a child's VWM limitations constrain his/her language learning and/or comprehension. There are also children with deficient language knowledge who may demonstrate less efficient lexical learning or sentence comprehension because their poor knowledge does not support the efficient processing of the input. For example, a sentence containing unknown words or complex grammar may be weakly or incompletely stored in VWM such that the majority of attentional resources (e.g., amount of mental energy, mental focus) are allocated to the less-familiar content, leaving fewer resources available to process the entire sentence. Although there are certainly bidirectional influences, the primary focus in this article is on the potential influence of VWM on the lexical/morphological learning and sentence comprehension abilities of children with SLI.

Verbal Working Memory: Some Theory

The construct of VWM has been modeled in different ways by different investigators. The models differ with respect to both architectural and functional details. Cowan (1997), for example, regards VWM as a unitary mental construct that cannot be neatly or easily divided into separate subsystems, such as a discrete short-term memory storage buffer and a processing component. Moreover, Cowan proposes that VWM is integrally related to and

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