

Setswana Speech Rhythm Development in High-Socioeconomic Status Setswana-English Bilingual Children

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Abstract : The present study investigates the effects of socioeconomic status (SES) and bilingualism on the Setswana speech rhythm of Batswana (citizens) children aged 6-7 years with typical development born and residing in Botswana. Botswana is a country in which there is a diglossic Setswana/English language setting, where English is the dominant high-status language in educational and public contexts. Generally, children from low SES have lower linguistic and cognitive profiles than their age-matched peers from high SES. A greater understanding of these variables would allow educators to distinguish between underdeveloped language skills in children due to impairment and environmental issues for them to successfully enroll children in language development enhancement programs specific to the child's needs. There are 20 participants: 10 high SES private English-medium educated early sequential Setswana-English bilingual children, taught full-time in English (L2) from the age of 3 years, and for whom English has become dominant; and 10 low SES children who are educated in public schools for whom English is considered a learner language, i.e., L1 Setswana is dominant. The aim is to see whether SES and bilingualism, have had an effect on the Setswana speech rhythm of children in either group. The study primarily uses semi-spontaneous speech based on the telling of the wordless picture storybook. A questionnaire is used to elicit the language use pattern of the children and that of their parents, as well as the education level of the parents and the school the children attend. A comparison of the rhythm shows that children from high SES have a lower durational variability than those from low SES. The findings of the study are that the low durational variability by children from high SES may suggest an underdeveloped rhythm. In conclusion, the results of the present study are against the notion that children from high SES outperform those from low SES in linguistic development.

Keywords : bilingualism, Setswana English, socio-economic status, speech-rhythm

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