

Key Findings on Rapid Syntax Screening Test for Children

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Abstract : Introduction: Late identification of language difficulties in children could result in long-term negative consequences for communication, literacy and self-esteem. This highlights the need for early identification and intervention for speech, language and communication difficulties. Speech and language therapy is a relatively new profession in Sri Lanka and at present, there are no formal standardized screening tools to assess language skills in Sinhala-speaking children. The development and validation of a short, accurate screening tool to enable the identification of children with syntactic difficulties in Sinhala is a current need. Aims: 1) To develop test items for a Sinhala Syntactic Structures (S3 Short Form) test on children aged between 3;0 to 5;0 years 2) To validate the test of Sinhala Syntactic Structures (S3 Short Form) on children aged between 3; 0 to 5; 0 years Methods: The Sinhala Syntactic Structures (S3 Short Form) was devised based on the Renfrew Action Picture Test. As Sinhala contains post-positions in contrast to English, the principles of the Renfrew Action Picture Test were followed to gain an information score and a grammar score but the test devised reflected the linguistic-specificity and complexity of Sinhala and the pictures were in keeping with the culture of the country. This included the dative case marker 'to give something to her' (/ejɔ:ɔ/ meaning 'to her'), the instrumental case marker 'to get something from' (/ejɔ:gən/ meaning 'from him' or /gəhən/ meaning 'from the tree'), possessive noun (/ammage:/ meaning 'mother's' or /gəhe:/ meaning 'of the tree' or /male:/ meaning 'of the flower') and plural markers (/balla:/ ballo:/ meaning 'dog/dogs', /malə/mal/ meaning 'flower/flowers', /gasə/gas/ meaning 'tree/trees' and /wala:kulə/wala:kulu/ meaning 'cloud/clouds'). The picture targets included socio-culturally appropriate scenes of the Sri Lankan New Year celebration, elephant procession and the Buddhist 'Wesak' ceremony. The test was piloted with a group of 60 participants and necessary changes made. In phase 1, the test was administered to 100 Sinhala-speaking children aged between 3; 0 and 5; 0 years in one district. In this presentation on phase 2, the test was administered to another 100 Sinhala-speaking children aged between 3; 0 to 5; 0 in three districts. In phase 2, the selection of the test items was assessed via measures of content validity, test-retest reliability and inter-rater reliability. The age of acquisition of each syntactic structure was determined using content and grammar scores which were statistically analysed using t-tests and one-way ANOVAs. Results: High percentage agreement was found on test-retest reliability on content validity and Pearson correlation measures and on inter-rater reliability. As predicted, there was a statistically significant influence of age on the production of syntactic structures at $p < 0.05$. Conclusions: As the target test items included generated the information and the syntactic structures expected, the test could be used as a quick syntactic screening tool with preschool children.

Keywords : Sinhala, screening, syntax, language

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