



Differential Diagnosis of Bilingual Language Acquisition vs. Language Disorder

The following observation checklist may be useful when assessing bilingual children and the differential diagnosis process.

Presentation	Bilingual Language Development	X √	Language Disorder	X √
Attention & listening difficulties	No difficulties with maintaining attention and listening.		Difficulties maintaining eye contact, sitting, listening.	
Play (symbolic, imaginative, role)	Developing along normal lines		Delayed play evident	
Non-verbal communication	Developing along normal lines		Difficulties often evident	
Pragmatic intent	Developing along normal lines		Difficulties often evident	
Echoing	Yes – may be verbal rehearsal strategy to cue in own comprehension		Can indicate comprehension difficulties	
Echolalia	Not evident, may be repeating modelled language.		May be evident, and inappropriate.	
Learnt Phrases	Often used by children learning English as a second language.		May be evident-indicating reduced expressive skills.	
Jargon – non – communicative	Not evident		May be evident and may persist.	

Presentation	Bilingual Language Development	X √	Language Disorder	X √
Syntax	May appear disordered Child may make grammatical mistakes as he/she is mapping linguistic structures from L1 onto L2.		Disordered	
Jargon – communicative	Yes, possibly		May be evident, can/often persist (s)	
Mixing jargon in sophisticated Language	Not evident		May be evident, can/often persist(s)	
Perseveration	Not evident		May be evident	
Word finding difficulties (WFD) Phonemic errors Semantic errors	Not specifically WFD, but reduced exposure to vocabulary. Important to check exposure of different vocabulary across all languages spoken..		Yes difficulties with word retrieval.	
Tangential language	Unusual		May be evident/can persist	
Phonological difficulties	May be evident		May be evident	
Accent vs prosody	Accent may be evident		Prosodic difficulties	
Rate of progress	Often very rapid		Slow, and child does not generalise learnt information.	
Need for therapy	Discharge		Yes, evidence to show that bilingual children with language disorder often in moderate severe range	
Stimulability e.g. within session/nursery	Very Stimulable.		Often not	
Impairment in both languages	Mild delay depending on type of acquisition –may have a stronger, normally developing dominant language		Yes –can affect both comprehension and expression.	