Preschool language assessment for multilingual children. A usage-based approach

Nicole Weidinger[1], Stefanie Haberzettl[2] & Valentin Kany[3]
[1]LMU Munich, weidinger@daf.lmu.de [2] Saarland University, [3] Saarland University

In this talk we present the implementation and evaluation of a game-based assessment tool designed for four- to six-year-old preschool children with German as first or second language (cf. Roche et al. 2016). Building on usage-based language acquisition theory (Tomasello 2003) the assessment is based on empirical findings of children's language production in authentic communicative settings (e.g., Behrens, Madlener & Skoruppa 2016). Thus, rather than assessing the use of sentences in isolation, it aims at evaluating children's productive communicative abilities in meaningful contexts relating to discourse structure and across different cognitive domains (space, possession, definiteness). To avoid traditional examiner-examinee test situations the core of the tool is an interactive app following the principles of Serious Games. The examinees play the game on a tablet by themselves while the examiner merely controls the child's tablet via a second device (Wizard-of-Oz Principle). Children are asked to help the game's characters (i.e., the children's interaction partner) by talking to them. Test items are embedded in communicatively relevant real-life situations applying a child-friendly background story. Furthermore, the app is supplemented by a system of data recording and data transfer to a server, data management, efficient procedures for transcribing the audio recordings and computer-based evaluation routines. The app is particularly suitable for use in daycare centers, as the implementation of the game itself takes little time and requires little training of the educators. This makes it easy to identify children who are at risk of learning difficulties later in school due to communicative delays.

The goals of our talk are (a) to show how Serious Games and insights into language development from a usage-based perspective can help to enhance the validity of preschool assessment for monolingual and multilingual children, and (b) to present the results of the app validation test (38 monolingual and 70 multilingual children aged 4;5-6;0) in the conceptually difficult domain of spatial language. In addition, we will discuss preliminary results from a study in daycare centers in Saarland. In this study, 100 preschool children are tested twice at 6-month intervals with the aim of comparing the language acquisition progress of two groups: one attending daycare centers with a special focus on language development and the other attending daycare centers without such a focus. Since the daycare centers with a special focus on enhancing language development follow a training concept integrated into everyday life, the tool we present is particularly well suited for this purpose with its orientation to everyday communication situations.

References

Behrens, Heike, Madlener, Karin & Skoruppa, Katrin. 2016. The role of scaffolding in children's questions: Implications for (preschool) language assessment from a usage-based perspective. In Juliana Goschler & Susanne Niemeier (ed.), *Yearbook of the German Cognitive Linguistics Association*, 237-259. De Gruyter Mouton.

Roche, Jörg, Jessen, Moiken, Weidinger, Nicole, Behrens, Heike, Haberzettl, Stefanie, Hasselhorn, Marcus, Ifenthaler, Dirk, Kapica, Natalia, Kecker, Gabriele, Klein, Wolfgang, Madlener, Karin, Pagonis, Giulio, Schug, Maike, Skoruppa, Katrin, Terrasi-Haufe, Elisabetta & Thissen, Frank. 2016. Zur Entwicklung eines interaktiven Verfahrens der Sprachstandsermittlung bei mehrsprachig aufwachsenden Kindern – von der Idee zu ersten Umsetzungsschritten. *Zeitschrift für Interkulturellen Fremdsprachenunterricht* 21(2). 127-142.

Tomasello, Michael. 2003. *Constructing a language: A usage-based theory of language acquisition*. Boston: Harvard University Press.