

Maria Luisa Lorusso (Scientific Institute IRCCS E. Medea):

Identifying Developmental Language Disorder in multilingual children

Bilingual individuals are not the sum of two or more monolingual persons. Their language experience and their language competence in the two or more languages spoken is not perfectly equivalent to that of monolingual individuals, and performance on language tests can be influenced by these differences. For this reason, distinguishing Developmental Language Disorder (DLD) from insufficient exposure to the societal language in bilingual children can be challenging for clinicians. This can lead to overdiagnosis as well as to underdiagnosis. In both cases, the problem is that the child does not receive the type of intervention that suits their needs.

The most important thing to avoid misdiagnosis is to have access to assessment tools which are both sensitive (able to detect the problem when it is present) and specific (able to exclude the problem when it is absent). Tools designed for monolingual children often lack these characteristics. We will go through different types of solutions to this “diagnostic dilemma”, from fully computerized assessment in multiple languages to the use of very specific clinical markers (both language-related and language-independent), to dynamic assessment procedures focusing on the process rather than on the outcomes of language learning.