

Supporting Language and Literacy

By Daniel Bérubé

Language lies at the heart of every human interaction, yet we know very little about its development. Until recently, research on the acquisition of phonology—the system of speech sounds in a language—has been principally focused on Indo-European languages and, in particular, English.

Since 2009, Dr. May Bernhardt and Dr. Joseph Stemberger from the University of British Columbia have explored the phonological acquisition of preschool and school-aged children from numerous language backgrounds. Their project, entitled “Cross-linguistic Investigation of Phonological Impairment in Children,” was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC). It united more than 100 practitioners, students, teachers, and researchers from 15 countries.

One of UNESCO’s primary concerns is how to support the literacy development of all children. Literacy skills are dependent on strong language skills, including phonology. Moreover, educators and practitioners have the responsibility to help children develop strong language and literacy skills. But how can educators best support language skills? Should they foster skills in the same way for all children, or should they respond to individual language differences? Children whose first language is neither English nor French need specific supports.

As an assistant professor at the Université de Saint-Boniface, I participated in a cross-linguistic investigation that resulted in the development of numerous tools that can be used to evaluate the phonology of each language in the study. In Canada, and in Manitoba in particular, we looked at the acquisition of French. The new evaluation tools we created represent a breakthrough in the field of education that allows us to further support language acquisition, including the literacy skills of children—particularly those who have the greatest need for support in reading and writing. Our project’s objective is to establish a detailed phonological comparison across languages, focusing on word structure (e.g., monosyllabic and multisyllabic words), speech sound segments (e.g., consonants and vowels), and their interaction. We are guided by the following key questions: (a) What aspects of language acquisition are universal and what characteristics

are unique to each language? (b) Do all children demonstrate the same patterns of language acquisition across languages? Specifically, the research project addresses phonological development. Therefore, we asked: Are there more similarities than differences between languages in the acquisition of phonology?

This cross-linguistic phonology project is unique because it is the first study to incorporate a wide variety of languages, including Arabic, Chinese, English, French, German, Hungarian, and Slovenian, thereby representing Finno-Ugrian, Germanic, Romance, Sino-Tibetan, Slavic, and Semitic language groups. We used an equivalent methodology with all 15 languages included in the study, and evaluated preschool and school-aged children who demonstrated typical language development, as well as those who showed the greatest need for literacy and academic support. This allowed us to further understand language commonalities and differences. The evaluation tools we created (including those in French) examined the detailed word structure and sound inventories of each language. Our analyses are guided within a non-linear phonology framework and can be adapted to many dialects, such as Parisian French, Haitian French, and Louisiana French. The Canadian French tool is currently used by practitioners in private practice, in school divisions, and in rehabilitation centres across Canada, France, and Switzerland.

In 2012, we established a working group with collaborators from Australia, led by Dr. Sharynne McLeod from Charles Sturt University, with the primary objective of fostering speech and language competence for multilingual children and to support governments, professional associations, and universities that prepare future practitioners who work with these children. This collaboration ensures a global reach to help children from both the northern and southern hemispheres.

We have offered several workshops on how to use our project tools in a variety of languages. On April 10, 2015, we launched the Cross-linguistic Project Phonological Development website, which provides educators with free access to most of the evaluation tools and offers webinars on how to administer and analyze the tests. Readers can access the website at <http://phonodevelopment.sites.olt.ubc.ca>.

In some small way, it is my hope that our projects directly support educators and practitioners who work on a daily basis with children who have the greatest needs. I thoroughly enjoy reading a good book with my son, and it is my hope that all children receive continued support with language and literacy so they too can discover a love for reading.

Profile Daniel Bérubé

Daniel Bérubé, Ph.D. is an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Education, at the Université de Saint-Boniface, Winnipeg. His teaching and research interests focus on language and literacy development of bilingual and multilingual children. Daniel is an accredited speech-language pathologist and worked with the Division scolaire franco-manitobaine and the Society for Manitobans with Disabilities.

