

Word definition skills – underlying processes and background factors

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Aim and research questions

The aim of this recently started project is to contribute to our understanding of the role of executive functions (EF), Theory of mind (ToM) and language skills in supporting word definition (WD) skills in children, as well as the role of background factors. We want to answer the following question:

- How do EF skills, ToM, lexical and grammatical skills and background factors contribute to WD skills in children representing a variation of EF and language skills, language background and exposure, and socio-economic conditions?

Area of investigation

WD skills open a window to the mental lexicon and are predictive of school success and literacy. At the same time, schooling plays a crucial role for the development of WD skills. WD tasks have a potential as an instrument in assessing children's lexical skills and teachers need to work with word definitions as an integrated part of different school subjects. We therefore need more knowledge on how cognitive and language skills support WD skills and how background factors are associated with WD skills in order to be able to give children optimal support.

Methodological design

We will collect data related to EF, ToM and language skills and collect information related to socio-economic status and language background and exposure from children aged 8-10 with Swedish as first or second language, children with and without developmental language disorder and children with hearing loss. The test results and background information will be related to the children's performance on WD tasks.

Conclusions

We will present and motivate the chosen tests. Most importantly we will discuss the WD tasks: what considerations were made in the selection of target words (e.g., with respect to grammatical category, frequency and semantic characteristics) and how the children's responses will be analysed, quantitatively and qualitatively.

Based on the data collected we expect to be able to understand more about the interaction between linguistic, cognitive and social variables that shape language variability. The project is part of a larger transdisciplinary research program concerning language learning and multilingualism.