

Abstract EFAS/DGA 2007

Learning to use grammar – past tense in the spoken narratives of children with cochlear implants at the hearing age of 2 to 5 years

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Background

Svirsky et al. (2002) have proposed that grammatical morphologic development in children using cochlear implants may be influenced by the perceptual prominence of the grammatical forms learned. Finnish is an agglutinative language in which grammatical relations are formed by adding suffixes to words. The perceptually rather salient vowel /i/ is the basic marker of past tense in Finnish. However, because word endings are in general less prominent (i.e., less audible), they may be challenging to perceive for children with hearing impairment.

Methods

Video-recorded narrative samples were collected annually from eleven children using a cochlear implant. Their implants were activated on average at the age of 3 years 2 months (range 2;1 to 4;10). Narratives were elicited using series of four pictures which the children were free to narrate with their preferred mode of communication. The use of tenses 2 to 5 years after implantation was compared with those from a similarly elicited set of narratives from a total of 37 hearing children (age range from 2 to 5 years).

Results

The percentage of children using past tense at least once in their short narratives increased along with their hearing age (being 50% at the hearing age of two, 55% at three, 73% at four, 91% at five). Among the six 2-year-old hearing children the use of past tense markers was just emerging, whereas all the 3-year-olds (N=8) used them quite frequently. In this small sample, children with cochlear implants used past tense in their narratives more often than the more salient present tense when 5 years had elapsed after implantation.

Conclusions

It may take several years after implantation before children can use past tense in their narratives in a consistent way.

Literatur:

Svirsky, M., Stallings, L., M., Lento, C. L., Ying, E., & Leonard, L. (2002). Grammatical morphologic development in pediatric cochlear implant users may be affected by the perceptual prominence of the relevant markers. *Ann Otol Rhinol Laryngol Suppl*, 111, 109 - 112.

