SLA and children with developmental disabilities: the case of autism

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Although the benefits of bilingualism on the cognitive and linguistic abilities of typically-developing children are well-studied, very little is known about the effects of learning an additional language on the linguistic abilities of children with severe communication disorders, including autism. Relative to other clinical populations, children with autism are unique in that they tend to have severe social impairments (e.g., lack of joint attention, non-preference for human speech), which could further jeopardize their language development. I will review the research on the language abilities of bilingual children with developmental disabilities, including specific language impairment and Down syndrome. I will then present on recent studies that were conducted in my lab with children with autism who are exposed to a second language. In this line of research we compared their general language abilities, vocabulary and narrative skills to those of monolingual counterparts. Our results consistently show no differences between the groups, suggesting that exposure to a second language does not have a negative influence on the children’s language abilities, and that the social impairments associated with autism do not seem to limit the children’s ability to function in two languages.

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