

Wijesinghe, T.
Perera, I.
Shadden B.
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Developing a Narrative Assessment Tool for Sinhala Speaking Children through Cross-cultural Collaboration: The Process and the Product

T. Wijesinghe, I. Perera, & B. Shadden Faculty of Medicine, University of Kelaniya & University of Arkansas

Background: The lack of standardized assessment protocols for the Sinhala and Tamil languages used in assessing clients with communication disorders poses a challenge to speech and language therapists working in Sri Lanka. Assessments are carried out by translating the norms of English and its standardized assessments into Sinhala and Tamil. The language specifics of Sinhala and Tamil are not addressed in these translated assessments. This presents questions regarding best practice in the health service provision for people with communication difficulties in Sri Lanka.

Aim: To describe the process of an international, cross-cultural collaboration in translating American narrative discourse assessment procedures used for pediatric and adult populations, into the development of a tool for children aged 6-10 years speaking Sinhala.

Methods: The participants were 10 Sinhala speaking children of 6-10 years living in Sri Lanka. Two assessment tools were developed and administered. The first tool was a story re-telling task (spoken and written). The second tool was a story generating task (spoken and written). Record sheets were developed and audio and video recordings were obtained.

Results: The child narratives displayed age appropriate aspects of story grammar and true narrative skill level in the story re-telling task. Contradictory results were obtained in information analysis of story generating task. The influence of culture and the Sinhala language was seen with respect to diglossia and in analysis of 3rd person pronoun cohesive ties.

Conclusions: The implementation of the pilot study within the Sri Lankan context was invaluable in fine tuning of the tool to be linguistically and culturally appropriate. More collaboration with Sri Lankan educators and speech and language pathologists will make the assessment tool appropriate for use. The tool will be invaluable in the early identification of spoken and written narrative skill difficulties among primary school children in Sri Lanka.