

Imitation of relative clauses in Czech children with developmental language disorder

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Sentence imitation (SI) is a sensitive marker of developmental language disorder (DLD; Riches, 2012), revealing difficulties in syntactic structures, as children should imitate only mastered structures (Poll et al., 2013). While children with DLD have difficulties using relative clauses (RCs; De López et al., 2014), this study compares them with the use of adjectival nominal phrases. In Czech, both *wh*-words and adjectives follow adjectival declension. Sixty-three monolingual Czech speaking children with DLD (6;5-9;6, $M = 8;10$) were gender- and vocabulary-matched with TD children (3;7-6;7, $M = 6;1$). They completed SI task involving 32 RCs and 16 simple sentences with adjectival phrases. The study analyzed avoidance strategies, error types, and scored the grammaticality of using relative pronouns/adjectives within the sentence core. Generalized linear mixed-effects models revealed a greater tendency in children with DLD to avoid the target structure ($z = -3.096$, $p = 0.002$), with a reinforced difference between the scores gained in RCs and sentences with adjectival phrases (interaction group*construction: $z = -2.959$, $p = 0.003$). Moreover, children with DLD used the target structures less grammatically ($z = -5.099$, $p < 0.001$) with a weakened difference between the scores gained during the imitation of structures (interaction group*construction: $z = 2.564$, $p = 0.010$). RCs modifying an isolated noun phrase and simple sentences were the most frequently used another *wh*- and grammatical structure, respectively. Children with DLD exhibited higher rates of *wh*-word omissions ($\chi^2(2) = 12.27$, $p < 0.001$) and non-inflected *wh*-word substitutions (214 cases vs. 94 cases) than TD children. Children exhibited similar error types and avoidance strategies, but increased avoidance of target structures and omissions of relative pronouns indicated greater syntactic difficulties with RCs in children with DLD. Challenges with adjectival declension were suggested by the non-inflected *wh*-word substitutions and ungrammatical target structures.