

Typical phonemic and phonological development of three year old Sri Lankan Tamil – speaking children in the Colombo district

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Background:

In Sri Lanka, speech and language therapists currently use standardized English language norms in clinical practice for diagnosis and when planning intervention for speech disorders. Cross - linguistic studies have shown that languages have both universal and specific features; the norms of one language can thus not be applied to another. So, the need to obtain language specific normative data of speech development for children in Sri Lanka is essential for assessment and differential diagnoses.

Objectives:

The objective of this study is to determine the speech sound inventory and phonological error patterns that exist in Sri Lankan Tamil speaking 3 year old children. In addition, it also investigates the effect of age, gender and socio dialectal variation on speech sound development.

Materials and methods:

An informal picture-based assessment was used to gain speech samples from 80 Tamil-speaking children between the ages of 3;0 – 3;11 years from Colombo district. The data were phonetically transcribed and audio recorded. In addition, the data were statistically analysed using t-tests and qualitatively analysed with reference to norms for English used in current clinical practice.

Results:

It was found that 75% of speech sounds are acquired by the age of 4;0. The children produced more speech sounds at an earlier age than their English- speaking peers. The findings indicate a statistically significant influence of age on phoneme acquisition and on the suppression of phonological error patterns, but no significant effect was found on gender or socio- dialectal variation.

Conclusions and recommendations:

The findings can be used as tentative norms in clinical practice for Sri Lankan Tamil speaking children. Furthermore, the study can provide speech-language therapists with a framework for further research, and contribute to constructing a relevant database for Sri Lankan Tamil speech development.

Keywords: Speech sound, phonological error patterns, socio dialectal variation