

ESL learning by immigrant children: Catching up to native-speakers

Johanne Paradis
University of Alberta

Prairie Metropolis Centre Research Symposium, Jan 2010

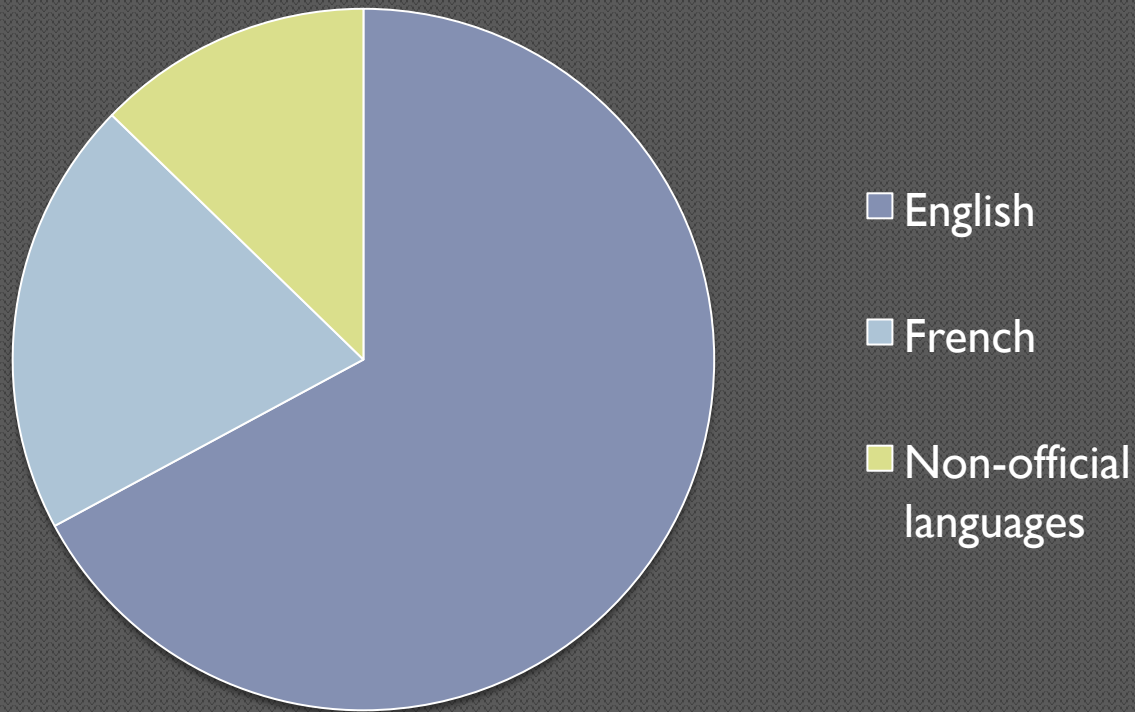
Overview

- ▶ Identifying the problem space
- ▶ Description of research program
- ▶ Research results:
 - ▶ How long does it take to become like a native-speaker?
 - ▶ Why do some children learn English faster than others?



Linguistic Diversity among Canadian Children

Mother Tongue



Children 0-14 – mother tongue – Statistics Canada 2006



Linguistic Diversity among Canadian Children

Non-Official Languages



Children 0-14 years – language spoken most often at home – Statistics Canada 2006



Demographic Trends for ESL Children

- ▶ 13.6% increase in foreign-born population in Canada between 2001-2006
 - ▶ 44% of Toronto population is foreign born
- ▶ 18-26% of children are ESL in large urban areas
 - ▶ Vancouver, Toronto, Calgary, Edmonton, Ottawa



Issues in Assessment of ESL Children

- ▶ Limited knowledge of typical ESL oral language development
- ▶ Inappropriate use of standardized tests normed with monolinguals is widespread
- ✓ *Over- and under-identification of language and learning disabilities in ESL children is a risk factor*
- ✓ *Need for assessment resources for ESL children in Canadian context*



Description of Research Program

Research Objectives

- ▶ To gather data on oral language development from typically-developing ESL children, and ESL with specific language impairment (SLI)
- ▶ To gather background data on factors influencing rate of language development
- ▶ To include standardized and non-standardized measures of a wide range of linguistic skills
- ▶ To create web-accessible resources to assist in assessment in a multilingual context



Who are the Children?

- ▶ Over 200 children from newcomer families in Edmonton and Toronto, Canada
- ▶ Children are 5;0-6;11
- ▶ First languages:
 - ▶ Mandarin/Cantonese
 - ▶ Arabic
 - ▶ Urdu/Punjabi/Hindi
 - ▶ Spanish/Portuguese
- ▶ Children were typically-developing (TD) or referred as SLI / at risk for SLI



What counts as “ESL”?

Exposure to English

- ▶ 2 months – 3.5 years
- ▶ English in preschool or school
- ▶ Onset of English \neq age of arrival
 - ▶ Children Canadian born and foreign born

- ▶ Parents = both 1st generation/foreign born
- ▶ Excluded:
 - ▶ One or both parents born in Canada
 - ▶ Parents speaking both English and first language to child from birth



Language Measures

- ▶ Comprehensive Test of Phonological Processing (CTOPP)
 - ▶ Non-word repetition and digit span
 - ▶ Phonological short term memory
- ▶ Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT)
 - ▶ Receptive vocabulary size
- ▶ Test of Early Grammatical Impairment (TEGI)
 - ▶ Verb morphology



Language Measures

- ▶ Edmonton Narrative Norms Instrument (ENNI)
 - ▶ Macrostructure & microstructure
- ▶ Spontaneous language sample (CHILDES)
- ▶ Detailed parental questionnaires
 - ▶ Alberta Language Development Questionnaire
 - ▶ Alberta Language Environment Questionnaire



How long does it take to become
like a native speaker?

Profile Effects in ESL Children

Do they soak up language like a sponge?

- ▶ Mandarin L1 - English L2 girl
- ▶ 10 and 16 months of exposure to English

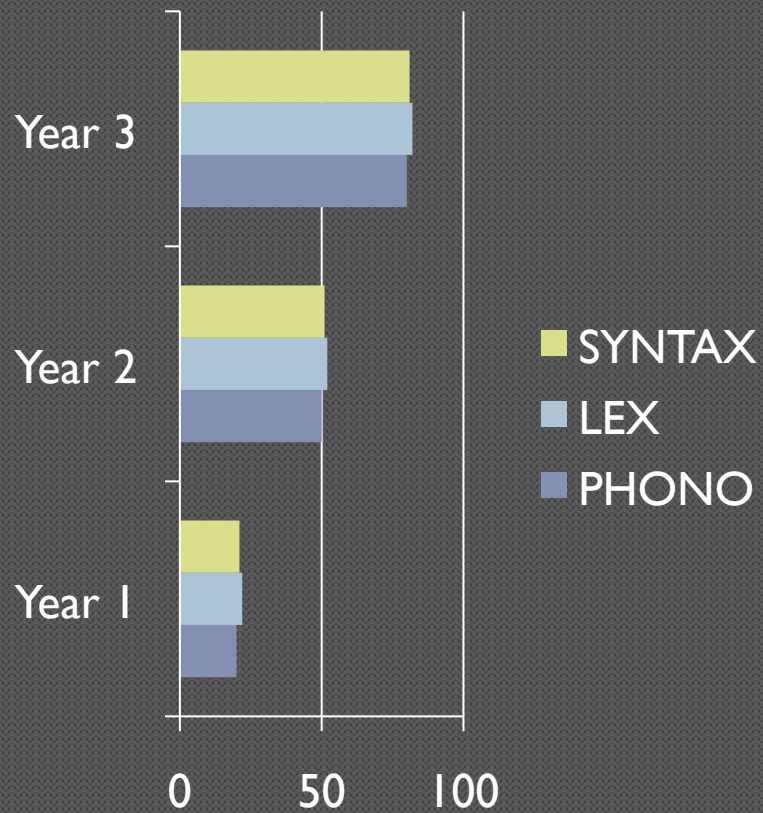


How long does it really take?

- ▶ It takes *five to seven years in school*
 - ▶ Academic English skills like monolinguals
 - ▶ Roessingh and colleagues: do they ever catch up?
- ▶ It takes *three to five years in school*
 - ▶ Vocabulary, grammar, global proficiency close to monolinguals
 - ▶ Saunders & O'Brien; Jia: do they ever catch up?
- ▶ Profile effects/asynchrony in development



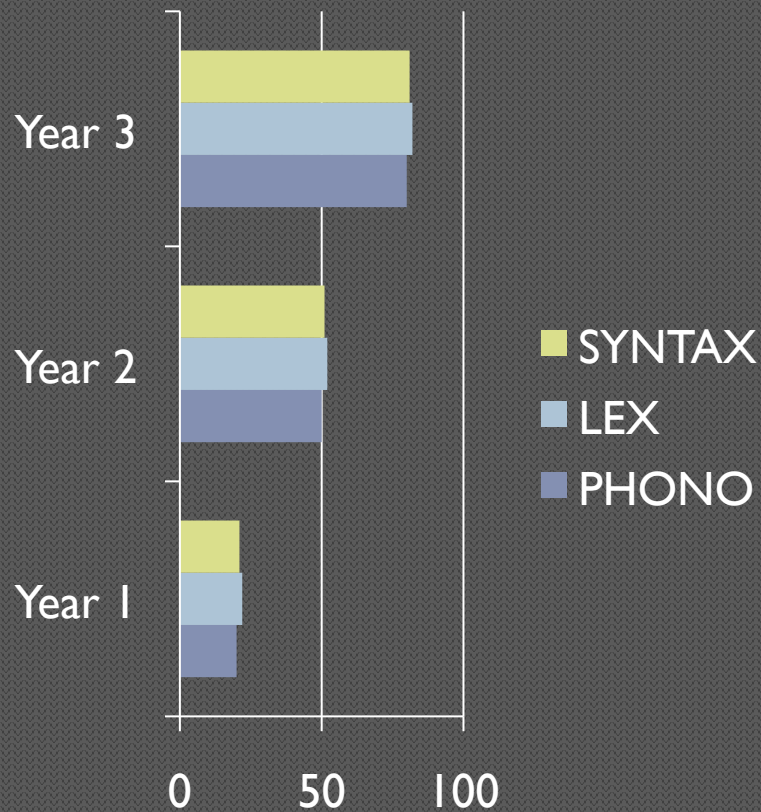
Profile Effects = Asynchrony



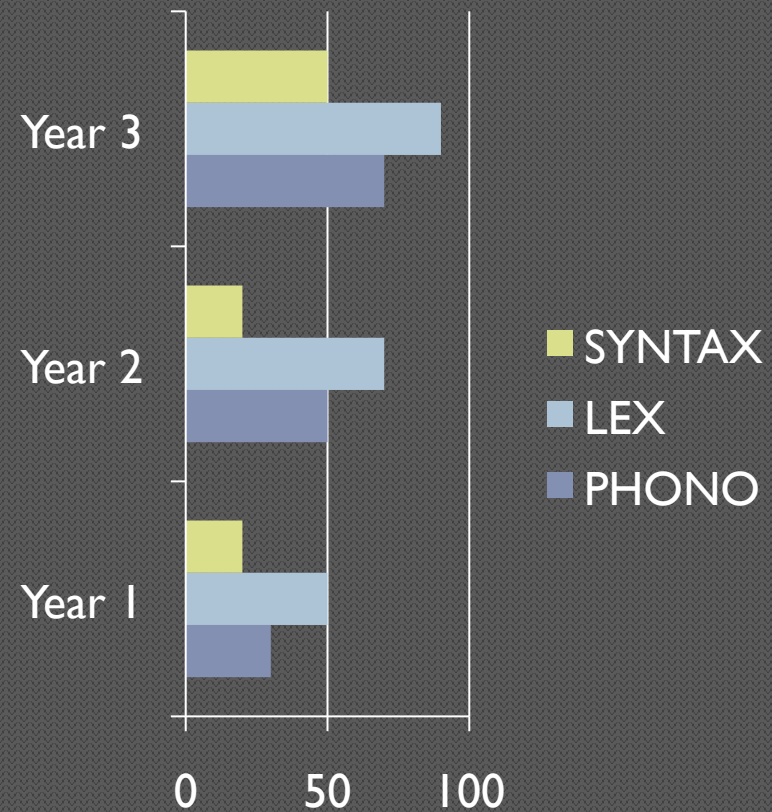
Synchronous convergence
on monolingual norms



Profile Effects = Asynchrony



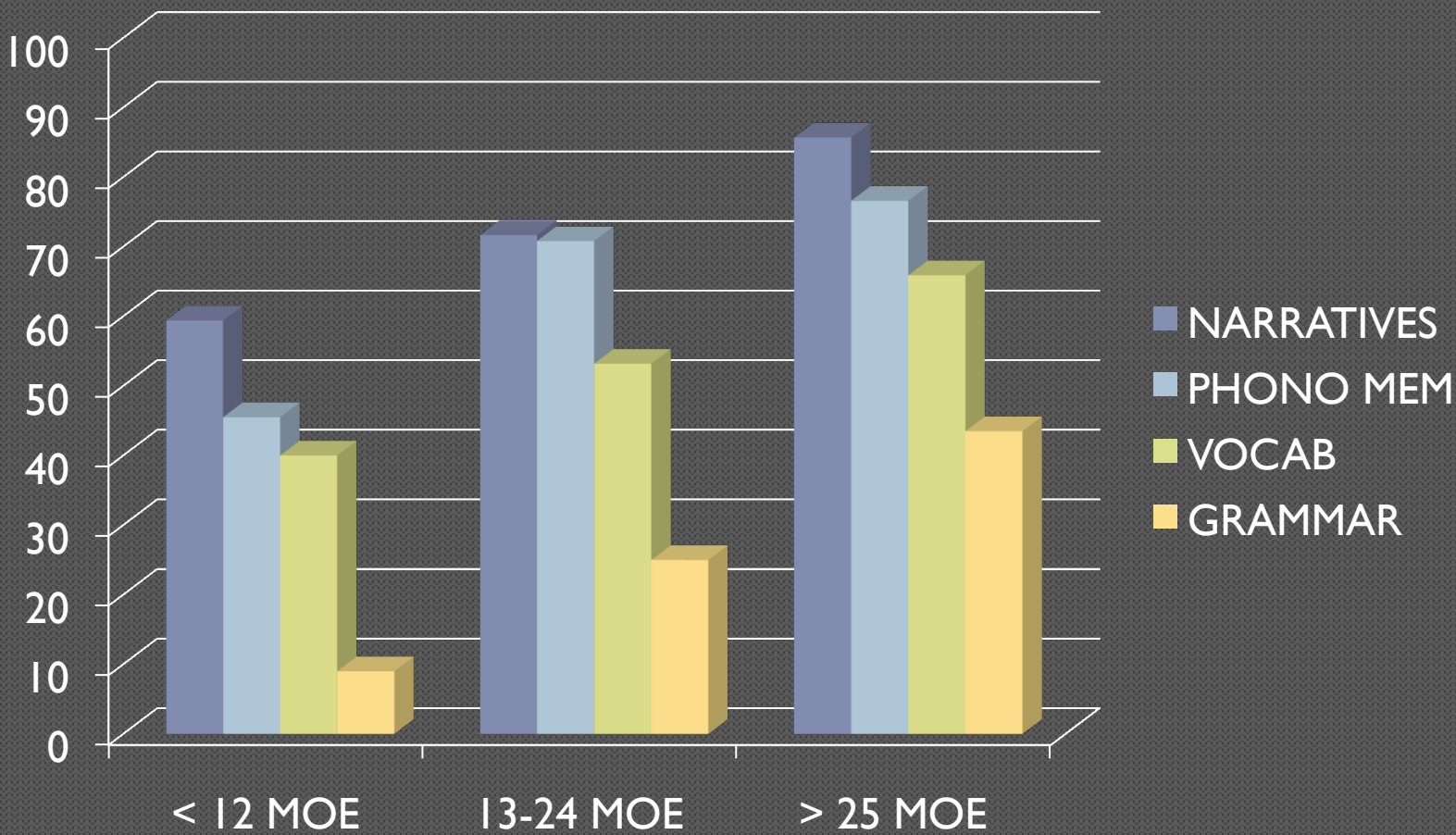
Synchronous convergence
on monolingual norms



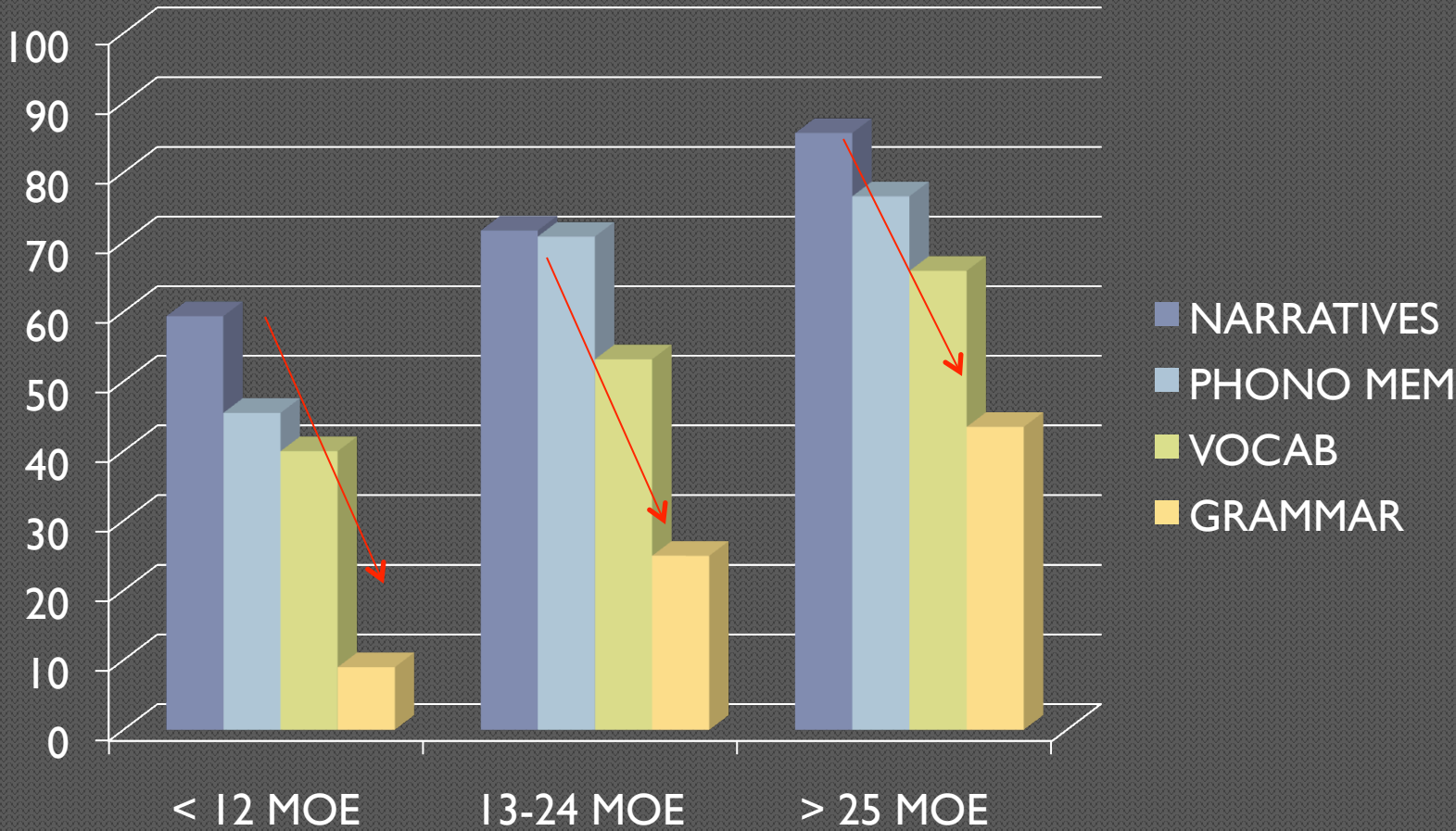
Asynchronous convergence
on monolingual norms



Percent ESL Within Normal Range of Monolinguals



Percent ESL Within Normal Range of Monolinguals



Why do some children learn English
faster than others?

Sources of Individual differences

Factors Predicting Rate of Development

Child-Internal

- ▶ First language typology
- ▶ Language aptitude
 - ▶ Working memory
 - ▶ Pattern recognition
- ▶ Cognitive maturity
 - ▶ Age

Child-External

- ▶ Language use at home
 - ▶ Across interlocutors
- ▶ Parents' fluency in English
- ▶ Maternal education
- ▶ Older siblings
- ▶ Richness of English environment
 - ▶ Media, friends, activities



Analyses with Predictive Factors

- ▶ Early stage (<18 MOE) / later stage (>18 MOE)
- ▶ Outcomes
 - ▶ Vocabulary (PPVT)
 - ▶ Verb morphology (TEGI)
- ▶ Multiple Linear Regression with partial correlations



What factors predict rate of development?

- ▶ More prediction at early stage than later stage
 - ▶ More for morphology than vocabulary
- ▶ Child-internal more at early stage; child external more at later stage
- ▶ English in the home advantage at early stage; Richness of English environment advantage at later stage
- ▶ Older age an advantage at later stage



Implications for Educators & Clinicians

- ▶ Expect ESL children to take a long time to meet native-speaker norms
- ▶ Expect ESL children to show uneven profiles across linguistic domains as they catch up to native-speakers
- ▶ Gather information about a child's English exposure outside preschool/school
 - ▶ More English at home, older siblings, parents fluent in English and a richer English environment = stronger English
- ✓ Setting appropriate expectations for ESL children an important component in assessment



Many thanks to research assistants and students: Julie Coutu, Heather Golberg, Lindsay Greiner, Ruiting Jia, Laura Marcon, Dorothy Pawlina Pinto, Tamara Sorenson Duncan, Cinnamon Suyal, Emily Yiu, Tatiana Zdorenko, and to the Edmonton Public School Board, the Toronto Catholic District School Board, and the Multicultural Health Brokers Cooperative

This research has been funded by the Alberta Heritage Foundation for Medical Research, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Canadian Language and Literacy Research Network, and the Alberta Centre for Child, Family and Community Research

