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What Box: A task for assessing language lateralization in young children

Nicholas A. Badcock [a], Rachael Spooner[b], Jessica Hofmann[c], Atlanta Flitton[c], Scott Elliott[c], Lisa Kurylowicz[c,d], Louise M. Lavrencic[c], Heather M. Payne[e,f], Georgina K. Holt[g], Anneka Holden[g], Owen F. Churches[h], Mark J. Kohler [b] and Hannah A.D. Keage [c]

[a]ARC Centre for Excellence in Cognition and its Disorders, Department of Cognitive Science, Macquarie University, North Ryde, New South Wales, Australia; [b]Cognitive Neuroscience Laboratory, School of Psychology, Social Work and Social Policy, University of South Australia, South Australia, Australia; [c]Cognitive Ageing and Impairment Neurosciences Laboratory, School of Psychology, Social Work and Social Policy, University of South Australia, South Australia, Australia; [d]Department of General Paediatrics, University Children's Hospital Bonn, Bonn, Germany; [e]Deafness, Cognition, and Language Research Centre, University College London, London, UK; [f]Institute of Cognitive Neuroscience, University College London, London, UK; [g]Oxford Study of Children's Communication Impairments, Department of Experimental Psychology, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK; [h]Brain and Cognition Laboratory, Flinders University, South Australia, Australia

ABSTRACT
The assessment of active language lateralization in infants and toddlers is challenging. It requires an imaging tool that is unintimidating, quick to setup, and robust to movement, in addition to an engaging and cognitively simple language processing task. Functional Transcranial Doppler Ultrasound (fTCD) offers a suitable technique and here we report on a suitable method to elicit active language production in young children. The 34-second "What Box" trial presents an animated face "searching" for an object. The face "finds" a box that opens to reveal a to-be-labelled object. In a sample of 95 children (1 to 5 years of age), 81% completed the task—32% with ≥10 trials. The task was validated ($\rho = 0.4$) against the gold standard Word Generation task in a group of older adults ($n = 65$, 60–85 years of age), though was less likely to categorize lateralization as left or right, indicative of greater measurement variability. Existing methods for active language production have been used with 2-year-old children while passive listening has been conducted with sleeping 6-month-olds. This is the first active method to be successfully employed with infants through to pre-schoolers, forming a useful tool for populations in which complex instructions are problematic.

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CONTACT Nicholas A. Badcock nicholas.badcock@mq.edu.au
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Introduction

The specialization of cognitive capacities to the left and right cerebral hemispheres is referred to as the lateralization of cognitive function and, in most people, the left hemisphere is specialized (or dominant) for language processing whilst the right is specialized for visuo-spatial processing. Early in development, there is evidence of this specialization for language reception (Dehaene-Lambertz, 2000) but the lateralization of language production has been harder to determine. Here we report a method for examining language reception and production that is suitable for use with young children.

Owing to the inherent difficulty for children below the age of 5 to stay still—a significant problem for functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI)—researchers have favoured functional Transcranial Doppler Ultrasound (fTCD) for investigating language lateralization in this age group. FTCD is used to measure the blood flow velocity in the left and right cerebral arteries, most commonly, the middle cerebral arteries (Aaslid, Markwalder, & Nornes, 1982; Newell & Aaslid, 1992); faster event-related velocities in a given hemisphere are indicative of cerebral lateralization for that event (i.e., language production). The gold standard task for assessing language lateralization using fTCD is Word Generation—visually cued word generation (Knecht et al., 1996). The task is reliable (Knecht, Deppe, Ringelstein et al., 1998; Stroobant & Vingerhoets, 2001) and has been validated against Wada (Knake et al., 2003; Knecht, Deppe, Ebner et al., 1998) and fMRI (Knecht, Deppe, Ebner et al., 1998; Somers, Neggers, Kahn, & Sommer, 2011). However, whilst Word Generation works well for adults, silent word production to letters (i.e., requiring letter-sound knowledge) and long periods of inanimate relaxation are not suitable for children. Alternatives have been developed.

Child-friendly fTCD tasks include Picture Description (Haag et al., 2010; Lohmann, Drager, Muller-Ehrenberg, Deppe, & Knecht, 2005), Animation Description (Bishop, Watt, & Papadatou-Pastou, 2009), and Story Listening (Stroobant, Van Boxstael, & Vingerhoets, 2011). These have been used with children as young as 2 years of age but continue to rely on sustained periods of rest and attention. Picture Description and Story Listening include approximately 30 seconds of production or listening followed by 30 seconds of rest. The animation description task is more child-friendly with 12 seconds of animation followed by 10 seconds of production and 8 seconds of rest; however, our pilot work determined that this task was not suitable to maintain 18-month-olds' interest. In addition, the reliance on overt production is difficult for children below the age of 4.

Covert language has been used to successfully activate the cerebral structures involved in overt production (Bookheimer et al., 1998) and the strength of lateralization is similar for covert and overt production (Gutierrez-Sigut, Payne, & MacSweeney, 2015). Taking advantage of this, Wilke et al. (2005)

developed tasks that induce the automatic covert production of predictable words, replaced within sentences by a tone. For example, “A frog lived under a flower. One day a girl picked the [tone].” Observers automatically fill-in the missing word as evidenced by increased activity in areas typically associated with overt production. This activity is enhanced by the presentation of a picture of the missing word. This covert production task has been successfully completed by children as young as 6-years-of-age using fMRI, producing plausible lateralization indices (Lidzba, Schwilling, Grodd, Krägeloh-Mann, & Wilke, 2011). Using fTCD, this task has been compared with Word Generation in adults but lateralization was weaker and less reliable than Word Generation (Badcock, Nye, Bishop, 2012). However, participants were not given instructions and the paradigm did not explicitly encourage labelling.

The What Box task

The “What Box” task follows from this literature as a procedure to elicit covert or overt language production in young children. Here we build upon a previous report of the task (Kohler et al., 2015), providing a detailed methodology for the presentation and administration of the task as well as updated processing and analysis techniques for use with fTCD in young children and older adults. In the adults, What Box was also compared with the gold standard Word Generation task.

Materials and methods

Participants

Children

Ninety-five children between 1- and 5-years-of-age ($M = 39.46$ months, SD = 15, min = 12, max = 67), born between 35- and 42-weeks’ gestation, were tested. Forty-nine (52%) were male. Children were included if English was the primary language, they had no known visual or auditory impairments, learning problems, developmental delays or syndromes affecting cognitive development (e.g., Autism or Down syndrome), they were not currently taking medication known to affect cardiovascular blood vessel function or neurocognitive performance (such as a stimulant or psychotropic drug) or suffering from any acute illness, such as a cold.

Ninety percent of the sample were Caucasian with socioeconomic status ($M = 1009.2$, SD = 47.9) similar to the national mean ($M = 1000$, SD = 100: Australian Bureau of Statistics Index of Relative Socio-economic Advantage/Disadvantage 2011 national census data). Hand preference was determined by planned observation of the use of age-appropriate objects, based on methods used in children from 6 months of age (Michel, Ovrut, & Harkins, 1985): 76 (80%) were right-handed, 12 (12.63%) were left-handed, and 7 (7.37%) did not demonstrate a dominant hand.

Older adults

Sixty-seven adults with a mean age of 68.94 years (SD = 6, min = 60, max = 85) also participated. Twenty-eight (42%) were male. All were right-handed based on the Flinders Handedness Survey (Nicholls, Thomas, Loetscher, & Grimshaw, 2013).

Procedure

What Box

The What Box task includes an animation of a face "searching" for an object. The animation is created with a series of still-frame images and accompanying sounds (see Figure 1 for a schematic diagram of a trial including timing). The key steps are:

(1) A blank background is presented
(2) The face "moves" down and then up the screen
(3) A box appears then opens followed by a spoken "Look!"
(4) The box is then replaced by an object and a spoken "What's this?", and the object's verbal label is presented after a delay, to allow for verbal labelling
(5) A face with hands covering its mouth appears with the spoken "Shh".

What Box was administered to children and adults in the same manner with the exception that a different set of stimuli was used for each group and the task was discontinued after 20 trials with a correct response for adults. There were 51 stimuli, chosen from http://websites.psychology.uwa.edu.au/school/MRCDatabase/uwa_mrc.htm (for a list see Supplementary Materials). There was a minimum of 25 trials in adults, and 37 were required for 2 individuals to achieve 20 correct labels. Additional stimulus and presentation details are provided as supplementary materials.

Word Generation

Adult participants also completed the Word Generation task: based on Knecht et al. (1996). There were 24, 60-second trials corresponding with the letters of the alphabet, excluding "x" and "z". Each trial consisted of six periods (note: words in inverted commas were displayed on the screen and acted as instructions): (1) a blank normalization period (15 seconds), (2) "Clear Mind" (5 seconds), (3) a single, randomly selected letter was presented on the screen (2.5 seconds), (4) silent word generation of words beginning with the presented letter (12.5 seconds), (5) "Say" (5 seconds), and (6) "Relax" (15

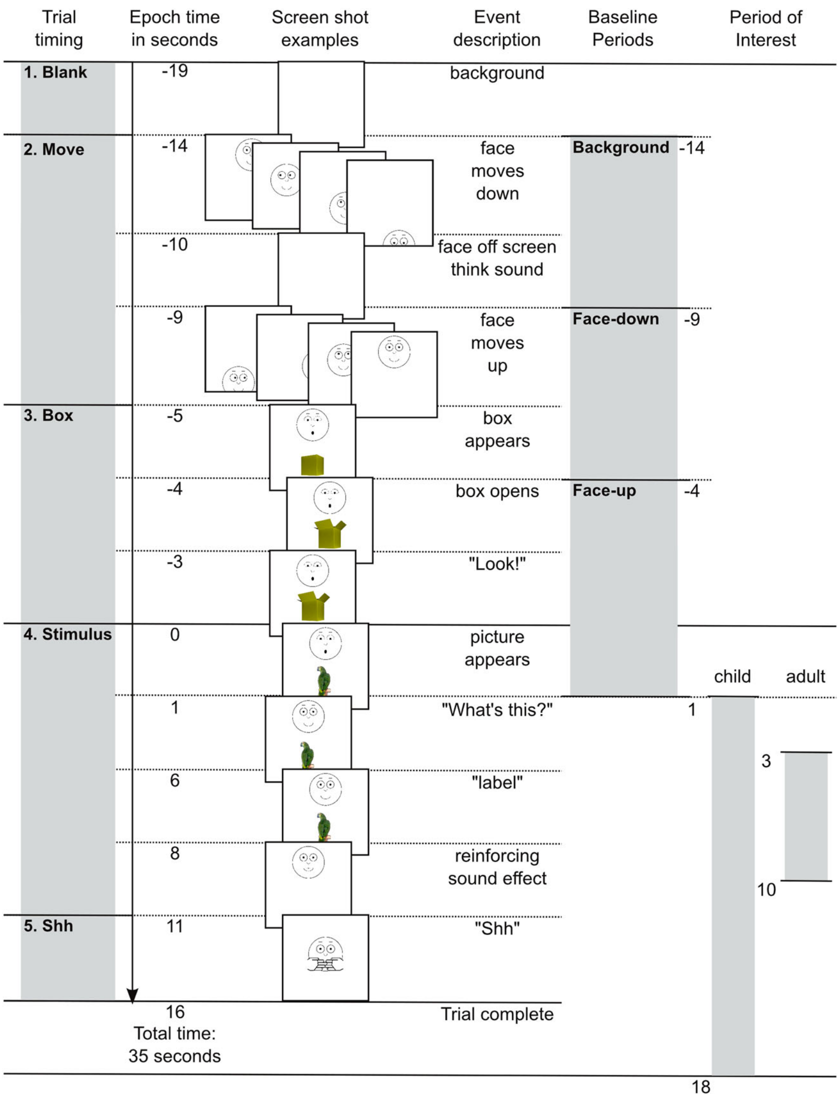

Figure 1. A schematic diagram of a What Box trial. It includes trial timing, event descriptions, and baseline and period of interest timings for children and adult data processing. Please note the timing of the baseline periods accounts for the delay due to neurovascular coupling.

seconds). Brief auditory tones were presented at the start of the clear mind, say, and relax periods.

Functional Transcranial Doppler ultrasonography

Blood flow velocity was measured using a Doppler ultrasonography device (Doppler-Box™; DWL Elektronische Systeme, Singen, Germany) with a

Diamon® headset or elastic headbands to hold 2-MHz transducer probes over the left and right temporal skull windows to insonate the middle cerebral arteries. Seated participants viewed the Psychtoolbox (Brainard, 1997; Pelli, 1997) MATLAB (R2011b Mathworks, Natick, MA, USA) presentation on a 22-inch Dell P2210 monitor (50 cm viewing distance). Event markers were inserted via parallel port (http://apps.usd.edu/coglab/psyc770/IO32.html). fTCD data collection was conducted after standardized test administration as part of ongoing research at the University of South Australia, Cognitive Neuroscience Laboratory (for preliminary findings, see Keage et al., 2015; Kohler et al., 2015).

Data processing

The fTCD data were processed using DOPOSCCI (Badcock, Holt, Holden, & Bishop, 2012) version 3.0, a MATLAB-based summary suite for fTCD data (see https://github.com/nicalbee/dopStep). DOPOSCCI implements the processing described by Deppe et al. (Deppe, Knecht, Henningsen, & Ringelstein, 1997; Deppe, Knecht, Lohmann, & Ringelstein, 2004). Here we extend upon these methods to maximize epoch retention and reliability. The data were trimmed to exclude irrelevant recording before the first and after the final epoch. Heart cycle artefacts were removed (see Deppe et al., 1997, 2004) and smoothed using MATLAB's "linspace" function across steps.

Epochs were excluded manually if the participant was observed to be disengaged from the task, conducted gross movements, or was talking during the baseline period. The median number of manually excluded epochs was 2 (IQR = 6, min = 0, max = 20).

To maximize data retention, spurious extreme values beyond −3 or 4 standard deviations from the mean,[1] affecting less than 5% of the data, were adjusted using "linspace" between values 1.5 seconds either side of the extreme value.[2] The data were epoched from baseline onset (see below and Figure 1) to 18 seconds relative to event markers, and normalized to a mean of 100 within each epoch (i.e., not overall), correcting for left and right probe angle differences (see Deppe et al., 2004). Baseline correction was conducted, subtracting the mean of data within this period (see below) from all other data points.

Epochs with extreme values were excluded: values beyond ±50% of the mean or with a left-minus-right difference greater than 8%, affecting more than 1% of the data within the epoch. Regarding the left-minus-right difference (or activation separation), the literature reports group fTCD laterality

[1]These values are based on a personal communication from Dorothy Bishop, found to be effective for the correction of movement-related signal disruption from children's fTCD data.

[2]For future reference, the descriptives for the affected data sets were: <−3 SD, $n = 37$ (48%), median = 10% data affected, IQR = 35, min = 0.016, max = 98; >4 SD, $n = 2$ (2%), median = 0.43, IQR = 0.06, min = 0.36, max = 5.

indices (LIs) in the magnitude of 3–5% change (e.g., mean + 3 × SD = 7.33; Badcock, Nye et al., 2012), therefore, separations greater than this are likely due to movement artefacts (see supplementary materials for justification of the 8% criterion).

Baseline selection

As this is a new paradigm, and bearing in mind the 5–7-second delay due to the timing of neurovascular coupling (Malonek et al., 1997; Rosengarten, Osthaus, & Kaps, 2002)—i.e., the stimulus-related neurophysiological response will be delayed, therefore the timing of these baselines is delayed—three baseline periods were tested in children to determine the most suitable using split-half reliability as an index of quality (see supplementary materials). The three baseline periods are displayed in Figure 1. The "face-up" period was selected as the most reliable. This was −4 to 1 seconds relative to event onset, including activation to the presentation of the face moving up the screen.

LI calculation and categorization

LIs were calculated as the average left-minus-right signal over a 2-second period surrounding the peak left–right difference within the period of interest: 5–18 seconds in children (see below for adults). Positive LI values indicate left lateralization, negative indicate right.

To determine whether the LI was significantly different to zero, a one-sample *t*-test was applied to the LI values for the group. Split-half reliability was calculated based upon LIs calculated for the odd and even numbered epochs, adjusted to equate the number of odd and even epochs used.

LIs were also categorized as left, right, or neither based on the overlap of 95% confidence intervals with zero (i.e., an LI was considered left if the lower interval was greater than zero). Categorization comparisons were conducted using Chi-squared and McNemar (i.e., repeated measures Chi-squared) tests. These comparisons tested whether the ratios differed: (1) within children dependent upon the selection of epochs (<10 versus ≥ 10), (2) between children and adults for the What Box task, and (3) within adults for between task comparisons. Regarding (3), McNemar tests require binomial categories, therefore two of the three categories were collapsed for each comparison: left versus not (neither + right), right versus not, and neither versus not.

Older adult data processing

What Box. Alternate timings were used for the older adults' What Box data: epoch −14 to 10 seconds, baseline −14 to −9, and period of interest 3–10. As evidenced by the physiological response (see Figure 2, Panel B), the adults adhered to the instruction better than children, requiring alternate timing. The baseline period was earlier, corresponding to 10 seconds after the “Shh” instruction (see Figure 1 trial schematic and timing). The period of interest was earlier and shorter, longer periods picked up a second component in some individuals resulting in changes from typical to atypical lateralization and poorer internal reliability.

For the adults, epoch exclusion by activation separation was based on individually calculated cut-offs. The distribution of separations was smaller for adults than children—average median = 3.01 (IQR = 1.59, min = 0.97, max = 9.81)—indicative of cleaner recordings. The median activation separation plus 8 times the interquartile range was most reliable method of screening epochs for activation separation, increasing the split-half reliability from $\rho = 0.65$ [95% CI: 0.45, 0.78] without screening to $\rho = 0.71$ [0.52, 0.84]. Spearman’s rank order correlations were used to reduce the impact of extreme values.

Word Generation. The Word Generation data were processed as described earlier with timings based on previous research (Keage et al., 2015; Knecht et al., 1996; Knecht, Deppe, Ringelstein et al., 1998); epoch −15 to 25 seconds, baseline −15 to −5, and period of interest 5 to 15. Individually calculated cut-offs were used for activation separation epoch exclusion, 5 times the interquartile range (for reference, the average median activation separation was 3.80, IQR = 2.89, min = 1.16, max = 13.06). This cut-off increased the split-half reliability from $\rho = 0.77$ [95% CI: 0.63, 0.86] without screening to $\rho = 0.82$ [0.69, 0.89].

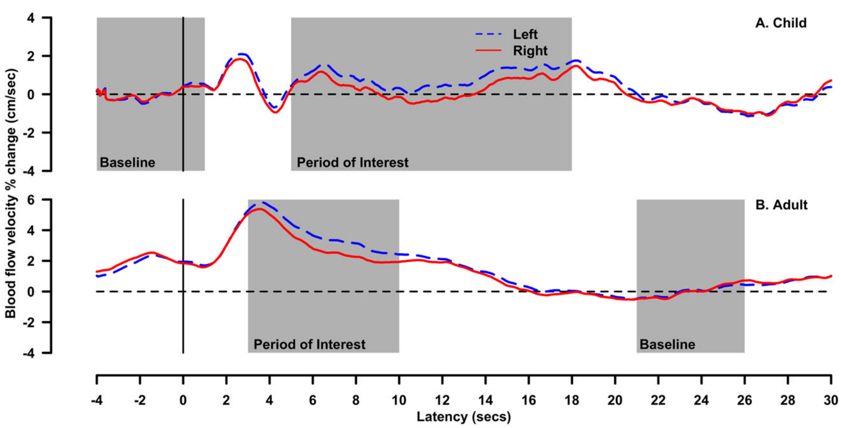

Figure 2. Group-averaged change in blood flow velocity relative to object presentation (latency = 0 second) for the left (broken blue line) and right (solid red line) as a function of time (in seconds). Panel A displays the infant data ($n = 77$, 81% of the total sample) that were calculated using a −4 to 1 second baseline period (first grey panel). Panel B displays the adult data ($n = 66$, 99% of total sample) that were calculated with a 21–26-second baseline (equivalent to −14 to −9 but adjusted for visualization here to maintain the same *x*-axis). The periods of interest (−5 to 18 seconds for infants and 3 to 10 for adults) are also displayed for reference. Please note the *y*-axis range is greater in Panel B. [To view this figure in color, please see the online version of this journal.]

What Box and Word Generation comparison. Data from participants with 10 or more accepted epochs for both What Box and Word Generation were included in the data analysis (there were two exclusions). Validity was calculated by disattenuating (Schumacker & Muchinsky, 1996; Spearman, 1904) the correlations between the LIs for the two tasks.

Results

What Box

For the What Box task, the group-averaged change in blood flow velocity, for the left and right middle cerebral arteries, relative to object presentation is displayed in Figure 2 (children and adults in Panels A and B respectively).

For the children, there are three features to note. The first feature is an early (around 3 seconds), non-lateralized peak that likely reflects a rapid, attention-related response to the object presentation. The second feature includes two left-lateralized peaks (around 6.5 and 16 seconds) that likely reflect a labelling response to the object and a receptive or repetition response to the verbally presented label. These peaks are included in the period of interest. The third feature is convergence of the left and right velocities: evident at 22 seconds. This has implications for the selection of the baseline period. The continuation of task-related activity into the "Blank" phase of the next trial (see Figure 1) has an impact on the task reliability, dependent upon the timing of the baseline period, i.e., this continuation produces poorer reliability for the −14 to −9 baseline compared to −4 to 1 that does not have this continuation, which aids in the justification of its use.

There were 1 or more acceptable epochs for 77 participants (81% of the total sample): median = 7, IQR = 10, min = 1, max = 32. The distribution of all LIs is displayed in Figure 3, panel A, and the categorizations (i.e., left, neither, right) are presented in Table 1. The number of accepted epochs was correlated with age such that older children had more accepted epochs, Spearman's $\rho = 0.38$ [0.18, 0.59], $p < .01$.

The minimum number of acceptable epochs for LI calculations varies in the literature from 8 (Gutierrez-Sigut et al., 2015) to 12 (Groen, Whitehouse, Badcock, & Bishop, 2011): here we used 10. Based on this criterion, the distribution of LIs for participants with 10 or more epochs is displayed in Figure 3, panel B ($n = 31$, 33% of the total sample). The number of accepted epochs (median = 14, IQR = 6, min = 10, max = 32) was not significantly related to age, Spearman's $\rho = 0.06$ [−0.32, 0.45], $p = .75$. The mean LI was 0.82 (SD = 1.95, min = −3.41, max = 3.5, 95% CI = 0.68), which is statistically different to zero $t(30) = 2.35$, $p = .026$, and represents a medium effect size, Cohen's d = 0.42. On average, the group was left-dominant for language processing. Laterality categorizations are presented in Table 1 and were not significantly

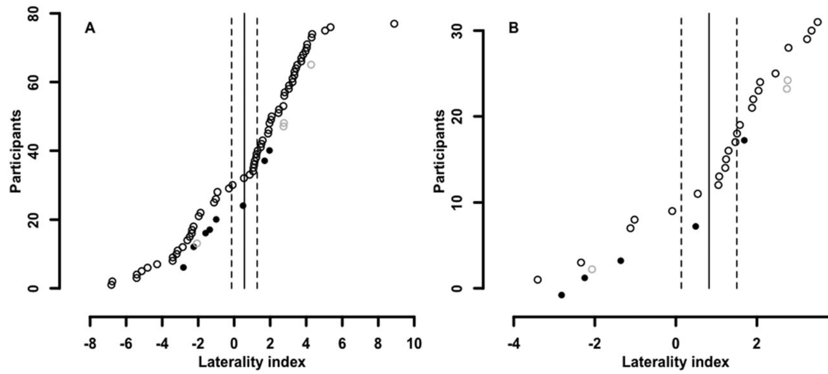

Figure 3. The distribution of What Box LIs in children for (A) participants with 1 or more accepted epochs ($n = 77$, 81% of the total sample) and (B) participants with 10 or more accepted epochs ($n = 31$, 33% of the total sample). Sample mean (solid vertical line) and 95% confidence intervals (dashed vertical lines) are also displayed. Filled and greyed symbols represent left-handed and undetermined-handed individuals respectively, offset vertically for visualization.

affected by epoch selection (i.e., <10 versus ≥10); $\chi^2(2, N = 77) = 2.89$, $p = .24$, Cramer's $V = 0.14$ (small to medium effect). The split-half reliability is 0.64 [0.37, 0.81], $t(29) = 4.47$, $p < .001$. In addition, the What Box laterality categorizations did not differ significantly between children and adults: χ^2 $(2, N = 96) = 0.09$, $p = .96$, Cramer's $V = 0.02$.

What Box versus Word Generation

There were 65 older adult participants with 10 or more epochs for both the What Box and Word Generation tasks (What Box: median = 24, IQR = 3, min = 15, max = 27; Word Generation: median = 22, IQR = 3, min = 11, max = 24). The mean LI for both tasks indicated left lateralization overall: What Box = 0.95 (SD = 2.36, latency = 6.39, latency SD = 2.37, $t(64) = 3.25$, $p < .01$, $d = 0.40$), Word Generation = 1.57 (SD = 2.47, latency = 9.31, latency SD = 2.75, $t(64) = 5.13$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.64$). The internal reliability for both tasks was high (What Box, $\rho = 0.71$, Word Generation, $\rho = 0.82$) and the disattenuated correlation between the two tasks was $\rho = 0.40$, indicating medium correspondence. A scatter plot of the LIs for the two tasks is presented in Figure 4.

Table 1. Lateralization categorization numbers (percentages) by task, sample, and epoch selection.

Sample	Task	Epochs	*n*	Left	Neither	Right
Child	What Box	All available	77	29 (37.66)	27 (35.06)	21 (27.27)
		Less than 10	46	14 (30.43)	17 (36.96)	15 (32.61)
		10 or more	31	15 (48.39)	10 (32.26)	6 (19.35)
Adult	What Box	10 or more	65	32 (49.23)	22 (33.85)	11 (16.92)
	Word Gen	10 or more	65	40 (61.54)	16 (24.62)	9 (13.85)

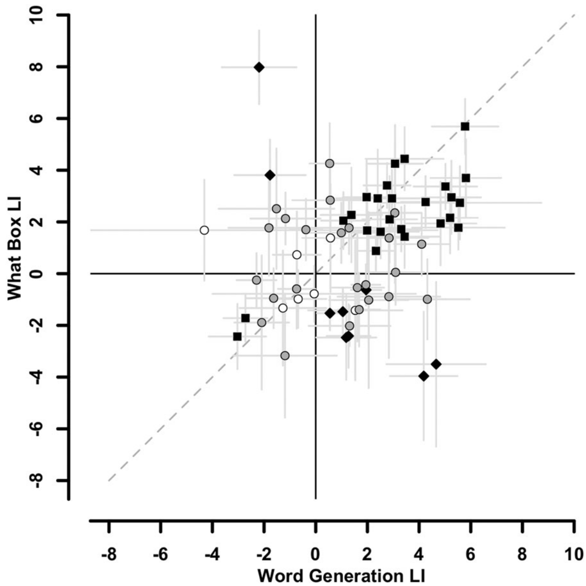

Figure 4. Scatter plot of the LIs for the What Box and Word Generation tasks ($n = 65$, 97% of the total sample). A diagonal line is included for reference to consistent LI mapping between the tasks. Lateralization categorization (based on the 95% confidence interval criterion used for Table 1) is indicated by symbol–colour combinations: black symbols indicate statistically reliable categorization in both tasks (square = left or right on both, and diamond = switched between tasks—i.e., left to right or right to left), grey diamonds indicate a neither categorization in one task and left or right in the other, and open circles indicate neither categorization in both tasks. The 95% confidence intervals are displayed for each individual (light grey).

The laterality categorizations for the two tasks are presented in Table 1. McNemar tests indicated that the "neither" categorization was 1.3–1.6 times more likely in What Box versus Word Generation: categorization did not differ for left versus not (neither or right); χ^2 (1, $N = 65$) = 0.49, $p = 0.48$, OR = 0.61; but did for right versus not (left or neither), $\chi^2(1, N = 65) = 30.73$, $p < .001$, OR = 1.27; and for neither versus not (right or left), $\chi^2(1, N = 65) =$ 11.46, $p < .001$, OR = 1.57.

Discussion

Here we report the methods and statistical characteristics of a child-friendly task for the assessment of language lateralization using fTCD. The task presentation involves a face "looking" for something, finding a box, the box opening, and an object appearing. Observers are prompted with "What's this?" and the label of the object, cueing overt and/or covert language production. This was successfully employed with young children aged between

1 and 5 years as well as older adults (60–85). LIs showed a broad distribution, with the group averages indicative of left lateralization. In addition, the older adults also completed the gold standard fTCD assessment for language lateralization, Word Generation (Knecht et al., 1996; Knecht, Deppe, Ebner et al., 1998). The LIs for both tasks were correlated ($\rho = 0.40$), indicative of medium evidence for the What Box task invoking language processing. In addition, the task was less likely to categorize individuals as left or right dominant for language processing (50% correspondence with Word Generation), suggesting it to be a more variable paradigm overall.

The rates of lateralization categorization for Word Generation are different relative to previous work with right-handed populations (92.5% left and 7.5% right in Knecht et al., 2000 versus 61.5% left, 24.5% neither, and 14% right, see Table 1). Whilst the paradigms are the same and the current sample speaks English rather than German in the earlier work, the major difference between the populations is the age: between 17 and 50 in Knecht et al., average of 26, versus between 60 and 85, average of 69 in the current study. This may be the critical factor as language lateralization is reported to reduce with aging (Keage et al., 2015; Matteis et al., 1998). This is consistent with increased rates of non-left lateralization reported here and may speak to developmental changes late, as well as earlier in development—language lateralization may stabilize around the age of reading instruction (Groen, Whitehouse, Badcock, & Bishop, 2012) but this is a fertile space of enquiry. These developmental changes may also contribute to the weaker lateralization indices observed.

The work adds to the methods available for assessing lateralization using fTCD in children, including Picture Naming (Haag et al., 2010; Lohmann et al., 2005), Story Listening (Stroobant et al., 2011), and Animation Description (Bishop et al., 2009). Relative to the existing techniques, the internal reliability for the What Box—$r = 0.64$ [0.37, 0.81]—was lower than Animation Description ($r = 0.89$–0.90 in 4-year-olds; Bishop, Holt, Whitehouse, & Groen, 2014; Bishop et al., 2009) and lower but comparable to Picture Naming depending upon the study ($r = 0.88$; Lohmann et al., 2005; intra-class correlation = 0.66; Stroobant et al., 2011). It should be noted that the average number of accepted epochs was lower for What Box than other tasks and the internal reliability was higher when more suitable epochs were available ($n = 12$, $r = 0.69$ [0.36, 0.87]; $n = 14$, $r = 0.76$ [0.36, 0.92]; see Supplementary Materials). The fact that the current sample included younger children than other studies (previously down to 2 years of age), does not entirely account for this discrepancy as the adult sample also demonstrated lower reliability compared with Word Generation.

We employed two novel approaches to data exploration and retention using DOPOSCCI (Badcock, Holt et al., 2012). This included activation correction and activation separation epoch screening (for specific details, see Method and Supplementary Materials). These are little-explored forms of data cleaning and screening that maximized reliability but would benefit from replication and refinement.

We tested three baseline periods to establish the best processing methods for the What Box task: (1) −14 to −9 seconds (time relative to stimulus), the presentation of a background image; (2) −9 to −4 seconds, presentation of the animated face moving down the computer monitor; and (3) −4 to 1 seconds, presentation of the animated face moving up the computer monitor. Relative to the end "Shh" instruction of the previous trial, these periods were 0, 5, and 10 seconds respectively. Examination of the reliability for each baseline as a function of the number of acceptable epochs indicated that the latest period was most consistent (–4 to 1, 10 seconds after following the end of the previous trial). With reference to Figure 2, this is not surprising; the left-minus-right difference had normalized (i.e., no difference) by 10 seconds after the end of the previous trial. This is in line with neurovascular coupling estimates (Rosengarten et al., 2002). Future work may benefit from increasing the duration of the face-animation stages of the paradigm.

Limitations

Despite the What Box producing left lateralization at the group level for children and adults, the index was relatively weak (i.e., lower lateralization indices) and only moderately correlated with Word Generation is adults. The neural substrates underpinning Word Generation have been demonstrated (e.g., Deppe et al., 2000), whereas this is unknown for What Box, and it is possible that alternate activation may underpin the differences. In relation to the patterns of activation (i.e., Figure 2), it is clear that qualitative differences exist between the children and adults. We speculate that this relates to the adult's consistent approach to the task (i.e., a single alerting and production peak) whereas children appear to be alerted and then cued to production—perhaps involving greater executive processes—which extends over a longer time course (i.e., two peaks and up to 8 seconds longer than adults for left–right channel convergence). In addition, differences may be due to the low volume of production required in the task. Recently Payne, Gutierrez-Sigut, Subik, Woll, and MacSweeney (2015) demonstrated that reduced rates of production are associated with weaker lateralization. This pattern of behaviour likely accounts for the weaker lateralization observed for the What Box task. Increasing the number of to-be-labelled objects per trial may increase the lateralization index as well as the correspondence between What Box and Word Generation.

Based on the adult literature, a minimum of 8 (Gutierrez-Sigut et al., 2015) to 12 (Groen et al., 2011) epochs are suggested for LI calculation. In the current paper, we used 10. To date, there has been no empirical test to determine the optimal number of epochs but the data presented here indicate that higher internal reliability is associated with a greater number of epochs, therefore, we recommend a minimum of 10 epochs for methods such as What Box. We suggest multiple testing sessions to achieve these numbers as well as tailoring stimuli to the interests of each individual participant if on-task behaviour is poor. In addition, the criterion against which to judge the validity of a task is currently against the gold standard Word Generation task. If lateralization was clearly predictive of some behaviour, this would provide a better criterion against which to judge the quality of a task, and in turn, the cost of minimal epochs. Currently, this remains elusive (Bishop, 2013).

Future applications

Although What Box was designed for typically developing infants and toddlers, we also demonstrated its use with older adults. The task is simple and may be conducted without verbal instructions. This provides a rare paradigm that can be applied across a broad age range to map the development of lateralization. Given the flexibility of the task, it will be useful in populations with atypical development such as dyslexia, specific language impairment, and Autism, where research has previously used the Word Generation in adults (dyslexia, Illingworth & Bishop, 2009; specific language impairment and Autism, Whitehouse & Bishop, 2008). In addition, the simplicity of What Box makes it useful for working with populations where memory for and adherence to the rules associated with Word Generation limit its application, including intellectual impairment (e.g., Down syndrome, Bowler, Cufflin, & Kiernan, 1985), cognitive decline such as aging (Keage et al., 2015), dementia (Matteis et al., 1998), and brain damage (Bragoni et al., 2000). TCD per se has been applied successfully in a wide range of populations (for systematic reviews, see Bakker et al., 2014, in children, and Keage et al., 2012, in aging and dementia), therefore the combination of fTCD and What Box provides a useful tool for future investigations.

Conclusion

We report detailed methodology and data processing for the assessment of language lateralization in young children that can also be used with adults. The method, the "What Box" task, was successfully employed in children aged between 1 and 5 years using fTCD and showed medium correspondence with Word Generation collected with older adults.

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ORCID

Nicholas A. Badcock http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6862-4694
Mark J. Kohler http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7265-6242
Hannah A.D. Keage http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6814-4997

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