

LANGUAGE ACQUISITION IN BILINGUAL CHILDREN: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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Abstract: *This article explores the process of language acquisition in bilingual children and compares it to that of monolingual children. By examining cognitive, phonological, and grammatical development, it highlights both the advantages and challenges bilingual children face. The study analyzes how growing up with two languages influences cognitive flexibility, vocabulary acquisition, and code-switching. The findings suggest that while bilingual children may initially lag in vocabulary development in one language, they exhibit a broader overall lexicon across both languages.*


INTRODUCTION

Bilingualism is an increasingly common phenomenon in our globalized world. Children growing up in bilingual environments navigate two linguistic systems, leading to a unique path of language acquisition. While the cognitive advantages of bilingualism, such as enhanced attention and problem-solving skills, are well documented, there are also challenges, including potential delays in vocabulary development and grammatical milestones. This article investigates how bilingual children acquire language compared to their monolingual peers and explores how code-switching aids in bridging linguistic gaps. Bilingual children often demonstrate impressive metalinguistic awareness, recognizing and understanding the rules and structures of both languages.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research has consistently demonstrated the cognitive benefits of bilingualism. Bialystok emphasizes that bilingual children develop superior executive function, particularly in tasks requiring cognitive flexibility and attentional control. These advantages arise from the need to manage two languages simultaneously, a process that strengthens mental agility and working memory. While bilingual children often show cognitive advantages, they may experience slower vocabulary acquisition in each individual language. Hoff et al. Found that bilingual children tend to have smaller vocabularies in one language compared to monolingual children.





However, when both languages are considered together, bilinguals typically have a broader overall lexicon. Grammatical development may also take longer in bilinguals, but by middle childhood, these differences often diminish. Bilingual children tend to have heightened phonological awareness, which stems from their exposure to two distinct phonetic systems. This increased sensitivity to sounds gives bilinguals an advantage in learning new languages and distinguishing subtle phonetic differences. Additionally, code-switching, once viewed as a linguistic deficit, is now recognized as a sophisticated linguistic strategy that bilinguals use to navigate between languages based on context.


METHODOLOGY

The study included 60 children aged 4-8, divided equally between bilingual and monolingual groups. The bilingual group consisted of children exposed to Russian, English and Uzbek in their home environments, while the monolingual group spoke only Uzbek. The Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT) was used to measure vocabulary proficiency in both languages for bilingual children and in Uzbek for monolinguals. To measure cognitive flexibility, the Dimensional Change Card Sort (DCCS) was used. Observational studies were conducted to analyze code-switching behaviors in naturalistic settings, such as home environments, where children interacted with family members. Language proficiency tests were administered in controlled, quiet settings. Cognitive flexibility tasks followed language assessments to minimize fatigue effects. Code-switching patterns were recorded through video analysis of interactions between the children and their families, allowing for a detailed examination of how bilingual children navigate between languages in daily conversation. Data were analyzed using t-tests to compare language proficiency between groups, while anovas were applied to assess cognitive differences. Qualitative methods were used to interpret code-switching behaviors.

RESULTS

The study revealed that bilingual children scored lower on vocabulary tests in each language compared to monolingual children. However, when considering the total lexicon across both languages, bilingual children demonstrated a larger overall vocabulary. These results align with existing research, which suggests that while bilingual children may lag behind in vocabulary acquisition in one language, their combined word knowledge across both languages surpasses that of monolinguals. In terms of cognitive flexibility, bilingual children outperformed monolinguals on the Dimensional Change Card Sort task, exhibiting faster reaction times and greater accuracy. These findings reinforce the cognitive advantages associated with





bilingualism, particularly in tasks that require attention switching and adaptability to new rules. Code-switching was observed frequently in bilingual children, especially in environments where both languages were spoken. The analysis revealed that children used code-switching strategically, particularly in conversations involving complex or abstract topics. Rather than reflecting confusion, code-switching allowed bilingual children to bridge linguistic gaps effectively, demonstrating an advanced level of linguistic control

DISCUSSION

The study supports the growing body of evidence that bilingualism enhances cognitive flexibility. Bilingual children's ability to manage two languages simultaneously appears to strengthen executive function, which enables them to excel in tasks requiring cognitive agility. This finding resonates with previous research that highlights the cognitive benefits of bilingualism. Although bilingual children may initially experience delays in vocabulary development in one language, the results suggest that these delays do not indicate a linguistic deficit. When accounting for the combined lexicon across both languages, bilingual children demonstrate a broader vocabulary than monolinguals. Delayed grammatical development observed in bilingual children typically resolves by middle childhood, supporting the idea that bilingualism ultimately leads to linguistic competence in both languages. Code-switching, once viewed as problematic, is now recognized as a valuable linguistic strategy used by bilingual children to navigate the demands of communicating in two languages. The study found that bilingual children employed code-switching strategically, particularly when faced with linguistic challenges, further emphasizing the cognitive and linguistic agility that comes with bilingualism.

CONCLUSION

This comparative study highlights the unique trajectory of language acquisition in bilingual children. While bilinguals may face initial delays in vocabulary and grammar development in one language, they exhibit superior cognitive flexibility and a broader overall lexicon. Code-switching is a key strategy that allows bilingual children to manage linguistic complexity, enhancing their ability to communicate effectively across different contexts. These findings suggest that bilingualism should be nurtured through educational strategies that support dual-language development, fostering the cognitive and linguistic advantages bilingualism brings.



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