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Keeping up and forging ahead: English language outcomes of proficient bilingual adolescents in the United States

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 17 August 2016

Received in revised form 28 March 2017

Accepted 13 April 2017

Available online xxx

ABSTRACT

Research on the English language outcomes of bilingual adolescents is limited, particularly for the subgroup of proficient bilingual adolescents who are not classified as limited English proficient. The current study addresses this gap by investigating the correlates of English language outcomes in a group of proficient bilingual adolescents in grades 5–7 ($n = 37$), a pivotal stage of development due to the entry to adolescence and school transition. To examine the similarities and differences in English language development between monolingual and bilingual adolescents, the study also compares bilingual adolescents with a group of monolingual native English speakers ($n = 23$) who are comparable in age, socio-economic status and content instruction. All participants completed a background survey and five English language tests. The results showed that bilingual adolescents performed comparably to their monolingual peers in all English proficiency tasks. Their self-ratings of reading and writing ability were significantly higher than those of their monolingual peers. Among bilingual adolescents, those who reported more frequent reading and use of English scored higher in grammar and speech production tasks. They were also more confident in their English speaking and reading skills.

Published by Elsevier Ltd.

1. Introduction

The number of bilingual¹ students in preschool through grade 12 in the United States (U.S.) has grown exponentially in the past decades ([National Center for Education Statistics, 2014](#)). As of 2012, approximately one out of four of children in the U.S. are from immigrant families and in most cases these children speak a different language at home and learn English as a second language (L2) ([Samson & Collins, 2012](#)). Despite the large number of bilingual students in the U.S., and the robust relationships between English language proficiency, academic achievement ([Kieffer, 2008](#)) and psychological well-being ([Kim, Wang, Deng, Alvarez, & Li, 2011](#)), research on bilingual students' English language development is limited, particularly for adolescent bilingual students ([Mancilla-Martinez, Kieffer, Biancarosa, Christodoulou, & Snow, 2011](#); [Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007](#)). Compared to monolingual native English-speaking (NES) students, bilingual students in preschool and early elementary grades have a smaller vocabulary ([Bialystok, Barac, Blaye, & Poulin-Dubois, 2010](#); [Bialystok, Luk, Peets, &](#)

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¹ We use the term bilingual/dual language learner students to refer to all students in the U.S. context who use or speak an additional language other than English at home regardless of their English language proficiency level and language dominance.

Yang, 2010; Oller, Pearson, & Cobo-Lewis, 2007) and lower performances on morphological and syntactic tasks (Butler & Hakuta, 2009; Nicoladis, Palmer, & Marentette, 2007; Paradis, 2010; but cf.; Gutiérrez-Clellen, Restrepo, & Simón-Cerejido, 2006). However, little research has been devoted to comparing bilingual students and their monolingual peers in secondary grades, a pivotal stage of development due to a variety of challenges in biological, psychological and social development (Lord, Eccles, & McCarthy, 1994; Rudolph, Lambert, Clark, & Kurlakowsky, 2001). Not only are the demands of English language skills higher in secondary schools, they are also critical to academic achievements (Carhill, Suárez-Orozco, & Páez, 2008; Saunders & O'Brien, 2006). Bilingual students face double challenges of mastering the English language and the content (Greenberg Motamedi, Singh, & Thompson, 2016; Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007). Furthermore, unless enrolled in a K-grade 8 school, adolescents also experience a school transition as they move from elementary to middle school, and the academic goals and instructional issues for bilingual adolescents differ from those in PreK and elementary grades (Baker et al., 2014; Mullins & Irvin, 2000).

The bilingual population in the United States is highly heterogeneous (Lesaux, 2006). Some of the bilingual students are classified as having limited English proficiency (LEP) or as English language learners (ELLs), depending on the term used by the school district, while others have never been labeled as LEP/ELL or received any English as a second language (ESL) services in school. While the majority of research on bilinguals did not differentiate among the subgroups (Davis, Huang, & Yi, 2016), many studies included only bilinguals classified as LEP/ELL, thus painting a negative picture of bilingual students' English language development and academic achievement (Kieffer, 2008). To gain a full picture of bilingual students' language/literacy learning process and outcomes, it is crucial to differentiate and examine all the subgroups (Lesaux, 2006).

This study aims to provide a better understanding of the English language and literacy outcomes of a subgroup of bilingual adolescent students, the proficient bilinguals. Specifically, the study examines the correlates of English language outcomes of bilingual adolescents in grades 5–7 who speak a home language different from English but are not categorized as LEP by the school at the time of testing. The study also includes a monolingual NES group to examine the similarities and differences, if any, in the language and literacy development trajectories between monolingual and bilingual adolescents. Finally, in contrast to the majority of the existing research that focused on vocabulary (e.g., Bialystok's work) or reading outcomes (e.g., Kieffer, 2008), the study includes a more comprehensive battery of assessments to examine English language development in totality.

The three methodological improvements in the present study are: 1) ensuring that bilingual students and their monolingual NES peers were comparable on several critical demographic variables, i.e., age, socio-economic status (SES) and content instruction; 2) utilizing a comprehensive battery of English language proficiency tasks; 3) surveying both learner- and input-level factors to investigate their relationships with bilingual students' English outcomes. The monolingual/bilingual group comparison is important for two reasons. Theoretically, the results would inform the research base on the similarities and differences in the language and literacy development between monolinguals and bilinguals, affording us a better understanding of the consequences of speaking an additional language. Furthermore, as research has shown that bilinguals' language differences may correlate with their difficulties in academic achievements, a better understanding of the language differences between the two groups would also help parents and educators meet the needs of bilingual students. The findings can also be applied to creating instruction, assessment and education policies for bilingual children (Lesaux, 2006). Note that we specifically use the term "language differences" rather than "language delays" or "deficient languages skills" to reflect our disagreement with the deficit model for studying bilingualism or bilingual children (Hoff, 2013; MacSwan, 2000). However, we acknowledge that the mismatch between the skills that bilingual children possess and the skills that schools or education policies require may cause academic difficulties in bilingual children. We believe that understanding the language differences between monolinguals and bilinguals and the mismatch between bilingual skills and school/academic demands is critical to promoting bilingual children's development and academic success.

2. Literature review

2.1. Research on bilingual students' English language proficiency outcomes

Research on bilingual students' English proficiency outcomes generally focused on vocabulary and grammar. Most studies showed that bilingual students in kindergarten and early elementary grades have a smaller vocabulary in English than their monolingual English-speaking peers (e.g., Cobo-Lewis Pearson, Eilers, & Umbel, 2002), with a couple of exceptions that found either a marginal difference between bilingual and monolinguals (Bialystok, Barac et al., 2010; Bialystok, Luk et al., 2010) or no reliable differences between the two groups (Barac & Bialystok, 2012). To illustrate, Bialystok and colleagues conducted a large-scale, cross-sectional study with children between 3 and 10 years of age to examine the receptive vocabulary difference between monolinguals and bilinguals in their language of schooling, i.e., English. Using a standardized norm-referenced vocabulary test, the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT-III) (Dunn & Dunn, 2007), the authors found that both monolinguals and bilinguals performed within one standard deviation of the population mean, but monolingual NES children outperformed bilinguals in every age group comparison.

In another study, Mancilla-Martinez and Lesaux (2011) followed 173 Spanish-speaking children from 4.5 to 11 years of age to examine their oral language and word reading development. Individual growth modeling techniques were employed to model bilingual children's growth rates in both English and Spanish concurrently and in comparison to national monolingual English norms from early childhood to preadolescence. The authors found that bilingual children's oral language skills lagged

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