How do bilingual children learn to read?

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Learning to read is a challenge for all children; it doesn’t come naturally. Babies begin life with the ability to learn language, and they do, rather quickly and effortlessly. Before a child is even able to tie her shoes, she will know the grammar of her language – not the grammatical rules taught in school, but the system for how sounds are combined into words and phrases.

On the other hand, it takes years of instruction and practice for a child to become a skilled and fluent reader. Children have to learn how letters (orthography), sounds (phonology), and meaning (semantics) relate to one another, and the bulk of this process happens during the primary school years, between the ages of six and ten. This is challenging in one language, so how does a young bilingual child accomplish the task of learning to read in two languages?

In our research, Laura-Ann Petitto and I ask precisely these kinds of questions. In the case of monolingual children, we know that language knowledge, such as vocabulary and the awareness of and ability to manipulate language sounds (termed phonological awareness), supports learning to read. A young child’s phonological awareness and vocabulary strongly predict future reading ability. We can test these language skills in children with the help of various clever and fun tasks, for example by asking children to name pictures, give antonyms and synonyms to words, break apart words into sounds, or delete sounds in a word. For instance, we might ask them to say “stop” without the “s” sound.

Bilingual children have two phonologies (sound systems) and two vocabularies (equivalent words in each language, for example cat and gato for a bilingual English-Spanish child). We wanted to find out if phonological awareness and vocabulary knowledge support learning to read in the same way for bilingual and monolingual children. Would having two phonologies and two vocabularies change how children learned to read?

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Of course, not all bilinguals are the same. Some children learn two languages from birth (simultaneous bilingualism), and some children may learn one language from birth at home, adding the second language a few years later when they enter kindergarten (sequential bilingualism). Would being a simultaneous or sequential bilingual make a difference in how they learned to read? We also wanted to know whether the age at which a child was first exposed to a second language, and therefore to a second phonological system and vocabulary, affected reading.

Our study showed that being a monolingual or bilingual does indeed make a difference in learning to read. Bilingual children who were exposed to two languages simultaneously from birth outperformed monolingual children on phonological awareness tasks, such as saying “stop” without the “s” sound. Simultaneous bilingual children also outperformed monolingual children on
novel word reading tasks (e.g. reading “words” such as feap, jox, snirk).

Being bilingual did not slow down or confuse children when it came to reading – in fact, bilingual kids were good readers and even showed some advantages over their monolingual peers. Moreover, children who were first exposed to English at school (“later-English” sequential bilinguals) caught up with their peers and showed no reading disadvantages by the time they reached the fourth grade.

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The crucial finding of our study concerns how phonological awareness and vocabulary skills relate to children’s reading skills. The role of phonological awareness and vocabulary skills in the development of reading skills differed depending on whether the child was monolingual, a simultaneous bilingual, or a sequential bilingual. We know that phonological awareness and vocabulary skills are important predictors of reading skills for all children, and this was clearly the case for the monolingual children in our study; phonological awareness and vocabulary were strong predictors of reading skills.

For simultaneous bilinguals, however, phonological awareness skills were more predictive of reading skills than were vocabulary skills. Vocabulary matters, of course, but it appears that phonological awareness skills matter more. The opposite was true for sequential bilinguals (in our study, children who were first exposed to English in school around ages 5-6). For these “later-English” sequential bilinguals, vocabulary skills were more predictive of reading skills than was phonological awareness.

Understanding how growing up bilingual affects children’s language skills, and in turn, reading outcomes can help us understand which language and reading skills teachers should focus on to promote reading success.


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