



Bilingual Acquisition of Language and Literacy: State of the Art and Beyond

JOSEFIN LINDGREN 

ASSUNTA SÜSS 

NATALIA GAGARINA 

*Author affiliations can be found in the back matter of this article

1. INTRODUCTION

This special collection brings together selected papers from the conference Bilingual Acquisition of Language and Literacy (BiALL) that took place May 22–24, 2019, at the Leibniz-Centre General Linguistics, Berlin, Germany. The collection aims to provide an in-depth view on selected aspects of the bilingual acquisition of language and literacy in children aged 4 to 16. In particular, the four papers address reading and writing, narrative skills, and expressive and receptive vocabulary. The four studies, taken together, include data from over 300 children speaking four language combinations (Russian-German, Arabic-Swedish, Greek-German, Dutch-German). The papers in the special collection contribute substantially to the growing body of literature on bilingual acquisition and shed light on a number of interesting issues such as the importance of input for vocabulary in bilingual children's languages; the interaction between language dominance and linguistic distance in bilingual narrative development; and the role of factors such as lexical knowledge, reading experience, and home language classes in the development of biliteracy. In this introduction, we give an overview of relationships between the aspects brought up in the four studies. First, we discuss vocabulary and (oral) narrative skills (Section 2), after which we focus on oral language skills, including narrative skills, and biliteracy (Section 3), ending with a conclusion and overview of the studies in the special collection (Section 4).

2. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN VOCABULARY AND (ORAL) NARRATIVE SKILLS IN BILINGUALS

While previous studies reveal strong relationships between lexical and grammatical development in specific domains (e.g., Bland-Stewart & Fitzgerald, 2001; Conboy & Thal, 2006; Kohnert et al., 2010; Marchman et al., 2004), vocabulary and narrative skills have shown more general associations. Results from previous studies of bilingual children, specifically, indicate that their vocabulary knowledge, often measured as a score on a vocabulary test, might have an impact on their narrative skills (e.g., Bitetti & Hammer, 2016; Bohnacker et al., 2020; Fiani et al., 2020; Iluz-Cohen & Walters, 2012; Pearson, 2002; Roch & Hržica, 2020; Uccelli & Pérez, 2007). The effect of vocabulary knowledge seems to be similar for both story comprehension and the production of story structure. For example, a number of studies have found a relationship in both languages between the bilingual child's vocabulary scores and either story comprehension (Bohnacker et al., 2020; Fiani et al., 2020) or production of story structure/narrative macrostructure (Bitetti & Hammer, 2016; Pearson, 2002; Uccelli &

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CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Josefin Lindgren

Department of Scandinavian languages, Uppsala University, Uppsala, SE

josefin.lindgren@nordiska.uu.se

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In one of the few studies of both languages of bilingual children, Rhys and Thomas (2013) investigated receptive vocabulary and reading accuracy and comprehension of 175 Welsh-English bilingual children aged 7 to 11 growing up in Wales with Welsh as their primary language of schooling. In both languages, they found significant correlations between vocabulary and both reading measures, irrespective of the children's amount of exposure to the languages in the home. However, both vocabulary and reading skills were influenced by the amount of language exposure; children receiving more exposure to a language at home performed better in that language. These results emphasize that supporting both languages is important not only for oral skills, but also for the development of biliteracy.

Finally, a study of monolingual children shows where the research of bilinguals' literacy may be on its way. The results from the longitudinal study by Suggate et al. (2018), who followed 58 English monolinguals for 15 years and investigated the combined interactions of vocabulary, oral narrative skills, early literacy skills, and reading comprehension, suggest the continuing interrelation of various factors, with vocabulary at age 19 months predicting reading comprehension at age 12. The authors also conclude: "Controlling for maternal and infant vocabulary, children's oral narrative skill around school entry related uniquely to reading comprehension 10 years later" (Suggate et al., 2018, p. 82). During the last years, research is moving away from examining simple relationships between two factors, e.g., vocabulary as a predictor of reading, towards the investigation of complex interrelations between background factors and language skills, such as narrative or literacy skills (e.g., Reese et al., 2010) as well as between a number of different language skills. This type of studies investigating bilinguals has not yet been carried out. In sum, the studies described here show that vocabulary is a constant factor linked to bilingual children's reading skills across languages and suggest a reciprocal relationship between vocabulary and literacy; progress in one area benefits the other. However, studies investigating a wider range of language pairs and more complex interrelationships are still needed.

4. CONCLUSION AND OUTLINE OF THE SPECIAL COLLECTION

In this introduction, we have discussed several aspects of the relationships between, on one hand, vocabulary and narrative skills, and, on the other, vocabulary and literacy in bi- and multilingual children. Despite the growing number of papers investigating these topics, much is still unknown about the development of language skills, such as vocabulary and narrative skills, and literacy and how they are influenced by different types of social, cognitive and linguistic factors. Here, the papers in this special collection provide new insights. Additionally, the papers show the breadth of current research into bilinguals' acquisition of language and literacy. The paper by *Bohnacker, Haddad and Öberg* adds to the body of research investigating bilinguals' vocabularies with their study of receptive and expressive vocabulary in both languages of 100 Arabic-Swedish bilinguals aged 4–7, where effects of age, socio-economic status, age of onset, daily exposure and home language use in the family are explored. The paper by *Knopp* contributes to the research on factors influencing bilingual children's narrative skills. Her study investigates the effects of language dominance and typological proximity on narrative skills in 30 Greek-German and Dutch-German bilinguals aged 10–11. The paper by *Usanova and Schoor* reports results from a longitudinal study of scriptural skills in Russian as a home language. In this study, 131 Russian-German bilinguals were followed for two years starting either at age 13 (Grade 7) or age 15 (Grade 9) and their reading and writing skills were analyzed. Finally, the paper by *Krause and Ritter* used eye-tracking to investigate silent and oral text reading in both languages of Russian-German bilinguals aged 9–10 and 15–16. The age groups and reading modes were compared and the bilinguals were also compared to monolinguals.

Vocabulary, narrative skills and literacy are linked to different functions within communication, and, in bilingual children, they impact one another in a number of complex ways. Despite or maybe even because of that complexity, it is through studying both languages of bilingual children that we can better understand these aspects and their relationships, and in the end the fascinating phenomenon that is language. Future research should thus consider investigating the interplay of a wide range of background factors (such as socio-economic status, age, and school background) and language combinations with various language skills, which should not be restricted only to, for example, productive and receptive lexicon, but be expanded to

