

In the STARlight

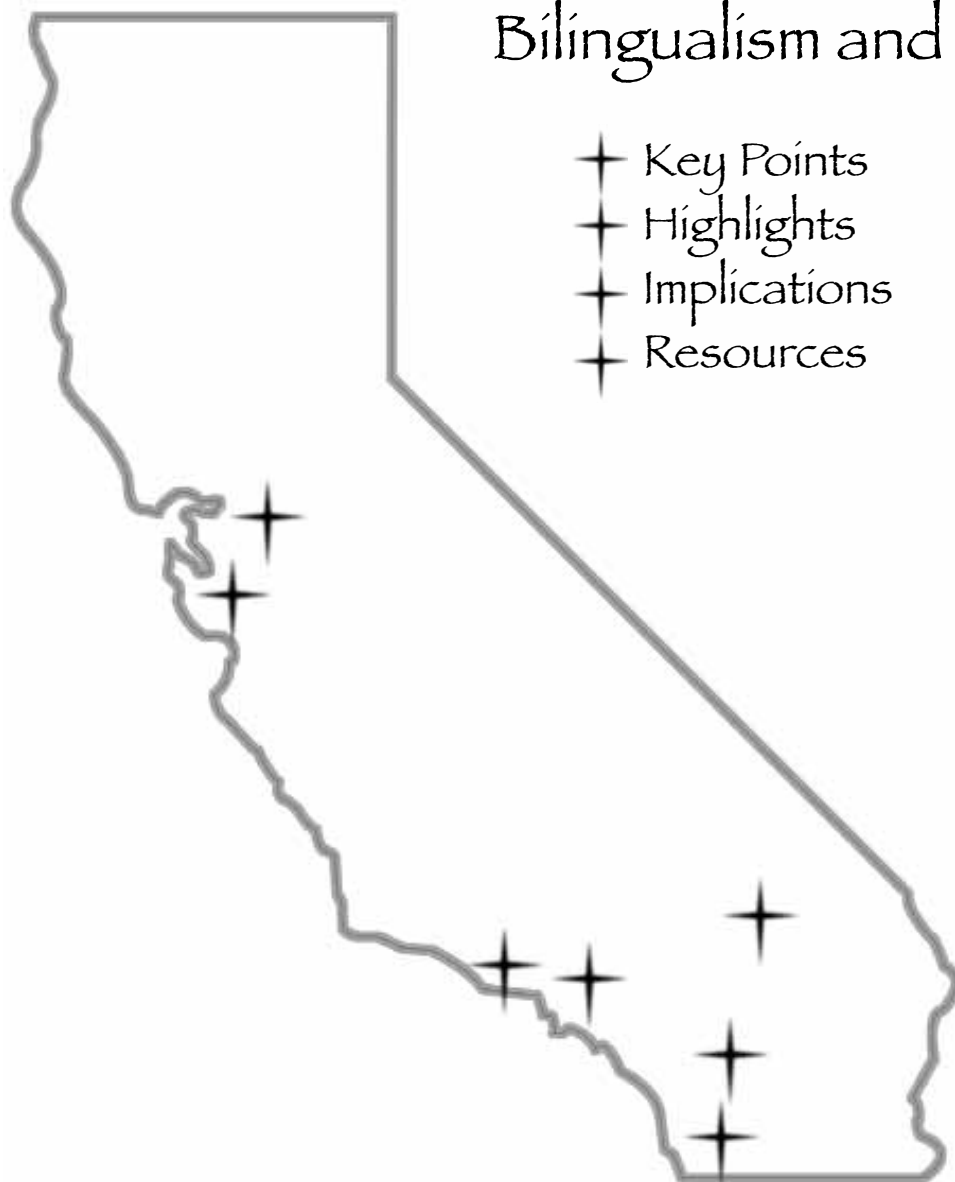


Research & Resources for English Learner Achievement

Issue 3

Bilingualism and Young Children

- + Key Points
- + Highlights
- + Implications
- + Resources



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★ Students of ★ Today ★ Achieving ★ Results

We are a wonderfully multilingual and multicultural nation. But we are not yet a fair nation. We continue to perpetuate language and cultural destruction. We have so much to gain by welcoming, supporting, listening to and learning from the voices encoded in each of our languages. (Laurie Olsen, California Tomorrow)

Students' growing bilingualism needs to be lavishly praised and showcased both within and beyond the classroom... Both students and their parents can take pride in noting that 8-9 year-olds are able to do things their own peers, parents, other relatives, and even most government officials cannot do. (Mimi Met, Montgomery County Public Schools)

“At what age can I expose my baby to another language without causing language confusion?”

Childhood Bilingualism

The objective of this research was to provide empirical evidence concerning young bilingual children's early knowledge of their two languages. Specifically, what is the optimal age for bilingual language exposure? Despite the widespread prevalence of children in bilingual contexts in the United States and throughout the world, there are few empirical studies of very young bilinguals. This paucity of research has fostered contradictory views about childhood bilingualism. On the one hand, parents marvel at the seeming effortless with which young children can acquire multiple languages. On the other hand, many parents, educators, and scientists alike, have concluded that exposing a child to two languages too early may cause developmental language delay, and, worse, language confusion. The question of optimal age of exposure is particularly reflected in contemporary educational policy, where children typically receive their first exposure to other languages at relatively advanced ages.

Focus of Research

Six distinct lines of inquiry were undertaken over several years, each consisting of several sub-studies. One method used to examine the optimal age for bilingual language exposure was to study young bilinguals who were exposed to their “other” language for the first time beginning from ages (i) birth, (ii) three, (iii) five, and (iv) seven; these ages correspond to key periods of brain development and provide a first-time window into the biological factors that contribute to successful bilingual acquisition. Also studied was the age of first bilingual exposure and its enduring impact on adult bilingual language processing. Additionally, this issue was looked at by examining children acquiring two languages across a variety of social contexts (home, community, and classroom only). Hearing babies acquiring two spoken languages were compared with signing-speaking babies who can potentially produce their two languages simultaneously. Also studied was whether they take this option, and under what conditions, as a window into the knowledge that underlies all childhood bilingualism. Finally, multiple research methodologies were utilized (spanning from behavioral measurement to brain imaging). This three-fold approach (using an interdisciplinary perspective, multiple populations, and multiple methods) provides the most powerful lens to lay bare the answers to any research program.

Summary of Bilingual Findings (all studies)

Overall, this research endeavor has been spectacularly successful and has yielded many important findings that bear directly on the nation's educational priorities and policy towards bilingual children. As hypothesized, the age of bilingual exposure has a significant impact on bilingual language development. Moreover, early age of bilingual exposure has a positive impact on multiple aspects of a child's development: linguistic, cognitive, and reading. Children who experience early and extensive exposure to both of their languages quickly grasp the fundamentals of both of their languages and in a manner similar to that of monolingual language learners. As adults these bilingual individuals, in addition to their good behavioral performance on language tasks, also show brains that process their two languages in a similar manner. The field raised concerns that early bilinguals may be linguistically, cognitively and academically disadvantaged. Our findings suggest that early bilingualism offers no disadvantages; on the contrary, young bilinguals may be afforded a linguistic and a cognitive advantage. Early dual language exposure is also key to skilled reading acquisition. Moreover, learning to read in two languages may afford an advantage in key phonemic awareness skills vital to reading success.

Publications / Abstracts

- Petitto, L. A., Katerelos, M., Levy, B., Gauna, K., Tétrault, K., & Ferraro, V. (2001). Bilingual signed and spoken language acquisition from birth: Implications for mechanisms underlying early bilingual language acquisition. *Journal of Child Language*, 28(2), 453-496.
- Kovelman, I., Baker, S. A., & Petitto, L. A. (2005, April). Age of bilingual language exposure as a new window into bilingual reading development. Abstract submitted to the *Society for Research in Child Development*, Atlanta, GA.

Implications for Teachers

The research reinforces the value of Dual Language Programs and Bilingual Education Programs that provide children with rich language experiences in two languages. The development of two languages simultaneously at an early age is not detrimental. In many ways it provides linguistic, cognitive and social advantages over monolingual development. Such instructional programs should consider the simultaneous introduction of beginning reading in both systems as early as pre-school.

Teacher Resources

Virtual Pre-K

<https://www.virtualpre-k.org/>

Contains ideas for teachers and parents in English and Spanish that cover important concepts for pre-schoolers and help build early literacy, math, social studies, and science skills. Video lessons can be previewed on-line.

Colorín Colorado

<http://www.colorincolorado.org/educators/>

Information, and resources for Pre K -3 teachers and Spanish-speaking parents.

Reading Rockets

<http://readingrockets.learningstore.org/products/RR1064.html>

Site offers a wealth of strategies, lessons and activities to help young children learn how to read. Available through the site is, *Becoming Bilingual*, a PBS video.

Scholastic Lee y Serás

<http://www.scholastic.com/aboutscholastic/community/programs/leeyseras.htm>

Lee y Serás is a National Latino Early Literacy Initiative that helps parents and communities to foster early literacy skills. Parents and childcare providers can learn how to use everyday routines to contribute to literacy development.

Research On-line

Pre-School English Learners:

Principles and Practices to Promote Language, Literacy and Learning

<http://www.edgateway.net/pub/docs/pel/resources.html>

The entire site is dedicated to pre-school English Learners. It provides an extensive bibliography containing links to research available on-line related to several aspects of bilingualism and young children. It also contains links to professional organizations and other resources that promote language, literacy and learning for early bilingual readers. Some teacher training materials are also available in pdf format.

National Literacy Panel on Language Minority Children and Youth

U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences

<http://www.cal.org/projects/natlitpanel.html>

This study examines critical factors that influence the development of English-language literacy (reading and writing) among Spanish-speaking children. The research addresses: How do children, whose first language is Spanish, learn to read and write in English? Why do some Spanish-speaking children have difficulties acquiring English-language reading and writing skills? What teacher knowledge, teaching skills, and instructional strategies are required to ensure optimal outcomes?

Dual Language Abilities of Bilingual Four-Year Olds: Initial Findings from the Early Childhood Study of Language and Literacy Development of Spanish-speaking Children

<http://www.uc.edu/njrp/pdfs/Tabors.pdf>

The study describes language and literacy skills in Spanish and English for four-year olds entering Pre-K programs. A comparison group consisted of monolingual Spanish-speaking children.

I used to speak with my son in Farsi when he was really young, but then people told me not to any-more, that he would be confused. So now he doesn't speak Farsi and I can't have a deeper conversation with him. I wish I could though. (First generation Iranian parent, Oakland, CA)

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Questions for Reflection

1. How does biliteracy enhance the academic performance of students?
2. What are the instructional implications of this research for the teaching of reading at your school/district?
3. In what ways can biliteracy be fostered for youngsters who are not in a Dual Language or Bilingual Education Program?
4. What are the major implications for parents regarding early bilinguals and the teaching of reading in both languages?
5. What are some of the common misconceptions about bilingual language exposure in early childhood that are addressed by this research/article?

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