

Bilingual Environments and Bilingual Development: Studies of Children in South Florida

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Children's language development is shaped by their language exposure, and children's language exposure is shaped by the larger social context in which they live. In the Bilingual Environments and Bilingual Development Project in South Florida, we have been identifying influences on language exposure and language development among children from Spanish-English bilingual homes. The project comprises two longitudinal studies, spanning the age range from 22 months to 6 years.

We find that children's exposure to English and Spanish in bilingual homes depends on their parents' language backgrounds, their age, and their siblings' ages. We find that children's development of English and Spanish depends on the quantity and quality of their exposure to each language. We find that parents' child-directed speech is more supportive of language development when the parents are speaking their native language than when they are speaking a late-acquired second language. We find that children who are acquiring two languages simultaneously initially lag behind monolingual children in their rate of development of each language and that children who continue to make progress in two languages shower a faster rate of total language growth than children acquiring only one language. We find that early bilingualism is not always maintained; English dominance increases with age. We find that for some bilingual children, expressive skills do not develop in tandem with receptive skills in one of their languages.

These findings have implications for understanding the processes underlying bilingual development, and they have implications for programs and policies aimed at supporting both heritage language maintenance and school readiness in English among language minority children.