

Book Review

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Language and Literacy in Bilingual Children, edited by D. Kimbrough Oller and Rebecca E. Eilers. Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters, 2002. 310 pp. Hb. \$89.95; pb. \$29.95

Researchers, policymakers, administrators, and educators are engaged in heated discussions about bilingual education in the United States. Some advocate a “late-exit” or maintenance (additive) program in which children have an opportunity to add a second language (L2) (i.e., English) to their mother tongue (L1) (e.g., Spanish), as can be seen in two-way bilingual programs in which two language groups are schooled bilingually through each other’s languages. Others support “early-exit” or transitional (subtractive) programs—the approach used in most bilingual education programs in U.S. schools—which focus on developing students’ English-language skills and not on promoting maintenance of their L1. Still others support English-only immersion programs in which children are taught an L2 through subject-matter instruction in that language.

Those who support the early-exit program may claim that bilingual children, as they grow, seem to be facing much more challenging tasks than do monolingual children and, therefore, have disadvantages (e.g., learning two languages simultaneously or consecutively) (Dunn, 1987). The tendency of bilingual children to demonstrate below-average vocabulary scores in each language (Verhoeven, 1994) may support the widespread belief that bilinguals are learning almost twice as many words simultaneously. Some perceive bilinguals to be at a disadvantage because, due to limitations in children’s cognitive capacity, they are unable to achieve the same depth in language as monolinguals. Those who support late-exit or maintenance (additive) bilingual programs propose diverse methodologies that concentrate on developing either literacy skills or oral-language proficiency skills, or even both skills, in bilingual children.

In response to these many different issues, Oller and Eilers's *Language and Literacy in Bilingual Children*, an edited volume containing a collection of twelve articles, identifies and discusses misunderstandings surrounding bilingualism and bilingual education. The book is based on a Miami research project initiated and directed by the two editors. As a result, eight of the twelve articles report their collaborative efforts with other researchers, and the remaining four describe research on the same subject (although the editors themselves did not participate).

The book, which investigates English–Spanish bilingual children in Miami schools, is divided into four parts. Part 1, titled “Background,” consists of two chapters. Chapter 1 provides a theoretical foundation, and Chapter 2 provides an overview of methods used to identify factors that contribute to the development of bilingual children’s linguistic capabilities. These two chapters discuss the importance of incorporating certain variables into the research, including school instructional methods (e.g., two-way or English-immersion classes) and other variables that have tended to be neglected in past bilingual research, such as the role of socioeconomic status (SES) and the effect of language spoken at home. In other words, the researchers in this book emphasize the significance not only of classroom environments, but also of home environments (e.g., only Spanish spoken at home or both English and Spanish spoken at home in relation to SES). The inclusion of children’s L1 may not be entirely innovative, but conceptualizing its importance is critical. When it comes to vocabulary, for instance, children might have knowledge of a substantial number of Spanish words that they do not know in English. This vocabulary distribution across the two languages seems perfectly natural because the children speak mostly Spanish in their homes while their use of English is limited to school settings. In reality, however, bilingual children’s academic ability in U.S. schools is often judged without any attempt to assess their knowledge of their L1. The tendency is to examine only children’s English proficiency and to ignore their L1, which is the main or dominant language at home.

Based on the theoretical foundation and the study design laid down in Part 1, Part 2 (Chapters 3–6) covers the influence of Spanish–English bilingual ability on oral and written skills (Chapter 4 discusses English skills, and Chapter 5 focuses on Spanish skills). In Oller and Eilers’s study, children in Miami schools were tested for vocabulary knowledge both in English and Spanish. Chapter 4 reports how children’s English literacy and oral language skills influence their performance on standardized tests, and Chapter 5 discusses how Spanish literacy and oral language skills influences children’s English oral and written skills. Chapter 6 connects the results obtained in Chapters 4 and 5 and discusses the relationships between the two languages, in particular the possible interdependence of the two languages. Influenced by Cummins’s (1991) interdependence hypothesis, Oller and Eilers take the position that L1 and L2 proficiency are interdependent, and that a strong foundation in the L1

supports the learning of an L2. In accordance with this premise, the researchers believe that late-exit or additive bilingual programs have certain advantages over other types of bilingual programs, such as early-exit or English as a Second Language programs.

However, the results found in Oller and Eilers's research are fairly complicated. For example, the role of SES differs in the two languages. In standardized tests of English performance, SES is found to have a positive effect; high-SES children tended to outperform low-SES children, especially in oral language skills. On the other hand, in tests of Spanish performance, low-SES children outscored high-SES children. The authors speculate this reversal may reflect a difference in linguistic environment between low-SES and high-SES homes because in most low-SES homes, Spanish is the only language spoken at home, whereas in high-SES homes, the parents may use both languages at home. What further complicates the research findings is that Hispanic children in Miami showed strong signs of rejecting their L1 (i.e., Spanish) in circumstances in which they had a choice; specifically, the majority of the subject children showed a preference for speaking English to their peers.

One reason for this rapid language shift (and possibly the cultural assimilation of Miami Hispanic children, as well) may be in part associated with the particularly effective environment for assimilation in the United States, where English is the dominant language and the exposure to the first language is dramatically reduced (Blum-Kulka, 1997; Fishman, 1991). It is often stated that immigrant communities in many bilingual and multilingual societies have undergone a shift to the dominant language over a period of a few generations (Blum-Kulka, 1997). The language shift to English in the United States is now so prevalent that people at times cannot maintain informal intergenerational interactions in their heritage languages even within the confines of the family (Fishman, 1991). Many children from immigrant families lose their L1 entirely, even though they may retain some sense of ethnic identity or cultural vitality. This rapid language shift and cultural assimilation is a general trend in U.S. society, but some people—particularly those in the mainstream—fear that this general pattern may not apply to Hispanics. This apprehension, in fact, triggered a campaign that established English-immersion programs across the state of California in 1998 and similar recent movements in other states. However, Oller and Eilers contend that Hispanics living in Florida are no different than other immigrant groups and are experiencing rapid language shift and cultural assimilation into U.S. society. The editors speculate that the generally perceived “strength of the Spanish language in Miami may be almost exclusively due to continued immigration rather than to language maintenance” (p. 291). Most immigrant children grow up in communities where their L1 is in the process of replacement by English (Fishman, 1991). In fact, the findings of the researchers in the book illustrate that Hispanic parents are afraid that their

attempts to maintain Spanish may be futile, and, as a consequence, language shift may cause communication difficulties even among family members.

Part 3 (Chapters 7–11), titled “Probe Studies on Complex Language Capabilities,” consists of studies of bilingual children’s competencies through the examination of various linguistic factors, such as narrative discourse capabilities (Chapter 7), complex syntax—morphosyntactic distinction (Chapter 8), grammatical gender (Chapter 9), that-trace phenomena (Chapter 10)—and phonology (Chapter 11). Because multiple dimensions are inherent in bilingual abilities, by including various linguistic factors, researchers can avoid the danger of relying solely on test scores for the analysis of the social and cognitive nature of bilingual children’s language skills (Edelsky, 1991). Part 4, titled “A Retrospective View of the Research,” consists of a single chapter (Chapter 12) summarizing the results in Part 3 and, at the same time, reviews the earlier discussions of such topics as monolingual and bilingual advantages and disadvantages, and the interdependence of languages.

In sum, using statistically sophisticated analytical procedures, Oller and Eilers’s comprehensive research, as described in *Language and Literacy in Bilingual Children*, demonstrates the effects of bilingual learning on the ability to speak two languages and the ability to acquire literacy in both. The belief of those involved in this research project was articulated by Oller and Barbara Zurer Pearson in Chapter 1:

The question of how bilingualism affects cognition and education cannot be answered fully in a single study. But well-controlled investigation can help to improve our reasoning on a topic that has been addressed often on the basis of anecdotally-inspired fears that bilingualism and bilingual education are inherently damaging to children. (pp. 20–21)

As described earlier in this review, the research reported in this volume reveals that language shift is difficult to reverse, and Hispanics, who tend to be considered exceptional in terms of maintaining their L1, have not evaded the trend. Furthermore, the narrative research reported in this volume illustrates that bilingual children have noticeable weaknesses in storytelling, especially in Spanish, with regard to linguistic expression, vocabulary, and grammar. Thus, the research in the present volume, which includes not only diverse variables (e.g., the role of SES, the effect of language usage patterns in children’s homes, and the type of schooling) but also various linguistic factors, depicts the complexities of being bilingual and suggests the necessity of multiple assessment measures in order to monitor bilingual children’s progress in the development of oral and written language skills. Oller and Eilers’s study was impressive in considering so many different variables in a holistic and extensive manner—a challenge that many other studies fail to meet.

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