



Cross-language associations in the development of preschoolers' receptive and expressive vocabulary



Michelle F. Maier*, Natalie L. Bohlmann¹, Natalia A. Palacios

Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning, Curry School of Education, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA 22904, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 12 May 2014

Received in revised form 2 November 2015

Accepted 24 November 2015

Available online 24 December 2015

Keywords:

Dual language learner

Vocabulary development

Preschool

Cross-language association

ABSTRACT

The increasing population of dual language learners (DLLs) entering preschool classrooms highlights a continued need for research on the development of dual language acquisition, and specifically vocabulary skills, in this age group. This study describes young DLL children's ($N = 177$) vocabulary development in both English and Spanish simultaneously, and how vocabulary skills in each language relate to one another, during a contextual shift that places greater emphasis on the acquisition of academic English language skills. Findings demonstrated that DLL preschoolers made gains in vocabulary in both languages with more change evidenced in receptive, in comparison to expressive, vocabulary as well as in English in comparison to Spanish. When examining whether children's vocabulary scores in one language at the beginning of preschool interact with their vocabulary scores in the other language to predict vocabulary growth, no significant associations were found for receptive vocabulary. In contrast, the interaction between initial English and Spanish expressive vocabulary scores was negatively related to growth in English expressive vocabulary. This cross-language association suggests that children who have low expressive vocabulary skills in *both* languages tend to grow faster in their English expressive vocabulary. The study extends previous work on dual language development by examining growth in expressive and receptive vocabulary in both English and Spanish. It also provides suggestions for future work to inform a more comprehensive understanding of DLL children's development in both languages.

© 2015 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Demographic changes in the United States in recent years have resulted in a growing population of students who are exposed to a language other than English at home (Aud et al., 2011; National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition and Language Instruction Educational Programs (NCELA), 2006). This linguistic diversity is evident among young children in the increased number of dual language learners (DLLs) enrolled in early childhood programs nationwide (Hernandez, Denton, & Macartney, 2007). For example, reports on student enrollment in the nation's federally funded Head Start program calculate that about 30% of enrolled children are DLLs, with 85% of those coming from families who

speak Spanish as their primary language (Office of Head Start, 2007).

As a consequence of this growing population of DLLs in the U.S., many young children experience a shift in their language context, specifically the vocabulary to which they are exposed, as they transition from the home into a school-based setting. For many DLLs, this shift represents their first official foray into formal education and experiences with the English language. Many go from a home setting where the primary language is typically not English into a school setting whose goal tends to be the promotion and support of English language development, both in terms of comprehension and production (Pacini-Ketchabaw & Armstrong de Almeida, 2006). Although the primary goal of a majority of educational programs is English language acquisition, there is great diversity in how this goal is achieved: programs for DLLs range from reliance on the first language to requiring use of English only (López & Tapanes, 2011; Thomas & Collier, 2002). Even in immersion contexts where children's academic, or school-based, exposure is in their home language, many children likely experience various sources of English language exposure from siblings and peers to the media, libraries, or

* Corresponding author at: MDRC, 16 East 34th Street, 19th floor, New York, NY 10016, United States.

E-mail address: michelle.maier@mdrc.org (M.F. Maier).

¹ Present address: Department of Educational Theory and Practice, College of Education, Montana State University, Billings, MT, United States.

schools. In sum, the early language experiences of young children entering formal school settings are diverse and nuanced, making this transition from the home to preschool a salient time period to examine language development in DLL children.

Despite the growing population of DLLs entering the nation's schools and a growing understanding of the receptive and expressive vocabulary development of school-age DLLs (Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, & Christian, 2005; Gutiérrez, Zepeda, & Castro, 2010; Hernandez, Denton, & Macartney, 2008), the course of dual language development in young children exposed to multiple languages during the transition to school is not well understood (McCardle & Hoff, 2006)—particularly the interactions between the two languages. For instance, there is less, and sometimes conflicting, evidence about the association between oral language skills in children's first and second languages (Melby-Lervag & Lervag, 2011). Given the importance of vocabulary skills for children's school readiness and later academic success (Biemiller, 2003), as well as the complexity of acquiring two languages, we were interested in examining young children's vocabulary development in both English and Spanish simultaneously, during a contextual transition that places greater emphasis on the acquisition of academic English language skills. Therefore, the goal of this study was to examine the development of vocabulary skills in both English and Spanish and how they relate to one another among young, DLL preschoolers during a period when vocabulary is a rapidly developing and critical skill.

1.1. Interactive contexts and processes in dual language acquisition

This study was motivated by developmental and linguistic theories that highlight the importance of understanding children's language development within specific contexts and as an important tool for communication across multiple contexts. Evidence suggests that variation in both home (Farkas & Beron, 2004; Hart & Risley, 2003; Place & Hoff, 2011) and school (Barnett, Yarosz, Thomas, Jung, & Blanco, 2007; Schechter & Bye, 2007) contexts plays an integral role in the nature and course of language development. This change in context expands the microsystem-level interactions that most children experience – interactions typically take place between child and parents or child and siblings – to include classroom-level interactions with peers and teachers (Bronfenbrenner, 1986, 1994). Moreover, as Vygotsky would argue, language serves as one of the primary tools through which meaning making occurs in the context of social interactions, and language is particularly important for children as they transform and internalize elementary processes toward higher-order, abstract conceptualizations (Lantolf & Thorne, 2007). Given the rapid growth in vocabulary taking place for children ranging between two and four years of age (Farkas & Beron, 2004), and the changing microsystem-level context that may place an increasing emphasis on the acquisition of academic English, the present study seeks to examine how the vocabulary of DLLs grows during this important developmental period.

In addition to ecological and sociocultural perspectives, this study is motivated by competitive models of language development, such as the Unified Competition Model (UCM) (MacWhinney, 2005, 2012). These models highlight the coactive and interactive processes by which two languages may influence one another over time (Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008). For example, research documents the interactive nature of learning two languages: skills in one language may interact with developing skills in the other language—in positive or negative (through interference) ways (Melby-Lervag & Lervag, 2011). Thus, for DLL children, it is important to examine language development in both the home and second language.

1.2. Development of vocabulary skills

1.2.1. Importance of early vocabulary

Decades of research on monolingual children demonstrate the critical role young children's vocabulary skills play in many areas of development, including reading comprehension and overall school success into the elementary grades (Biemiller, 2003; Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997; NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, ECCRN, 2005; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Storch & Whitehurst, 2002). This work demonstrates that early vocabulary skills lay a foundation for learning how to read and write (Dickinson & Snow, 1987; Lonigan, 2003; Storch & Whitehurst, 2002; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Similar relationships have been found for DLLs, confirming a link between early vocabulary skills in both English and Spanish and later reading abilities (Davidson, Hammer, & Lawrence, 2011; Hammer, Lawrence, & Miccio, 2007; Rinaldi & Páez, 2008; Swanson, Saez, & Gerber, 2006).

1.2.2. Growth of vocabulary skills

Vocabulary skills – both receptive and expressive – are developing throughout childhood, particularly during the preschool years (Farkas & Beron, 2004). These skills follow a developmental sequence whereby receptive vocabulary skills appear to develop before expressive vocabulary skills (Benedict, 1979). Studies of monolingual children from low- and middle-income families demonstrate that vocabulary growth consistently follows a linear trend (Snow, Porsche, Tabors, & Harris, 2007) with some acceleration in growth around age two (Huttenlocher, Haight, Bryk, Selter, & Lyons, 1991; Pan, Rowe, Singer, & Snow, 2005). Research on the vocabulary development of DLLs coincides with the results from monolingual populations. Regardless of whether receptive or expressive vocabulary is examined, several studies on DLLs have demonstrated positive growth in English and Spanish vocabulary over two years of Head Start (Hammer, Lawrence, & Miccio, 2008; Hammer, Scarpino, & Davidson, 2011), in Kindergarten (Uchikoshi, 2006), and from first to third grade (Swanson et al., 2006). There is also evidence of acceleration in the growth rates of English receptive vocabulary in preschool (Hammer et al., 2008). Similar to research on monolingual children, DLLs' growth in language skills during preschool (in both languages) has been shown to be positively related to the development of reading skills later on in kindergarten and in first grade (Davidson et al., 2011; Hammer et al., 2007; Páez & Rinaldi, 2006; Rinaldi & Páez, 2008).

Despite the positive growth that DLLs demonstrate, their vocabulary scores on standardized tests in each language are typically lower (one to two standard deviations) than national norms of monolingual peers as early as preschool (Mancilla-Martinez & Lesaux, 2010; Nakamoto, Lindsey, & Manis, 2007; Uccelli & Páez, 2007). Yet, DLLs' vocabulary is distributed across the two languages making the combined size of their English and Spanish vocabulary bank similar to their monolingual peers in preschool (Hammer et al., 2008; Páez, Tabors, & López, 2007; Zill et al., 2003). These results have been found in studies of children from homes of middle- (Bialystok, Barac, Blaye, & Poulin-Dubois, 2010) and lower-socioeconomic status (Hammer et al., 2008; Tabors, Páez, & López, 2003). Although differences in English language abilities between monolingual English speakers and DLL preschoolers tend to persist into later grades (Lesaux, 2006; Mancilla-Martinez & Lesaux, 2011), there is evidence that DLLs catch up to the typical range for monolingual children after several years (Hammer et al., 2011).

Notwithstanding these studies on young children, there is a relative dearth of research on both English and Spanish receptive and expressive vocabulary of young DLL children. The studies that have examined both languages and both types of vocabulary do so in early elementary school or focus on a special population, such as children at risk for reading disability (Swanson et al., 2006). Or, they

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/353646>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/353646>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)