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Early development among dual language learners: The roles of language use at home, maternal immigration, country of origin, and socio-demographic variables☆

Adam Winsler[a,*,1], Margaret R. Burchinal[b], Hsiao-Chuan Tien[b], Ellen Peisner-Feinberg[b], Linda Espinosa[c], Dina C. Castro[d], Doré R. LaForett[b], Yoon Kyong Kim[e], Jessica De Feyter[f]

[a] George Mason University, United States
[b] University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, United States
[c] University of Missouri, United States
[d] Arizona State University, United States
[e] BSC Best Solution for Competency Issues, South Korea
[f] ICF International, United States

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ABSTRACT

Using nationally representative data from the ECLS-B, we examined children's outcomes and growth from 9 to 65 months as a function of language used in the home at 24 months (English only $n = 7300$; English and another language $n = 1500$; other language only $n = 400$). We also examined whether demographic variables moderated the effects of DLL status in predicting child outcomes. Results revealed substantial variation within the DLL population within and across language groups in immigration status, heritage country, child outcomes, and family socioeconomic risk. DLL status was associated with differential outcomes, gains over time, and processes in complex ways. Maternal birth outside of the U.S., child gender, and parental education moderated relations between home language and child outcomes. Use of the heritage language at home served as a protective factor for children of immigrant families for a few outcomes. Gender and parental education were more strongly associated with child outcomes among English-speaking households than among DLLs.

1. Introduction

Children who are dual language learners (DLLs) are in the process of learning a majority language (i.e., English in the U.S. [L2]) in addition to a (minority) language (L1) that is spoken at home. About 25% of children in the U.S. grow up in a home in which a language other than English is used (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The number of DLL children in schools doubled between 1997 and 2008, and continues to grow faster than the general population (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2010). Understanding and promoting positive early development among the growing population of DLLs is critical for our nation's future. Indeed, many scholars have urgently called for research and policy attention on dual language learners and their early educational needs (August & Shanahan, 2006; Garcia & Jensen, 2009; Hernandez, Denton, & McCartney, 2007; Takanishi, 2010).

Research on DLLs is in its infancy for a number of reasons. First, there are fundamental definitional and assessment challenges present in research with this heterogeneous population. Much existing research does not provide enough information about the child participants or the language environment of the home to properly determine whether children are being raised in the context of two or more languages. Also, DLL children are frequently excluded from studies because protocols often require children to have sufficient proficiency in English (i.e., NICHD ECCRN studies). Further, when DLL children are included in studies, they are often not included in the analyses because assessments conducted

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* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: awinsler@gmu.edu (A. Winsler).

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in another language are not considered equivalent/comparable to those in English (Chien et al., 2010; Espinosa & López, 2007; Howes et al., 2008), or they are analyzed separately (Chang et al., 2007; Winsler et al., 2008). Additionally, lack of validated assessments existing in L1, and the lack of bilingual norms for interpreting assessment results have severely limited our understanding of the typical developmental trajectories of DLL children across multiple domains of development (Barrueco, López, Ong, & Lozano, 2011; Espinosa & López, 2007; Francis & Rivera, 2007; Solórzano, 2008).

Also challenging are differences between DLL families and other families on other factors known to predict early development. It is important to tease apart differences due to DLL status from other factors such as ethnicity, country of origin, immigration status, and poverty status. Socio-economic differences are perhaps the largest confound that need to be addressed. As a group, DLLs are more likely to live in poverty and have less-educated parents: almost 70% of DLL students are considered low-income, and more than a third have parents with less than a high-school education (Matthews & Ewen, 2006). These sociocultural factors may, in part, explain why DLLs are less likely to perform well in school (Gandara, Rumberger, Maxwell-Jolly, & Callahan, 2003; U.S. Department of Education, 2008). Similarly, DLL families are more likely to have immigrated recently and to retain beliefs and practices from their heritage country, and thus it is important to distinguish DLL effects from cultural heritage effects (August & Shanahan, 2006; Garcia & Jensen, 2009; Hernandez et al., 2007).

The present study investigated variability in developmental skills and gains over time, and potential moderators of outcomes, for DLLs from diverse backgrounds by conducting secondary data analysis of the Early Childhood Longitudinal Survey-Birth Cohort data (ECLS-B; Najarian, Snow, Lennon, & Kinsey, 2010). The ECLS-B is a nationally representative dataset of children born in the U.S. in 2001, and one of the few data sets that, although still limited, includes sufficient questions about home language use, country of origin, immigration status, and other demographic variables to examine specifically the development of DLL children in their first five years of life. In this paper, we describe the extent to which cognitive, academic, and social development in early childhood might vary as a function of home language use, examine heritage country and maternal birth in the U.S. as moderator variables, and control for a variety of other demographic factors (child gender, marital status, parental education, family income). We also examine the extent to which relations between family demographics and child outcomes may differ for children with different language backgrounds.

Recent research and theoretical models of minority child development emphasize the need to explore developmental processes within distinct cultural groups, in order to understand which processes and outcomes are universal across different language and cultural groups and which vary according to particular cultural context (Garcia Coll et al., 1996; Quintana et al., 2006; Rogoff, 2003; Shweder et al., 2006). Culture and language influence development, cognition, and behavior through socially constructed ways of knowing and understanding the world (Rogoff, 2003; Shweder et al., 2006). There are a number of reasons to suspect that aspects of child development might be different for DLL children.

The contexts of DLL children's development expose them to a variety of vulnerability and protective factors. For instance, DLL children in the U.S. are more likely than other children to experience poverty and to have immigrated, or have parents who immigrated to the U.S. Poverty, the immigration experience, and one's ethnic/cultural heritage are each associated with variance in family opportunities, parenting values and practices, and, thus, child outcomes. Poverty is well known to negatively influence multiple domains of child development, both directly through biological, nutritional, and health mechanisms, but also indirectly through the effects that the stress of poverty has on undermining optimal parenting practices (Aber, Morris, & Raver, 2012; Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997; McLoyd, 1990). On the other hand, immigration status and fewer years of residency in the United States have also been associated with some positive child outcomes (Bender & Castro, 2000; Garcia Coll & Marks, 2012). Below, we briefly discuss unique features of immigrant families that may influence the early development of DLLs as well as differences due to cultural heritage.

1.1. Immigrant families

There are well-documented cultural and linguistic differences in the skills and abilities emphasized and reinforced by foreign-born parents (Crosnoe, 2007; Fuligni, 1997; Perreira, Chapman, & Stein, 2006; Portes, 1999; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). Immigrant advantage refers to children of immigrant parents surpassing children of native U.S.-born parents in terms of developmental outcomes (Garcia Coll & Marks, 2012). Such differences are often seen as 'paradoxical' because strong outcomes for children of immigrants are still observed in certain domains and certain age groups despite the personal, economic, and psychological hardships typically involved with the experience of immigrating to a new country, and because with increased duration of time in the U.S. (either ontogenetically or across generations), outcomes often decline for children of immigrant families (Garcia Coll & Marks, 2012). Even as early as infancy, immigrant advantage is seen in health benefits among children of immigrant parents when compared to infants of U.S.-born parents (Landale, Oropesa, Llanes, & Gorman, 1999). Personal and psychological strengths present among immigrant families, such as increased motivation, optimism, and hope are often considered potential mechanisms (Crosnoe, 2013).

However, immigrant "disadvantage" is also found especially among those with less economic means, particularly with regard to cognitive skills. Glick, Bates, and Yabiku (2009), using ECLS-B data with U.S.-born children, show that the early cognitive outcomes of children of immigrant parents are poorer than those from US-born mothers and that this nativity effect is mediated by the parenting practices and cognitive stimulation at home and the age at which the mother arrived to the U.S. Parenting, the home environment, and child cognitive outcomes are more similar to those of U.S.-born mothers when immigrant mothers arrive in the U.S. before the age of eight. By the entrance to kindergarten, children of immigrants show stronger social and emotional skills and fewer behavior problems than U.S.-born children but still show poorer cognitive and language skills (Crosnoe, 2007: De Feyter & Winsler, 2009). Although main effects for immigrant advantage or disadvantage are often found in child outcomes, some find such effects to be moderated by parental education or country/region of origin. Jackson, Kiernan, and McLanahan (2012) show that immigrant advantage for health and behavioral problems is intensified among low-educated parents in the U.S. and that immigrant disadvantage for internalizing behavior problems in the U.K. is stronger among children of mothers with less education. Finally, and as discussed in the next section, outcomes for immigrant and DLL children can also vary by heritage country of origin.

1.2. Heritage country of origin

The experiences and outcomes of DLL children also vary considerably as a function of ethnic heritage and/or country of origin. Children from immigrant families from Asian countries, for example, often fare better than those from Mexico during early childhood in the U.S. partly due to advantages in family educational and economic resources, but also perhaps due to differences in teaching practices in the home (Fortuny, Hernandez, & Chaudry, 2010; Han, Lee, & Waldfogel, 2012; Jung, Fuller, & Galindo, 2012). There are