



# Family learning environment and early literacy: A comparison of bilingual and monolingual children



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## ABSTRACT

Early research on literacy development usually focuses on children in preschool or kindergarten. Few studies have examined the early literacy of bilingual children. This study examines its relationship with different family learning environments (e.g. book availability), and family learning activities (e.g. reading books, telling stories, and singing songs) of bilingual and monolingual children from 9 months of age to kindergarten entry. The Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Birth Cohort was used as the analysis sample. We included 1300 bilingual children and 5150 English monolingual children. We uncover that bilingual children generally lag behind in both resources and frequency of family learning activities. Using various decomposition techniques, we show that early reading score differences between bilingual and monolingual children can be explained by differences in resources and early family learning environments.

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## 1. Introduction

Early childhood is a critical stage for language and literacy development. Research has shown that the quality of language and literacy experienced during early childhood has a significant impact on children's school readiness and academic performance (Dickinson & Neuman, 2006; Neuman & Dickinson, 2001). In particular, family learning activities such as book reading are shown to affect children's emergent literacy, language skills, and reading achievement (Administration for Children and

Families (ACF), 2002; Bradley, Corwyn, McAdoo, & Coll, 2011; Foster & Miller, 2007; Raikes et al., 2006; Roberts, 2008; Sénéchal, 2006; Yarosz & Barnett, 2001). Language development also has a long-term impact on dropout rates and earning potentials (Chiswick & Miller, 2001, 2007; Chiswick, Lee, & Miller, 2005; Dustmann & Soest, 2001).

Despite the importance of family learning environments on early childhood literacy and language development, available studies focus primarily on preschool-age or older children (ACF, 2002; Bradley et al., 2011; Foster & Miller, 2007; Sénéchal, 2006; Yarosz & Barnett, 2001), whereas studies examining infants are less common (Raikes et al., 2006; Roberts, 2008). Bilingual children, i.e., children who grow up in non-English speaking homes, may be at a far greater disadvantage at developing oral

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language, vocabulary, and familiarity with the literary aspect of English language (Bialystok, 2002; Bialystok & Herman, 1999).

We use the first large-scale, nationally representative study—the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study–Birth Cohort (ECLS-B)—to explore the relationship between family learning environments and young children’s language and literacy development, particularly in bilingual families from birth to kindergarten years. Bilingual children reading achievements are one standard deviation lower compared to monolingual English children at preschool. When they enter kindergarten, the reading achievements gap shrinks to half standard deviation apart. Given the reading achievement differences, we examine whether early childhood family literacy activities such as reading books, singing songs, and telling stories play a role in explaining the differences in reading achievement. Our analysis shows that reading books are more important than singing songs and telling stories in improving reading and literacy. Consistent with recent brain neuroscience (Kovelman, Baker, & Petitto, 2008; Petitto, 2009), it is crucial for bilingual children to be read as early as 9-month. Using Oaxaca decomposition, we find that over half of the reading test score gap between English monolingual and bilingual children can be explained by family literacy environment.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Family learning environment and reading achievement

Many researchers have indicated the importance of family literacy activities such as book reading on children’s emergent literacy, language skills, and reading achievement (ACF, 2002; Bradley et al., 2011; Foster & Miller, 2007; Raikes et al., 2006; Roberts, 2008; Sénéchal, 2006; Yarosz & Barnett, 2001). A large portion of these studies focused on preschool-age or older children (Bus, van Ijzendoorn, & Pellegrini, 1995; Mol, Bus, de Jong, & Smeets, 2008). Moreover, a meta-analysis pointed out that many of these studies had sample sizes that range from eight families to several hundred families (Sénéchal, 2006). Studies that focus on minority children are even less common (Raikes et al., 2006; Roberts, 2008). Foster and Miller (2007) reported that the early literacy comprehension gap prior to kindergarten was likely to persist into grade three. Raikes et al. (2006) studied children as young as 24 months of age, and found that minority children were much less likely to be read to, which foreshadowed the early literacy gap at 36 months. Additionally, language skills are found to affect outcomes later in life, such as school dropout rates and future earnings (Bleakley & Chin, 2008; Carliner, 1981; Chiswick & Miller, 2001, 2007; Chiswick et al., 2005; Dustmann & Soest, 2001).

Although there are some studies on the effects of family book reading or specifically coached parent book reading on early literacy, the majority of these studies involve preschool children or elementary school students. Bus et al. (1995) reviewed studies from the 1970s to the 1990s on joint book reading with parents, and found that family book reading tends to increase preschoolers’ language

growth, emergent literacy skills, and ultimately their reading achievements. However, Bus et al. (1995) did not include many studies that focused on younger children. Mol et al. (2008) analyzed studies carried out after the 1990s that dovetailed with the study of Bus et al. (1995), in that Mol et al. included studies on 2- to 3-year-old children. The Mol et al. study focused on dialog in parent–child book reading, where parents received training on evocative, informative feedback and adaptive technique.

Even fewer studies have focused on the population of interest in this study, bilingual children. In a meta-analysis of family literacy interventions on children’s acquisition of reading, Sénéchal (2006) reviewed 14 intervention studies with sample sizes ranging from eight to 248 families. She found that parents who taught their children specific literacy skills such as use of word cards, correcting child’s reading errors, teaching letter–sound correspondence and letter–sound blending were better at improving their children’s literacy test scores than parents who read to their children or listened to their children read. Even though this study provides a glimpse of the importance of family literacy interventions on reading, most of the studies have focused on children in elementary grades with only one study that focused on multiracial children.

In a recent study using the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study–Kindergarten Cohort, Foster and Miller (2007) examined phonics and text comprehension skills from the kindergarten year to 3rd grade. They determined that phonics skills tended to be similar among students with low, average, or high literacy readiness, whereas the text comprehension gap was found in students with low literacy readiness and other two groups. This study showed the importance of focusing on emergent literacy before children enter kindergarten. Raikes et al. (2006) documented the frequency of book-reading activities among mothers and children between 14 and 36 months of age who participated in the Early Head Start intervention program. This study showed that African-American and Hispanic mothers read less frequently to their children compared with white mothers, but did not find a statistical significance between other races and white mothers. Other earlier studies have similar findings in that minority children are less likely to be read to (ACF, 2002; Bradley et al., 2011; Yarosz & Barnett, 2001).

### 2.2. Bilingualism, cognition, and literacy acquisition

Research provided strong evidence that bilingualism has positive influence on cognitive development (Bialystok, Barac, Blaye, & Poulin-Dubois, 2010; Bialystok, 2001, 2005, 2007; Yang, Yang, & Lust, 2011). Bialystok (2001) reported that bilingual children at preschool age develop executive function earlier than their peers who were monolingual. Yang et al. (2011) also found that four-year-old bilingual children outperformed three monolingual groups in executive function tasks, given that all four groups of children were in similar socio-economic status but from different cultural and geographic backgrounds. Moreover, young bilingual children had executive control advantages on both verbal (metalinguistic tasks) and nonverbal tasks (Bialystok, 1988; Bialystok et al., 2010;

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