



The effect of speaking a minority language at home on foreign language learning

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ABSTRACT

The study investigates the effect of immigrant bilingualism on learning English as a foreign language, controlling for confounding background variables and examining the effect of proficiency in the instructional language at school. Using a sample of 2835 German 6th-graders (Arabic-German: $n = 105$, Chinese-German: $n = 110$, Polish-German: $n = 57$, Turkish-German: $n = 383$, heterogeneous bilingual: $n = 284$, and monolingual German group: $n = 1896$), we examined if speaking another language at home in addition to the instructional language at school presents an advantageous condition for learning English as a foreign language. Controlling for cognitive abilities, age, gender, socio-economic status, parental education, and indicators of cultural capital, the analysis revealed a general positive trend between bilingualism and English foreign language achievement. This positive trend differs significantly between bilingual groups with different home languages. The strongest predictor for foreign language learning revealed to be proficiency in the instructional language.

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1. Introduction

The growing proportion of immigrant students is changing the linguistic landscape in schools. Throughout Europe, immigrant students tend to be, on average, less successful in school than their non-immigrant peers (Stanat & Christensen, 2006). In particular, students with immigrant backgrounds lag behind their native peers in reading skills in the language of instruction at school. This is true even after controlling for socio-economic background characteristics (OECD, 2010), which are factors that have been shown to play an important role in academic achievement (Scheerens & Bosker, 1997). In Germany, the discrepancy is particularly noticeable for first generation immigrant students, as well as for students who primarily speak a minority language other than German at home (e.g. Stanat, Rauch, & Segeritz, 2010).

Despite this achievement gap, some students with immigrant backgrounds, namely those who are functionally bilingual in the language of instruction at school and a minority home language,

have resources that could potentially impact their foreign language learning in positive ways. Indeed, under certain circumstances bilingual students were shown to have an advantage when learning an additional language (e.g. Brohy, 2001; Cenoz & Valencia, 1994; Sanz, 2000). Bilingualism is associated with unique patterns of cognitive and linguistic processes, which differ from those of monolinguals and may foster foreign language learning. In fact, bilingual students, whose languages are officially supported by the education system and developed through formal instruction in school, tend to show significant advantages in additional language learning (Cenoz, 2003). However, it is less clear if bilingualism in other contexts, such as bilingualism due to immigration, is associated with positive foreign language learning outcomes as well.

In the present study, we seek to determine whether there is a relation between immigrant bilingualism and foreign language learning outcomes and to what extent the predicted pattern holds across bilingual groups with different instructional language proficiency and diverse home languages. In the following, we will first discuss why bilinguals can be expected to have advantages in learning additional foreign languages. Subsequently, we argue that current research potentially masks important group differences in language learning.

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1.1. Cognitive and linguistic consequences of bilingualism

Cognitive and linguistic differences between bilinguals and monolinguals have been studied in applied linguistics, psychology, and education. Since the 1960s, bilingualism has been shown to be positively related to various cognitive functions. In the landmark study by [Peal and Lambert \(1962\)](#) with a matched sample, bilingual children outperformed monolinguals in verbal and nonverbal tests of cognitive ability. Subsequently, bilinguals have repeatedly been shown to score higher than monolinguals on tests of various cognitive flexibility and processing functions (for reviews, see [Adesope, Lavin, Thompson, & Ungerleider, 2010](#); [Bialystok, 2009](#); [Hamers & Blanc, 2000](#)). [Bialystok \(2010\)](#) proposes that bilinguals have higher levels of executive control – the interrelated processes of inhibition, working memory, and cognitive flexibility – due to their need to switch between two language systems flexibly in varied contexts and with different interlocutors. These cognitive consequences of bilingualism are observable in non-verbal tasks (such as the Simon Task) that require controlled attention or the inhibition of routine responses. In these tasks bilinguals typically outperform monolingual controls (e.g. [Bialystok, Craik, Klein, & Viswanathan, 2004](#)).

In addition to advantages in general cognitive functions, bilingualism seems to be positively associated with *metalinguistic awareness* ([Thomas, 1988](#)), defined as “[...] the ability to focus attention on language as an object in itself or to think abstractly about language [...]” ([Jessner, 2006, p.42](#)). Studies investigating metalinguistic awareness have found that bilinguals have advantages on several metalinguistic tasks compared to monolinguals, such as applying morphological rules to unfamiliar forms (e.g. [Barac & Bialystok, 2012](#)) or explicit noticing of implicitly learned grammatical rules (e.g. [Reder, Marec-Breton, Gombert, & Demont, 2013](#)). The theoretical assumption is that bilinguals can draw upon two language systems, providing them with a larger linguistic reservoir compared to monolinguals. From this linguistic reservoir, which includes metalinguistic skills, knowledge can potentially be transferred between languages and thus may be helpful when acquiring a new language (cf. the construct of *common underlying proficiency* by [Cummins, 1981; 2000](#)). Indeed, research has shown that metalinguistic awareness is a significant predictor of foreign language reading outcomes ([Dufva & Voeten, 1999](#); [Rauch, Naumann, & Jude, 2011](#); [Zhang & Koda, 2013](#)). However, this relation can be complicated due to the relative proficiency level of the two languages ([De Angelis, 2007](#); [Koda, 2007](#)). Also, individual language properties, such as differences between languages with alphabetic or logographic orthographies can play a significant role in the development of metalinguistic skills ([Bialystok, 1997](#)). It has been shown that language combinations as well as relative proficiency and exposure explain noticeable variance in tasks examining executive functions and metalinguistic awareness ([Bialystok & Barac, 2012](#)). For these reasons, it is useful to pay particular attention to the specific language groups as well as language proficiency to better understand the underlying mechanisms.

1.2. Factors affecting language learning

Despite the potential benefits of bilingualism discussed above, it is widely acknowledged that bilingualism does not automatically lead to cognitive and linguistic advantages ([Bialystok, 2001](#)). The sociocultural context in which language(s) are developed plays an important role in a child's cognitive and linguistic development (e.g. [Vygotsky, 2012](#)). This is especially true for such factors as socio-economic status and cultural background, which are highly correlated with language proficiency, and have the potential to

mask or even negate the positive effects of bilingualism ([Cenoz & Valencia, 1994](#); [Jessner, 2008](#); [Sanz, 2000](#)). Low socio-economic status is typically associated with lower levels of language proficiency for all children. In the case of immigrant bilinguals, their lower language proficiency in the majority language may directly impair the development of possible bilingual advantages ([Diaz, 1983](#)). Furthermore, as background factors can systematically differ between immigrant groups ([Müller & Stanat, 2006](#)), it is important not only to take them into account but also to consider immigrant bilinguals not as a homogeneous group.

In addition to sociocultural background factors, immigrant bilingualism differs from other forms of bilingualism because the majority language is often fostered at the expense of the minority home language ([Cenoz, 2003](#)), creating unknown ‘levels’ of bilingualism. Despite the emphasis on becoming proficient in the majority language, immigrant bilinguals have been found to have difficulties mastering the language of instruction in school ([Esser, 2006](#)). As international and national studies show, students who speak another language at home tend to lag behind their monolingual peers in the majority language of the community ([OECD, 2010](#)), and this gap in the language of instruction can affect their academic performance across learning domains ([Haag, Heppt, Stanat, Kuhl, & Pant, 2013](#)). It may have significant effects on further foreign language learning as well for several reasons. Firstly, weak majority language students might experience difficulties in comprehending explicit information (i.e. grammar rules, explanation of abstract vocabulary) about the foreign language, as the teacher normally uses the majority language to transmit this explicit information to the student. Secondly, students who are weak in the majority language have limited resources with which to engage linguistic transfer, i.e. the ability to learn skills in a new language based on previously acquired language resources ([Genesee, Geva, Dressler, & Kamil, 2006](#)).

In conclusion, bilingualism may lead to advantages in additional language learning, yet several factors can affect this process, especially background characteristics and language proficiency. Failing to take these factors into account may be leading to biased conclusions in empirical studies and potentially masking possible advantages for immigrant bilingual groups.

1.3. Immigrant bilingualism and language learning: empirical evidence

As mentioned above, a variety of factors can influence bilingual development and consequently additional language learning, namely background characteristics (i.e. socio-economic status, cultural capital) as well as individual language characteristics and proficiency. Studies in which both languages of the examined bilinguals are officially supported by the education system through bilingual or foreign language instruction typically show significant advantages of bilinguals in third language acquisition. For example, with a sample of 17–19 year olds from the Basque Country, [Cenoz and Valencia \(1994\)](#) found a significant positive relation between being a Basque-Spanish bilingual (compared to a Spanish monolingual) and English language ability given similar levels of general cognitive abilities, age, motivation and exposure to the foreign language. This positive association was also replicated for English language achievement with a sample of Catalan-Spanish bilinguals and Spanish monolinguals ([Sanz, 2000](#)), as well as with French achievement in a sample of Romansch-German bilingual and Romansch monolingual children ([Brohy, 2001](#)). These results, replicated across several sociolinguistic contexts, suggest that when schools support the formal development of both languages (i.e. leading to high proficiency in both languages), bilingualism is positively associated with further language learning.

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