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The development of German and English writing skills in a bilingual primary school in Germany

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ABSTRACT

The present study examined German and English writing skills of children who attended a partial German-English immersion program in a primary school in Germany. From Year 3 to Year 4 the children's writing improved from level A1 to level A2 (according to the Common European Framework of References, Council of Europe, 2001) in the English writing test, and they obtained age-appropriate values in the German writing test in Years 3 and 4. The writing test conducted in Year 3 turned out to be a significant predictor for writing outcomes in the same language in Year 4. The children's language background (i.e. minority vs. majority language background) and their gender did, on the other hand, not affect the test results in any year. On the whole, the results reported here suggest that in early partial immersion programs both majority and minority language children's writing skills can develop in an age-appropriate way in the majority language as well as in the foreign language, which is used as the language of instruction in different schools subjects.

1. Introduction

If writing is a skill requiring a long time to develop, how much more difficult is it to learn to write in a second or even in a third language? The purpose of this study is to shed more light on the development of writing skills by students attending a German-English bilingual school in Germany. The data presented here are relevant for researchers and practitioners alike because they do not only reflect the writing development of majority language children (i.e. students whose native language is German and for whom English as the first foreign language is the L2¹) but also that of minority language children (i.e. students growing up in Germany with an L1 other than German and who learn German as an L2 and English as an L3). To focus on the writing skills of these children is an important endeavor because current demographic changes are resulting in more heterogeneous classrooms (in the sense that they become, for example, more multicultural and multilingual). So far, studies on L3 writing (mainly conducted in the Basque Country and in Canada) have primarily been concerned with older learners (e.g., Bild & Swain, 1989; Cenoz & Gorter, 2011; Errasti, 2003) and not with learners below age ten who start to write in two languages simultaneously. In addition, the question as to how L3 literacy skills of students from minority language backgrounds enrolled in bilingual programs develop over time has not received any attention so far, be it in Germany or elsewhere (but see Steinlen, 2016 for the development of reading skills in such a context).

In Germany, bilingual programs can currently be found at 2% of all (private or public) primary schools, which is equivalent to

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¹ Following Hahn and Angelovska (2017), the terms L2 and L3 will be used according to the chronological onset of acquisition, i.e. the term 'second language' (L2) refers to the first non-native language acquired by an individual, while 'third language' (L3) relates to the second non-native language being learned.

almost 300 schools.² In these schools at least one subject (e.g. science, music, physical education, maths) is taught in the new language, most often English or French (FMKS, 2014). Throughout Europe, the umbrella term *Content and Language Integrated Learning*, i.e. CLIL, is nowadays used to refer to bilingual programs offering the educational option of teaching content through a FL. More specifically, CLIL refers to “all types of provision in which a second language (a foreign, regional or minority language and/or another official state language) is used to teach certain subjects in the curriculum other than the language lessons themselves” (Eurydice, 2006). In such a context, the students acquire skills in the school language (L1, often the students’ first language, in this case German) as well as in the target language (here English). Immersion programs represent the most time-consuming and – based on previous research – also the most effective variety of CLIL programs. In such programs, the FL is used as the language of instruction for at least 50% of the teaching time (see e.g., Pérez-Cañado, 2012, for a review). In ‘total immersion’ programs, all school subjects are taught in the FL (see, for example, the early French immersion programs in Canada, e.g. Genesee, 1987). In Germany, however, only ‘partial immersion’ programs are offered in public schools, because German language arts has to be taught in the majority language German (Kultusministerkonferenz, 2013). Therefore, a maximum of 70–80% of the teaching time can be conducted in the FL. However, no figures are available regarding the exact number of primary schools in Germany offering partial immersion programs. We assume that there are no more than 30 schools because partial immersion programs are more challenging than less intensive bilingual programs, particular in terms of the teaching staff required.

The development of writing skills in German and English constitutes the focus of the present study. The children examined here attended a German-English primary school in the south of Germany, which offers a partial immersion program from Year 1 to 4. In this program, English is used as the language of instruction in all subjects, except for German language arts, maths and religious education, which corresponds to 50% of the teaching time. Writing is examined in this paper because it is one of the basic skills acquired during the primary school years, and because it plays a key role in the acquisition of academic knowledge and later participation in society (e.g., Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung, 2007). In Germany as in many other countries, however, the development of FL writing skills within the primary school context has received relatively little attention in previous research because writing has played only a minor role in the curricula of the Federal States of Germany until recently (e.g. Ministry of Education, Baden-Württemberg, 2004). In addition, an approach to systematic literacy instruction in the foreign language (including, for example, an approach to teach English spelling) has not been developed yet as the Ministries of Education of the sixteen Federal States of Germany cannot decide on a common procedure (e.g., Burwitz, 2010; Steinlen & Piske, 2016). Even within the Canadian immersion context, which has been studied in great detail over the past fifty years, research on the development of beginning L1 and FL writing is rather scarce.

1.1. L1 writing in primary schools

Writing may be defined as “a process-oriented, goal-directed and problem-solving process, which involves the writer’s awareness of the composing process and the teacher’s or peer’s intervention at any time needed” (Dyson & Freedman 1991: 58). It is a complex task which requires the coordination of fine motor skills and cognitive skills and reflects the social and cultural patterns of the writer’s time. Within a language system, writing relies on many of the same structures as speech, such as vocabulary, grammar and semantics, with the added dependency of a system of signs or symbols, often (as in the case of German and English) in the form of a formal alphabet. Among other things, writing places a heavy demand on working memory and to a large extent depends on reading skills because the process of composing a text always involves reading and rereading of the unfolding text (e.g., Myhill & Fisher, 2010). Other fundamentals of successful writing include topic knowledge, the ability to rapidly access lexical items, a positive attitude towards writing, knowledge of text features, writing strategies, cognitive skills, visual-spatial performance and, in addition, spelling skills and strategies (see Myhill & Fisher, 2010). During their development, children progress from the level of copying familiar structures up to recognizing and reproducing text structures. Evaluations of writing proficiency rely on different components of which spelling, punctuation, vocabulary and grammar are the most frequent ones used, at least with respect to the primary school context (e.g., Rathvon, 2004).

Individual variables may influence the development of L1 writing skills: For example, in German mainstream (i.e. non-immersion) primary schools, girls have often been found to outperform boys in L1 (German) writing tests (e.g., May, 2006; Valtin, Badel, Löffler, Meyer-Schepers, & Voss, 2003), and minority language (e.g., Turkish) children have frequently been found to obtain lower scores than majority language children in majority language (i.e., German) writing tests (e.g., Chudaske, 2012; May, 2006; Schründer-Lenzen & Merckens 2006; Valtin et al., 2003). Moreover, a high socio-economic background may positively affect writing skills (e.g., May, 2006; Zöller & Roos 2009), and children with higher (non-verbal) intelligence have been found to achieve better scores in writing tests than their peers with lower intelligence (e.g., Gebauer, Möller, & Zaunbauer, 2012). Such effects have also been attested in other studies outside of Germany, examining L1 writing skills in the mainstream primary school context (e.g., Abbott, Berninger, & Fayol 2010; Ehri, 2003; Kennedy et al., 2012).

In most primary schools in Germany, German literacy skills are regularly evaluated, and this also applies to public schools offering immersion programs. For example, in a German writing test, primary school students in partial immersion programs performed equally well as their peers in mainstream schools at the end of Year 4 (e.g., Gebauer et al., 2012). Similar results were reported for the Canadian immersion context (e.g., Genesee 1987; Rubin, Turner, & Kanter, 1991 ; Turnbull, Lapkin, & Hart, 2001). Thus, attending

² In Germany, primary school generally starts at the age of 6. After four years (i.e. after Year 4), children enter secondary school (which generally consists of *Haupt- or Realschule*, offering a six-year middle-school degree, and *Gymnasium* or *Gesamtschule*, offering high-school diplomas that provide access to tertiary education).

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