

## **Bilingualism and Biliteracy in Preschoolers**

### **A Longitudinal Home-School Transition Study**

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#### **KEY IMPLICATIONS**

- Though pre-schoolers from low socioeconomic status (SES) homes translanguage creatively, they do not have access to quantity and quality of languages in their environment for optimal development of bilingualism. This is one reason they do not show development in mean length of utterance (MLU), lexical density (LD) and discourse complexity (DC) in both their languages.
- Parents of young children should be encouraged to explicitly provide a rich diet of vocabulary and discourse features for their children.
- Teachers of pre-schoolers should be encouraged to include explanatory talk in their discourse as this type teacher-talk is correlated with language learning.

#### **BACKGROUND**

The overarching problem which inspired this study is previous research (Justice & Ezell, 2001; Hart & Risley, 1995) which found that pre-schoolers from low SES homes do not have access to a linguistically rich environment either at home or school for adequate language development.

An added problem or challenge for researchers and policymakers is to document and estimate the amount of language pre-schoolers have acquired in Mother Tongue (MT) and English

when they come to Primary 1 (P1). And finally, there is a lack of description regarding pedagogy and language acquisition in preschools.

#### **FOCUS OF STUDY**

The broad aims of this study are as follows:

- To find out how bilingualism and biliteracy develop in disadvantaged preschoolers from diverse language groups from K2 to P1 (within home literacy environment and interactional patterns in preschool) leading to dual language outcomes.
- To document the way LD, grammatical forms and discourse develop in MT and English amongst preschoolers from low SES backgrounds.
- To describe the richness of language and discourse that pre-schoolers experience in school.
- To find out the links between the amount/richness of languages that preschoolers are exposed to and the amount/richness of languages they acquire.

#### **KEY FINDINGS**

The children in this sample are English dominant across the 3 home observations as they produced hundreds of English-only utterances but far fewer MT-only utterances. In keeping with their language dominance they have higher LD in English than in MT.

However, their MLU and DC are not substantially higher in English which is their dominant language, indicating that though they use more English, they do not know more grammar in English than in their MT. Though the children produced fewer translanguaged utterances than English-only utterances, their MLU for translanguaged utterances was the highest. This indicates that they are most expressive and produce the longest utterances when they mix languages. There were no discernible trends across the 3 home observations indicating that the children are not learning more vocabulary, grammar and discourse in both their languages as they are growing up.

In terms of home language environment, in most cases the quality of talk provided by the mother did not have the richness conducive to a high level of language acquisition by the children. In a few cases where the mother did provide high quality input, the MLU, LD and DC of the children were higher in both MT and English compared to their peers.

There were zero episodes of explanatory talk in the discourse of MT teachers and 4 episodes in the discourse of English teachers. Thus, this type of teacher talk is not a common pedagogy in classrooms.

## SIGNIFICANCE OF FINDINGS

To include any of the below that might be applicable to the project.

### Implications for practice

Preschool teachers should be trained in including explanatory talk (Aukrust, 2007) in their pedagogy as this type of talk is correlated with language learning.

### Implications for policy and research

Preschool language teachers should be trained to adopt strategies like translanguaging and the use of explanatory talk to increase language learning in their classes.

### Proposed follow-up activities

An intervention with pre-schoolers from low SES homes is timely. In this intervention, parents should

be encouraged to increase the quantity and richness of their input to improve exposure to language experiences for their children.

## PARTICIPANTS

Seventeen preschoolers, aged 6 to 7 were observed at 3 time periods at home and 3 time periods at school (preschool and primary school). This is a baseline longitudinal study where ethnic group and SES were the main selection criteria. The initial 18 focal students were selected from the larger SKIP project. A total of 55 teachers and 17 caregivers of the children were observed. Approximately 49 hours of video data from homes and 50 hours from schools was collected.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

### Coding transcripts

Nearly 50% of the total data collected was transcribed and coded. The utterances of the children and caregiver were initially divided on the basis of English-only, MT-only and translanguaged utterances. An utterance was defined as a connected group of words, at least 3 words, bounded by pauses. Thereafter the utterances were coded by bilingual research assistants for MLU (average number of words and morphemes in an utterance), LD (number of different words in a text) and DC (number of simple vs complex/compound utterances). The teacher's utterances were only coded for explanatory talk which is talk based on principles, concepts or explanations of the same.

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