Russian language proficiency of monolingual and Russian–English bi/multilingual children

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Abstract

This paper reports the results of a study investigating the Russian-language proficiency of bi/multilingual (Russian–English [+additional language]) children in Saskatchewan, Canada, as compared to monolingual children in Russia. Very few studies of Russo-English bilingual children’s language performance are available in the Canadian context, and no studies have ever been conducted in Saskatchewan, where input is severely restricted compared to other contexts due to demographic reasons. The major impetus for the study was therefore to determine if in these settings, bi/multilingual children can develop minority language proficiency comparable to that of their monolingual peers in Russia. The methodology employed in the study focuses on the linguistic analysis of audio recordings of a picture description task performed by participants. Oral language proficiency parameters (including vocabulary, fluency, and syntactical complexity) in the speech of the 5–6-year-old bi/multilingual children were compared with the ones produced by a control group (monolingual children) from Russia. The results demonstrate that the oral language proficiency in the bilingual group is on a par with that of the monolingual group. However, reading and writing skills of the bi/multilingual group are less developed than in the control group.

References


Children acquiring two languages in this way are called simultaneous bilinguals. Even in the case of simultaneous bilinguals one language usually dominates over the other. This kind of bilingualism is most likely to occur when a child is raised by bilingual parents in a predominantly monolingual environment. It can also occur when the parents are monolingual but have raised their child or children in two different countries. Children whose parents each speak a different language, in multilingual communities. In monolingual communities, when parents maintain a different-parent/different-language household, younger children may appear to be multilingual; however entering school will overwhelm the child with pressure to conform to the dominant community language. Native speakers of Russian, matched for proficiency in English (L2), translated words from Swedish (L3) into Russian (L1). Swedish and Russian are very different languages with Swedish being closer to English. If we admit that the mental lexicon of a bi-/multilingual is organized on the basis of item characteristics, words from all languages might be activated, assuming language-nonselective access (Lukatela, Savic, Gligorijevic, Ognjenovic, & Turvey, 1978; Nas, 1983; Beauvillain & Grainger, 1987; Grainger & Beauvillain, 1987; Chen & Ho, 1986; De Groot, & Nas, 1991; Van Heuven, Dijkstra, & Grainger, 1998; Dijkstra, Van Jaarsveld, & Ten Brinke, 1998). The participants are the native speakers of Russian with a very high level of proficiency in English (L2).