

LITERACY/SCHOOLING, DEVELOPMENTAL DIFFERENCES, SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS: FACTORS AFFECTING COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT OF BILINGUAL CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT

The present study aims to investigate the factors that affect the cognitive development (i.e. non-verbal intelligence, verbal and non-verbal working memory and executive functions) of bilingual children. Previous studies suggest that bilinguals often show a ‘cognitive advantage’ over monolingual speakers, conceivably, because they move from one language to the other. In addition, other studies have noticed the role of developmental factors (i.e. chronological age, socioeconomic status and maternal education) as important factors that affect cognitive development. More recent studies claim that the language dominance, literacy practices and schooling also have a positive impact on the cognitive abilities (i.e. working memory and executive functions) of bilingual speakers. In the present study participated sixty-five monolingual children and one hundred forty-five bilingual children coming from different linguistic and educational backgrounds and they were tested by means of a large battery of cognitive tests (on non-verbal/fluid intelligence, (non-)verbal working memory and executive functions, i.e. updating). The results revealed that in most of the tasks the bilingual ‘cognitive advantage’ was not confirmed. Only in the updating task bilinguals outperformed monolinguals.; possibly the cognitive advantage is more evident in more complex and demanding tasks. The main factors that seem to affect bilingual cognitive development are literacy and schooling; age and socioeconomic status found also to affect and predict their cognitive abilities. Finally, language dominance found not to have a considerable impact on bilinguals’ cognitive skills. The present findings confirm previous studies that indicate the role of literacy and schooling as the most important factors in bilingual cognitive and language development.

Keywords: Bilingualism, cognitive abilities, literacy/schooling, complex working memory, bilingual cognitive advantage.