

## Do phonological awareness skills develop differently for Spanish–English and Cantonese–English bilinguals?

### What this research was about and why it is important

Phonological awareness relates to the ability to recognize and identify sounds used in speech. Phonological awareness has been known to play an important role in young children’s reading achievement. Yet it is not well known how phonological awareness develops in bilingual children. For example, bilingual children might learn phonological awareness skills differently depending on whether they know two languages that share a writing system (such as Spanish and English) or know two languages that do not share a writing system (such as English and Cantonese). In this study, the researchers addressed this issue by examining whether the development of phonological awareness skills in English differed between bilinguals with two languages that are structurally similar (English and Spanish) and bilinguals with two languages that are different (English and Cantonese). Both types of bilinguals were recruited from the same schools and thus were likely to have received similar reading instruction. The researchers showed that young bilingual children with different home languages who are receiving similar reading instruction in school did not differ in their development in English phonological awareness skills during the early elementary years (from kindergarten to second grade, aged 4 years and 8 months to 8 years and 11 months).

### What the researcher did

- The researchers tested 86 Cantonese–English bilingual children and 72 Spanish–English bilingual children. The children were followed over three years—from kindergarten to second grade.
- Approximately half of the children were in mainstream classrooms, where English was the only language of instruction, and half were in bilingual classrooms, where some instruction was delivered in the children’s home language (Spanish or Cantonese) as a way of transitioning these children to English-only instruction.
- The researchers assessed language and literacy in kindergarten, first grade, and second grade, by testing children’s:
  - phonological awareness skills in English (e.g., forming a word by putting together sounds or syllables, or listening to a word and repeating it with a syllable or a sound missing);
  - word reading skills in English;
  - vocabulary in English and their home language (Spanish or Cantonese);
  - comprehension of age-appropriate English books.

### What the researcher found

- Spanish–English and Cantonese–English bilinguals did not differ in the development of their phonological awareness skills in English over the three years of the study.
- There was also no difference in growth in English phonological awareness skills between bilinguals enrolled in mainstream and bilingual classrooms.
- Children with more developed English vocabulary and English word reading skills had more developed phonological awareness in English at the beginning of kindergarten.
- Children who began kindergarten with weaker comprehension of English books caught up by the end of second grade in their phonological awareness compared to their peers who had begun kindergarten with better comprehension of books.

### Things to consider

- Young bilingual children’s vocabulary in the main language of instruction (English in this case) seemed to be related to their phonological awareness.
- Although the two bilingual groups performed similarly in tests of phonological awareness in this study, it is still possible that other bilingual children (e.g., children who speak different pairs of languages or children in different education systems) might develop phonological awareness at different rates and to different degrees of success.

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