

Chapter 6

The Relationship Between Oral Language and Reading in English–Only, Proficient Bilingual, and Emergent Bilingual Adolescents

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ABSTRACT

The chapter examined the English language and reading outcomes and the relationship between language and reading for two bilingual adolescent groups (Proficient Bilinguals and Emergent Bilinguals) and their English-only peers (n = 78 total). Participants completed a variety of English language assessments, and their scores from a standardized accountability reading assessment were collected from their teachers. Results from the study showed that Proficient Bilinguals performed comparably to their English-only peers in all language and reading measures, suggesting that simply being bilingual does not detract from adolescents' English language proficiency. Furthermore, the relationships between oral language and reading differed as a function of participants' English language proficiency. Oral language skills correlated with reading for both bilinguals and English-only adolescents, but the relationships were more robust for bilinguals than for English-only adolescents. Finally, the relationship between speech production and reading was significant only for Emergent Bilinguals and not for Proficient Bilinguals.

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INTRODUCTION

Reading difficulties have been linked to detrimental consequences for subsequent education and life outcomes, including grade retention, high school dropout rates, teen pregnancy, and juvenile delinquency (Connor, Alberto, Compton, & O'Connor, 2014). Research has also generally shown that school-aged bilingual students¹ fall behind their English-only peers in reading achievements (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016; Slavin & Cheung, 2003). However, although the number of bilingual students in the United States has grown rapidly in the past few decades (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014) and is projected to reach 40% by 2030, relatively little research has been devoted to investigating bilingual students' English reading development. Furthermore, despite the fact that bilingual students are a heterogeneous group with a large diversity of native languages, cultures, language dominance, literacy skills, prior schooling experience, among others (García & Kleifgen, 2010; Huang, Davis, & Ngamsomjan, 2017; Lesaux, 2006), most research studies on bilingual students did not differentiate among the subgroups, and some of them included only emergent bilinguals who are classified as an English Learner (EL) or Limited English Proficient (LEP) students by their school districts. To better serve the school-aged bilingual population, research on the reading processes and outcomes of subgroups of bilingual students are clearly needed.

Theoretical frameworks of reading identify language skills as critical to reading success for monolingual readers (e.g., Hoover & Gough, 1990; McCardle, Scarborough, & Catts, 2001; Snow, 1983, 1991), and recent research demonstrates that language skills also support second language (in this case, English) reading (e.g., Hammer, Lawrence, & Miccio, 2007; Proctor, Carlo, August, & Snow, 2005; RAND Reading Study Group, 2002). Some studies have even found that language skills contribute more to reading comprehension for bilingual students than for English-only students in upper elementary grades (Davis, Huang, & Yi, 2017; Geva & Zadeh, 2006). However, it remains unknown how bilingual students in upper elementary and secondary grades vary in their language and reading outcomes and how their language and reading skills compare to their English-only peers. It is also unclear how the various oral language components contribute to bilingual students' English reading development, and whether the language-reading relationship differs for subgroups of bilingual students.

The current study aims to address these gaps by utilizing a variety of language and reading assessments for two subgroups of bilingual adolescents and their English-only (EO) peers. The two groups of bilingual adolescents, *Proficient Bilinguals* and *Emergent Bilinguals*, self-reported speaking a language other than English at home and varied in the level of their English language proficiency as determined by their school districts, i.e., EL vs. non-EL students. The English-only adolescents, on the other hand, reported speaking only English at home and were not classified as EL students. The study will provide a better understanding of bilingual adolescents' language and reading development, and the relationship between language and reading development for bilingual adolescents and their English Only (EO) peers. Results from the study can also inform the development of evidence-based reading instruction and intervention for bilingual students, who constitute 20% of the school-aged population in the United States.

In the following sections, we first summarized literature on language-reading relationships and on bilingual students' language and reading development. We then described our research questions, followed by the methodology used in the current study. Next, we presented the results organized by research questions and discussed the results and implications for theory and practice. We concluded the chapter with recommendations for future research.

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