

COGNITIVE BENEFITS OF MULTILINGUALISM IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

This study is devoted to examining the cognitive advantages of multilingualism in early childhood education. Multilingualism fosters metalinguistic awareness, allowing children to analyse language structures and develop critical thinking skills at an early age. Additionally, the need to switch between languages sharpens attention control and problem-solving abilities. The article argues that integrating multilingual education in early childhood not only enhances linguistic skills but also supports broader cognitive development, offering long-term benefits in learning and adaptability.

Key words: linguistic diversity, ECEC settings, multilingualism, early language acquisition, preschoolers.

Multilingualism has gained significant attention as language teachers and researchers explore the cognitive development of children exposed to multiple languages from an early age. In early childhood education, multilingualism not only enhances communication skills but also strengthens various cognitive processes. This article investigates the cognitive benefits associated with multilingual education during the formative years of child development. Across the globe, many young children are raised in environments where they are exposed to two or more languages from an early age. Even in predominantly English-speaking nations like the United States and Australia, linguistic diversity is on the rise. For instance, in Australia, nearly one in six children under the age of five regularly hear and speak a language other than English (Verdon et al., 2014b). In the United States, 27% of children under six are reported to be learning two languages (Guiberson & Ferris, 2019). These children are often described in the literature as ‘bi/multilingual learners,’ ‘dual language learners,’ or ‘simultaneous language learners’ (Hoff, 2018; Piller & Gerber, 2018; Verdon et al., 2014a). Such terminology differentiates between children exposed to multiple

languages from birth and those who begin learning a second or additional language after the age of three (Langeloo et al., 2019; Wright Karem et al., 2019).

Stating the advantages of multilingualism and the growing linguistic diversity in many nations, it is crucial to highlight how best to support children from diverse linguistic backgrounds in acquiring the majority language while preserving their native languages. While much of the research has centered on the role of the home environment and the direct language input provided by parents (Hoff, 2018), the increasing enrollment of young children in early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings positions these environments as key spaces for early language acquisition (Hildenbrand et al., 2017). ECEC settings represent children's first formal learning experiences outside of the home. High-quality interactions between teachers and children in these environments are key to fostering early language development (Vernon-Feagans et al., 2013; Walker et al., 2020). However, there is limited understanding of how early childhood educators support multilingual language acquisition. Research indicates that a positive multilingual learning environment includes emotionally and intellectually supportive feedback, the promotion of autonomy, and open communication between teachers, children, and their peers (Khalifaoui et al., 2020). Yet, this evidence often focuses more on children's social and emotional growth rather than the specific opportunities and outcomes related to language learning. Other studies have examined interventions aimed at second language acquisition (Langeloo et al., 2019; Lipsky, 2013; Kultti, 2013). Langeloo et al. (2019), for example, reviewed teacher interactions with children acquiring the majority language as a second language in ECEC settings. They found that strategies such as using the first language, incorporating cultural elements, and utilizing non-verbal communication improved interactions. In Sweden, Kultti (2013) suggested that activities like singing and resource-based scaffolding could aid young multilingual learners in acquiring the majority language. Lipsky (2013) explored the link between teachers' vocabulary instruction methods and multilingual preschoolers' English vocabulary outcomes. Despite acknowledging the importance of early education settings in promoting multilingualism (Verdon et al., 2014a), few studies have specifically investigated how to maintain young multilingual children's home languages within these contexts. This gap is particularly pressing given findings that educators often lack sufficient knowledge to effectively support multilingualism. For instance, Hayes et al. (2020) revealed that early childhood teachers had limited understanding of bilingual development and how to foster it. Similarly, Degotardi and

Gill (2019) observed that many educators were unaware of the potential influence of infants' home language experiences on their English language development. These findings underscore the need for educators to receive more information and guidance on strategies to support early multilingual development.

To conclude, the cognitive benefits of multilingualism in early childhood education are well-established and diverse. From enhancing cognitive flexibility to improving executive functioning, multilingualism equips children with critical cognitive skills that support their overall development. As education systems continue to prioritize global communication and cognitive growth, fostering multilingual environments in early childhood education promises to be an invaluable tool in shaping the cognitive potential of future generations. By understanding these cognitive advantages, teachers can improve their teaching methods to maximize the benefits of multilingualism, ultimately contributing to the development of young learners.

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