How do Parents of Toddlers Exposed to Spanish and English Perceive the Value of Bilingualism?

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Background

- Despite growing evidence for the benefits of learning in two languages, bilingualism is often seen as enriching for native English speakers but a barrier to success for language minority children.
- How do parents of young children make sense of these conflicting views?
- Attitudes about language diversity and heritage language maintenance have been explored among pre-service teachers and parents (Byrnes, Kiger, & Lee Manning, 1999; Velázquez, 2009).
- However, we still know very little about how parents of young children view the value of speaking more than one language, and whether their views influence how they support their child’s language acquisition.

Research Questions

1. How do parents of toddlers with different language backgrounds perceive the value of bilingualism in the larger society and for their own child’s language development?
2. Do perceptions of bilingualism vary by language background and region?

Participants

- **Qualitative Samples**
  - National representation
  - Tri-lingual speak English, Spanish, and another language
  - Parents of Toddlers
  - Toddler's exposure to English only (n=220)
  - Toddler’s exposure to Spanish & English (n=422)

- **Quantitative Sample**
  - Nationally representative sample of adults
  - Parents of Toddlers
  - Toddler's exposure to English only (n=220)
  - Toddler’s exposure to Spanish & English (n=422)

Method

- **20-minute online survey**
- Demographic background
- Language exposure of Parent and Child (adapted from the LSUR, Luk & Balytsky, 2013)
- Four optional open-response items (qualitatively coded)
- **Original Perception of Bilingualism (POB) attitude scale** (some items adapted from Byrnes & Kiger, 1994)

Results

**Perceptions of Bilingualism by Language Group**

- **POB+** score is the average of 7 items
  - 4.8-5.0 = “Strongly agree”
  - Range 1-5
  - Cronbach’s alpha: .91 (n=90)

- **POB** score is the average of 7 items
  - 4.0-4.4 = “Agree”
  - Range 1-5
  - Cronbach’s alpha: .78 (n=90)

**Themes from Open Responses: Parents of English-only Toddlers**

In your opinion, how are people who speak more than one language portrayed in the media?

- Intelligent, proficient in English
- Foreign or not “American”?
- Challenges of learning two languages at a young age
- Would you like to enroll your child in a bilingual education program or dual language school?

**Parents of Spanish-English Exposed Toddlers**

- Is there anything else you would like to share about your child’s language development?
- Is there more you would like to share about your racial or ethnic heritage?

Bilingualism to maintain cultural identity

I am proud to be Latina and speak fluent English and Spanish. It is very important that I teach my kids Spanish before they start school. This way they will never forget the Spanish language even if they start learning and speaking English for the first time at school and with their friends.

**Discussion**

- Both Perception of Bilingualism (POB) scales had strong internal reliability, suggesting that items may tap into two related constructs and reflect consistency across the items in the current survey.
- The parents of the toddlers who were exposed to both Spanish and English showed more positive attitudes towards bilingualism than those whose toddlers only heard English, particularly on the scale that asked about the value of bilingualism for one’s child.
- Parents in the West tended to report more positive perceptions than those in the Northeast, and the gap between parents of English-only and Spanish-English exposed toddlers was larger outside of the West.
- Most parents expressed positive views of bilingualism, but open answers revealed polarized and ambivalent views of how bilingualism is perceived in society among the parents of English-only toddlers.
- Parents of Spanish-Language-exposed toddlers cited the importance of learning two languages early to maintain one’s cultural identity.

**Future Directions**

- These findings are likely specific to the U.S. context; parallel versions will be developed for international comparisons.
- Results are biased towards adults who seek out surveys online; data collection in school districts and lab-based studies will diversify our sample and provide more enriched sociolinguistic information for data interpretation.
- Additional analyses will look at the relationship between perceptions, language experience, and vocabulary development in English and Spanish.

**References**


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