

Who knows more words: bilingual or monolingual children?

What this research was about and why it is important

Many people are concerned about the language development of children growing up with two languages in the family. Such children have been thought to have a smaller vocabulary (fewer words) than monolingual children. This study investigated the development of vocabulary size – an important indicator of language development – by bilingual (Dutch and French) and monolingual children (Dutch only) at 13 and 20 months of age. Both comprehension (how many words children understand) and production (how many words they can say) was tested. While there were large differences in vocabulary size between individual children, the study found very few differences between the two groups of bilingual and monolingual children.

What the researchers did

- They recruited participants from 61 middle-class families with a single child. 30 used Dutch at home (monolingual) from birth and 31 used Dutch and French at home (bilingual) from birth. In 14 of these, mothers spoke French with their child, while fathers spoke Dutch. In 16 families, this was reversed. In one bilingual family, both parents used both languages when speaking to their child.
- They asked mothers, fathers and third persons (e.g., grandmothers) to individually indicate children's word knowledge on standardized lists of vocabulary items. They did this twice, when the focus child was 13 and 20 months old. People were asked to mark whether the child understood a word that (s)he did not yet say (comprehension) or whether (s)he *both* understood and said it (production). For the 30 monolingual children, Dutch lists were completed; for the 31 bilingual children, Dutch and French lists were completed.

What the researchers found

According to what the parents reported:

- Both at 13 and later at 20 months, bilingual children understood and produced as many Dutch words as the monolinguals.
- At 13 months, for both groups, children could understand many Dutch words beyond those they could say. At 20 months, this was still true, but the comprehension-production gap had decreased in both groups.
- The researchers also looked at total knowledge (*taking comprehension and production together*). At 13 months, total knowledge of Dutch words was similar across groups. For total knowledge of Dutch at 20 months, the monolingual children knew more Dutch words than the bilingual children.
- At 13 months, when total knowledge of Dutch *and French* was considered, bilinguals knew 60% more words than monolinguals. When comprehension without production was considered, the difference was even larger, with bilinguals understanding 71% more words.
- Differences *between* the two groups were generally small. Instead, differences between individuals *within* the groups were generally large. For example, at 20 months, children in the monolingual group said between 19 and 531 words; children in the bilingual group said between 14 and 1234 words.

Things to consider

- There were large differences between individuals in both groups, and few differences between the groups as a whole. From this it seems that growing up bilingually may not be the most decisive factor for vocabulary development. If in a bilingual situation a child's vocabulary development is late, it is important to consider explanations other than being bilingual (for instance, a child may have a hearing problem).
- This study showed that growing up bilingually does not necessarily slow vocabulary development and may in fact speed it up. The participating children were selected for their similarities in terms of age, family composition, age of first exposure to each language, and socio-economic background. More research is needed to find out if the present findings hold in different types of bilingual settings and with different types of language pairs.