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## From Vocabulary to Oral Narrative: Preschool Bilingual Children's Biliteracy Development

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### Abstract

*Biliteracy, the proficient ability to read and write in two languages integrating linguistic and cultural systems, is vital for preschool bilingual children's lifelong learning and social adaptation in today's interconnected world. This article examines biliteracy development in preschool bilingual children, focusing on the critical roles of vocabulary acquisition and oral narrative abilities as foundational to academic and cognitive growth. It identifies challenges like subtractive bilingualism, limited resources, biased assessments, and inadequate teacher training. This article proposes evidence-based interventions such as dual language programs, translanguaging practices, culturally responsive pedagogy, family engagement, and comprehensive assessments. By integrating linguistic and cultural systems, these strategies aim to support children's biliteracy, fostering cognitive flexibility, cultural identity, and long-term success in multilingual contexts. The discussion provides practical insights for educators, policymakers, and parents to effectively nurture biliteracy from an early age.*

**Keywords:** biliteracy development, oral narrative ability, preschool bilingual children, vocabulary acquisition.

### Introduction

In an increasingly interconnected and multilingual world, linguistic and cultural diversity have become a fundamental part of social development, making bilingualism and biliteracy essential competencies for individuals to thrive. For preschool children growing up in bilingual environments, early biliteracy

development—not only the ability to read and write in two languages but also the integration of dual linguistic and cultural systems—lays a critical foundation for their lifelong learning and social adaptation.

Early childhood is widely recognized as a critical period for language acquisition. During this stage, children's brains exhibit remarkable plasticity, enabling them to absorb and process multiple linguistic inputs efficiently (Kuhl, 2010). Research has consistently demonstrated that bilingual children gain distinct cognitive advantages, such as enhanced cognitive flexibility, metalinguistic awareness, and problem-solving skills, which positively impact their academic performance and cross-cultural communication abilities (Bialystok, 1999; Reyes & Azuara, 2008). Moreover, biliteracy helps children maintain their cultural heritage while fostering openness to diverse cultures, equipping them to navigate an interconnected global society.

This article explores the multifaceted process of biliteracy development in preschool bilingual children, with a particular focus on two core and interrelated components: vocabulary acquisition and oral narrative abilities. Vocabulary serves as the building block for reading comprehension and academic success (Nation, 2013; Zhang & Zhang, 2020). Oral narrative abilities enable children to construct meaning, express thoughts, and connect with others (Bruner, 1990; Berman & Slobin, 1994). These two abilities are closely linked to emergent literacy and long-term academic achievement, making them key focus of research.

While research highlights significant cognitive and academic advantages associated with early bilingualism and biliteracy—such as enhanced executive function (Barber, 2025; Bialystok, 2015) and metalinguistic awareness (Bialystok, 2015; Koskulu-Sancar, et al., 2026)—the pathway is fraught with challenges. Many young bilingual learners contend with subtractive bilingualism in educational settings that privilege a dominant language, inequitable access to high-quality bilingual resources, assessment tools that fail to capture their full linguistic repertoire, and a frequent lack of specialized teacher training. These systemic barriers can undermine the development of robust literacy skills in both languages, potentially affecting long-term educational outcomes. In response to these challenges, this article synthesizes current research to propose a framework of evidence-based pedagogical and policy interventions. This includes implementing structured dual language programs that promote balanced literacy development, embracing translanguaging pedagogies that validate and leverage children's entire linguistic toolkit, employing culturally and linguistically responsive assessments, and actively engaging families as partners in literacy development. By integrating linguistic with cultural competencies, these strategies aim not only to foster biliteracy but also to affirm children's cultural identities and equip them with the skills to navigate and contribute to a globalized society.

This article holds significance in both academic and practical realms amid the global trend of increasing linguistic diversity. Theoretically, it enriches the framework of biliteracy research by systematically exploring the evolutionary definition of biliteracy—highlighting the integration of linguistic and cultural systems that early definitions overlooked—and clarifying the developmental mechanisms of core components like vocabulary and oral narrative abilities. It synthesizes empirical evidence to confirm the cognitive advantages of biliteracy, such as enhanced cognitive flexibility and metalinguistic awareness, strengthening the theoretical basis for bilingual education advocacy. Practically, it addresses pressing challenges faced by preschool bilingual children, including subtractive bilingualism, limited resources, biased assessments, and inadequate teacher training, offering actionable interventions like dual language programs and translanguaging practices. These

insights provide guidance for educators, policymakers, and parents to support preschool children's balanced linguistic and cultural development. Socially, this article responds to the demand for multilingual competence in a globalized world, emphasizing that early biliteracy fosters cultural identity and lifelong adaptability, contributing to the promotion of linguistic diversity and cultural inclusiveness. Its findings transcend regional boundaries, serving as a valuable reference for diverse communities worldwide striving to nurture bilingual children's holistic growth.

### **The definition of biliteracy**

Initially, biliteracy is defined as the interrelationship between reading and writing rather than reading in one language (Goodman et al., 1979). Later, biliteracy is defined as the proficient literacy skills in two languages in terms of reading and writing (Cummins, 1981; Elaine, 2015; Genesee, 1980; Hickey, 2001; Hornberger, 1990, 2003; Niyekawa, 1983; Valdés, 1983). For instance, Hornberger (1989) defines biliteracy as “any and all instances in which communication occurs in two (or more) languages in or around written material” (p. 213).

However, the previous definition of biliteracy has limitations, as it may not fully encompass all aspects and characteristics inherent to biliteracy. For example, Pérez and Torres-Guzmán (1996) argue that previous definition of biliteracy neglects cultural systems. Sociocultural researchers address that both linguistic and cultural factors influence children's biliteracy development (Reyes, 2012). Therefore, biliteracy is termed as “the acquisition and learning of the decoding and encoding of and around print using two linguistic and *cultural systems* [italics added] in order to convey messages in a variety of contexts” (Pérez & Torres-Guzmán, 1996, p. 54). Children associate what they have read in language and culture with writing, thereby helping them build and develop hybrid bilingual practices (Gregory et al., 2004; Gutiérrez et al., 1999; Martínez-Roldán & Sayer, 2006).

Later, several researchers define biliteracy from an extensive and comprehensive perspective. Reyes (2006) states that the new definition of biliteracy should not only embraces all uses of language to think, speak, read, and write in multiple linguistic systems but also include several factors and experiences related to culture. Thus, biliteracy is referred to bilingual and multilingual literacy (Gentil, 2011; Hornberger & Link, 2012).

### **The importance of developing emergent biliteracy**

Many scholars have stressed the importance of developing emergent biliteracy. Firstly, early childhood is “a critical period in a child's intensive social, emotional, linguistic, and cognitive development” (Schwartz, 2018, p. 2) as well as a foundational period for language and literacy learning (Jean & Debbie, 2001; Mackenzie & Veresov, 2013; Scarborough & Dobrich, 1994; Snow & Tabors, 1993). Studies on monolingual children have demonstrated that early language experiences and early exposure to literacy are significant precursors for their later language acquisition and literacy development (Snow et al., 1998; Dickinson & Tabors, 2001). Secondly, a large and growing number of the children entering early childhood education settings are growing up with two languages and cultures in their home, community, and school environments. Possessing proficient biliteracy increasingly viewed as an asset and a channel for success in multilingual and multicultural world. Thirdly, previous research has confirmed the advantages of biliteracy in academic, cognitive, linguistic, occupational, and social arenas (Agirdag, 2014; Bialystok, 1999; Orellana & Reynolds, 2008; Portes & Fernández-Kelly, 2008).

Some scholars have claimed that biliteracy development may bring cognitive benefits to students, particularly because bilinguals have been found to have heightened cognitive flexibility and metalinguistic awareness (Bauer, 2000; Bauer & Montero, 2001; Bialystok, 2001; Reyes & Azuara, 2008; Roberts, 2008). For instance, Roberts (2008) discovers that Hmong and Spanish preschool children capitalized on both of their linguistic resources to learn English vocabulary when they engaged in home storybook reading in two languages. There was no negative influence of storybook reading in L1 and L2 on the acquisition of English vocabulary by the children as children made significant gains in learning the English vocabulary. Spanish/English bilingual preschoolers in Reyes and Azuara's (2008) study realized that although Spanish and English use letters, both languages are different in writing; as a result, they were not confused when reading in these two languages. The study focused specifically on biliteracy development of a child during his early childhood years, from 4 years old to 5 years old.

#### **Research on preschool bilingual children's biliteracy development**

The focus of existing work on preschool bilingual children's biliteracy development is organized into two categories: vocabulary development and oral narrative abilities development.

##### ***Preschool bilingual children's vocabulary development***

The significance of developing children's vocabulary skills has been widely recognized and studied, highlighting its crucial role in various aspects of children's development. Nagy and Townsend (2012) emphasized that vocabulary development is crucial for reading comprehension and overall academic success. They argue that a larger vocabulary allows children to understand more complex texts, which is essential for learning across various subjects. Vocabulary serves as a critical predictor determining word and text reading comprehension in monolingual and bilingual children (Nation, 2013; for a review, see Zhang & Zhang, 2020).

Preschool bilingual children exhibit different vocabulary profiles, including L1-dominant, L2-dominant, and balanced profiles (Bedore et al., 2012). According to Bedore et al. (2012), children with an L1-dominant profile have stronger vocabulary skills in their L1 compared to their L2. This profile is often seen in children who have more exposure to their L1, either at home or in their community. Understanding the L1-dominant profile is important for educators and parents to tailor language support strategies. For instance, providing additional L2 exposure and support can help these children develop stronger vocabulary skills in their second language. In contrast, children with an L2-dominant profile exhibit stronger vocabulary skills in their L2. This is often observed when children have more exposure to their L2, such as in a school setting or through media. These children may have a limited vocabulary in their L1 but perform better in their L2. This can be attributed to the frequency and context of language exposure. Understanding the L2-dominant profile is crucial for educators to tailor language support strategies. For example, providing additional L1 exposure and support can help these children develop stronger vocabulary skills in their first language. Children with a balanced profile exhibit similar vocabulary skills in both their L1 and L2. This profile is often attribute to consistent and equal exposure to both languages. It highlights that children who receive consistent input in both languages, particularly in both home and school settings, are

more likely to develop a balanced profile. Developing strong vocabulary skills in both languages can provide significant cognitive and academic advantages. These children often demonstrate better executive function skills and are better equipped to handle multilingual environments.

##### ***Preschool bilingual children's oral narrative abilities development***

Oral narrative ability can be conceptualized as the skills that create coherent linguistic structures by several cohesive utterances, these utterances describe an experience or an action, either real or imagined (Berman & Slobin, 1994). Oral narrative abilities are the principal ability for children in representing meaning, making sense of the world, expressing their thoughts and feelings (Bruner, 1990, 1991). It is deemed as one of the most comprehensive methods to investigate children's language development, particularly for dual language learners (e.g., Bedore et al., 2010; Fiestas & Peña, 2004; Gagarina et al., 2012, 2015; Gutiérrez-Clellen, 2002; Laing & Kamhi, 2003; Peña et al., 2006; Peña et al., 2014; Rhodes et al., 2005; Terry et al., 2013). Oral narrative abilities of preschool children are considered to be closely related to emergent literacy outcomes (Dickinson & McCabe, 1991). These skills are also found to link with later school achievements, such as reading performance (Boudreau, 2008; Owens, 2010; Stockman, 1996; Westby, 1992), writing performance (Licandro, 2016), and later mathematical ability (O'Neill et al., 2004).

The development of preschool bilingual children's oral narrative abilities varies across studies. According to Licandro (2016), existing work on the development of preschool bilingual children's oral narrative abilities is mainly informed from three research perspectives: longitudinal and cross-age research, cross-linguistic evidence, and the role of expressive language skills.

##### ***Longitudinal and cross-age research***

Studies have explored the development of preschool children's oral narrative abilities through both longitudinal and cross-age approaches, providing valuable insights into how narrative abilities evolve over time and how they differ across age groups. The findings emphasize the importance of fostering narrative abilities in early childhood education to support overall language and literacy development. A study by Roch et al. (2016) found that the macrostructure of narratives (e.g., story grammar elements such as setting, characters, events, and resolution) improved significantly as children progressed from kindergarten to primary school. This suggests that narrative abilities become more sophisticated with age. Altman et al. (2016) examined the macrostructure and microstructure of narratives in English-Hebrew preschool bilingual children. Results showed that older children demonstrated more sophisticated narrative structures and greater lexical diversity. Gagarina et al. (2016) used the MAIN to assess narrative abilities in preschool bilingual children. It found that older children produced narratives with more complete story grammar elements and higher syntactic complexity. Iluz-Cohen and Walters (2012) compared the narratives of preschool bilingual children with typical and impaired language. It found that older children consistently outperformed younger children in terms of narrative complexity and coherence.

##### ***Cross-linguistic evidence***

Cross-linguistic evidence regarding the development of preschool bilingual children's oral narrative abilities reveals several key



findings, including similarities in narrative structure across languages, influence of language proficiency and exposure, cultural and contextual influences, and developmental trajectories. Cross-linguistic evidence highlights the interplay between linguistic proficiency, cultural context, and educational experiences in shaping preschool bilingual children's oral narrative abilities. Preschool bilingual children demonstrate remarkable flexibility and transfer of narrative abilities across languages, although their development may follow unique trajectories compared to monolingual children.

*Similarities in narrative structure across languages.* Preschool bilingual children can produce narratives with similar story grammar structures in both their first and second languages. For example, Fiestas and Peña (2004) found that Spanish-English preschool bilingual children produced stories with comparable complexity and productivity in both languages, although the specific elements included in the story grammar might vary due to cultural influences and vocabulary exposure. Moreover, preschool bilingual children's narrative abilities in both languages might be enhanced through a transfer process, where skills learned in one language can be applied to the other (Gagarina et al., 2012). This transfer is particularly evident in the macro-structure of narratives, such as the ability to organize events and maintain coherence.

*Influence of language proficiency and exposure.* While the overall narrative structure may be similar, preschool bilingual children often show differences in lexical and morphological skills between their two languages. For instance, preschool bilingual children may lag behind monolingual peers in their L2 in terms of vocabulary and grammatical complexity, especially if their exposure to the L2 is limited (Bonifacci et al., 2018). Furthermore, the age of first bilingual language exposure plays a significant role in narrative development. Kovelman et al. (2008) highlighted that early exposure to both languages can facilitate the development of narrative abilities in both languages, as children are more likely to reach a higher level of proficiency and transfer narrative strategies more effectively.

*Cultural and contextual influences.* Narrative styles and the importance placed on certain narrative elements can vary across cultures. For example, in Barboza and Sparks's (2014) study on narrative development across cultural contexts, they observed differences in how children from Anglo middle-class families and Latino families structure their narratives during family reminiscing. These differences reflect cultural variations in the pragmatic conventions of storytelling, with some cultures emphasizing detailed descriptions of events and others focusing more on the emotional context and responses of characters.

*Developmental trajectories.* Preschool bilingual children's oral narrative abilities improve significantly as they transition from preschool to school age. They become more capable of producing structured and complex narratives over time. This progression is observed across different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, highlighting the universal aspects of narrative development in early childhood. Firstly, preschool bilingual children display improvement in narrative complexity. For instance, Fiestas and Peña (2004) analyzed the stories produced by preschool bilingual children who speak Spanish at home and English at school. They found that as children transition from preschool to school age, their narratives become more complex in both languages. The children include more story elements such as setting, initiating events, internal responses, plans, attempts,

consequences, and endings. Secondly, research showed that preschool bilingual children's narratives in both languages become more structured as they grow older. Iluz-Cohen and Walters (2012) found that the morphosyntactic and lexical measures improve, but the story grammar remains consistent, indicating that the macro-structure of narratives becomes more sophisticated. Kupersmitt and Berman's (2001) study on Spanish-Hebrew bilingual children demonstrated that as children progress from preschool to school age, their narratives include more complex elements such as goal-directed actions and consequences, similar to monolingual children. Thirdly, preschool bilingual children's narrative abilities development demonstrates cross-cultural and cross-linguistic consistency. Gutiérrez-Clellen's (2002) study highlighted that preschool bilingual children's narrative abilities develop in a manner consistent with monolingual children, with improvements observed in both languages. The findings suggest that the development of narrative abilities is a universal aspect of early childhood, influenced by cognitive and linguistic maturation. According to Curenton and Justice (2004), African American and Caucasian preschoolers showed that as children transition to school age, their ability to produce structured narratives with literate language features improves, regardless of their linguistic background.

#### *The role of expressive language skills*

Preschool bilingual children's expressive language skills show a marked increase in lexical diversity. They begin with simple, concrete words and gradually incorporate more abstract and complex vocabulary. This expansion allows them to describe events, characters, and settings in greater detail. Fiestas & Peña (2004) examined the narrative discourse of preschool bilingual children and highlighted how their vocabulary use becomes more complex over time. The findings showed that preschool bilingual children initially use simple, concrete words but gradually incorporate more abstract and complex vocabulary as their expressive language skills develop. Preschool bilingual children's grammatical skills also progress, moving from simple sentences to more complex structures. They start using compound sentences, conjunctions, and more varied verb tenses. This grammatical complexity enhances the coherence and richness of their narratives. Licandro (2016) noted that children's use of compound sentences and varied verb tenses improves over time, contributing to more coherent and detailed narratives. Roch et al. (2016) investigated the narrative competence of bilingual children aged 5 to 7 years. The findings show that children's grammatical skills improve over time, with increased use of compound sentences, conjunctions, and varied verb tenses, enhancing the coherence and richness of their narratives.

#### **Challenges in preschool bilingual children's biliteracy development**

***Subtractive bilingualism.*** Many bilingual children face challenges in developing biliteracy. A common issue is subtractive bilingualism, where the development of L2 comes at the expense of the L1. For instance, Restrepo et al. (2010) documented that four-year-old in all-English preschool programs showed stalled development in their home language. This is particularly evident in educational settings where the dominant language is prioritized, leading to a decline in the use and proficiency of the heritage language (Restrepo et al., 2010).

Subtractive bilingualism can result in a loss of cultural identity and limited literacy skills in both languages, as children may not develop advanced literacy skills in either language (Genesee & Lindholm-Leary, 2013).

**Limited access to resources.** Many preschool bilingual children, especially those from low-income families, have limited access to high-quality bilingual resources, such as books, educational materials, and digital tools. This disparity can exacerbate existing inequalities in literacy development (Garcia & Li, 2014). Without access to rich linguistic input in both languages, children may struggle to develop the necessary vocabulary and grammatical skills required for biliteracy.

**Assessment and standardized testing.** Standardized testing often disadvantages preschool bilingual children, as these tests are predominantly available in English and focus on reading skills. This can lead to an underestimation of preschool bilingual children's literacy abilities. Inaccurate assessments can result in inappropriate educational interventions and a lack of recognition for the linguistic strengths of preschool bilingual children.

**Teacher training and support.** Educators may lack the training and support needed to effectively teach biliteracy. Many teachers are not equipped to implement dual language programs or to support the development of literacy skills in both languages. Without proper training, teachers may inadvertently promote subtractive bilingualism or fail to provide the necessary scaffolding for biliteracy development.

#### **Inventions for preschool bilingual children's biliteracy development**

To assess biliteracy, educators should incorporate writing assessments that allow children to use their full linguistic repertoire. Children who struggle with English reading tests can demonstrate grade-level-appropriate writing skills when allowed to use both languages. This suggests that writing assessments can provide a more accurate picture of a children's biliteracy abilities. Additionally, strategies like dictation can be used to teach spelling, punctuation, and grammar in both languages, while also tracking children's progress.

It highlights the need for educational interventions that support the development of both languages. Effective strategies include allowing children to fluidly switch between languages during the school day, providing bilingual vocabulary focus, and using culturally relevant books. Parental attitudes and involvement are also crucial; engaging families through bilingual programming can reinforce the value of biliteracy at home.

Encouraging translanguaging, or the fluid use of both languages, can support biliteracy development. This practice allows children to leverage their full linguistic repertoire to construct meaning and demonstrate knowledge. Teachers can create classroom environments that value and utilize both languages, allowing children to switch between languages as needed. This can be supported through activities such as bilingual storytelling, writing projects, and group discussions.

Using culturally relevant materials and instructional strategies can enhance biliteracy development. This includes incorporating books, stories, and activities that reflect the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of the children. Teachers can select bilingual books and materials that resonate with the children's

experiences and use these resources to teach literacy skills in both languages.

Engaging families and communities in the biliteracy development process can reinforce the value of both languages and provide additional support for children. Schools can organize family literacy nights, provide bilingual resources for home use, and encourage parents to read and engage in literacy activities with their children in both languages.

Implementing high-quality dual language programs has been shown to be effective in promoting biliteracy. These programs provide children with opportunities to develop literacy skills in both languages simultaneously. Dual language programs should be designed to ensure balanced literacy instruction in both languages, with a focus on developing reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills.

Developing comprehensive and culturally sensitive assessment tools can provide a more accurate picture of children's biliteracy skills. Assessments should include writing tasks that allow children to demonstrate their abilities in both languages. Teachers can use formative assessments to monitor children's progress and provide targeted feedback. This can help identify areas where children may need additional support and ensure that instructional strategies are effectively promoting biliteracy.

## **Conclusion**

The development of biliteracy in preschool bilingual children is a multifaceted and crucial endeavor, with significant implications for their cognitive, academic, and social development. As globalization continues to drive the importance of multilingualism, the ability to read and write in two languages becomes increasingly important. This article has explored the various aspects of biliteracy development in preschool bilingual children, focusing particularly on vocabulary and oral narrative abilities.

The significance of vocabulary development cannot be overstated, as it serves as a critical predictor of reading comprehension and academic success. Preschool bilingual children must develop a broad and deep knowledge of words in both their first and second languages. This requires targeted interventions and educational strategies that support vocabulary acquisition in both languages. Similarly, the development of oral narrative abilities is essential for preschool bilingual children. Narrative abilities become more sophisticated with age, and preschool bilingual children demonstrate remarkable flexibility and transfer of these abilities across languages. However, their development may follow unique trajectories, influenced by factors such as language proficiency and exposure. As such, educators must be aware of these differences and design interventions that cater to the specific needs of preschool bilingual children.

The process of developing biliteracy in preschool bilingual children is fraught with challenges, such as subtractive bilingualism, where the development of one language may come at the expense of the other. To mitigate these challenges, educators and policymakers must incorporate strategic interventions that support the development of both languages. This includes allowing children to fluidly switch between languages during the school day, providing bilingual vocabulary focus, and using culturally relevant books. Parental attitudes and involvement are also crucial in reinforcing the value of both languages and providing additional support for children.

By supporting vocabulary and oral narrative abilities development, and addressing the challenges associated with biliteracy development, educators can ensure that these children have the tools to thrive in a multilingual world. As the number of preschool bilingual children continues to grow worldwide, the importance of fostering biliteracy from a young age becomes increasingly evident. By doing so, we can equip these children with the cognitive, academic, and social benefits associated with proficiency in multiple languages, setting them on a path for long-term success.

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