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A longitudinal study on the language development of bilingual Arabic-Swedish-speaking children.

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Abstract

In Sweden, just like in other parts of the world, a challenge in speech-and-language pathology assessments has been to find suitable ways to assess bilingual children with suspected developmental language disorder (DLD). With Arabic being the largest minority language in Sweden (Skolverket 2023), the first larger-scale study in Sweden is being conducted to learn more about the typical development of bilingual Swedish-Arabic-speaking children. In the cross-sectional part of the study, 100 Arabic-Swedish-speaking children aged 4-7 were assessed in both their languages (Öberg 2020, Haddad 2022). These children were either born in Sweden or had lived in Sweden for at least 2 years. In an ongoing longitudinal study, 23 of the 4-5-year-old children have been retested 5 years later at age 9-11. All children have been attending Swedish-medium schools since preschool. The assessment tools used are from the LITMUS battery (MAIN storytelling and comprehension, CLT vocabulary production and comprehension, QU-NWR, CL-NWR (nonword repetition tasks)), complemented by TROG2 (comprehension of grammar in Swedish), questionnaires, parental interviews, teacher interviews, and school observations. Although not all the data have been fully analyzed yet, the following patterns emerge: At age 9-11, the Arabic-Swedish-speaking still exhibit smaller vocabularies when tested in each of their languages compared to monolingual children. Regarding TROG2, the children fall within the average range when compared to the monolingual Swedish norm. Teacher interviews highlight difficulties in evaluating the language proficiency of bilingual children, along with a wish for more education on bilingualism in teacher training. In the cross-sectional Arabic-Swedish study, it was observed that some children with typical language development had results overlapping with age-matched children with DLD (Öberg/Bohnacker 2022). In the longitudinal follow-up 5 years later, some children (that were considered typically-developing when younger) still exhibit low vocabulary scores and incoherent narratives in Swedish, despite having attended Swedish preschools and schools since age 2 or 3. We show how the parental and teacher interviews and school observations can shed light on whether the low proficiency in Swedish is due to exposure and the environment that the children are in, or whether it is an indicator of DLD.