

Common Patterns and Individual Differences
in the Bilingual Development of Children in Immigrant Families

Erika Hoff

Bilingual children in immigrant families share the experience of using a language at home that is not the majority language of the country in which they live. Their experiences vary in how much they hear that heritage language at home, in their parents' levels of educational attainment, and their own language learning abilities. Using data from a longitudinal study of largely middle-class U.S.-born children from homes in which Spanish is spoken, either exclusively or in combination with English, we describe the common patterns and individual differences in bilingual development that arise from these shared and variable sources of influence.

The modal pattern of bilingual development between 2 and 5 years among these children is one in which the children are relatively balanced bilinguals at 2 years and become English dominant by 5 years. Another common pattern is an increasing gap between children's receptive and expressive skills in Spanish.

There are individual differences in children's rates of English and Spanish growth between 2 and 5 years, and, as a result, there are differences in their skill profiles at age 5. While the most frequent pattern is to have strong English skills and relatively weaker Spanish skills, some children are strong in both languages and some children are weak in both languages.

Both these common patterns and individual differences can be traced to influences of the quantity and quality of children's language exposure, influences of children's own language use, and influences of individual differences in children's phonological memory skills.