

Bilingual children equally adept at telling stories in either language

December 18 2019, by Katie Willis

Bilingual children use as many words as monolingual children when telling a story, and show high levels of cognitive flexibility as storytellers, according to new research by University of Alberta scientists.

"We found that the number of words that bilingual children use in their stories is highly correlated with their [cognitive flexibility](#)—the ability to switch between thinking about different concepts," said psychology professor Elena Nicoladis, who was the lead author on the study. "This suggests that bilinguals are adept at using the medium of storytelling."

Nicoladis noted that [vocabulary](#) is a strong predictor of school achievement, and so is storytelling.

"These results suggest that parents of bilingual children do not need to be concerned about long-term school achievement, she said. "In a storytelling context, bilingual kids are able to use this flexibility to convey stories in creative ways."

The researchers examined a group of French-English bilingual children between the ages of four and six who had been taught two languages since birth, rather than learning a second language later in life. The results showed that bilingual children used just as many words to tell a story in English as [monolingual children](#) did. Participants also used just as many words in French as they did in English when telling a [story](#).

Previous research has shown that bilingual children score lower than monolingual children on traditional vocabulary tests—something Nicoladis said is not surprising.

"Learning a word is related to how much time you spend in each language. For bilingual children, time is split between languages," she explained. "So, unsurprisingly, they tend to have lower vocabularies in each of their languages.

"However, this research shows that as a function of storytelling, bilingual children are equally strong as monolingual [children](#)."

The researchers used a new, highly sensitive measure for examining cognitive flexibility, rating the participants' ability to switch between games with different rules while maintaining accuracy and reaction time.

The study builds on previous research examining vocabulary in [bilingual children](#) who learned English as a second [language](#).

The study, "How to Use a Wide Variety of Words in Telling a Story With a Small Vocabulary: Cognitive Predictors of Lexical Selection for Simultaneous Bilingual Children," was published in *Language, Cognition and Neuroscience*.

More information: Elena Nicoladis et al. How to use a wide variety of words in telling a story with a small vocabulary: cognitive predictors of lexical selection for simultaneous bilingual children, *Language, Cognition and Neuroscience* (2019). [DOI: 10.1080/23273798.2019.1678758](https://doi.org/10.1080/23273798.2019.1678758)

Provided by University of Alberta

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