Background

Australia is a linguistically and culturally diverse society – over 200 different languages are spoken. Australian school entrants are similarly diverse. In 2012, around 7.5% of children who started school were born overseas, and almost a fifth spoke a language other than English at home. While most of those children were proficient in English at school entry (English-proficient bilinguals), a proportion started school with limited English skills (emerging bilinguals).

English is the sole language of instruction in nearly all Australian schools, which means that the English proficiency of bilingual children can impact on their opportunities for learning and achievement at school. Children’s ability to communicate in English may be particularly relevant for their ability to acquire and demonstrate academic language skills. Academic language skills are those that reflect their ability to perform language-based academic tasks – reading, writing, composing stories, giving verbal reports – and are distinct from everyday conversational language skills.

Findings from international research suggest that:

- Children who start school as English-proficient bilinguals may be at a developmental advantage, and tend to outperform their monolingual peers on a range of cognitive tasks.
- Bilingual children who are not yet proficient in the language of instruction at school entry tend to show poorer academic outcomes throughout their primary school years.
- Regardless of language background, lower socio-economic status is associated with poorer language skills and academic outcomes.

Much of the available evidence in regards to bilingual children’s outcomes is derived from US populations. The Australian bilingual population has a high degree of linguistic diversity, a distinct difference between Australia and other countries such as the United States. Given this difference, there are limits to the extent that findings from other countries can be applied to the Australian population. It is therefore important to examine local data in order to ensure Australian health and education policy is well informed.
Aim

This study aimed to determine the relationship between the English proficiency of Australian bilingual children at school entry and their academic language skills six years later (at age 10-11 years).

Key Findings

Around the time of school entry most of the bilingual children in the study sample were rated by their teacher as having “very good/good” English proficiency, however a significant proportion started school with “average” or “poor/very poor” English proficiency (as shown in Figure 1).

Figure 1. Teacher ratings of bilingual children’s English proficiency at school entry

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Very good/good</th>
<th>Average</th>
<th>Poor/very poor</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
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Bilingual children with “very good/good” English proficiency at school entry had higher academic language and literacy scores later in later primary school (age 10-11 years), compared to bilingual children who were not English proficient at school entry, as shown in Figure 2. Even when taking into account the influence of gender and socioeconomic status in the analyses, stronger English proficiency at school entry continued to be associated with higher academic language outcomes later in primary school.

Overall, the findings suggest that Australian bilingual children who begin school with limited English proficiency are at risk of difficulties with language-based academic skills, even after six years of exposure to English in the classroom.

Implications

For policy and practice

The findings of the study highlight the need for education policymakers and practitioners to consider how best to support bilingual children who arrive at school not yet English proficient, such that they can reach their full potential. It is important to note that English language skills should not be promoted at the expense of bilingual children’s home language; children achieve the best outcomes when they are proficient in both their home language and in English.

Schools can promote language development by providing language-rich environments in the classroom, while health and education professionals can upskill and support bilingual families in ways that promote their child’s language development at home. Attending a preschool program may be an effective way of enhancing children’s exposure to the English language prior to school entry.

Bilingual children who experience underlying language impairments will require more targeted and individualised support. However, it remains a challenge to distinguish between bilingual children with limited English proficiency due to underlying language impairments, and those children who have limited English proficiency due to lack of exposure. It is likely to be cost beneficial to invest effort at the outset of schooling into identifying and providing early intervention for those emerging bilingual children who have underlying language difficulties.
The findings support international evidence that bilingual children who start school with limited proficiency in the language of instruction are at risk of poorer long-term academic outcomes. Further research is needed to determine ways of identifying bilingual children who are most at risk of academic difficulties. Identifying factors that predict earlier versus later English-language acquisition in bilingual children will be valuable to understand where services and resources can best be directed.

This study draws on data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC), which is a nationally representative sample of two cohorts of Australian children. LSAC commenced in May 2004. Data were analysed from a sub-sample of 129 bilingual children from the LSAC Kindergarten cohort whose teachers also completed the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) in 2004.

The AEDC is a measure of early childhood development at school entry that includes a measure of English proficiency, and measures five important domains of early childhood development: physical health and wellbeing; social competence; emotional maturity; language and cognitive development (school-based); and communication skills and general knowledge.

For further details
Details of the research paper

A full list of references used in the development of this snapshot is available online with this link.

About research snapshots
Research Snapshots provide a brief and accessible overview of research being undertaken in relation to the AEDC. This project was funded by the Australian Government under the AEDC program. For further up-to-date information consult the AEDC website and its many resources: www.aedc.gov.au

About the organisation
The Royal Children’s Hospital Centre for Community Child Health (CCCH) has been at the forefront of Australian research into early childhood and behaviour since 1994. The CCCH conducts research into many conditions and common problems faced by children that are either preventable or can be improved if recognised and managed early. By working collaboratively with leaders in policy, research, education and service delivery, the Centre aims to influence early childhood policy and improve the capacity of communities to meet the needs of children and their families.

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Since 2002, the Australian Government has worked in partnership with eminent child health research institutes, Centre for Community Child Health, Royal Children’s Hospital, Melbourne, and the Telethon Kids Institute, Perth to deliver the Australian Early Development Index programme to communities nationwide. On 1 July 2014, the Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) programme became known as the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC), and was launched through a new website www.aedc.gov.au. The Australian Government continues to work with its partners, and with state and territory governments to implement the AEDC.