

Bilingualism in Middle Childhood: Bilingual First Language Acquisition, Early Second Language Acquisition, and Second Language Acquisition

De Houwer, Annick. 2021. *Bilingual Development in Childhood*.
(1st edition.) Cambridge University Press, Chapter 4.



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- **Soc-L** (Societal Language)
The language of the school and community (e.g., English in the US, Dutch in Flanders).
- **Non-Soc-L** (Non-Societal Language)
The home or heritage language.

BFLA (Bilingual First Language Acquisition)



Two languages from birth.

ESLA (Early Second Language Acquisition)



Home language first; L2 introduced in preschool (ages 3–5).

SLA (Second Language Acquisition)



Home language first; L2 introduced in primary school (Age 6+)

Central questions of Chapter 4



How do bilingual children's languages **develop** at school age?



What happens to the **home / Non-Societal Language**?

How do children **choose which language** to speak?



Which factors influence **success** or **language loss**?



Navigating the critical shift from home to school in middle childhood

Middle childhood \approx ages 6–11



HOME

Typically begins
with school entry

Home or
Heritage Language
(Non-Soc-L)

SCHOOL



School introduces:

- One dominant societal language (Soc-L)
- New academic and social pressures



BFLA & ESLA language development at school

All children still learning the Soc-L



BFLA children

Usually strong in
Soc-L at school
entry

ESLA children

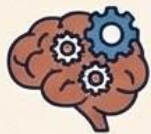
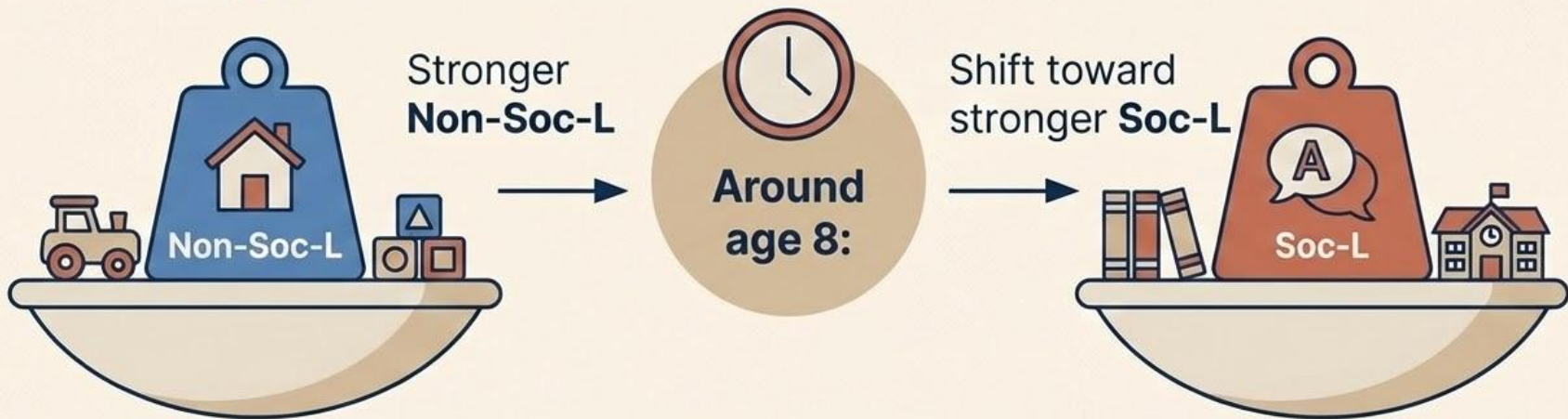
Often good
comprehension
Weaker production



Differences may level
out over time

Balance between the two languages

Early years



Vocabulary and **processing speed** reflect this shift

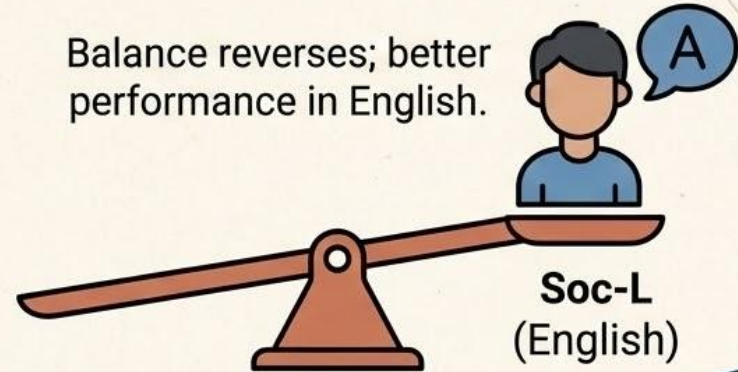
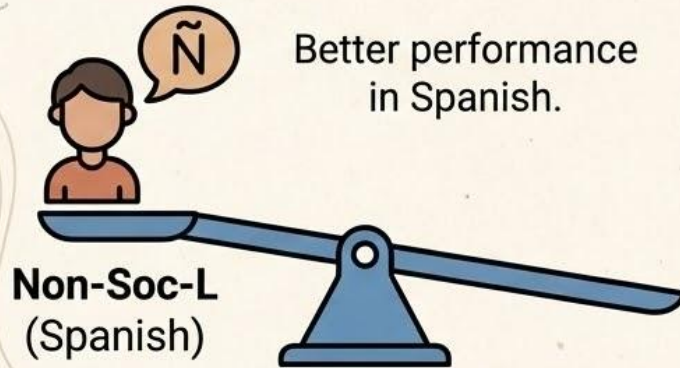
Longitudinal Study on Picture-Naming Speed (Oppenheim et al., 2020)

5-Year Study of BFLA and ESLA Children (N = 139)

Before Approx. Age 8



After Approx. Age 8



Speed and accuracy improved in both languages over time.

Vocabulary and Narrative Development (Uccelli & Páez, 2007)



1st to 2nd Grade (24 ESLA children)

L2: English (Soc-L) - Strong Gains



- **Strong** growth in **production vocabulary**.
- Not yet at monolingual English norms.

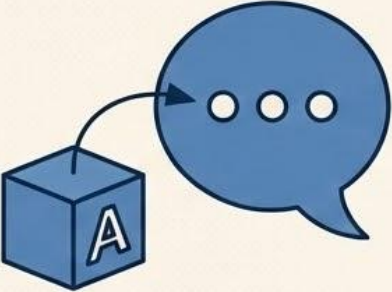
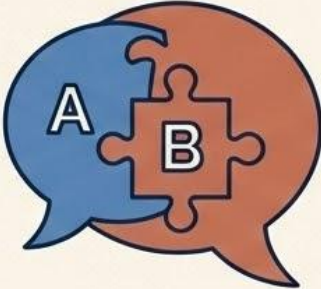


L1: Spanish (Non-Soc-L) - Gains Only in Storytelling



- Gains seen **only** in **narrative skills**.
- No significant growth in general production vocabulary.

Language mixing in school-age children

Younger children	Older children
 <p>single-word insertions</p>	 <p>More complex mixed utterances</p>



Mixing \neq confusion



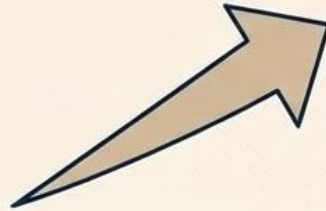
Requires competence in both languages

Rapid Gains in L2-English Comprehension (Uchikoshi, 2006)

Start of First School Year



150 L2 Children
(ESLA/SLA Mix)



Rapid Gains in
Comprehension

End of First School Year



English Level
of 4.5-year-old
Monolingual



Unclear: Is this level sufficient for full participation in Second Grade?

L2 Production in Early Childhood: Debunking the “Silent Period”

Wagner-Gough (1975) / Hatch (1978): The Case of Homer (Age 6)

Arrival & First Weeks



Imitated English words/phrases.

Replied to yes/no-questions by repeating them.

Second Month & Beyond



Went beyond imitation.

Started forming sentences of his own making.



Conclusion: No obligatory “silent period” in SLA, as experienced by many younger ESLA children.

L2 acquisition in middle childhood: A case study of John (Age 7)

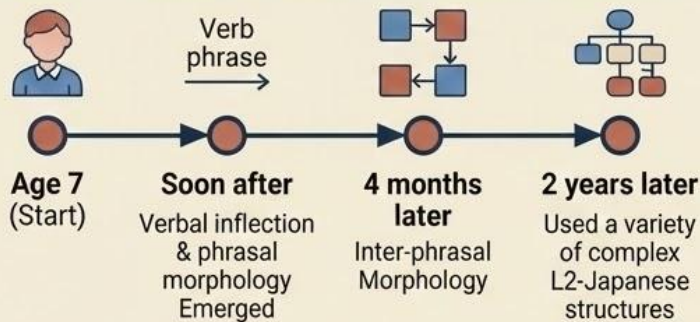
Itani-Adams et al. (2017): Immersion in Japanese (Australia)

John's profile



L1-English speaker.
Started Japanese
immersion school at 6;3.

Morphological development timeline



L2 vs. BFLA Comparison



L2 John
(2 years input)
Much more advanced
morphosyntactic
structures.



BFLA preschooler
(5 years input)
Excellent
age-appropriate
speaking skills.



Conclusion: Older L2 learners can achieve rapid structural progress, outperforming younger BFLA learners in specific morphosyntax within a shorter timeframe.

How long does SLA take?

Huge individual variation.

Conversational Fluency



 **1–5 years**

Developing basic social communication.

Academic Proficiency



 **Often 7–10 years**

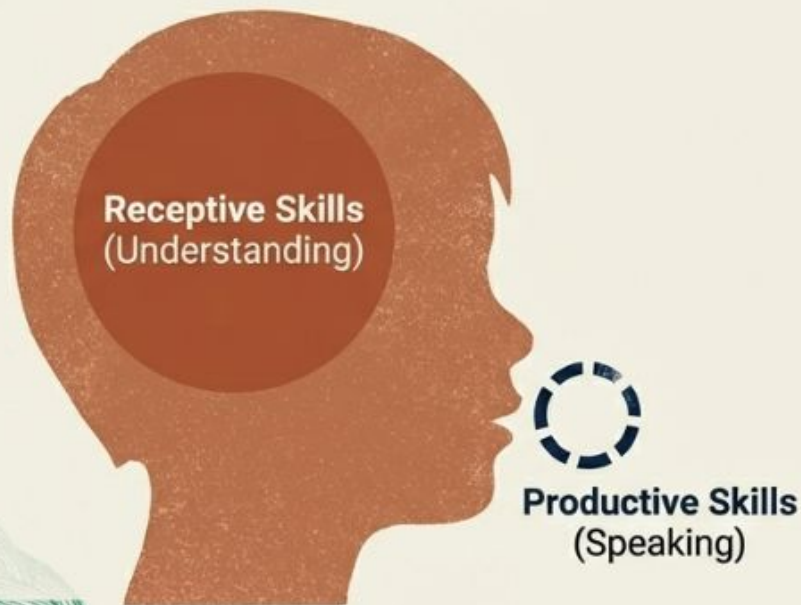
Mastering complex, cognitive language.



Age Factor

Older learners may progress faster initially.

Uneven Development & The Passive Bilingual



25%

of bilingually reared children do not speak one of their languages.

30.3%

of BFLA children spoke only the Societal Language, despite having a parent who spoke the Home Language.

Hearing two languages \neq Speaking two languages.

(De Houwer, 200¹⁴)

Language choice in middle childhood

Language choice depends on:

Interlocutor



Depends on who they are speaking to.

School



Mostly Soc-L.

Context



Depends on the situation and environment.

Home

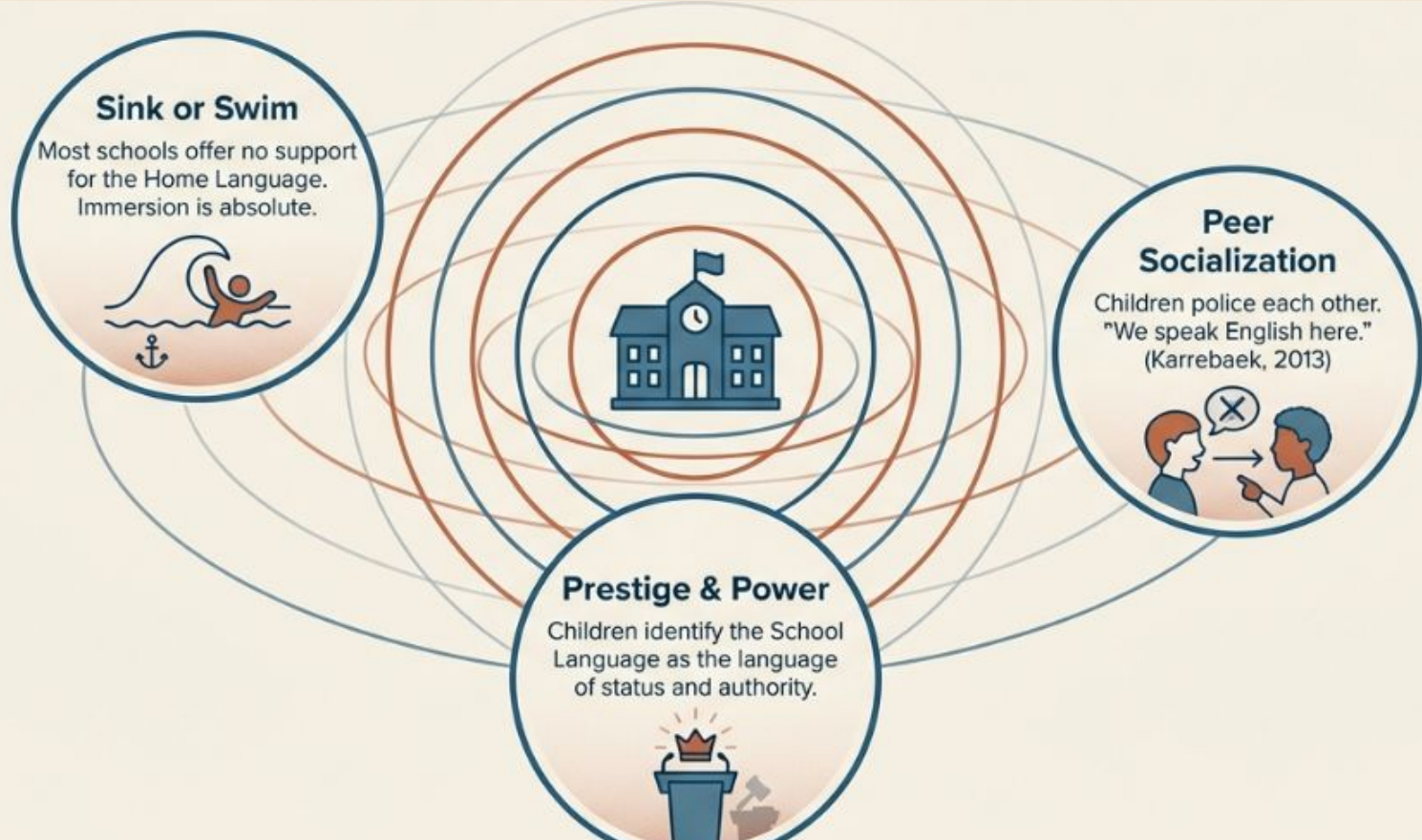


Increasing Soc-L over time.



The Risk: If the child knows the parent understands the School Language, they will default to it. This leads to BFLA children addressing Home-Language parents in the School Language.

Why do children shift to the Soc-L?



Factors affecting bilingual development



Timing of exposure



Amount & diversity of input



Motivation & attitudes



Number of speakers



School environment



Parental strategies

Which Families Maintain the Home Language?

Success rates based on parental input patterns (De Houwer, 2007)

Both parents speak Non-Soc-L + One speaks Soc-L

93% Success

Both parents speak BOTH languages

79% Success

One Parent One Language (OPOL)

74% Success

Less effective than expected.

Both parents speak Soc-L +
Only one speaks Non-Soc-L

36% Success

Chapter Summary: Key Takeaways

Societal Language (Soc-L) Dominance



Grows rapidly in middle childhood. Often becomes the dominant language.

Non-Societal Language (Non-Soc-L) Vulnerability



Is highly vulnerable to loss without active, consistent support.

Crucial Factors for Maintenance



Consistent **Input** and meaningful **Communicative Need** are the essential keys.



THANK YOU!