



Teaching Reading to Young Bilinguals: Is Whole Word or Phonics the Answer?

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INTRODUCTION

Reading Approach For decades debates have raged over whether the Whole Word or Phonics-based approach is best for teaching literacy to monolingual English children^{1, 3, 4}.

NEW QUESTION: Is the *Whole Word* or *Phonics*-based approach most optimal for teaching reading to young bilinguals in early grades?

Language proficiency Research with monolingual English children shows that language proficiency affects reading development⁸.

NEW QUESTION: Is bilingual language proficiency related to bilingual reading proficiency? Does the *age* of first bilingual exposure affect *language* and *reading proficiency* in bilinguals^{2, 5-7}?

SIGNIFICANCE

Knowing which approach is best to teach reading skills to bilingual children is vital to ensuring reading success in young bilinguals.

METHODS

PARTICIPANTS

Group	n N=148	Age of English Exposure	Languages at Home	Reading at Home	Reading in Class
Birth Bilinguals	19	birth-3	English & Spanish	English & Spanish	English & Spanish OR English Only
Late Bilinguals	67	3-6			
Mono-linguals	62	birth	English Only	English Only	English Only

6 Schools

across 5 states in the USA (SC, NH, CA, NJ, CT)

2 Reading approaches

Whole Word (n=98) and *Phonics* (Success for All, n=50)

2 Classroom types

bilingual (Spanish-English) and monolingual (English)

2 Grades

2nd and 3rd (N=148 children)

TASKS

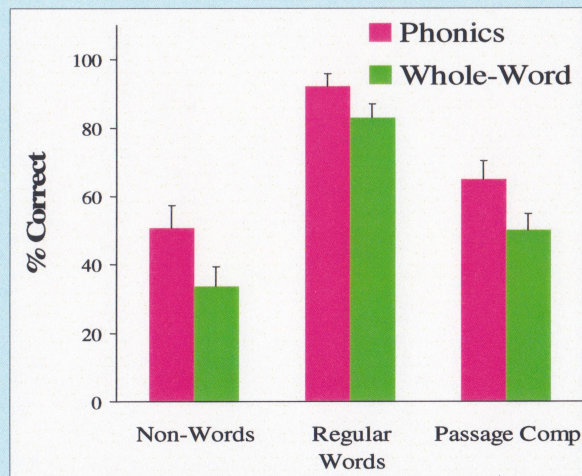
3 Types of Standardized Spanish and English tasks

• Language Competence & Proficiency

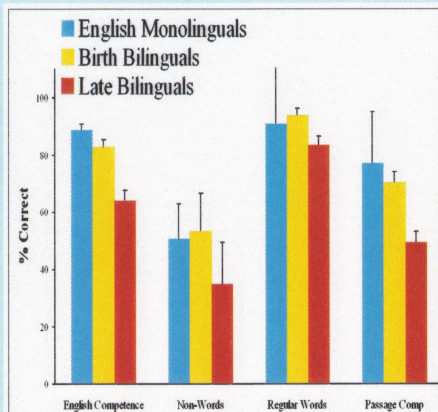
- **Reading Tasks** Non-Words, Regular Words, Passage Comprehension
- **Phoneme Awareness** Initial & Final Phoneme Deletion, Phoneme Segmentation

RESULTS

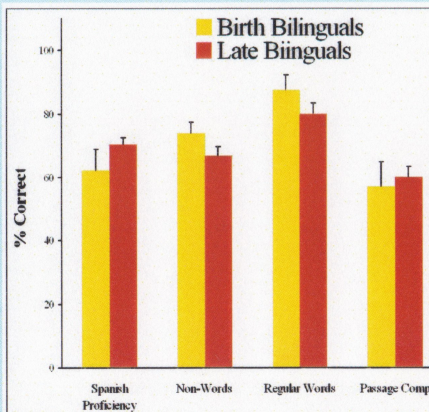
PHONICS VS WHOLE WORD Bilinguals in Phonics programs outperformed bilinguals in Whole Word programs on most **English** reading tasks ($p < .01$)



ENGLISH TASKS Birth Bilinguals had the same language and reading proficiency as Monolinguals ($p > .01$) and better than Late Bilinguals ($p < .001$) on most **English** tasks.



SPANISH TASKS All bilinguals had the same language and reading proficiency on **Spanish** tasks.



DISCUSSION

Reading Approach Bilinguals in Phonics-based approaches outperformed bilinguals in Whole Word-based approaches. Research with monolingual English children has shown that *Phonics* instruction is optimal in early grades^{1,3}. Our results also show that the Phonics-based approach is optimal for young bilinguals.

Language Proficiency In young bilinguals high language proficiency was related to high reading proficiency. Age of first bilingual exposure does impact both language and reading proficiency in bilinguals: Birth Bilinguals performed best on both language and reading tasks in English, and they performed better than Late Bilinguals.

CONCLUSIONS

We provide evidence that a *Phonics-based* approach is key to successful *bilingual reading* development in the early grades. This was true regardless of whether the *bilingual* child was in an English-Spanish or English Only classroom.

A Phonics-based approach may be especially beneficial for Late Bilingual children who can have difficulty learning to read in their new language². This is so because a Phonics-based approach makes the components of skilled reading explicit, with less reliance on language competence.

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