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# THE DYNAMICS OF LANGUAGE ADAPTATION: INSIGHTS FROM UKRAINIAN REFUGEE PRESCHOOLERS IN POLISH EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENTS

This article delves into the intricate dynamics of language adaptation among Ukrainian preschoolers with refugee backgrounds navigating the educational landscape in Poland. Focusing on the acquisition of Polish language skills through structured learning and interactions with native speakers, the study underscores the pivotal role of family language policies and the linguistic milieu within migrant households. Central to the analysis is the linguistic background of Ukrainian preschoolers, predominantly characterized by Ukrainian-Russian bilingualism, thus fostering early childhood trilingualism amidst the accelerated pace of language adaptation in the host country. Emphasis is placed on the significance of balanced language input to mitigate potential challenges associated with trilingualism, ensuring the preservation of active speaking abilities.

In this article examines how their existing bilingual proficiency in Ukrainian and Russian serves as a springboard for navigating the complexities of acquiring a third language, Polish, within the Polish educational environment. By exploring the cognitive and linguistic advantages that bilingualism confers, the study sheds light on how these preschoolers leverage their linguistic repertoire to facilitate the acquisition of Polish while simultaneously maintaining their proficiency in their first language(s). Furthermore, it addresses the importance of fostering a supportive linguistic environment that encourages the development and enrichment of multiple languages from an early age, thereby laying a solid foundation for lifelong language learning and intercultural communication skills.

By shedding light on these nuanced processes, this research contributes valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of language adaptation among forced migrant communities, offering implications for educational policies and practices tailored to support the linguistic development of young refugees.

Keywords: bilingualism, trilingualism, family language policy, home language, language adaptation.

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## ДИНАМІКА МОВНОЇ АДАПТАЦІЇ: ДОСВІД УКРАЇНСЬКИХ ДОШКІЛЬНИКІВ-БІЖЕНЦІВ У ПОЛЬСЬКОМУ ОСВІТНЬОМУ СЕРЕДОВИЩІ

У статті розглядається складна динаміка мовної адаптації українських дошкільнят із досвідом біженства, які перебувають в освітньому середовищі Польщі. Звертаючи увагу на опанування польської мови через системне навчання та взаємодію з носіями мови, дослідження підкреслює важливу роль збалансованої сімейної мовної політики та мовного середовища в родинах мігрантів. Важливим моментом аналізу є мовний досвід українських дошкільників, який часто є білінгвальним. У ситуації вимушеної міграції і вивчення польської мови українсько-російські білінгви стають трилінгвами, прискорено адаптуючись до мови країни перебування. У статті підкреслена важливість збалансованого мовного введення для уникнення потенційних проблем, пов'язаних із ранньою дитячої двомовністю та багатомовністю.

У цій статті досліджується, як наявне двомовне володіння українською та російською мовами впливає на опанування третьої мови у польському освітньому середовищі. Досліджуючи когнітивні та лінгвістичні переваги, що дає двомовність, робота проливає світло на те, як українські діти дошкільного віку із досвідом біженства використовують свій мовний репертуар, щоб полегшити засвоєння польської, одночасно зберігаючи рівень володіння рідною мовою (мовами). Крім того, в статті розглядається важливість мовного середовища, що впливає на розвиток і збагачення мов у ранньому віці, тим самим закладаючи основу для подальшого опанування мов протягом життя та навичок міжкультурного спілкування.

Це дослідження проливає світло на багатогранну природу мовної адаптації серед вимушених мігрантів у ранньому віці, пропонуючи наслідки для освітньої політики та практики, спрямованої на підтримку мовного розвитку біженців.

Ключові слова: білінгвізм, трилінгвізм, сімейна мовна політика, домашня мова, мовна адаптація.

Background. The concept of early language acquisition is a subject of considerable controversy within the scientific community, as researchers differ on both theoretical and practical aspects, particularly in the context of children acquiring more than two languages. The success of this complex process is influenced by various factors, such as family language policy, the linguistic environment, and the degree of language proximity. A crucial aspect in understanding language acquisition among early bilinguals is the observation of the dynamics of language adaptation. Language adaptation in bilingualism and multilingualism refers to an individual's capacity to adjust language use and communication style based on the linguistic context or interlocutors involved. This adaptation encompasses flexible switching between languages, code-switching, or adjusting language patterns to meet social or situational requirements. Linguistic adaptation empowers bilingual individuals to navigate effectively in diverse language environments and engage with speakers of different languages. This article directs scientific attention to Ukrainian children who are forced migrants under temporary protection in Poland, attending educational institutions in their host country. Researchers have long been intrigued by various aspects of the educational achievements, including linguistic development, of migrant children

(Stanat & Christensen, 2006). Studies indicate that the educational shortcomings of migrant children become apparent upon entering primary school, with their first (L1) and second (L2) language skills, particularly vocabulary, lagging those of their monolingual peers (Leseman, 2000; Leseman & van Tuijl, 2006; Oller & Eilers, 2002). Migrant children face the challenging task of acquiring a substantial vocabulary in the majority language for success in school (Stipek, 2001), while also maintaining and expanding their L1 skills for various communicative purposes within the school context, as well as in the family and broader cultural community. This study aims to comprehensively examine the circumstances of forced migration among preschool children from Ukraine due to the military conflict, focusing on their early language acquisition and proficiency in the Polish language through systematic learning and immersion in a language-rich environment (Stipek, 2001).

A crucial factor influencing the language proficiency of bilingual children is family speech practices, herein referred to as family language policy in alignment with B. Spolsky. This comprehensive term encompasses an in-depth examination of various components, including family language management and language ideologies. However, this study specifically directs attention to the child's home language, a factor that undoubtedly shapes the child's active vocabulary. The scientific literature consistently underscores the significance of home communication in the early development of language skills (Foster et al., 2005; Hoff, 2006; Raviv, Kessenich & Morrison, 2004). Moreover, research indicates a close correlation between bilingual children's proficiency in each language and the quantity of input received in that language. The more exposure a child has to a language, the higher their performance on assessments measuring vocabulary, reading, and writing skills in that language (De Houwer, 2007; Duursma et al., 2007; Oller & Eilers, 2002; Patterson & Pearson, 2004). This emphasizes the pivotal role of family language practices in shaping the linguistic capabilities of bilingual children.

Researcher T. Hickey (2013) underscores the vital link between home and school in fostering the language development of children aged two to six. This is particularly relevant for those who may be acquiring a second language, contributing to the enhancement of their home language as well.

This article explores the concept of family language policy, a subject extensively studied in linguistics (Smith-Christmas, 2016; Spolsky, 2004, 2009). It is crucial to examine the linguistic landscape in Ukraine, as it profoundly influences the language abilities of Ukrainian children, molding them into bilingual individuals, with a focus on family language policy. Adopting Bernard Spolsky's framework (2004), this study delves into key components of language policy, including language ideologies, practices, and management. The language spoken at home and the mother tongue play crucial roles in shaping both conscious and subconscious language ideologies within the family (Spolsky, 2004). This underscores the pivotal role of language input in early childhood bilingualism and multilingualism, emphasizing its profound impact on language development and identity formation. Considering Ukraine's language situation, a significant portion of preschool children emerge as bilinguals (Shevchuk-Kliuzheva, 2023). In this context, the home language serves as the foundation for further speech development, even in cases where bilingualism as a first language.

Bilingualism is often praised for its numerous advantages. Research indicates that bilingual individuals often exhibit a combined vocabulary in both their first language (L1) and their second language (L2) that surpasses that of monolinguals (Oller, Pearson, & Cobo-Lewis, 2007; Vermeer, 1992). Additionally, the foundational knowledge acquired in the L1 aids in the learning process of the L2 (Cummins, 1991; Genesee, Paradis, & Crago, 2004; Kroll & de Groot, 2005; Verhoeven, 2007). Furthermore, bilingualism has been associated with cognitive benefits such as heightened metalinguistic awareness and executive control, which can facilitate L2 acquisition (Bialystok, 2007; Bialystok & Senmann, 2004). This positive aspect of bilingualism extends beyond favorable socioeconomic and cultural conditions, also benefiting young language-minority children from immigrant backgrounds (Verhoeven, 2007). However, it is important to approach these findings with caution. The correlations supporting positive transfer between languages are tentative, as contextual, and cognitive factors may also play a role and need to be controlled for. Moreover, the quantity and quality of exposure to both languages can significantly influence language development. Despite the advantages of bilingualism, there is a counterargument. The notion that times spent learning a second language may detract from the development of the native language suggests a competitive relationship between L1 and L2, potentially resulting in negative or subtractive bilingualism (Butler & Hakuta, 2004; Cummins, 1991). Studies have shown that bilingual immigrant children often have lower proficiency in each language compared to their monolingual peers (Oller & Eilers, 2002; Patterson & Pearson, 2004), suggesting that subtractive bilingualism may be a concern in these communities. Thus, the interplay between positive and negative mechanisms of bilingualism in immigrant communities and their effects on child outcomes is a crucial area for further investigation. While bilingualism offers many benefits, it is essential to consider both the advantages and potential challenges, particularly in immigrant communities where the dynamics of language acquisition and development are complex and multifaceted. Balancing input and ensuring adequate support for the development of both languages are critical for promoting positive outcomes in multilingual children.

The State of Research and Methodology. Prior to the full-scale invasion, the linguistic landscape of Ukraine exhibited a nuanced and intricate picture. Among both adults and children, a spectrum of bilingualism in Ukrainian and Russian was prevalent. Presently, the state's language policy views this widespread bilingualism as a transitional phase necessitating correction. Remediation efforts are likely to entail reshaping the attitudes of bilingual individuals, discouraging Russian usage, and fostering alterations in the speech patterns of those proficient in both languages. Scholars such as Larisa Masenko (Masenko, 2001, 2010, 2011), Gerd Hentschel, and Olesya Palinska (Hentschel, Palinska 2022), as well as Pavlo Levchuk (2015, 2019, 2020), have extensively explored various sociolinguistic dimensions of Ukraine's language dynamics amidst prevalent Ukrainian-Russian bilingualism.

Detailed descriptions of Ukraine's linguistic milieu and its direct impact on the linguistic repertoire formation of Ukrainian children in the pre-war era were outlined (Shevchuk-Kliuzheva 2020, 2023). Previous research materials indicate that a vast majority of Ukrainian-Russian children fall into the category of bilinguals, largely influenced by their bilingual environment: Ukrainian-first-language children, during socialization, acquire Russian (the local variant) through direct interaction with its speakers, while Ukrainian children primarily learn Russian as a second language through formal education, with Ukrainian being the primary language. The exigencies of war-induced migration significantly diversified their language repertoire by incorporating the languages of host countries. This study aims to scrutinize the linguistic adaptation dynamics of Ukrainian-Russian bilingual children in a Polish-speaking environment.

This research initiative evolved within the ambit of the project "Early stages of development of bilingualism in Ukrainian children in Polish kindergartens," backed by the National Agency for Academic Exchanges of Poland through its term grants program (agreement No. BPN/GIN/2022/1). The methodology and intricacies of the study were expounded upon in a previous article (Shevchuk-Kliuzheva & Blasiak-Tytula, 2023), elucidating the specifics of vocabulary assessments (both active and passive) and the average age of participating children (59.5 months), totaling 100 children (52 boys and 48 girls). For the purposes of this article, 10 children (5 girls and 5 boys), averaging 57.8 months in age, were selected, representing varying degrees of language usage and proficiency across their first, second, and third languages. The study aims to delineate:

- the rate of language acquisition in a language-immersive environment coupled with structured learning;
- the trajectory of diminishing active language skills in instances of language disuse and/or early-age priority shifts within bilingual and multilingual contexts.

The data analyzed in this article underwent a multifaceted methodological approach. Initially, direct observation was employed, entailing an evaluation of vocabulary acquisition levels, encompassing both active and passive, in two distinct languages – Ukrainian and Polish. Furthermore, the inclusion of the Russian language during testing, particularly through language code-switching and lexeme hybridization among actively bilingual Ukrainian-Russian children, illuminated the intricacies of acquiring related languages by early bilinguals. It also shed light on the unique language inputs within each familial context. This methodology facilitated a comprehensive understanding of language dynamics among forced migrants, including early bilinguals and multilinguals temporarily residing in Poland. After a span of 6 months, the vocabulary test was administered once again. This subsequent assessment yielded data regarding active and passive vocabulary proficiency in both languages, enabling the tracking of language adaptation dynamics among Ukrainian bilingual children within the Polish-speaking environment. Additionally, the study incorporated the outcomes of a sociolinguistic survey conducted within a focus group comprising parents of preschool children (Shevchuk-Kliuzheva and Blasiak-Tytula, 2023). This survey was pivotal in grasping the broader trends in speech practices within migrant families, offering valuable insights into the linguistic landscape of migration. The amalgamation of direct observation and sociolinguistic survey methodologies provided a nuanced and comprehensive examination of the linguistic circumstances prevalent among the target group.

**Results.** As previously mentioned, our study focuses on understanding the language adaptation dynamics of Ukrainian preschool children with refugee backgrounds residing in Poland and receiving education within a Polish-speaking environment. We selected 10 children out of 100 with diverse language backgrounds and categorized them into three groups:

- 1) Ukrainian Dominant: Consisting of 4 children (2 boys and 2 girls) whose primary language is Ukrainian, serving as the main mode of communication within their households (home language).
- 2) Russian Dominant: Comprising 3 children (2 boys and 1 girl) whose dominant language is Russian, predominantly spoken at home
- 3) Ukrainian-Russian Bilingualism: Comprising 3 children (1 boy and 2 girls) who exhibit a mixed form of bilingualism, where the choice of language in family interactions varies depending on the circumstances, with both Ukrainian and Russian being used interchangeably.

It's noteworthy to highlight that early childhood bilingualism, particularly in Ukrainian-Russian contexts, was observed in all children, regardless of their designated dominant language. This phenomenon underscores the inherent nature of language contact and acquisition when directly engaging with native speakers. According to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, the mother tongue, often synonymous with the first or native language, is acquired during childhood within the home environment. In the academic discourse within the Polish context, the terms "home language" and "heritage language" are used interchangeably, referring to the language spoken in everyday family life, often representing an ethnic language (Lipinska & Seretny, 2012). In our research, we emphasize the frequency of usage of the home language, with it being the primary mode of communication for the child and used most frequently.

Language adaptation denotes the evolutionary process through which a language evolves and undergoes changes over time, typically in response to the needs and contexts of its speakers. In the context of this study, conducted over a span of 6 months, language adaptation is observed among Ukrainian preschoolers navigating a predominantly Polish-speaking environment. The dynamics of this adaptation are primarily discernible through the logical mechanisms governing language interaction during contact, manifesting in various linguistic phenomena such as lexical borrowing, hybridization of lexical units, alterations in grammatical structures, as well as subtle shifts in phonetic articulation and accent patterns.

Evaluation of the active vocabulary among children with diverse primary languages (Ukrainian, Russian, or a mixture thereof) after the aforementioned 6-month period revealed significant fluctuations. Notably, there was a marked reduction in active Ukrainian vocabulary among children with Russian as their primary language, suggesting a propensity towards decreased proficiency in Ukrainian alongside heightened proficiency in Polish. Similar trends towards diminished active language use were observed among children with a mixed language background, indicative of an unequal balance between Ukrainian and Russian, with the latter exhibiting a prevailing influence.

Consequently, the dynamics of language adaptation among Ukrainian bilingual children in response to the novel linguistic milieu and their assimilation into the Polish-speaking environment engendered a trajectory towards trilingualism, notably encompassing Ukrainian, Russian, and Polish. Following 6 months of active immersion in the linguistic environment, both L1 (primary language) and L2 (secondary language) were notably influenced by L3 (third language), namely Polish. Conversely, the proficiency in the secondary language for bilingual children – Ukrainian for Russian speakers and Russian for Ukrainian speakers – showed a decline in active usage attributed to limited practice opportunities.

Conclusion. Therefore, the active vocabulary serves as a key indicator of the language adaptation dynamics among preschool children classified as bilinguals, trilinguals, or multilinguals. An essential aspect in comprehending their language repertoire lies in understanding the family's language policy and the primary home language. Primarily, fostering the home language is crucial as it aids in mitigating negative transfer effects and sustains active speaking skills, even as additional languages are acquired. Future investigations ought to prioritize examining the nuances of language hybridization specifically within the realm of active trilinguals at an early age.

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