

**Bilingual acquisition of phonetics and phonology in an immersion school setting:
Age of exposure and sociolinguistic context**

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This paper investigates the acquisition of phonetics and phonology in an immersion school setting. Typically, models of child bilingualism categorise children as either simultaneous bilinguals who acquire two languages from birth, or sequential bilinguals who acquire languages one after another, and report differences in linguistic behaviour between the two groups (e.g. Vihman 2014). Such studies often consider the age of exposure at which a child could be considered a sequential acquirer to be around three years old (McLaughlin 1978).

Here, I investigate two research questions: (1) Is it consistently the case that there are substantial differences between children who acquire a language from birth and those who acquire it from age three onwards? (2) To what extent is this distinction significant in a context of minority language obsolescence and revitalisation? In such contexts home language input may be substantially mixed, skip generations, and the minoritised language may lack community presence.

Data were collected from eighteen children attending Scottish Gaelic immersion schooling on the Isle of Lewis (Outer Hebrides, north-west Scotland). The children were aged 7-11 and were from a mixture of home language backgrounds. As such the sample represents a variety of ages and differing degrees of simultaneous and sequential bilingual children in a minority language setting. Two variables in Gaelic are investigated in this study: duration of preaspiration in word-medial stops and the realisation of Gaelic's three-way lateral contrast. These variables are investigated from word list data, collected via a picture-reading task. The results suggest that there are no clear links between home language background and production of the two variables under consideration here. These results indicate that, in this context at least, there is little difference between simultaneous acquirers and sequential acquirers.

I suggest that a combination of two factors can account for the results in this study. Firstly, the minority status of Gaelic is now such that home acquisition may be restricted and simultaneous acquisition in this context may not be comparable to other simultaneous bilingual contexts. Secondly, these pre-adolescent children may now be orienting towards a peer group variety and differences in home language background might not be as important in predicting speech production as among younger children. In exploring these factors, I build on other recent studies of minority language bilingualism such as Mayr et al. (2017) and show how greater consideration of a wide variety of bilingual contexts and sociolinguistic factors can help to expand and refine models of bilingualism.

References

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