Chapter 20
Vocabulary Inference in Bilingual and Monolingual Children With ASD and ADHD:
A Case Study Approach

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how bilingual and monolingual children with typical development (TD) and developmental disorders (DD) infer the meaning of unfamiliar words from contextual and morphological cues. It also examines how vocabulary knowledge, morphology, decoding, and comprehension affect inference, and whether bilingualism adds an extra burden for children with DD or leads to different performances across disorders. Six 11-year-old children were grouped into ADHD, ASD and TD, with one monolingual and one bilingual per group. Participants completed oral language and reading tasks, including: (a) fluid intelligence, (b) breadth and (c) depth of VK, (d) morphological awareness, (e) decoding, (f) reading compre-

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hension, and (g) vocabulary inference. BL and ML participants (in all groups) performed similarly in depth of VK, morphology, and reading comprehension, but BLs outperformed MLs in decoding. BLs with ASD and TD had lower breadth of VK than MLs, and all groups struggled more in the near inference condition. Vocabulary inference was linked to breadth of VK, and depth of VK was related to morphological awareness.

INTRODUCTION

Understanding how children infer word meanings from context is critical for supporting vocabulary development and reading comprehension, particularly among populations with additional cognitive or linguistic challenges. In typically developing (TD) bilingual and monolingual children, research has shown that vocabulary knowledge and morphological awareness interact closely—each supporting the other—and both contribute significantly to reading comprehension. Readers often rely not only on known vocabulary but also on morphological strategies (e.g., analyzing base and affixes) to interpret unfamiliar words. However, it remains unclear whether this interaction operates similarly in children with developmental disorders (DDs), such as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), especially when bilingualism is also a factor. This study addresses that gap by investigating how bilingual (BL) and monolingual (ML) children with TD, ASD, and ADHD perform on tasks related to vocabulary inference, vocabulary knowledge (VK), morphological awareness, decoding, and reading comprehension. The important contribution of this research lies in its integrated approach—exploring whether language strategies observed in TD children also support inference and comprehension in children with DDs, and whether bilingualism adds an extra burden or benefit for children with DDs. This offers new insights into the linguistic mechanisms that shape language development in complex learner profiles.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Bilingualism is a widespread trend, as more than half of the global population speaks multiple languages. While BLs often face challenges in acquiring proficiency in both languages (Bialystok, Luk, Peets & Yang, 2010), some studies suggest that early exposure to a second language can lead to enhanced proficiency (Thordardottir, 2011; Dosi, Siskou & Dourou, 2023). Previous studies suggest that simultaneous BLs tend to achieve higher proficiency in their second language (L2) than sequential BLs (Thordardottir, 2011). In contrast, other research indicates that language abilities are

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