

Narrative competence of Italian–English bilingual children between 5 and 7 years

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ABSTRACT

The study explored narrative production and comprehension in typically developing Italian–English sequential bilinguals. Thirty 5- to 6-year-olds and 32 6- to 7-year-olds were presented with story telling and retelling tasks, each followed by comprehension questions in Italian (their first language) and English (their second language). The macrostructure of narratives produced was analyzed, considering total amount of relevant information, story complexity, and mental state terms. Comprehension questions focused on implicit story information (i.e., characters' mental states and goals). The results indicated that (a) older children outperformed younger ones on all measures; (b) an advantage of first language (Italian) over second language (English) emerged for younger children; and (c) comprehension and production were both more accurate in story retelling than in telling. Theoretical and methodological implications of these results are discussed.

Narrative competence, defined as the ability to comprehend and produce narratives, is a complex ability that involves the encoding and interpretation of information and organization of this information in a coherent mental representation (Kintsch, 1988; Levelt, 1989). To date, research on narrative competence and development has mainly focused on monolingual children (e.g., Lever & Sénéchal, 2011; Oakhill & Cain, 2012; Silva, Strasser, & Cain, 2014) and mainly on Spanish/English bilingual children living in the United States (e.g., Fiestas & Peña, 2004; Squires et al., 2014; but see also Iluz-Cohen & Walters, 2012). The present paper contributes to the previous literature by focusing on the narrative competence of Italian–English sequential bilinguals aged between 5 and 7 years.

Research on narrative competence and its development is important for several reasons. First, narratives are pervasive in children's lives from an early age, and narrative competence is crucial to communicate social messages to others and to derive meaning from experience (Bruner, 1986; Nelson, 2007). Second, narrative competence has been shown to be related to later children's literacy development and school success (e.g., Oakhill & Cain, 2012; O'Neill, Pearce, & Pick, 2004;