The Weaker First Language Still Matters: Associations between Vietnamese Vocabulary and English Narratives

This study explores relationships between Vietnamese and English vocabulary and oral narratives in first- and second-grade bilingual children. It is well-established that both vocabulary and oral narrative are strong predictors of literacy (Storch & Whitehurst, 2002), and, further, that story structures of oral narratives represent an area where a child's two languages can tap into a common ability (Cummins, 1979; Gutierrez-Clellen, 2012; Pearson, 2002; Uccelli & Paez, 2007). Thus, oral narrative development in either language may contribute to increased story quality in both languages as shown, for example, by regression analyses in Uccelli and Paez (2007), where L1-Spanish story-scores contributed significantly to L2-English story-scores.

In contrast to the kindergarteners studied by Uccelli and Paez, who were approximately balanced between their two languages, the participants in this study were learning typologically different languages, and had much lower proficiency in Vietnamese than English. It is, therefore, an open empirical question whether their oral language measures will show cross-language facilitation in either direction.

Participants were 24 typically-developing children, mean age 7;3yrs. All parents were foreign born, and 83% of the children were exposed to Vietnamese-only in the home. School instruction was in English-only. Vocabulary and narrative skills were tested with parallel measures in Vietnamese and English. Vocabulary was tested with a subset of items from the Expressive and Receptive One-Word Picture Vocabulary Tests (EOW, ROW, Brownell, 2000ab) and a Vietnamese adaptation (Pham & Kohnert, 2014). Narrative skills were assessed with Vietnamese and English versions of the Multilingual Assessment Instrument for Narratives (MAIN: Gagarina et al., 2012). The MAIN protocol includes two parallel story-retell scripts, administered with picture support.

Table 1 displays means for the three tasks in each language and cross-language comparisons using paired-sample t-tests. On average, children performed better in English than Vietnamese, with the largest difference between languages in expressive vocabulary (EOW). Correlations between measures in Table 2 show that Vietnamese story-scores were positively related to receptive and expressive vocabulary in Vietnamese, but not to age. English story-scores were positively related to age, expressive vocabulary in English, and receptive vocabulary in *Vietnamese*. Regression models further examined the predictive nature of these correlations. Importantly, Vietnamese receptive vocabulary accounted for an additional 19% of unique variance in English story structure, even after controlling for age and English expressive vocabulary.

Findings suggest the presence of one-way cross-language transfer from Vietnamese to English, even for this sample of children with highly limited Vietnamese proficiency. Therefore, in addition to positive psychological and social effects of maintaining one's first language (e.g., Phinney et al., 2001), there seem to be academic benefits as well, even when children are already experiencing first language loss.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Cross-language Comparisons

	Vietnamese	English	p-value, paired-sample *t*-test
ROW	52% (17%)	60% (14%)	0.054
EOW	17% (10%)	50% (16%)	< 0.001**
Story	33% (19%)	53% (12%)	< 0.001**

Table 2. Correlations between Vocabulary and Story-scores in Vietnamese(V) and English(E).

	Story-V	Story-E
Age	0.39	0.44*
ROW-V	0.48*	0.50*
EOW-V	0.57**	0.13
ROW-E	0.01	0.37
EOW-E	-0.05	0.44*

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