Comparing Mechanisms Underlying Spanish-English Bilinguals’ Literacy Skills

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In clinical and educational settings, often Spanish-English bilingual heritage speakers are assessed against norm-referenced data of monolingual speakers of a specific language. However, being bilingual does not mean the individual carries the same linguistic profiles as two monolingual speakers. Because there is limited data on the literacy skills of bilingual literacy skills, we aim to understand the mechanisms underlying bilinguals’ literacy skills in Spanish and English. Participants recruited through flyers from Southern California universities are asked to complete tasks that measure Spanish and English literacy skills. To measure literacy skills, participants read four passages—two in Spanish and two in English—and complete (1) comprehension questions after reading each passage, (2) a Recognition Memory Task, where participants determine what sentences did or did not appear in the passages they read, and (3) the Test of One Word Reading Efficiency, a standardized measure which assesses fluency in sight word reading efficiency. Participants also complete a Language History Questionnaire, in which they self-report their frequency of Spanish and English use. We expect results to show participants’ self-reported bilingualism to range widely, from English-dominant to balance between the two languages to Spanish-dominant. We also expect greater variability in reading comprehension and memory in Spanish than English, dependent on individual experience with each language. Additionally, we will examine how memory and reading efficiency may predict reading comprehension in each language. Understanding the mechanism in which bilinguals process text helps researchers better understand how to assess and support literacy in the heritage language. These results also have the potential to shape clinical and educational policies and practices around biliteracy, which could also influence pedagogy from PreK to higher education. Moreover, these findings could provide much needed insight to caregivers, like parents, who want to be intentional in supporting biliteracy in their children, especially when they are young.