

SUCCESSSES AND CHALLENGES OF CHILDREN WHO ARE SYRIAN REFUGEES: LANGUAGE, LITERACY, AND WELLBEING – BILINGUAL DEVELOPMENT IN SYRIAN REFUGEE CHILDREN

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WHAT THE RESEARCH IS ABOUT

OBJECTIVE: This study explores how home language environment factors affect bilingual children's acquisition of their second language of English and maintenance of their heritage language of Arabic. This is a three-year longitudinal study with research carried out in Edmonton, Toronto, and Waterloo.

RESEARCH JUSTIFICATION: Research on the bilingual development of refugee children is limited, despite this group having distinct characteristics and migration experiences that could impact language development.

PRACTICAL GOAL: The objectives of this study were: (1) to examine the language environments and the English and Arabic lexical and morphological development of children from Syrian refugee families at the early stage of their settlement in Canada, and; (2) to determine how language environment factors shape children's English and Arabic development at this early stage, in addition to factors such as, age, amount of schooling and cognitive capacity.

PRIMARY AUDIENCE: Educators, mental health practitioners, service providers, and refugee families.

HOW THE DATA WAS OBTAINED

This study involved 133 children from 63 families with a mean age of 9.36 (SD = 1.96, range = 6-13); 83.5% of the children had siblings who also participated in the study. All families were resettled in Canada as refugees in 2015-2017. Parents were administered a questionnaire in Arabic to gather information on family demographics and the home language environment (Alberta Language Environment Questionnaire-4).



Children’s English vocabulary and grammatical abilities were assessed through standardized measures (Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test-IV, Test of Early Grammatical Impairment). Children’s Arabic vocabulary and grammatical abilities were assessed through measures developed for the Levantine variety of Arabic (Arabic Language Assessment Battery, Arabic Morphological Awareness). Non-verbal analytic skills were measured using the Matrix Analogies Test.

CALL TO ACTION

If home language environments are weak for certain refugee children, additional language enrichment for children’s first and second language from schools and communities should be made available to benefit them academically and for broader social inclusion.

WHAT THE STUDY FOUND

- › Environmental characteristics of Syrian refugee families are impacting children’s bilingual development.
- › Home language environment is weaker for Syrian refugee children than other Canadian bilingual children from diverse migration background and lengths of residency.
- › Children engaged in fewer literacy activities in Arabic than English, likely because they had interrupted or no schooling in Arabic.
- › Children had more schooling on average in English in Canada than schooling in Arabic.
- › Limited reading/writing in Arabic could be a risk factor for variable attainment in that language. However, parents reported that children socialized with friends more in Arabic than in English, and this could be a potential protective factor for maintenance of Arabic language skills.
- › Mothers’ educational attainment was a strong predictor of outcomes in both languages. Fathers’ educational attainment was a strong predictor for Arabic vocabulary.
- › Non-verbal analytical skills, (MAT) and how much exposure children had to each language (through schooling for English and according to age for Arabic) were strong predictors of scores in both languages.
- › More English use with siblings was associated with better English outcomes.
- › After 2 years in Canada, most of the Syrian children in this study were still Arabic dominant when interacting with siblings and peers.

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ABOUT CYRRC

The Child and Youth Refugee Research Coalition (CYRRC) is a network of researchers, service providers, and government partners working together to produce and share research that facilitates the integration of young refugees and their families in Canada and beyond.

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the Child and Youth Refugee Research Coalition.



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