**Brave New Word: Multilingualism and language learning**

A study of Portuguese immigrant children growing up in a multilingual society

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**Introduction**

Working memory - the ability to store and manipulate information in mind for a brief period of time in the course of ongoing cognitive activities (Baddeley & Hitch, 1974) - has been suggested to play a crucial role in children’s language acquisition; native and foreign (Gathercole, 2006; Service, 1992)

The central executive and the phonological loop have been found to make significant contributions to vocabulary acquisition and the comprehension of language (Cain, Oakhill, & Bryant, 2004; Mascoua & Gathercole, 1999; Papagno, Cecchetto, Reati, & Bello, 2007)

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**Method**

**Summary**

Working memory skills, vocabulary and comprehension were investigated in native and second language languages in a population of Portuguese immigrant children growing up in Luxembourg - a country in which Luxembourgish is mainly used in social interactions, and German and French are instructed in schools

**Participants**

- 20 Portuguese children: 7 years old, living in Luxembourg for at least 5 years
- 20 Luxembourgish children: 7 years old, living in Luxembourg
- 10 low SES, 10 high SES
- 20 Brazilian children: 7 years old, living in Brazil
- 10 low SES, 10 high SES
- Luxembourgers: 10 high SES
- Brazilians: 10 low SES, 10 high SES

SES: Socio economic status

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**Results**

**Tasks in Luxembourg**

- Digit recall
- Backwards digit recall
- Counting recall

**Tasks in Portuguese**

- Nonword Repetition
- Expressive vocabulary
- Receptive vocabulary
- Comprehension

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**Discussion**

As the Portuguese immigrant children and their monolingual peers from Luxembourg and Brazil performed at comparable levels on the working memory measures, their poor language performance in all three languages is unlikely to be related to a fundamental cognitive deficit. The fact that their knowledge of Portuguese vocabulary was even lower than that of children from impoverished backgrounds in Brazil also rules out the hypothesis that their poor language skills are simply a reflection of lower SES. Instead, the findings appear to be a direct consequence of growing up as an immigrant in a multilingual society.

Despite normal general cognitive functions, as documented by the working memory measures, immigrant children show a significantly slower native language development that can not be explained by differences in wealth or other socio economic factors. This result raises the question of the necessity of specific language support for immigrant children growing up in a multilingual society.

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**References**