

Brave New Word: Multilingualism and language learning

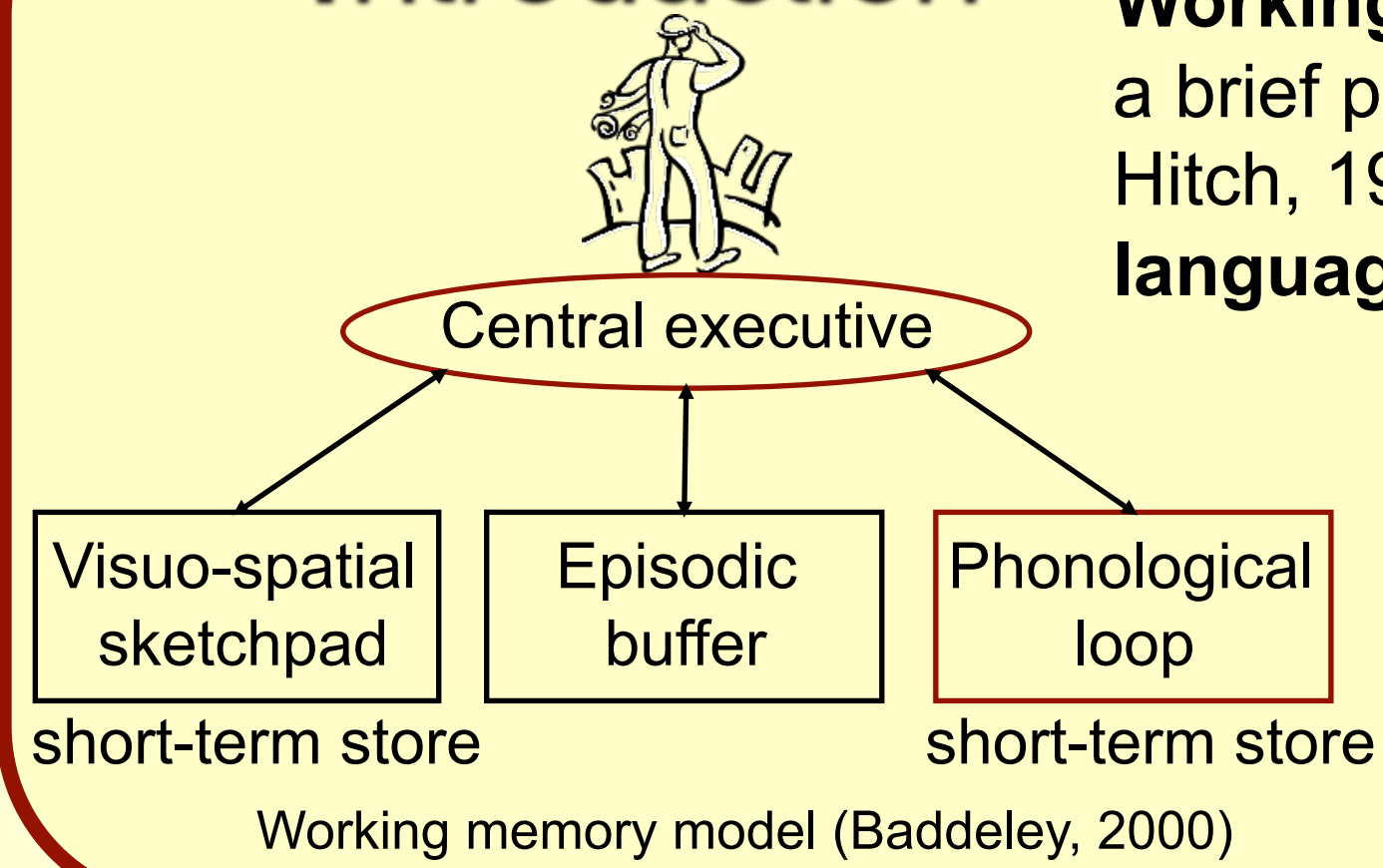
A study of Portuguese immigrant children growing up in a multilingual society

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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; Masoura & Gathercole, 1999; Papagno, Cecchetto, Reati, & Bello, 2007)

I know it is 'Wollek' in Luxembourgish, but what is it in Portuguese? Maybe Wolk-ão?

How does growing up with an immigrant background affect children's linguistic and working memory skills?

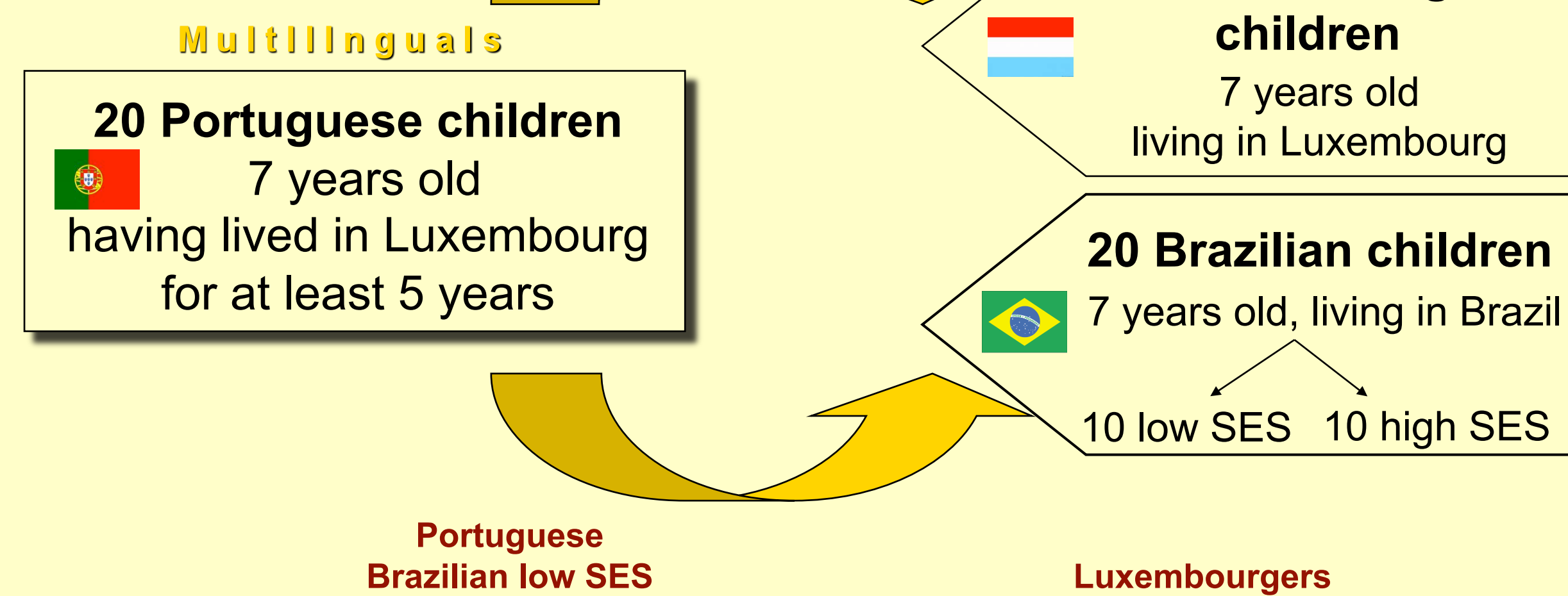
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Method

Summary

Working memory skills, vocabulary and comprehension were investigated in native and secondary 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



SES: Socio economic status

I know the word in Portuguese but what is it again in Luxembourgish?

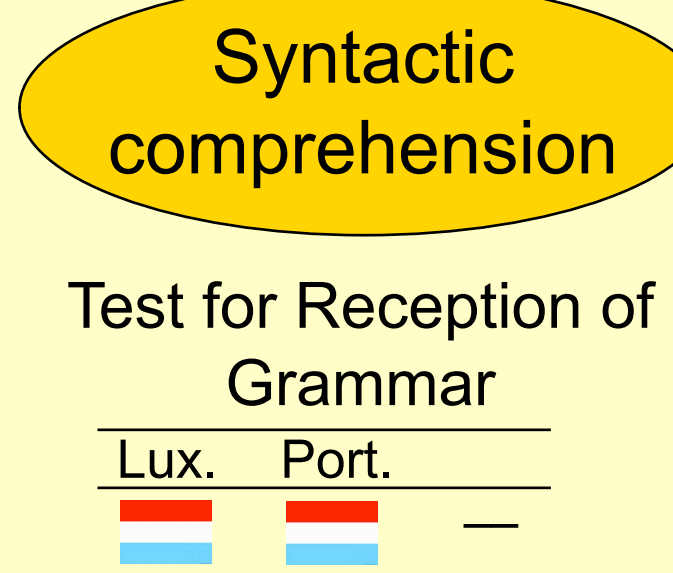
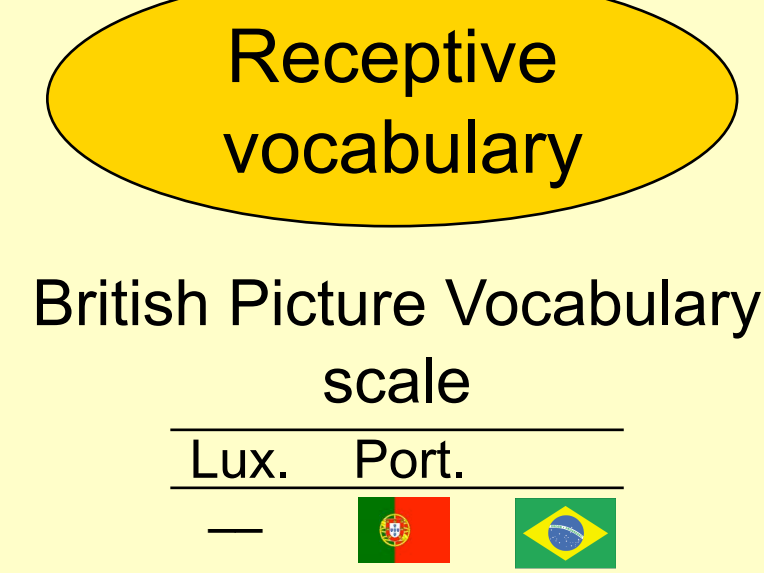


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Material



Method



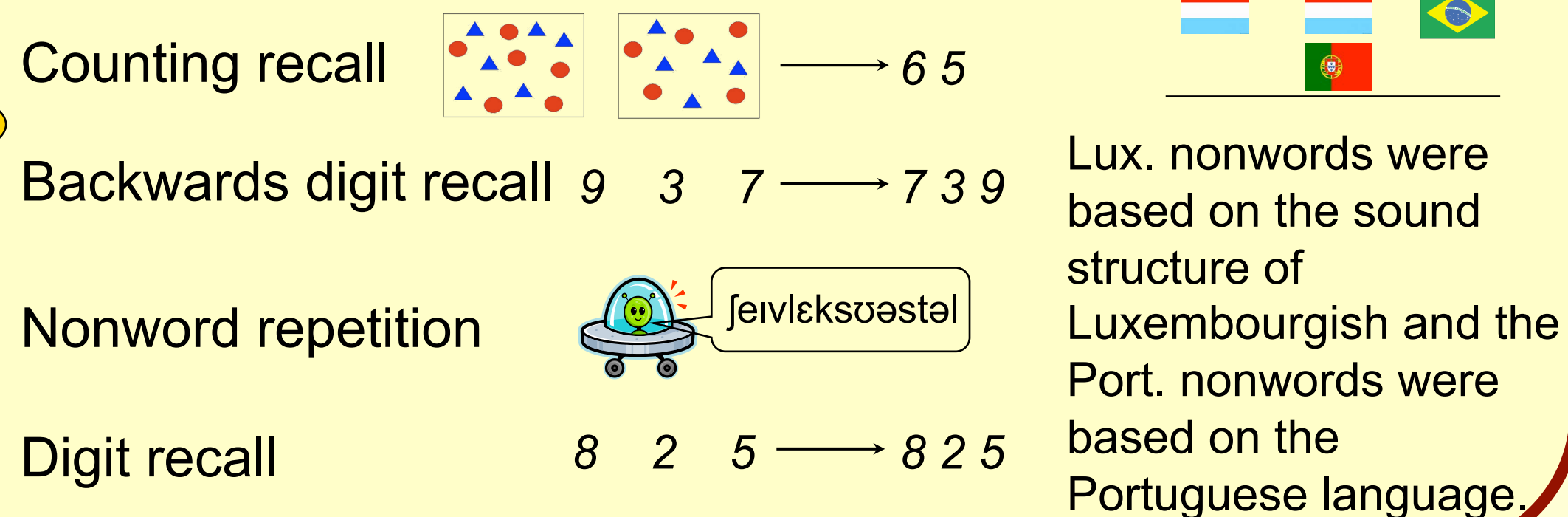
Tables: Languages in which the different groups of children performed each language task

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Method

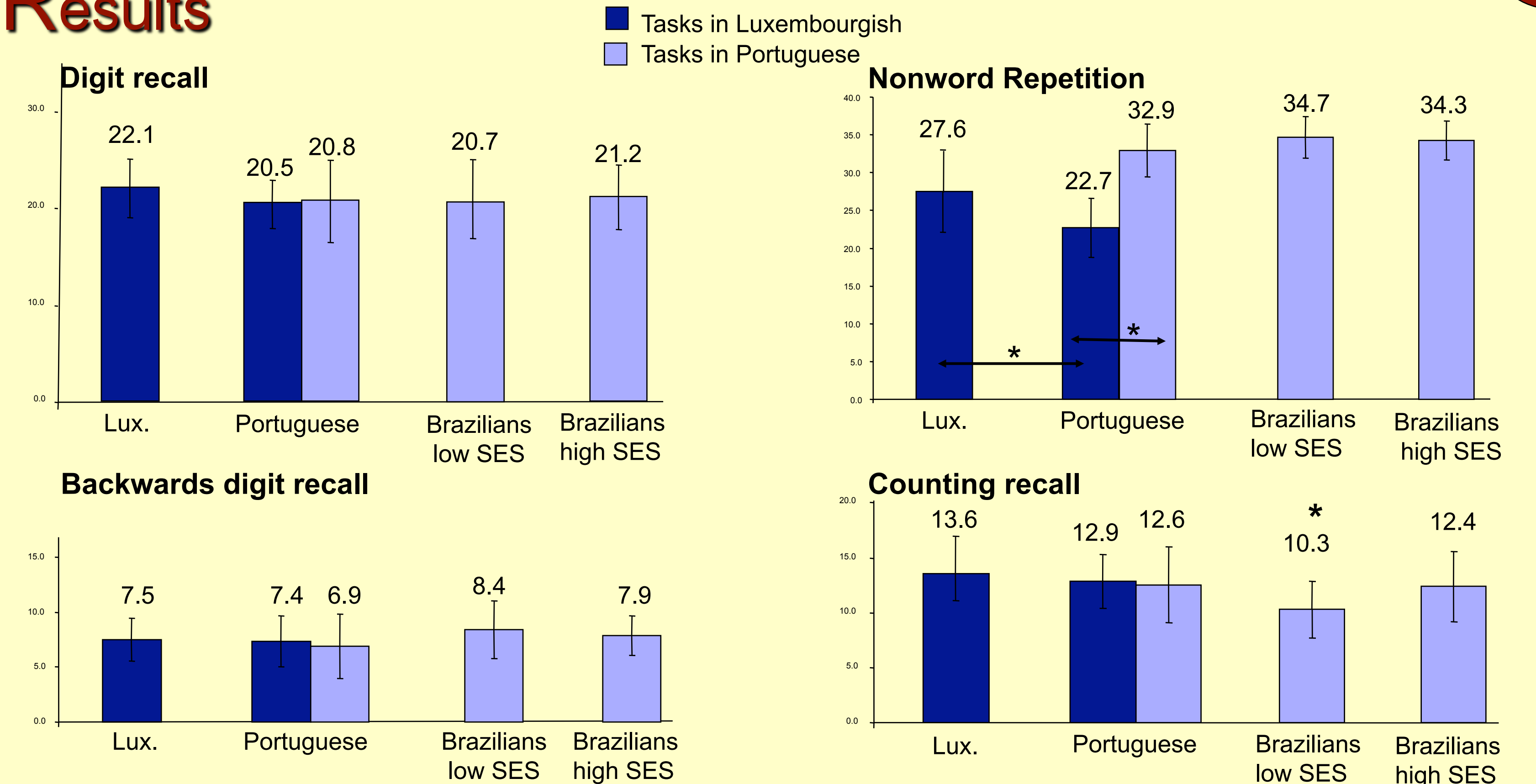
The monolingual children performed the tasks in their native language and the Portuguese immigrant children in both languages - Luxembourgish and Portuguese.

Material



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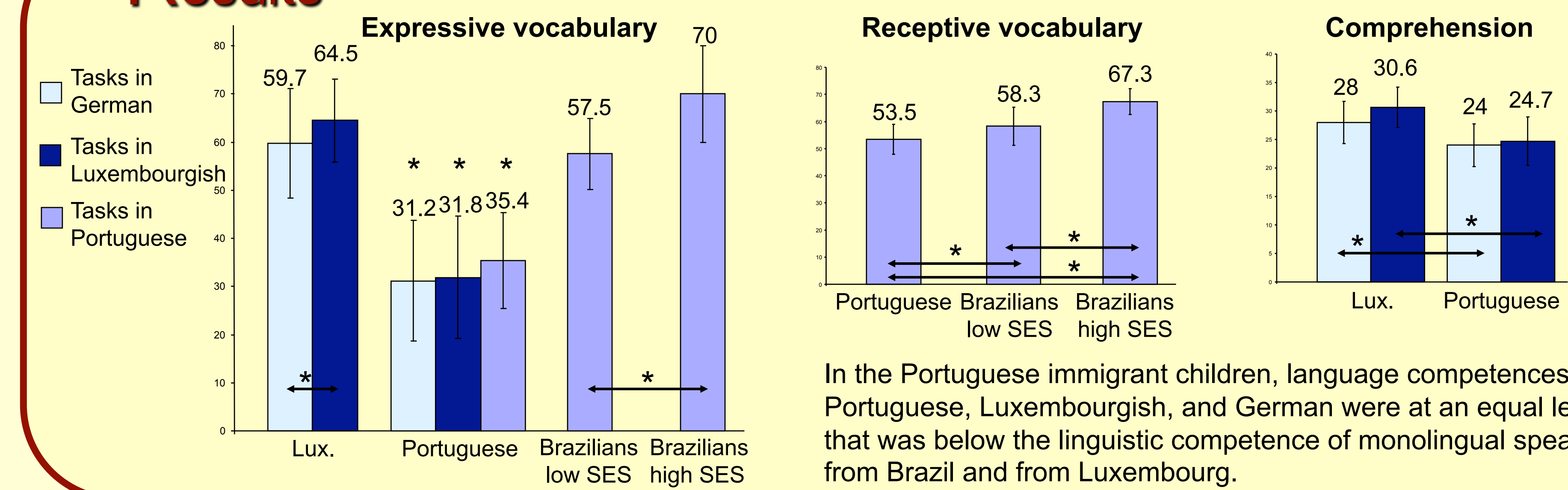
Results



The 4 groups did not differ on digit recall and backwards digit recall. The Portuguese immigrant children performed equally well to their Brazilian counterparts in the repetition of the Portuguese sounding nonwords, whereas their performance in the repetition of the Luxembourgish nonwords was below that of the native Luxembourgish speakers. On counting recall the low SES group from Brazil manifested scores that were below the three other groups.

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Results



In the Portuguese immigrant children, language competences in Portuguese, Luxembourgish, and German were at an equal level that was below the linguistic competence of monolingual speakers from Brazil and from Luxembourg.

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.

References

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