How to Quantify Bilingual Experience? A Delphi Consensus Survey

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While most investigations of bilingualism rely on the documentation of language background, there is substantial variability within the field regarding how bilingual experience is documented and quantified. The absence of methodological agreement on how to quantify bilingualism is reflected in the variety of language background questionnaires and resulting measures. Profiling bilingualism is also key to informing practice (i.e., teaching and speech & language therapy), where different tools are also used. This variability jeopardises comparability across studies and cross-pollination between research and practice. Recent discussions have suggested a need for consensus on which aspects of bilingualism to document and how (e.g., Marian & Hayakawa 2020).

To establish how children's bilingual experience should be documented and measured, we carried out a consensus survey by using the Delphi method (see Iqbal & Pipon-Young 2009). The survey was distributed online in two rounds, in which 132 panelists (researchers, speech and language therapists, teachers) from 29 countries rated a total of 124 statements (informed by an international, cross-sector scoping workshop). The statements related to various aspects of bilingual experience to be documented and the ways of doing it. Agreement or disagreement with each statement was rated on a 5-point scale (strongly disagree, disagree, I don't know, agree, strongly agree). Consensus was pre-defined as 75% agreement threshold.

After two rounds of the online survey, 79% of statements (i.e., 98/124) reached consensus, revealing near-unanimity regarding the need for common methods to document bilingual experience. Thematically, agreement was reached regarding the need to document the following aspects of bilingual experience: language exposure and use, language difficulties experienced, proficiency (when it cannot be assessed directly), child's education and literacy practices, indicators of input quality, language mixing practices, and attitudes (towards each language and towards language mixing). Consensus levels were the highest in relation to language exposure and use, and the need to document them in detail (i.e., across interlocutors, in different contexts, over time). The variability observed with respect to other aspects is likely a reflection of the fact that they have hitherto been researched less systematically. This is particularly the case with language mixing and input quality. We discuss the implications of these findings for the next step of our project: the creation of a new tool to quantify bilingual experience. Apart from being informative on which aspects of bilingualism to document and how, the level of consensus reached may provide some guidance in distinguishing the "core" aspects of bilingualism that should always be documented from other optional aspects.

Acknowledgements

References

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