

Home language maintenance across early childhood among culturally and linguistically diverse Australian children

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Background

Australia is a country built on a foundation of multilingualism and multiculturalism.

There are many known benefits to multilingualism, both cognitively and socially. Adesope, Lavin, Thompson, and Ungerleider (2010), found that multilingualism was associated with cognitive benefits including: increased abstract and symbolic representation skills, attention, working memory, and metalinguistic awareness. Multilingualism also has a number of social benefits as it enables children to communicate with members of their home community who may not speak the dominant language of the broader social environment (such as grandparents) and facilitates increased cohesion among immigrant families (Tannenbaum & Howie, 2002) and communities (Ward & Hewstone, 1985).

In English-speaking countries, children from multilingual families are often exposed to a number of languages. Upon learning a new language, children may maintain using their home language, resulting in them becoming multilingual, or they may experience a language shift to the dominant language and cease speaking the home language, resulting in language loss.

Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC)

Growing up in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) is a nationally representative study supported by the Australian government. The study commenced data collection in 2004 and is ongoing, with new waves of data being collected at two-year intervals. Data are collected from two cohorts, the birth (B) cohort (who were studied from birth) and the kindergarten (K) cohort (who were studied from kindergarten, aged 4- to 5-years) each containing approximately 5,000 children. The current study focuses on children in the B cohort.

Aims

The aim of this study was to answer the following research questions:

1. What patterns of language use, maintenance, and loss are occurring within multilingual children and among the most common language-minority communities in Australia during early childhood?
2. What personal and environmental factors are associated with patterns of language use, maintenance, and loss in Australian multilingual children?

Method

Participants: Participants were 4,252 children and their parents/caregivers in the birth (B) cohort of LSAC who were present for the first three waves of data collection.

At wave 1, children were aged 0 to 1 years, at wave 2 children were aged 2 to 3 years and at wave 3, children were aged 4 to 5 years.

Procedure: During wave 1 of LSAC data collection for the B cohort (when children were aged 0- to 1- year-old), parent 1 took part in a face-to-face interview with a member of the LSAC data collection team. Data collection involved the completion of a comprehensive questionnaire about their child and their family situation.

Data pertaining to language use and maintenance were selected from the data set for analyses. Data analyses were undertaken using the IBM Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) Statistics for Windows, Version 20.0 (IBM Corporation, 2011).

Reference for full paper: Verdon, S., McLeod, S., & Winsler, A. (in press). Language maintenance and loss in a population study of young Australian children. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*.

Findings

Linguistic diversity among Australian children

- At wave 1 - 9.1% ($n = 388$) of children were exposed to a language other than English.
- At wave 2 - 15.7% ($n = 666$) spoke a language other than English.
- At wave 3 - 15.2% ($n = 645$) spoke a language other than English.
- The most common languages other than English spoken by wave 3 were:
- Arabic ($n = 57$, 1.3%), Vietnamese ($n = 27$, 0.6%), Italian ($n = 25$, 0.6%), Spanish ($n = 22$, 0.5%), and Greek ($n = 20$, 0.5%).

Language maintenance

- Overall, 91.5% of children maintained speaking a language other than English at wave 2, and 86.6% maintained by wave 3 (See Figure 1).
- There were differences in language maintenance according to the language spoken.
- Arabic-speaking multilingual children tended to maintain speaking Arabic throughout early childhood.
- Italian-speaking children experienced a strong language shift towards English with 50% of children identified as speaking Italian at wave 1 making a language shift to English as their primary language by wave 3.

Personal and environmental factors influencing language maintenance

The following personal and environmental factors were associated with language maintenance among non-English speaking children (see Table 1):

- parental language use
- presence of a grandparent in the home
- type of early childhood care
- first- and second-generation immigrant status
- parental perception of support from the educational environment

Table 1

Personal and environmental factors bivariately related to language maintenance

Factor	Wave 2 to Wave 3	
	Maintained	Not Maintained
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	79.0%	21.0%
Female	76.9%	23.1%
Parent 1 spoke a language other than English	89.5%*	10.5%
Both parents spoke same language	80.1%*	19.9%
Grandparent present in the home	87.5%*	12.5%
Older sibling in the home	79.4%	20.6%
First/second generation migrant	89.4%*	10.6%
Family-based care	78.8%*	21.2%
Centre-based care	73.0%*	27.0%
No childcare	82.6%*	17.4%

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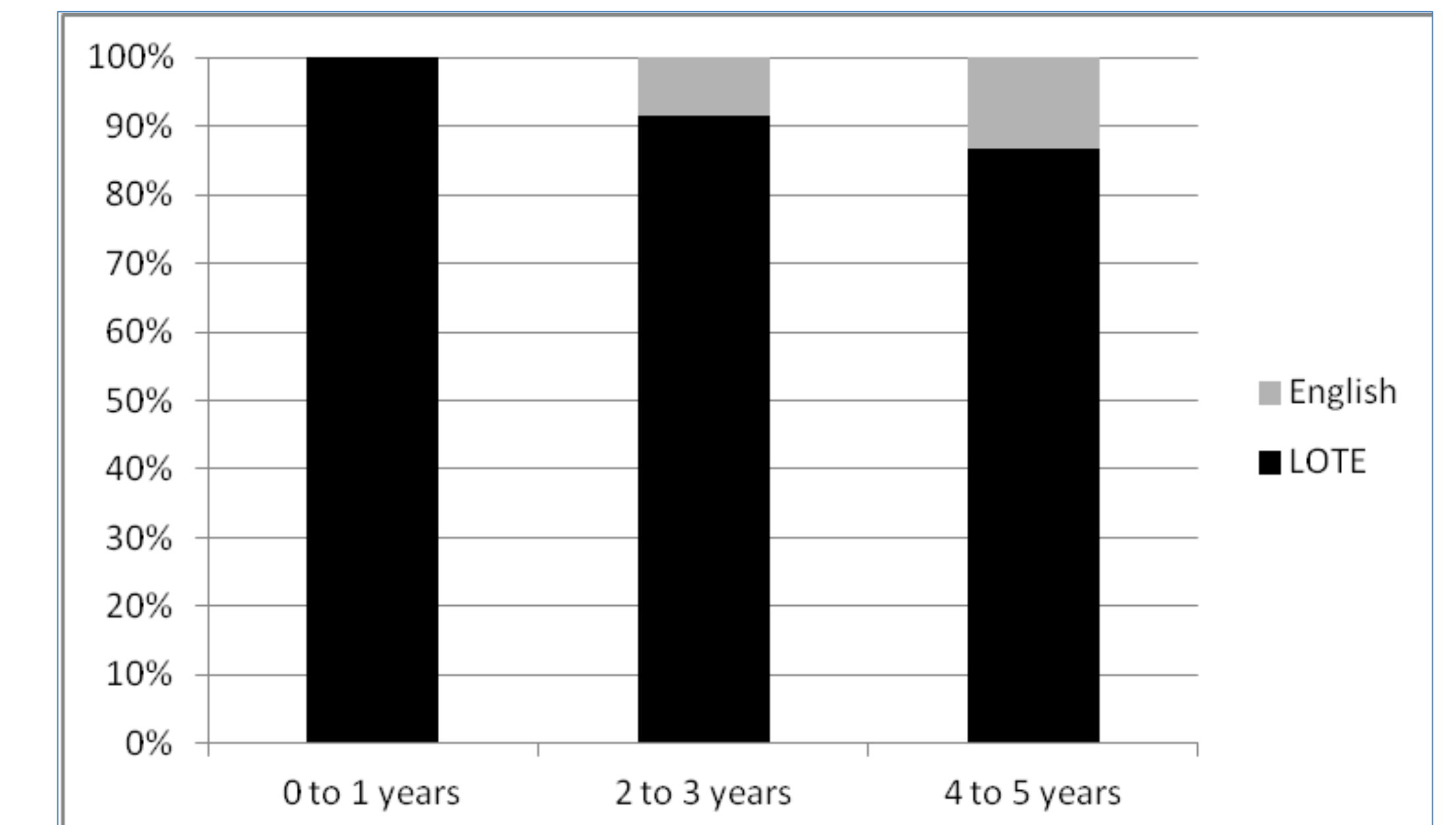


Figure 1 Language maintenance of children who spoke a language other than English (LOTE) compared with wave 1 (0 to 1 years) ($n = 388$)

Implications

Understanding the nature of a population's cultural and linguistic diversity is essential for supporting multilingual children to prosper in an otherwise monolingual-dominant society.

It is crucial that children have opportunities to hear and speak home languages with parents and other influential interlocutors. The current findings suggest that maintenance can be improved when both parents use their home language with multilingual children and also the presence of other family members (such as grandparents) in the home can promote home language maintenance.

Most children who speak a language other than English in Australia will learn to speak English, either as a first or an additional language, given that education is predominantly provided in English. This means that many of these children will be multilingual. Therefore,

it is important that educational settings provide multilingual children with equitable opportunities to facilitate and support home language maintenance as well as English language learning.

It is hoped that these data will be used to inform service planning, resourcing, and funding to assist in the provision of equitable and quality health and educational services that facilitate positive outcomes for all children, regardless of their ethnicity.

Conclusions

In summary, this study found that while many Australian children maintain speaking a language other than English throughout early childhood, many experience a language shift toward English by age five. The patterns of language use, maintenance, and loss varied between individual linguistic groups. Parental use of a language other than English, generations since migration and childcare type were all significantly related to home language maintenance in young Australian children.

References

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