

Foreign children take at least six years to learn the language used in school

September 21 2011



The study reveals that Arabic-speaking students acquire lower levels of Catalan and Spanish. Credit: SINC/ Edu Bayer

There are now more and more foreign children in the classroom, and many of them speak a different language to that of their sociolinguistic environment. A study by the University of Gerona has assessed the knowledge of Catalan and Spanish amongst these children and confirms that they take at least six years to acquire the same language levels as native pupils. Researchers propose a new system that has proven successful in other countries as a way of stopping language from becoming a barrier to academic development.

"Along with previous studies, we have assessed every stage of nursery and [primary education](#) and there is a significant difference between the native and foreign pupils when it comes to their knowledge of the

languages used in schools (Spanish and Catalan)," says José Ignacio Vila, head of Developmental and Educational Psychology and researcher and the University of Gerona.

Vila and his team assessed the knowledge of Catalan and Spanish of 153 Arabic-speaking pupils, 45 Romanian pupils and 259 Spanish-speaking students from Latin America in their final year of [primary school](#) (11-12 years old), all from 72 classes in 52 schools in Catalonia, Spain. All of the pupils had been schooled in this autonomous community since nursery age, and those who joined during primary school had been previously schooled in their own countries.

"Initially we selected 57 schools from a list provided by the Catalan Government of the 570 public schools across Catalonia that have more than 10% of foreign students. The selection process followed two criteria: percentage of foreign students in the classroom and the [language](#) of the school (either Catalan or Spanish)", he explains.

Within this selection, only 52 schools taught Romanian, Latin American or Arab students. Some 69% of pupils attended predominantly Spanish-speaking schools and 31% attended schools that use Catalan more habitually. Researchers assessed the children by testing their knowledge of both languages, which have been standardised in Catalonia since the mid 1990's.

The researchers state that "the sociolinguistic reality of Catalonia provides a good environment for the study of language acquisition in foreign primary school children because, unlike in other countries, the language of the school and the majority language do not usually coincide."

Arabic-speaking students have greater difficulty

According to the results, the Arabic-speaking pupils acquire lower levels of Catalan and Spanish except for spoken Catalan in Catalan-speaking environments, where their level was placed between the Romanian and Latin American pupils. Furthermore, the data suggest that foreign children take at least six years to match the level that native children have of the language used in school.

For the Romanian students living in a Catalan-speaking environment who were schooled in their own language, it takes them between six and nine years to acquire a native level. The Latin American pupils take six years and the Arabic-speaking students know significantly less Spanish than their native counterparts upon completing primary education. These results compliment those obtained from studies in other countries. In any case, those pupils who develop more quickly use the same language both at school and at home and their native language shares similar characteristics to Catalan and Spanish.

Vila highlights that "in order to overcome this difference, we must understand that it is not a problem of reinforcement but of modifying educational practice. Regardless of how much reinforcement or support they receive, acquisition will not take less time because the process of language learning is what it is. We must understand that schools should mainly provide and teach academic knowledge. Independently of what the pupil knows of the [school](#) language, he or she should have the same performance in basic subjects such as maths or science."

For experts, this would involve significant modifications to educational practice so that acquisition of academic knowledge does not depend of linguistic ability. Other countries like Canada, the USA and Australia use teaching methods whereby language does not interfere with academic knowledge.

"In actual fact, this is what bilingual educational has always done. In

other words, it schools [pupils](#) in a different language to their own based on the notion that the problem is not found in the language but in academic knowledge. Imagine if the linguistic immersion of Spanish-speaking [students](#) in Catalonia had failed. We would have a few generations of children without education but that is not the case," concludes Vila.

More information: Judith Oller, Ignasi Vila. "Interdependencia entre conocimiento de catalán y castellano y efectos de la lengua familiar en la adquisición de las lenguas escolares", *Cultura y Educación*, 23 (1): 3-22, 2011

Provided by FECYT - Spanish Foundation for Science and Technology

Citation: Foreign children take at least six years to learn the language used in school (2011, September 21) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2011-09-foreign-children-years-language-school.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.