Multiliteracy in the UK in action: learning to read in the home language supports literacy skills in the majority language

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UK context

More than a million children between 5–18 years old in schools who speak more than 360 different languages between them (National Association for Language Development in the Curriculum, www.naldic.org.uk)

School Census:

According to the School Census (2013), **one in six** primary school pupils in England (612,160) have **English as an Additional Language**.

In secondary schools the figure stands at 436,150, just over **one in eight.** (National Association for Language Development in the Curriculum, www.naldic.org.uk)

Heritage language

- Children who have English as an Additional Language acquire the **home language** as a **Heritage Language**.
- A language qualifies as a heritage language if it is a language **spoken at home** or is otherwise readily available to young children, and crucially **this language is not a dominant language of the larger (national) society**.
- **Majority** (English), **Minority** (heritage).

There is limited or no support of heritage languages in mainstream schools due to:

1. Lack of resources;

2. Lack of understanding about their importance;

3. **A misconception** and **a fear** that support of the heritage languages may be at the **expense of the majority language** and may affect **integration in the society.**

This is the context for the present study

→ investigate the heritage and majority languages of bilingual children in the UK

Heterogeneity in bilinguals

- Bilingual children: a **heterogeneous** population;
- Some may speak two languages from birth (**simultaneous**);
- Others may begin learning a second language later in their life (**sequential, early/late, second language learners**).
- The amount of **input** and **use of their languages** may differ due to various factors:
  - the **status** of each language (majority, minority);
  - which language is used in the **school**, and
  - whether they have **literacy** in one or both languages.

Language dominance

- The children's language ability depends to a large extent on the **use of each language** (Silva-Corvalan & Treffers-Daller, 2016);
- The two languages are usually **not acquired to the same level** (Montrul, 2008, 2013) → **LANGUAGE DOMINANCE**.

- **Language dominance** – construct: based on **language use** and/or **language proficiency** (Li Wei, 2000; Montrul, 2016, among others)

Previous research

- Growing up bilingually and acquiring two languages in their spoken and sometimes written form **influences literacy development positively** (Durgunoglu, Nagy and Hancin-Bhatt, 1993; Niolaki and Masterson, 2012).

- However, bilinguals do not use both languages for the same purpose and frequency but **use languages complementary** (Grosjean, 2006).

- Language use may **change over time** as a function of **experience**, and therefore, language dominance may also change.

Previous research

Language dominance usually **changes** when **children enter a school** that follows a monolingual curriculum in the majority language.

BUT it is unclear

1) if language dominance changes **during** school years and
2) whether it differs across **different domains of language and literacy.**

Reading development in bilingual children

Literacy may proceed differently for bilingual vs. monolingual children:

- Bilingual children may transfer the skills acquired for reading in one language to reading in the other (Bialystok, Luk & Kwan, 2005).

Orthography

The writing system may affect children's acquisition of word reading: each system is based on a different set of symbolic relations.

→ the process of learning to read in different writing systems may depend on the type of writing system used in each language – alphabetic, syllabary and logographic system.

Depth of orthography

Opaque ----------Transparent

(English) (Greek) (Finnish)

Gaps in previous research

There is limited research on how the heritage/minority language and majority language **develop side by side** and **how schooling in a majority language affects children's language acquisition and literacy skills**.

It is unclear **how they compare to monolingual children** and also **how the two languages compare to each other**.

Aims

1. Investigate how primary school children perform in the **heritage** vs. the **majority language** in **phonological awareness** and **reading** tasks and how this **may change over time**
2. Compare them with scores from **monolingual children**
3. Address **how language dominance changes over time** and **how language dominance** relates to **phonological awareness and reading**.

Research questions

- Do children perform better in the **heritage** or the **majority** language?
- Does this change over time **Year 1 → Year 2** & **Year 3 → Year 4**?
- Is there a **relationship** between language dominance, phonological awareness and reading skills?
- Do **monolingual** children have better literacy skills than **bilingual** children?

Participants

40 Greek-English bilingual children (Year 1=20; Year 3=20) and

40 monolingual English speaking children (Year 1=20; Year 3=20)

Socioeconomic Status: middle to upper middle

Attending Greek school on Saturdays

No history in speech and/or language delay or impairment and no parental concerns about language development

The bilingual children were tested also one year later (Year 2 and Year 4 in primary school).

Tasks

	Phonological Awareness		Reading Decoding	
	Blending	Elision	Real-Words	Pseudo-words
English	Comprehensive Test of Phonological Processes-2 (CTOPP-2;Wagner, Torgesen, Rashotte & Pearson, 2013)		Test of Word Reading Efficiency-2 (TOWRE-2;Wagner, Torgesen & Rashotte, 2011)	
Greek	Experimental tasks adapted in Greek by CTOPP-2		Greek adaptation of TOWRE-2 by Georgiou, Parrila & Papadopoulos (2005)	

Examples of tasks

Blending

Participants listened to the sounds of a word separately and had to put them together to create the word,
e.g. a-r-i-θ-m-o-ς (αριθμός) (= number).

Elision

Participant had to say a word without saying one syllable (e.g. /lemoni/ (λεμόνι) (= lemon) without /le/ is /moni/ (μόνη).

Examples of tasks

Real-word Reading Decoding

Assesses the number of real printed words that can be read accurately.

Pseudo-word Reading Decoding

Measures the number of pseudo-words that can be decoded accurately.

Questionnaire

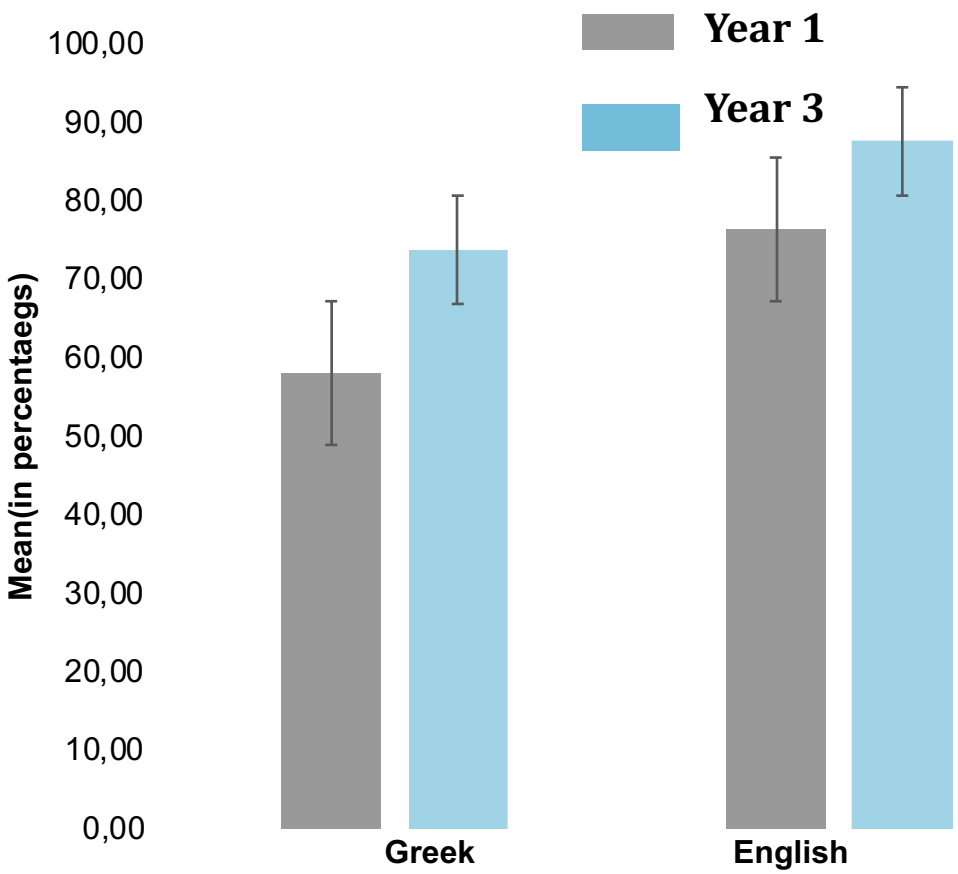
The LITMUS-PABIQ questionnaire (Tuller, 2015): children's language history, quantity and quality of input, and use.

Bilingual children: comparison between English and Greek

Language history - dominance

	Greek		English		
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	t-test
Language exposure before 4 years	**2.4**	.675	**1.88**	.686	$p < 0.05$
Language use in the home	**6.2**	1.92	**7.73**	2.75	$p < 0.05$
Language use outside the home	**6.5**	2.32	**11.65**	1.42	$p < 0.001$
Current skills	**10.8**	2.5	**13.6**	1.7	$p < 0.001$

Results - Vocabulary

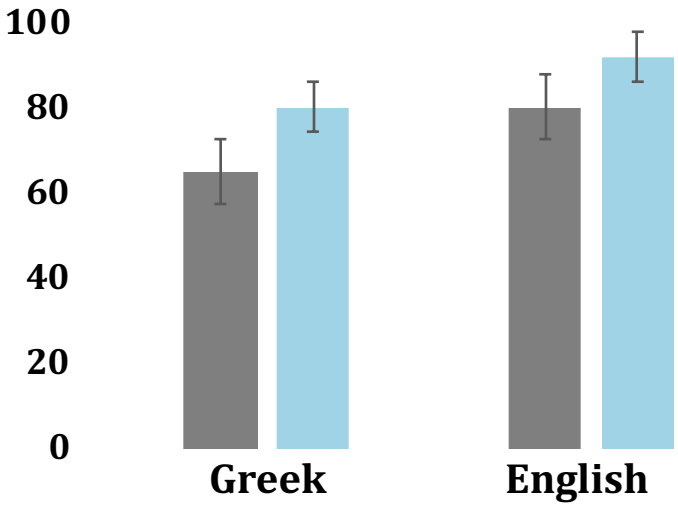


English > Greek
F (1, 38) = 85.841, p < .05

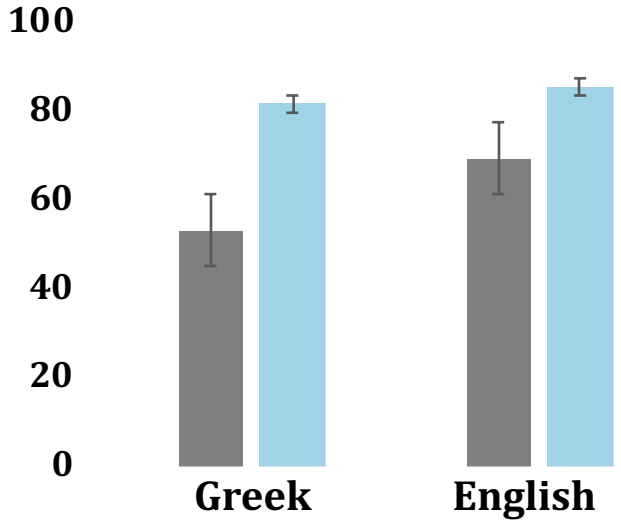
Year 3 > Year 1
F (1, 38) = 24.020, p < .05

No interaction

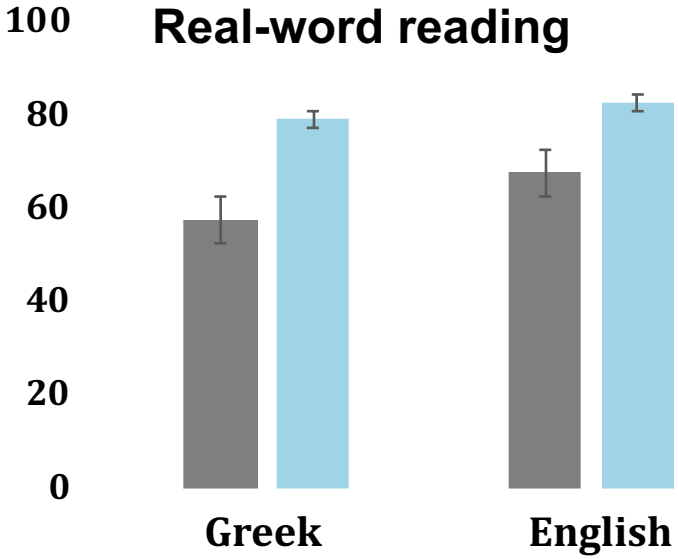
Blending



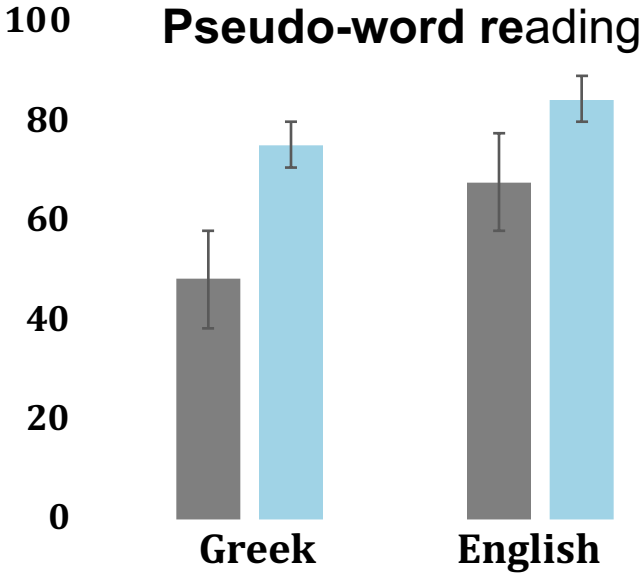
Elision



Real-word reading



Pseudo-word reading



	Exposure before 4 years	Current skills	Use in the home	Use outside the home	Exposure before 4 years	Current skills	Use in the home	Use outside the home
	Greek				English			
Blending		.179	.021	.212	-.263	**.331***	-.027	.181
Elision		.150	.155	**.348***	-.060	.235	.045	.097
Pseudo-word reading		.180	.096	**.351***	-.176	**.392***	.093	.183

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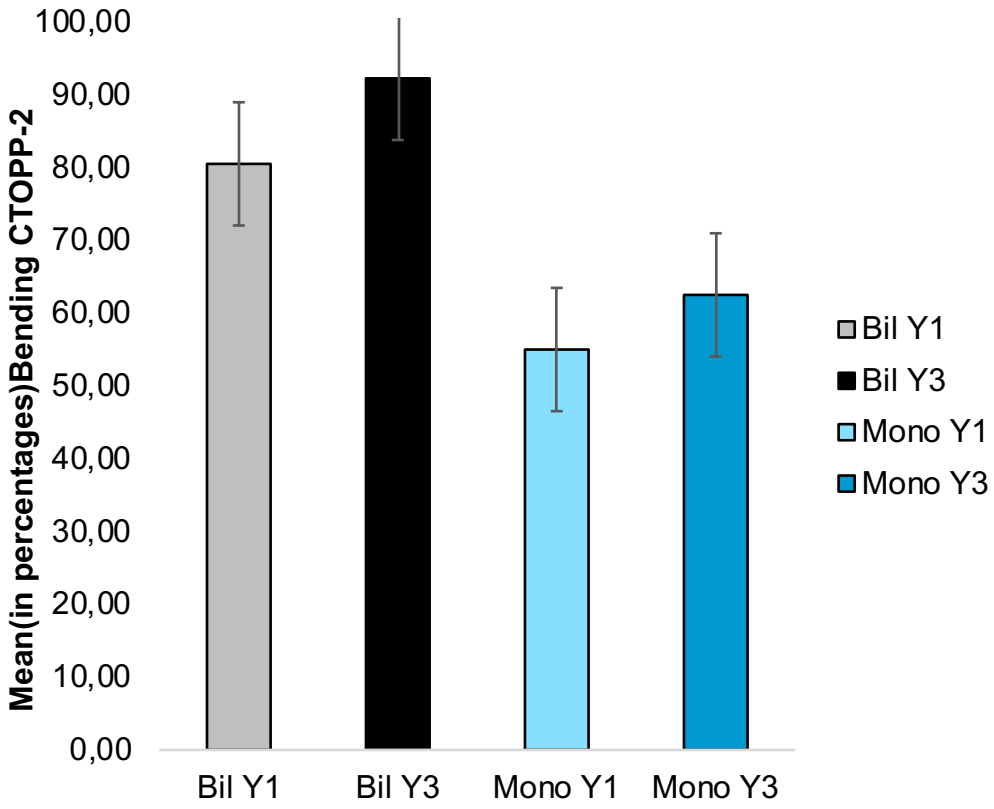
Pseudo-word reading		.180	.096	**.351***	-.176	**.392***	.093	.183

Bilingual children compared to monolingual children

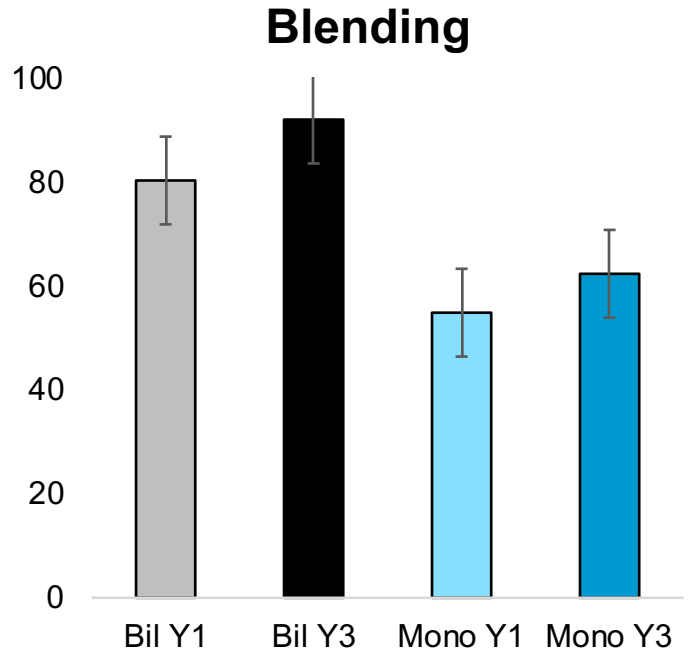
Results - Blending

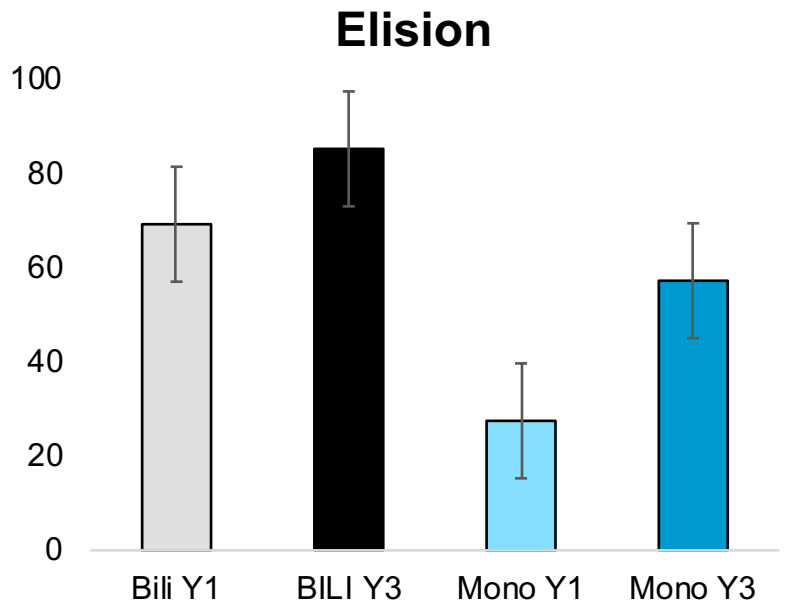


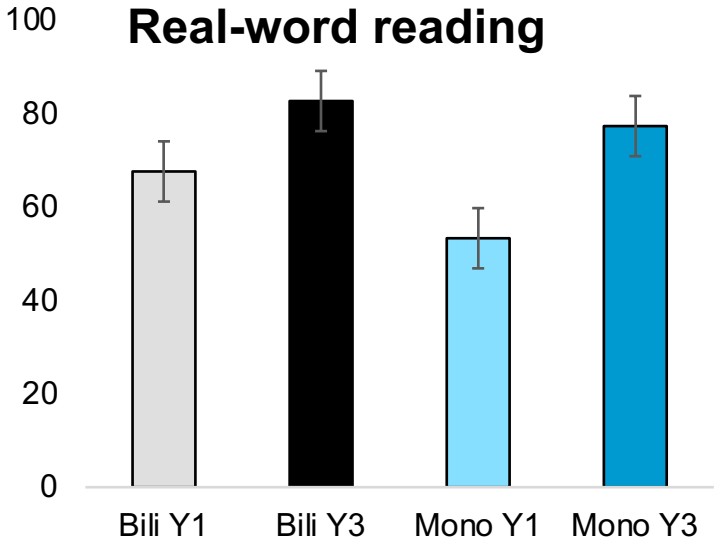
Year 3 > Year 1
$F(1,76)= 13.292$, $p < 0.001$;

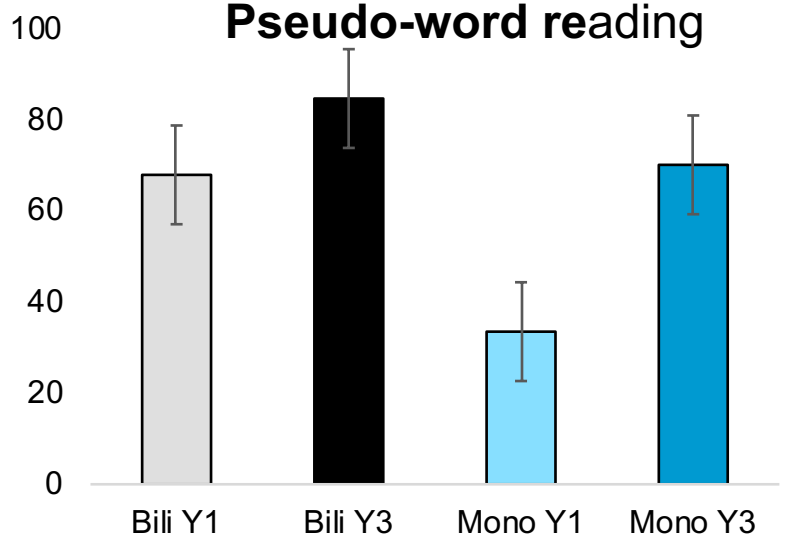
Bilingual > Monolingual
$F(1,76)= 109.5$, $p < 0.001$;

No interaction


Blending
100
80
60
40
20
0
Bil Y1
Bil Y3
Mono Y1
Mono Y3

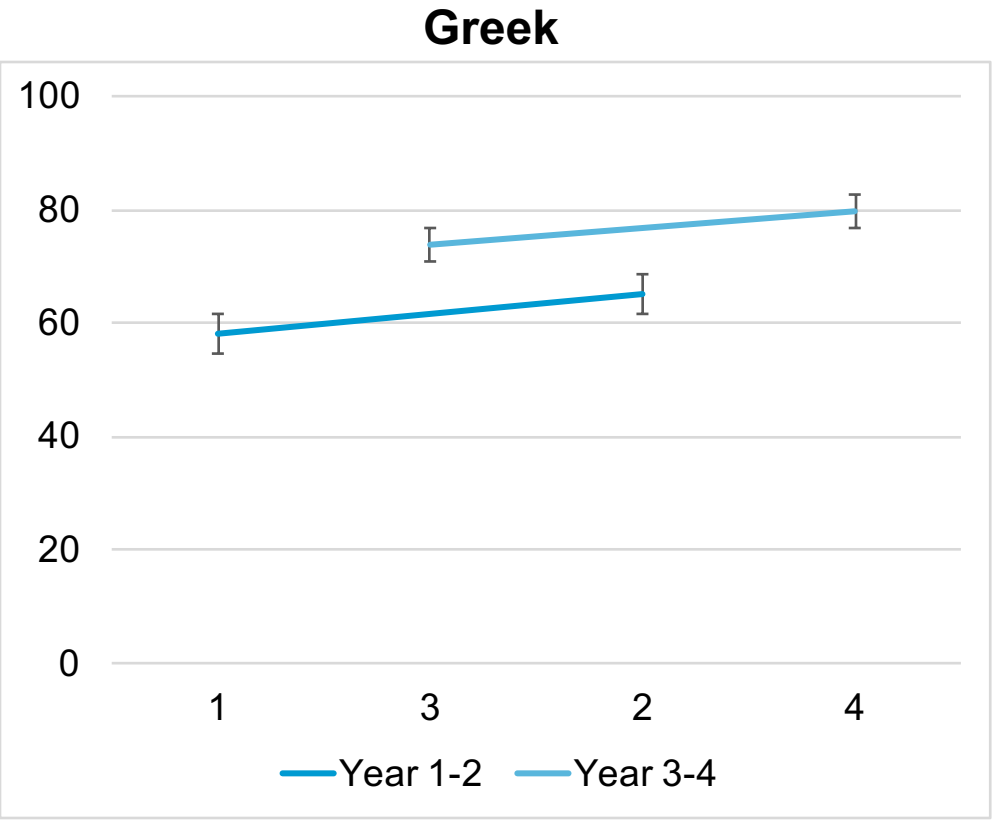

Elision
100
80
60
40
20
0
Bili Y1
BILI Y3
Mono Y1
Mono Y3

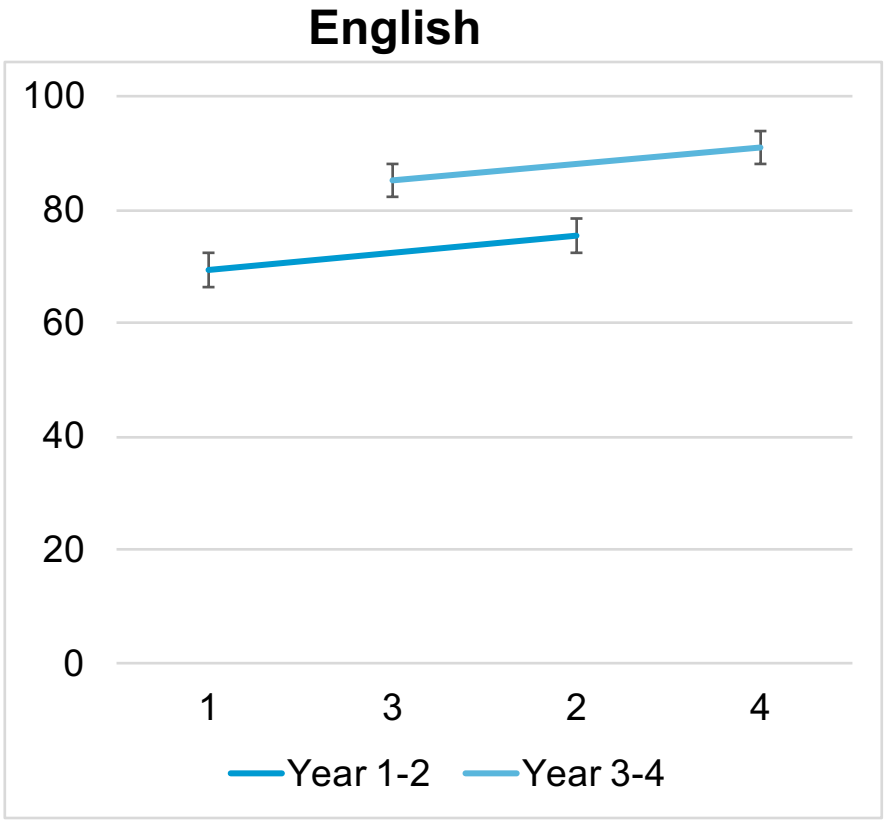

Real-word reading
100
80
60
40
20
0
Bili Y1
Bili Y3
Mono Y1
Mono Y3


Pseudo-word reading
100
80
60
40
20
0
Bili Y1
Bili Y3
Mono Y1
Mono Y3

Performance one year later – longitudinal design

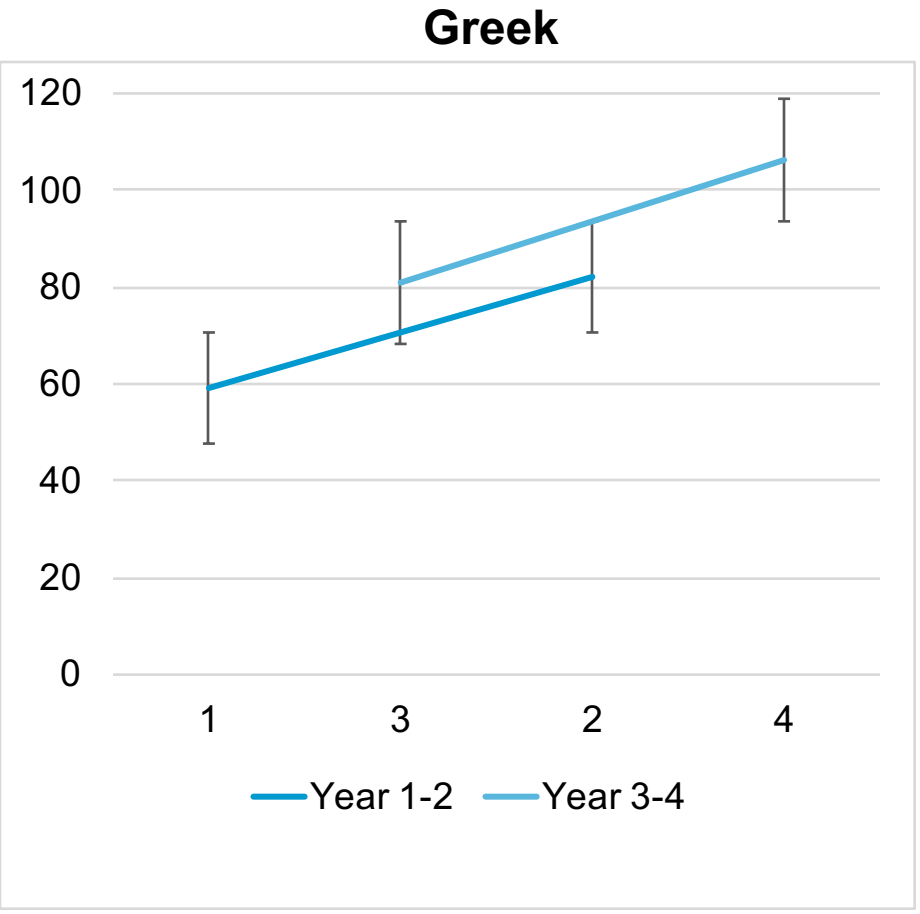
Vocabulary

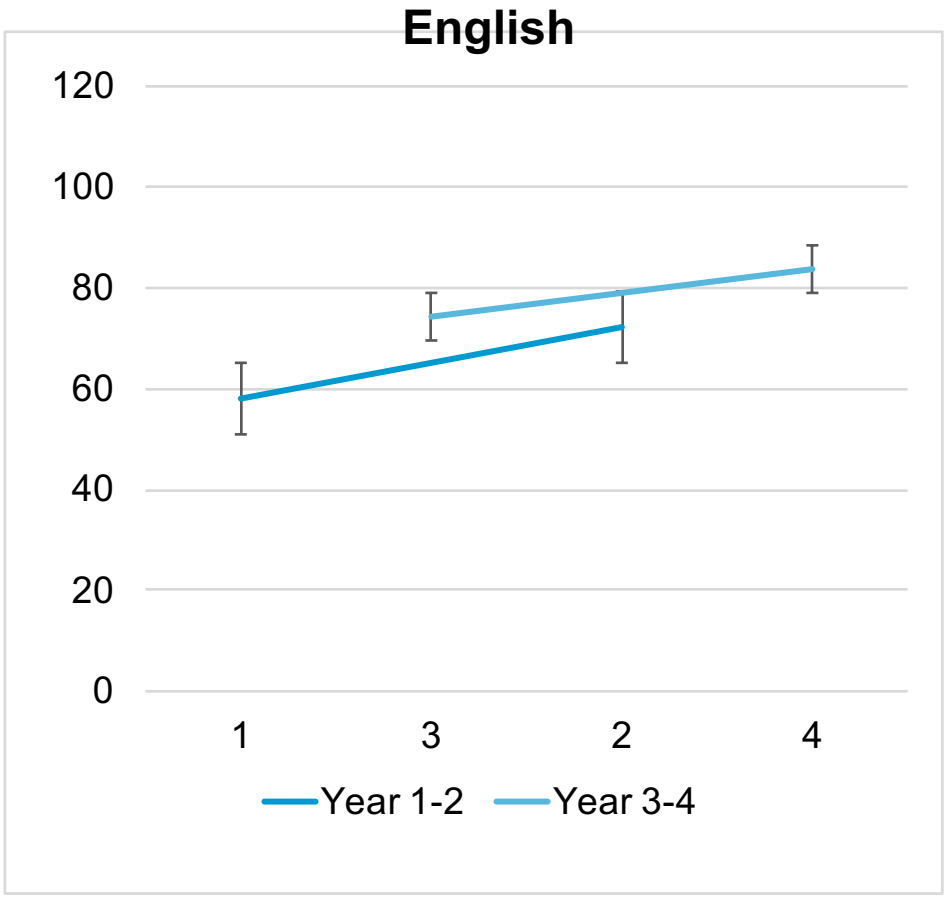




Effect of Time (Time 1, Time 2): $F(1, 38) = 30.868$, $p < .001$
Effect of Language (Greek, English): $F(1, 38) = 85.605$, $p < .0001$
No interactions

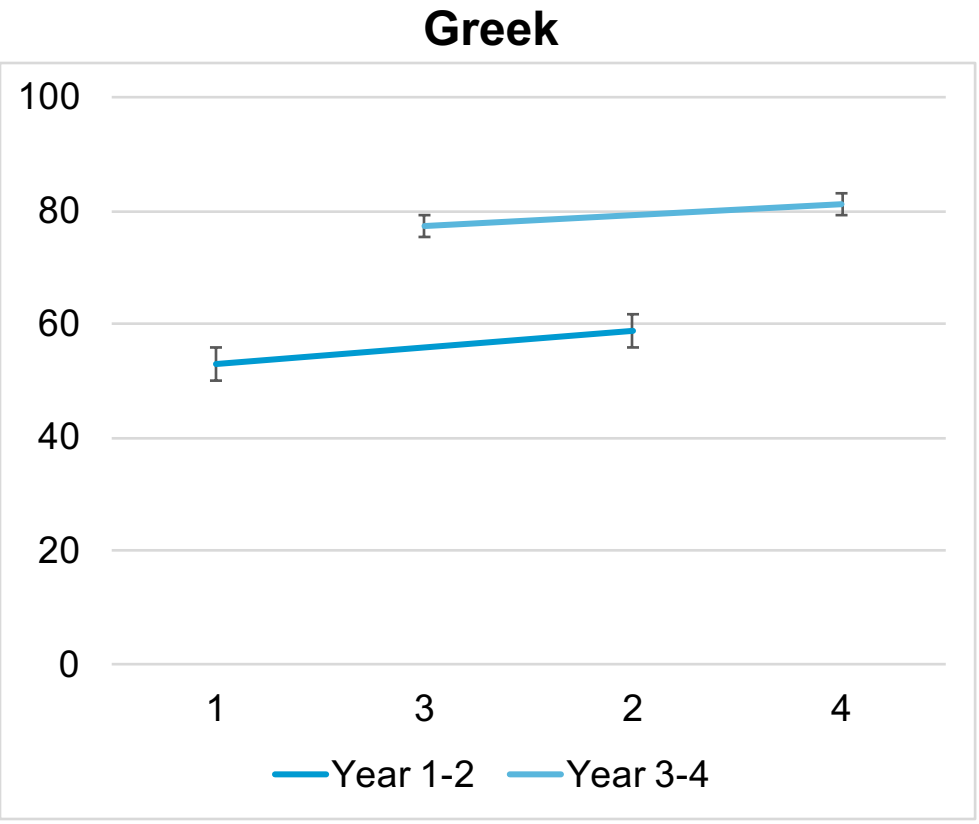
Phonol. Awareness

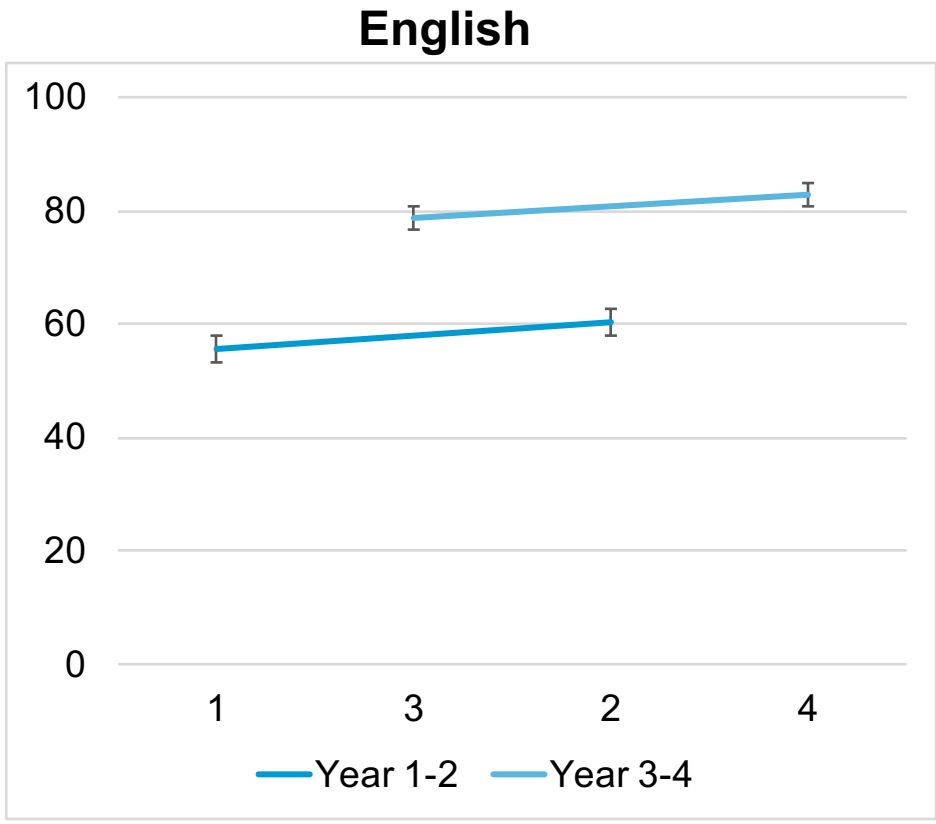




Effect of Time (Time 1, Time 2): $F(1, 38) = 32.934$, $p < .001$
No interactions

Decoding skills





Effect of Time (Time 1, Time 2): F (1,38) = 42.201, p < .001
Effect of Language (Greek, English): F (1,38) = 21.524, p <. 001
No interactions

Research questions

Do children perform better in the majority language (English) vs. the heritage language (Greek)?

YES

Does this change over time Year 1 □ Year 2 & Year 3 □ Year 4?

NO

Is there a relationship between language dominance, phonological awareness and reading skills?

YES BUT

Do monolingual children have better literacy skills than bilingual children?

NO, the opposite in their dominant language

Discussion: majority vs. heritage language

- **Language dominance changes** when children enter **school**;

- Children have **better phonological awareness & literacy skills in the dominant majority language** (English) compared to the non-dominant heritage language (Greek);

Language dominance doesn't change from Year 1 to Year 2 and from Year 3 to Year 4 in terms of language and literacy skills: children have better skills in the majority compared to the minority language in all 4 years of primary school.

Discussion: majority vs. heritage language

A strong relationship between language use outside the home and performance only in the minority language

→ parental effort should be directed towards the minority language because schooling levels out differences in the majority language.

Discussion: monolingual vs. bilingual children

- Better performance in the dominant language could be an effect of cross-linguistic transfer;
- All bilingual children had learnt to read in Greek, a language with transparent orthography;
- Learning to read the heritage language (Greek) may have facilitated phonological awareness and reading skills in the majority language (English).

Conclusion & implications

Being bilingual is a strength for literacy development in the majority language.

Implications:

- → **Supporting heritage languages at school is NOT at the expense of the majority language;**

- → **Literacy development in the heritage language may benefit literacy development in the majority language.**

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General points

Multilingualism advantages: aside of advantages at the cognitive level, multilingualism **opens opportunities** for people to **learn**, **communicate**, for **employment**, etc.

Role of the input: in the **Global North** → schooling can level out differences in home input for the majority language → **heritage languages are not maintained** → we need to look at input at home **for heritage languages** and how we can support them.

Who is setting the agenda?

Thank you

Grazie

Ευχαριστώ

Danke schön

Gracias

ధన్యవాదాలు

Merci

спасибо

धन्यवाद

Aitäh

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Papastefanou, D., Powell, D. & Marinis, T. (2019). Language and decoding skills in Greek-English primary school bilingual children: effects of language dominance, contextual factors and cross-language relationships between the heritage and the majority language. ***Frontiers in Communication 4.65.c***