

Empowering Chinese and English Bilingualism in Chinese Preschoolers: The Role of Conversational Reading

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Abstract: This study examines the effectiveness of conversational reading interventions in supporting bilingual language development among Chinese preschool children. Grounded in ecological systems theory, the investigation focuses on vocabulary, syntactic development, and pragmatic competence while accounting for individual differences such as age and prior language exposure. Semi-structured interviews with educators, parents, and children provide qualitative evidence regarding the intervention's impact. Participants reported enhanced linguistic confidence, increased cross-linguistic transfer, and greater engagement during shared reading. Teachers and parents also emphasized the value of culturally relevant texts and sustained adult-child interaction. The findings offer empirically informed recommendations for integrating conversational reading into early childhood programs and underscore the importance of coordinated home-school efforts in promoting early bilingual communication skills.

Keywords: Conversational reading intervention; Bilingual communication skills; Teacher and parent perspectives

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1. Introduction

In an increasingly globalized world, developing bilingual communication skills in early childhood is a critical educational priority. Many language-minority children enter preschool with limited prior exposure to their home language, creating challenges for second-language acquisition and later academic achievement ^[1]. The preschool years constitute a pivotal period for linguistic, cognitive, and socio-emotional development, during which delays in language proficiency may have enduring consequences ^[2]. In China, early foreign-language learning is particularly salient, yet assessing bilingual development remains complex due to heterogeneous language trajectories. Recent research underscores the need for multidimensional assessment approaches, including domain-specific tools and technology-enhanced measures that capture phonological awareness, vocabulary, oral expression, and print knowledge ^[3,4]. Despite these advances, existing studies often isolate single language skills and overlook the broader influences of parental involvement, individual learner differences, and teacher practices ^[5,6]. These factors collectively shape the effectiveness of early language interventions. Responding to these gaps, the present study examines the impact of dialogic reading and family conversational interaction

on Chinese preschoolers' bilingual development. It explores the effectiveness of conversational reading, improvements across vocabulary, syntax, and pragmatics, the influence of individual differences, and both teacher and parent perspectives on the intervention.

2. Literature review

2.1. Bilingual language acquisition in early childhood education

Bilingual language acquisition in early childhood refers to young children's gradual development of lexical, grammatical, and communicative competence in two languages. Research on children from diverse backgrounds, including refugee families with limited proficiency in the dominant language, highlights the importance of distinguishing language disorders from normal bilingual variation. Memory-based assessments provide useful tools for this purpose^[7]. Recent developments in English language teaching emphasize a redefinition of "English users," with increased recognition of bilingual identities and functional multilingual competence across personal and professional contexts^[8].

Early childhood programs provide structured opportunities for exposure and interaction, forming the foundation for later bilingual development. During this developmental period, children naturally acquire two languages due to heightened neuroplasticity^[9]. Longitudinal evidence shows that early difficulties in phonological processing, measured through nonword and word repetition at ages two to three, are predictive of later language difficulties, underscoring the need for early detection and support^[10].

2.2. Intervention strategies for bilingual language learning

Bilingual interventions aim to strengthen language development through structured activities that promote attention, perception, and cross-linguistic transfer. Studies show that bilingual children often demonstrate enhanced metalinguistic awareness, creativity, and cognitive flexibility; for example, bilingual preschoolers outperform monolingual peers on metalinguistic tasks^[11]. Bilingual approaches also encourage parental participation, even when parents are not proficient in the societal language, and support social and cognitive development through home-school collaboration. Effective interventions commonly use enriched language environments, purposeful play, and culturally relevant materials, leveraging young children's natural language-learning capacity^[12].

2.3. Teacher and parent perspectives on conversational reading intervention

Teacher and parent perspectives are central to understanding how conversational reading interventions function in practice. Media exposure and screen time can negatively affect children's attention and language development, reinforcing the importance of interactive literacy activities. Teachers highlight dialogic reading's benefits for engagement and language growth, while parents report improvements in confidence and bilingual use^[13,14]. Maternal sensitivity and responsive caregiver behavior also support cognitive and linguistic outcomes^[15]. Evidence suggests that early, sustained interventions, particularly those exceeding eight weeks and delivered in naturalistic, bilingual contexts, yield the strongest gains in vocabulary and narrative abilities, though syntactic improvements in L2 remain more limited^[16].

3. Research methodology

This qualitative study employs an interpretive phenomenological approach to examine the role of conversational reading interventions in fostering bilingual communication skills among Chinese preschool children. Participants include preschool children, teachers, and parents from diverse linguistic backgrounds, selected through purposive sampling to ensure variation in language proficiency and cultural context. All interviews were conducted in-person or via video conferencing according to participant preference. Ethical procedures, including informed consent and confidentiality, were strictly

followed.

Data were analyzed using iterative, data-driven thematic analysis. Coding focused on identifying recurring patterns, themes, and insights, with allowance for emergent findings. This approach enabled a comprehensive understanding of how conversational reading interventions influence bilingual language development in preschool children while incorporating perspectives from multiple stakeholders (refer **Table 1**).

Table 1. Demographic profile of participants

Participant	Gender	Age	Selected group
P1	Male	22	Parents
P2	Female	20	Teachers
P3	Male	23	Teachers
P4	Female	21	Teachers
P5	Male	35	Parents
P6	Female	28	Teachers
P7	Male	40	Parents
P8	Female	30	Parents
P9	Male	28	Parents
P10	Female	25	Parents
P11	Male	32	Teachers
P12	Female	27	Teachers
P13	Male	29	Teachers
P14	Female	31	Teachers

4. Analysis

A systematic analytic procedure was employed to examine the implementation of conversational reading interventions and their influence on preschoolers' bilingualism development. The analysis sought to identify recurrent patterns across participant accounts and generate an integrated interpretation of the intervention's effects.

All interview recordings were transcribed verbatim to ensure maximal fidelity to participants' original responses. Relevant paralinguistic cues were noted when they contributed to interpretive clarity. The finalized transcripts were organized and prepared for structured qualitative analysis.

An initial coding framework, aligned with the study's research questions, guided the analytic process. Transcripts were reviewed iteratively to identify meaningful units of data, which were assigned codes representing emergent concepts. Inter-coder reliability was established through independent coding of selected transcripts, with discrepancies resolved through discussion to refine the coding scheme.

The coded data-set was then subjected to thematic analysis to identify cross-cutting themes and conceptual regularities. Relationships among codes were examined, and higher-order thematic categories were constructed to capture the underlying structure of participants' experiences. These themes formed the analytical foundation for interpreting how conversational reading interventions shape bilingual communicative development in early childhood.

5. Results

Analysis of participant narratives yielded three overarching themes:

- (1) The centrality of conversational reading in early development
- (2) Bilingual language acquisition in preschool-aged children
- (3) Pedagogical implications for teachers and parents

Together, these themes illuminate how conversational reading, when paired with intentional adult scaffolding, supports bilingual communicative competence among Chinese preschoolers.

5.1. Theme 1: The importance of conversational reading in preschool children

Participants consistently emphasized conversational reading as a multidimensional developmental scaffold. Interactive dialogue during shared reading was described as enhancing linguistic enrichment, cognitive engagement, socio-emotional understanding, and cultural awareness. Such dialogic interactions were viewed as fostering children's contextual comprehension, imagination, emotional literacy, and foundational literacy skills. Moreover, participants noted that conversational reading strengthens parent-child relational bonds and cultivates early dispositions toward critical thinking and lifelong learning.

5.2. Theme 2: Bilingual language acquisition in preschool children

Findings underscored that bilingual acquisition in early childhood emerges through naturalistic, simultaneous exposure to two languages. Participants highlighted preschoolers' ability to draw on diverse linguistic inputs and interactional cues to develop vocabulary, syntactic knowledge, and communicative competence in both languages. The data reaffirmed that early bilingualism leverages heightened neuroplasticity, enabling children to manage multiple linguistic systems and develop cognitive flexibility, intercultural awareness, and robust linguistic identities.

5.3. Theme 3: Pedagogical implications for teachers and parents

Participants identified clear implications for educators and caregivers. Effective support for bilingual development requires coordinated strategies that integrate linguistic scaffolding, cultural responsiveness, and sustained adult-child interaction. Encouraging language confidence, facilitating cross-linguistic transfer, and maintaining collaboration between teachers and parents were viewed as essential. By creating structured yet supportive environments, educators and caregivers jointly contribute to preschoolers' bilingual growth and cultivate positive orientations toward language learning.

6. Discussion

This study demonstrates that conversational reading is an effective pedagogical tool for enhancing bilingual communication among Chinese preschool children. Participants reported improvements in children's vocabulary, syntactic awareness, communicative confidence, and cross-linguistic transfer. Children's increased willingness to use new words and structures in both languages indicates meaningful progress in bilingual proficiency. Teachers and parents also emphasized that bilingual development is shaped by daily interactional experiences, with conversational reading providing a structured yet flexible context for sustained language practice.

The findings are consistent with literature highlighting the value of developmentally appropriate language interventions and reinforce evidence supporting dialogic reading in early childhood education ^[2,17]. Observed patterns of bilingual acquisition similarly reflect research documenting fluctuations in proficiency based on exposure and cognitive demands ^[18]. Furthermore, the pedagogical implications align with studies underscoring the influence of teacher and learner beliefs on instructional effectiveness ^[19].

Practically, the study suggests that implementing systematic conversational reading sessions, incorporating culturally relevant texts and explicit cross-linguistic links, can strengthen bilingual development. Enhanced home-school

collaboration, particularly through parent-focused training may further enrich children's learning environments.

Limitations include the small, locally specific sample, short intervention timeframe, and uncontrolled external factors such as home language use. Future research should adopt longitudinal and comparative designs, broaden participant diversity, and explore cultural, neurocognitive, and technology-mediated dimensions of early bilingual development.

7. Conclusion

The results indicate that systematic conversational reading sessions significantly improve preschoolers' vocabulary, syntactic development, and functional communication abilities. Incorporating culturally relevant texts further strengthened language learning and promoted cultural awareness. These findings highlight the essential role of early childhood education in supporting bilingual communication skills and offer practical implications for teachers, parents, and policymakers.

However, the study's small sample size and short intervention period limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research should employ longitudinal designs to examine long-term effects and include more diverse participant groups to ensure applicability across different linguistic and cultural contexts. Overall, the study provides valuable insights into effective strategies for fostering bilingual development in Chinese preschool children, emphasizing the importance of coordinated school-home efforts to build young learners' confidence, competence, and cultural understanding.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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