



uOttawa

Inside and out: Pathways to childhood bilingualism and multilingualism

EMILY NISHIBORI, DR. NIKOLAY SLAVKOV (SUPERVISOR)
FACULTY OF ARTS, UNIVERSITY OF OTTAWA

1. Abstract

Issues pertaining to the acquisition and maintenance of minority languages continue to constitute an important area of inquiry for children raised in bilingual and multilingual families. This is particularly interesting in the context of Canada where the official bilingual status promotes educational settings with a medium of instruction in both English and French. This study analyzes the implications of the choices and practices employed by families with respect to the resources of the household and the educational system in relation to the number of languages children acquire and maintain. The preliminary findings help reveal some effects of parental choices on children's linguistic outcomes and offer a summary of best practices with regards to supporting bilingual and multilingual acquisition and the maintenance.

2. Introduction

- This poster is part of a larger study, and focuses only on a subset of the data and the research questions. This project is interested in:
 - the number of languages children are exposed to from birth (i.e. monolingual, bilingual or multilingual, first language acquisition, MoFLA, BFLA, MuFLA) (de Houwer 2009)
 - the parental choice to speak one's native language to the child and transmit one's native language to their child, or choose another language to speak to their child
 - the language shift (Ferguson 1983, Fishman 1991) among the parents, and whether they currently feel most comfortable using their native language or whether they have shifted to a new language themselves.

3. Methodology

- This study adopts a **mixed-methods approach**:
 - paper or online questionnaires completed by parents of bilingual or multilingual children.
 - semi-structured, follow-up interviews with a subset of participants (these are not discussed in the poster)
- All questions pertain to the participants' sociolinguistic context/setting/background, and include the following:
 - parent's language(s), children's language(s), receptive, productive and literacy skills, languages spoken between parents, siblings, code-switching in the family.
- A subset of questions are analyzed in this poster:
 - number of language(s) child was exposed to from birth, number of parents' native language(s) spoken to child, current program of study, number of parents experiencing language shift.
- Responses were coded and categorized with regards to:
 - initial language exposure
 - transmission rates
 - current school program
 - parental language shift

4. Results

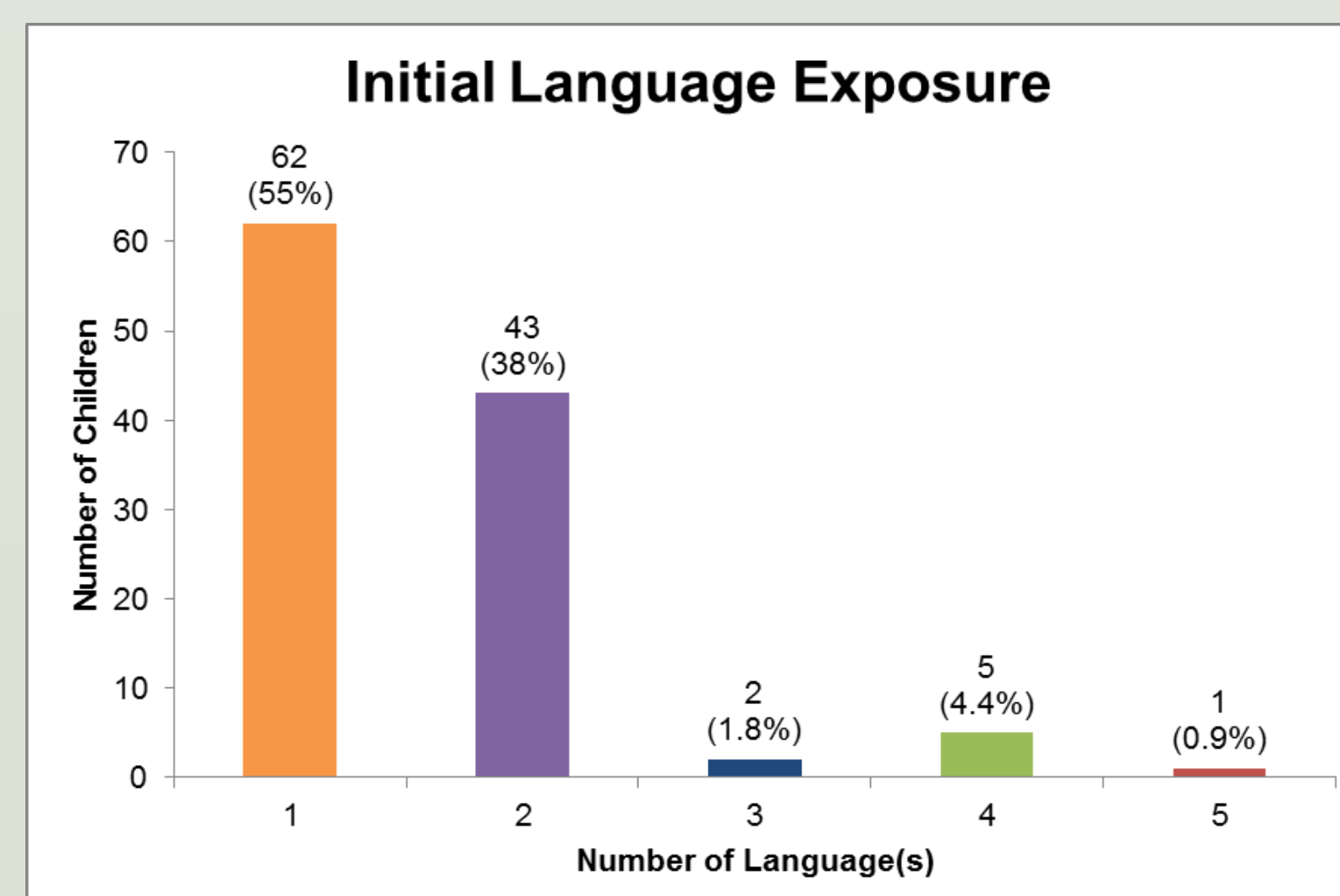


Figure 2. Initial language exposure. During the first year after birth, 55% of children are exposed to one language and 45% are exposed to more than one language.

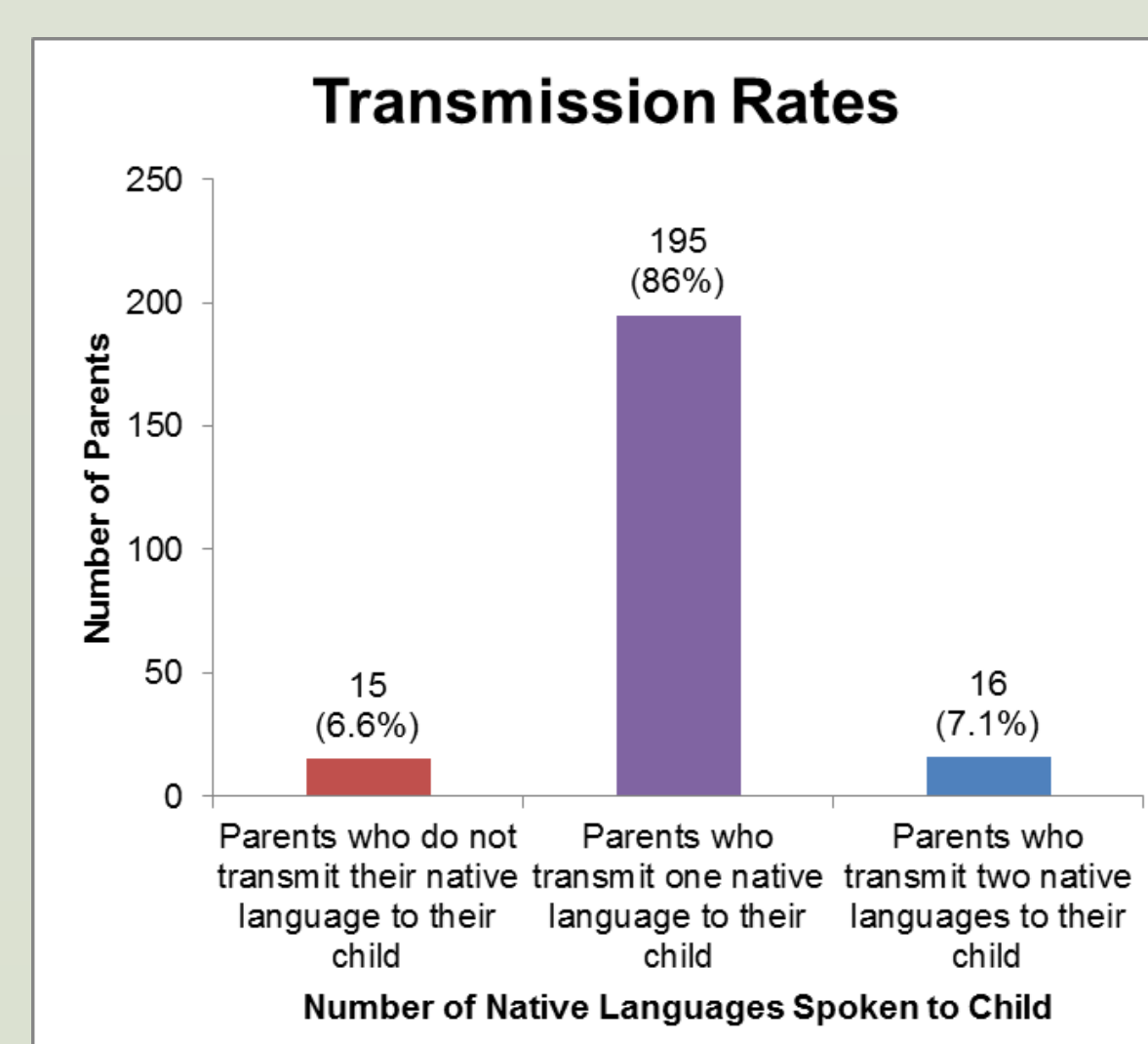


Figure 3. Parents' native language transmission rates to children. From most to least: 86% of parents transmit one native language to their child; 7.1% of parents transmit two native languages to their child; and lastly, 6.6% of parents do not transmit their native language to their child.

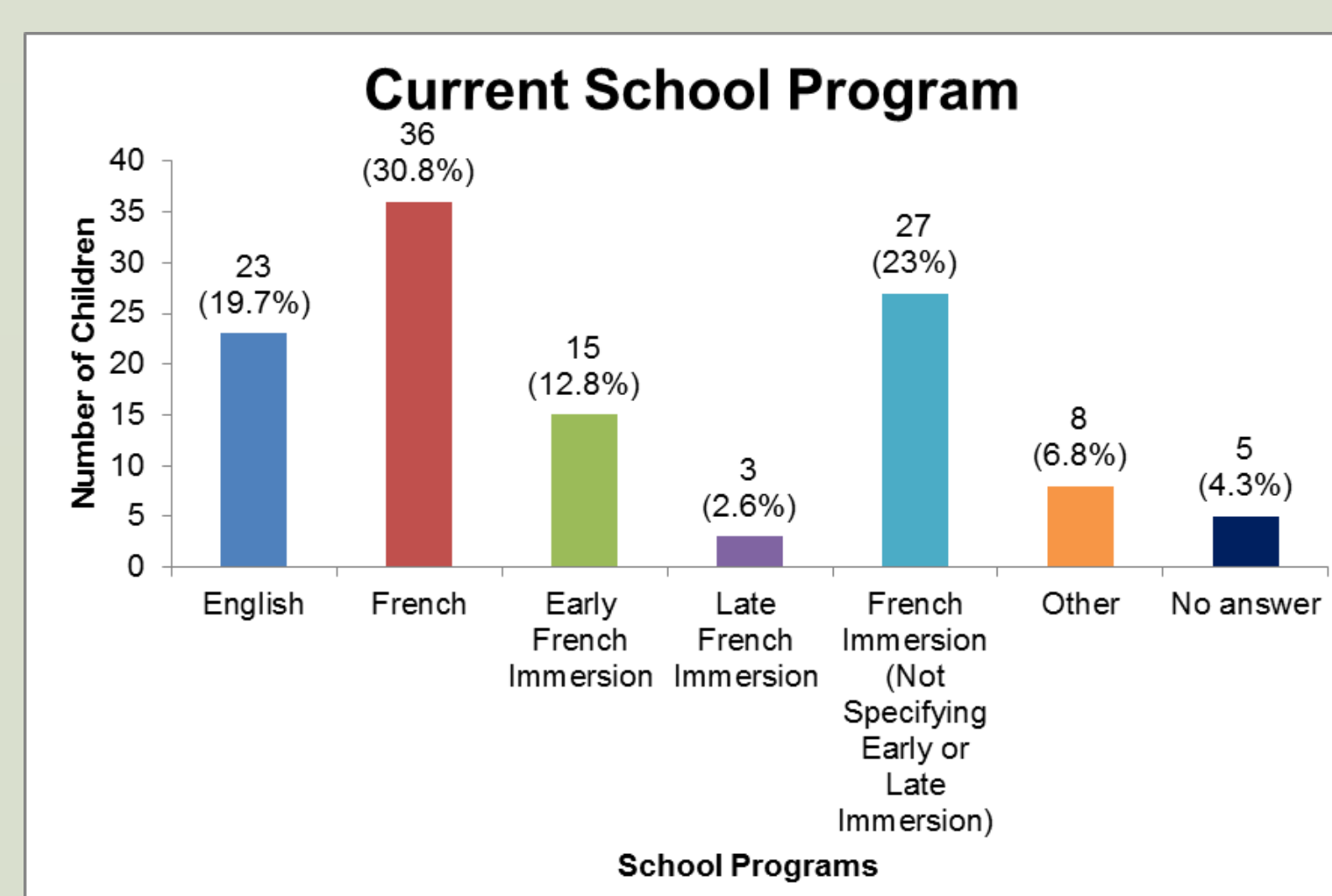


Figure 4. Current school programs of children. From most to least: 30.8% in French programs; 23% in French Immersion (not specifying early or late immersion); 19.7% in English programs; 12.8% in early French immersion; 6.8% in other, 4.3% without an answer; and lastly, 2.6% late French immersion.

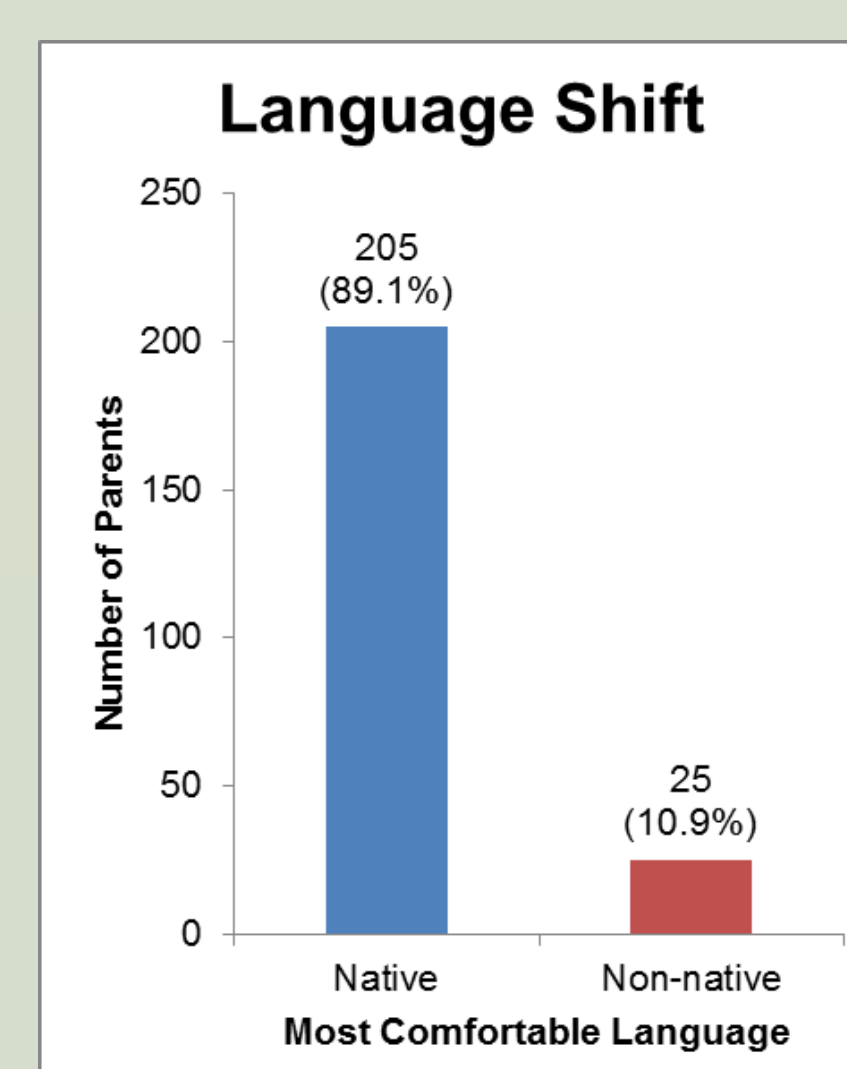


Figure 1. Language shift. Majority of parents are currently most comfortable in their native language, in contrast to those who are most comfortable in their non-native language (i.e. have shifted to a new language).

5. Discussion

- Results indicate that the likelihood of children becoming bilingual or multilingual was contingent on several factors:
 - a low percentage of parents (10.9 %) shifted to a different language (non-native)
 - many (93.1%) continued to transmit their native language(s) (i.e. other than the majority language, English) among themselves and their children
 - exposure to two or more languages from birth
 - additional language(s) introduced through schooling
- Research is ongoing, but the preliminary findings suggest that the children in this sample have a high likelihood of becoming/remaining bilingual or multilingual, and also adding more languages to their repertoire over time.

6. Future Work

- Continue acquiring data from families with bilingual or multilingual school-aged children
- Expand questionnaires outside Canada
- A need for a longitudinal study to determine the child participants' outcomes in terms of bilingualism and multilingualism

References

- Ferguson, C. (1983). *Language planning and language change*. In H. Cobarrubias & J. Fishman (eds.), *Progress in language planning: International perspectives* (pp. 29–40). Berlin: Mouton.
- Fishman, J. A. (1991). *Reversing language shift: Theoretical and empirical foundations of assistance to threatened languages* (Vol. 76). Multilingual matters.
- de Houwer, A. D. (2009). *Bilingual First Language Acquisition*. Bristol: MM Textbooks.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deep gratitude to my supervisor, professor Nikolay Slavkov, for his patient guidance, valuable feedback, and constant encouragement throughout the duration of this research project.

I would also like to thank the University of Ottawa for providing this invaluable experience through the Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program (UROP).

Contact Information

E-mail: enish096@uottawa.ca