

Questionnaires documenting childhood bilingualism: Review and comparability
A summary of “A review of questionnaires quantifying bilingual experience in children: Do they document the same constructs?”

There is currently a wide variety of different questionnaires which document children’s bilingual experience, and for teachers, researchers or speech and language therapists (SLTs) this variety might be problematic. The Q-BEx team looked at 48 different questionnaires currently used to document bilingual experience in children. Within these 48 questionnaires, there was a very high degree of variability in what components of bilingualism were being measured and how they were being measured. The consequence of this is that it is difficult to compare results from different questionnaires and it also becomes hard to facilitate collaboration between research and practice. Furthermore, for teachers it can be hard to know which questionnaires to use and how to interpret the results. This study identifies what components were common across the questionnaires, and analyses the different ways in which these components are documented in the questionnaires. This analysis is a first step towards developing a more universal set of components and measures for all stakeholders. It is vital for practitioners to have a reliable and customisable tool that can be trusted to give us accurate information about bilingual learners, which will enable better support for those students.

What were the aims of this study?

The Q-BEx team wanted to undertake a study to gain a deeper understanding of questionnaires that are currently being used to measure childhood bilingualism, as well as how these might be brought together to develop a universal tool. They had 3 main aims for this study:

1. To identify the questionnaires currently used
2. To identify the components of bilingual experience measured in these questionnaires (i.e. what information do the questionnaires seek to elicit and what are the components common to most of the questionnaires)
3. To discuss the comparability of the measures used (i.e. how do the questionnaires elicit this information, what different types of questions are used)

What did the study find?

The study identified 48 different questionnaires (39 of which were designed to be completed by parents/caregivers, 5 by teachers and 4 by children) currently used to measure bilingualism in children (0-18-year-olds). The researchers identified 32 main constructs from these questionnaires – these are the broad elements or areas of information that the questionnaires seek to elicit. From these 32, the team focussed on the following overarching constructs (these were chosen due to their importance):

- Language exposure and use
- Language activities
- Current language skills

Within these constructs, there was a lot of variability in how they were measured; although the labels may be the same, the precise elements of information sought and the ways in which this is done may be completely different. This could be problematic for researchers and practitioners as it may not give an accurate or adequate picture of a child’s bilingualism, which can have consequences in terms of expectations, understanding and support for that child.

An example of the questionnaire variability can be seen by examining how language exposure and use are documented. For example:

- Language ‘exposure’ and ‘use’ are sometimes not separated, but grouped together.
- In other questionnaires, they might be asked about separately.

- A questionnaire might have a section looking at 'language use' only, yet include responses such as "Never uses it. Never hears it.", which combine both exposure and use. Again, this presents an issue for researchers comparing data but also for teachers needing a clear picture of a child's bilingualism.
- When looking at the length of exposure or use of a certain language, some questionnaires might document it on a year-by-year basis or in specific age bands.
- Some questionnaires documented language exposure/use during specific days of the week, while others asked separately about the weekend and weekdays.

There was also a lot of variability in how information was quantified:

- 1-5 scales
- Different adverbs of frequency (often, rarely, etc.)
- Percentages
- Where the number of points on a scale was the same, the labels might be different
- Some questionnaires using combinations of the above

In summary, the wide range of different information being sought and the ways in which this is measured by the different questionnaires means that it is very difficult for teachers to really know what information is available and how to use this information. Similarly, it can be challenging to know which tool to use to gain a deeper understanding of bilingual experience. This study shows the need for more clarity on this and a more universal tool to measure bilingualism.

What next?

The Q-BEx team have carried out a detailed and extensive survey involving a number of stakeholders – teachers, SLTs, and researchers – to reach a consensus on which elements of bilingualism are essential to include in a questionnaire. The results of this will lead to the development of a customisable, modular questionnaire providing clear, universally understandable and relevant information about a child's bilingual experience. This, in turn, will allow teachers to support and understand bilingual learners with greater confidence and knowledge.