

"Social Conditions and Effects of Bilingualism"

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Abstract

Bilingual skills are generally regarded as being resources that are particularly useful to the success of migrants (children) in terms of education and the labour market. This paper discusses the theoretical mechanisms behind the acquisition of bilingual competency on the one hand, and the potential effects thereof on performance in school and at the workplace on the other. With regard to the theories derived, the currently available empirical evidence on decisive social conditions will be presented. For the acquisition of bilingualism these include particularly the age at immigration, spatial segregation, and interethnic networks. At the same time, a type of zero-sum problem appears to exist: Conditions that foster the acquisition of the second language simultaneously hinder the acquisition of the native language. Thus, while a too young age at immigration will counteract the acquisition of competency in the native language, it will at the same time support the acquisition of the second language (and vice versa). This explains why over the course of generations usually monolingual assimilation occurs and the native language is abandoned. In general, there appears to be hardly any empirical evidence of particular effects of bilingualism on school performance or success in the labour market. The paper concludes with a general discussion of the importance of ethnic resources for the integration of migrants.