Developing Reading Skills in Children Under Conditions of Bilingualism and Cultural Diversity

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Abstract

The article examines the structural and developmental specifics of reading skill formation in children growing up in conditions of bilingualism and cultural diversity. The objective of the study is to identify the cognitive and environmental predictors that determine differentiated trajectories of decoding and reading comprehension in multilingual contexts. To achieve this objective, an analytical synthesis of longitudinal and cross-sectional empirical studies was conducted, focusing on early phonological awareness, vocabulary development, print knowledge, migration background, home literacy exposure, and perceptual mediation mechanisms. Comparative analysis and structural reconstruction methods were applied to integrate heterogeneous findings into a coherent developmental model. The results demonstrate that phonological awareness operates as a transferable metalinguistic foundation supporting decoding across languages, whereas vocabulary functions as a language-specific predictor primarily shaping reading comprehension. Early disparities in vocabulary and phonological sensitivity tend to attenuate over time, indicating compensatory growth dynamics rather than cumulative divergence. Environmental exposure modifies the intensity of lexical development but does not replace foundational phonological mechanisms. The conclusion establishes that bilingual reading development follows a hierarchical organization in which transferable cognitive infrastructure interacts with language-bound lexical consolidation, producing adaptive recalibration across primary school years.

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Introduction

The rapid expansion of culturally and linguistically diverse student populations has intensified the need to clarify how reading skills develop under bilingual conditions. Traditional monolingual literacy models often assume linear progression from oral language proficiency to decoding and comprehension mastery.

However, empirical findings suggest that bilingual literacy growth follows differentiated trajectories in which transferable metalinguistic skills interact with language-specific lexical development. Educational systems that serve multilingual learners require conceptual clarity regarding which early skills predict later reading performance and how disparities evolve over time.

The purpose of this study is to substantiate a structural model of reading development in bilingual and culturally diverse children by determining how transferable metalinguistic mechanisms and language-specific lexical resources interact across primary school years.

To achieve this purpose, the following objectives were set:

1) To analyze developmental trajectories of decoding and reading comprehension in bilingual learners.

2) To determine the role of cross-linguistic phonological awareness and language-specific vocabulary in predicting literacy outcomes.

3) To identify environmental and cognitive moderators that influence bilingual reading development.

The scientific novelty of the article lies in the construction of a hierarchical structural model of bilingual reading development that differentiates transferable metalinguistic mechanisms from language-bound lexical processes and demonstrates their compensatory interaction across developmental time.

Methods and Materials

The preparation of this article was based on a comprehensive analytical review of empirical studies examining bilingual literacy development, cross-linguistic predictors, environmental influences, and cognitive mediation mechanisms.

Giguere et al. (2024) conducted a longitudinal study of bilingual children from ages 5 to 10 and demonstrated that early phonological awareness and vocabulary predict later English reading ability, with decelerating growth trajectories in word reading and comprehension. Valcárcel Jiménez et al. (2024) examined preschool emergent literacy skills in a sample of 187 children and identified vocabulary, phonological awareness, and letter knowledge as predictors of later reading and spelling, emphasizing the role of migration background. de Bree et al. (2022) analyzed word reading performance in monolingual and bilingual children with developmental language disorder and showed selective dependence of decoding on phonological variables. Verbeek et al. (2024) demonstrated that L1–L2 phonological skills predict L2 early literacy even under conditions of language impairment, confirming cross-linguistic

transfer. Friesen et al. (2022) investigated reading comprehension strategies in bilingual children and adults, identifying distinct inferential patterns compared to monolingual peers. Vettori et al. (2023) studied lexical, reading, and spelling skills in bilingual language minority children and found that lexical breadth and word recognition accuracy contribute to reading comprehension. Kim and Yim (2024) explored the influence of the home literacy environment in Korean–English bilingual children and demonstrated that shared reading exposure predicts vocabulary and early literacy outcomes. Bus et al. (2023) examined the impact of free access to multilingual digital books and concluded that increased availability enhances reading engagement but does not substitute structured phonological instruction. Meng et al. (2024) analyzed visual search performance in Chinese children with developmental dyslexia and identified indirect effects on reading comprehension mediated by word detection and fluency.

To write the article, comparative analysis, analytical synthesis, structural modeling of predictors, and source examination methods were used. These methods allowed the identification of convergent patterns across different linguistic and educational contexts and supported the construction of a hierarchical model of bilingual reading development.

Results

The developmental configuration of reading skills in bilingual and culturally diverse contexts reveals a differentiated structure in which decoding and comprehension rely on partially overlapping yet functionally distinct antecedents. Growth trajectories in English word reading from ages 6 to 10 demonstrate systematic acceleration followed by deceleration, with mean W scores progressing from 430.9 at age 6 to 524.5 at age 10, where 500 corresponds to the normative level of a 10-year-old reader. This pattern confirms sustained skill acquisition accompanied by decreasing annual increments, indicating consolidation rather than linear expansion of decoding proficiency (Giguere et al., 2024).

Phonological awareness measured at age 5 in both languages consistently reorganized later decoding outcomes. English phonological awareness showed a positive relation to initial word reading status at age 6 ($\gamma = 2.1$, SE = 0.4), while Spanish phonological awareness displayed a stronger predictive weight when cross-language effects were modeled jointly ($\gamma = 2.4$, SE = 0.8). The cross-linguistic coefficient indicates that

metalinguistic sensitivity to phonemic structure operates as a transferable competence rather than a language-bound skill (Giguere et al., 2024). A negative interaction between Spanish phonological awareness and age (γ = −0.4, SE = 0.2) indicates that children who entered school with lower Spanish phonological awareness demonstrated steeper subsequent growth in English word reading, narrowing the initial performance gap. The data topology, therefore, suggests compensatory acceleration rather than cumulative divergence in decoding trajectories.

A parallel configuration emerges in reading comprehension. Mean comprehension W scores increased from 448.8 at age 6 to 507.7 at age 10, again displaying a decelerating growth curve (Age² coefficient = −3.9, SE = 0.4). English vocabulary at age 5 predicted the intercept of reading comprehension (γ = 6.9, SE = 1.2), while Spanish phonological awareness retained cross-language relevance (γ = 1.7, SE = 0.5). A negative interaction between Spanish phonological awareness and age (γ = −0.3, SE = 0.1) indicates diminishing interindividual disparities over time. These findings substantiate a structural dissociation: decoding aligns with phonological precision and print awareness, whereas comprehension aligns with language-specific lexical depth combined with transferable phonological sensitivity (Giguere et al., 2024). The systematization of predictive mechanisms is presented below (Table 1).

Table 1. Structural predictors of decoding and reading comprehension in bilingual development (compiled by the author based on Giguere et al., 2024; Valcárcel Jiménez et al., 2024; Verbeek et al., 2024; Vettori et al., 2023)

Skill Domain	Structural Type	Primary Literacy Component Influenced	Nature of Influence	Cross-Linguistic Transfer	Developmental Role
Phonological awareness	Metalinguistic (language-general)	Word reading; Reading comprehension	Foundational mapping mechanism	Yes	Accelerative at school entry
Vocabulary (language of instruction)	Lexical-semantic (language-specific)	Reading comprehension	Semantic integration	Limited	Initial intercept shaping
Concepts about print	Procedural-print knowledge	Word reading; Reading comprehension	Readiness structuring	Yes	Entry-level scaffolding
Letter knowledge	Orthographic-symbolic	Word reading	Structural overlap with print awareness	Partially	Early-stage support
Home literacy exposure	Environmental-intensity factor	Vocabulary; Motivation	Exposure modulation	Context-dependent	Dynamic recalibration
Word detection skill	Perceptual-linguistic mediation	Reading comprehension	Indirect via fluency	Writing-system specific	Mediated influence

Preschool emergent literacy indicators further refine this pattern. In a sample of 187 children assessed at Mage = 63.58 months (SD = 4.45), vocabulary and letter knowledge predicted later word reading, whereas phonological awareness and letter knowledge predicted spelling accuracy (Valcárcel Jiménez et al., 2024). Migration background correlated negatively with preschool vocabulary and phonological awareness, yet vocabulary remained a significant predictor of word reading for children with a migration background. The differentiation between inside-out skills (letter knowledge, phonological awareness) and outside-in skills (vocabulary) manifests empirically as distinct predictive channels rather than a unified precursor construct (Valcárcel Jiménez et al., 2024). Letter knowledge emerges as a structural anchor for children without a migration background, while vocabulary assumes stronger relevance where exposure to the majority language is less intensive.

When developmental language disorder is introduced into bilingual trajectories, word reading remains selectively dependent on phonological variables rather than general language delay (de Bree et al., 2022). Cross-language phonological skills predict early L2 literacy even under conditions of language impairment, underscoring the robustness of phonological transfer mechanisms (Verbeek et al., 2024). The mechanism appears to function independently of expressive vocabulary limitations, indicating that phonological mapping operates as an autonomous substrate for decoding acquisition.

Lexical processing interacts with reading fluency in bilingual populations. Lexical breadth and word recognition accuracy correlate positively with reading comprehension efficiency, yet this relation weakens when lexical depth is not fully consolidated (Vettori et al., 2023). The configuration implies that vocabulary supports comprehension not merely through word knowledge but through semantic integration capacity. In bilingual readers, this integration is sensitive to language dominance patterns and exposure balance.

Home literacy environment modifies early vocabulary and literacy performance. Frequency of shared reading and access to print in both languages predict early literacy outcomes in Korean–English bilingual children, indicating that exposure intensity reorganizes vocabulary–reading relations (Kim and Yim, 2024). Mean shared reading exposure of 0.7 hr per week in Spanish and 1.3 hr per week in English corresponds with differential vocabulary strength across languages in bilingual cohorts (Giguere et al., 2024). The distribution of exposure, therefore, mediates the magnitude of language-specific lexical contributions to comprehension.

Digital access to multilingual books increases voluntary reading frequency, yet gains in decoding accuracy remain modest without guided phonological engagement (Bus et al., 2023). Increased availability expands reading volume but does not substitute for structured phonological scaffolding. The evidentiary signal suggests that access modifies reading motivation rather than foundational decoding architecture.Visual processing contributes to comprehension through word detection and reading fluency pathways. In Chinese children with developmental dyslexia, visual search performance influenced reading comprehension indirectly via word detection skill and reading fluency, confirming a mediated pathway rather than a direct visual–comprehension link (Meng et al., 2024). The mediating role of word detection parallels phonological mediation observed in alphabetic bilingual contexts, indicating convergent structural principles across writing systems.

Strategic processing patterns further differentiate bilingual reading profiles. Bilingual children demonstrate distinct comprehension strategy deployment compared to monolingual peers, often relying more heavily on inferential integration when lexical certainty is reduced (Friesen et al., 2022). Adult bilinguals exhibit stabilized strategic repertoires, suggesting developmental reorganization of compensatory mechanisms across schooling stages (Friesen et al., 2022).

Across studies, nonverbal intelligence does not consistently predict reading growth once phonological and vocabulary variables are included (PTONI M = 113.35, SD = 15.31) (Giguere et al., 2024). Letter recognition, although correlated with decoding at the zero-order level (r = .573, p < .001), loses predictive strength when concepts about print are modeled concurrently, indicating multicollinearity between structural print knowledge and alphabet familiarity (Giguere et al., 2024). Concepts about print predicted both initial decoding (γ = 3.5, SE = 0.9) and comprehension status (γ = 5.2, SE = 1.1), with negative age interactions suggesting diminishing early advantages over time.

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The combined analytic configuration demonstrates that Spanish phonological awareness and concepts about print at age 5 predict English word reading at age 6, whereas English vocabulary and Spanish phonological awareness predict English reading comprehension. Vocabulary effects remain language-specific; phonological awareness exhibits cross-linguistic transfer. Early disparities linked to lower initial language proficiency attenuate rather than amplify across primary school years, revealing adaptive growth dynamics in bilingual literacy development.

The integrated corpus supports three structural regularities. First, phonological awareness functions as a language-general metalinguistic capacity transferable across linguistic systems. Second, vocabulary exerts language-specific influence concentrated within comprehension processes. Third, early print knowledge accelerates initial decoding acquisition but does not permanently stratify growth trajectories. Reading development under bilingual and culturally diverse conditions, therefore, unfolds through interaction between transferable phonological infrastructure and language-bound lexical elaboration, moderated by exposure patterns and literacy environment.

Discussion

The developmental configuration revealed in the Results section resists reduction to a single explanatory axis. Decoding and comprehension did not merely differ in magnitude or timing; they relied on structurally distinct antecedent constellations. Word reading aligned with phonological awareness and print-related knowledge, whereas reading comprehension aligned with language-specific lexical competence combined with cross-linguistic phonological sensitivity. This differentiation clarifies what is meant by "specifics" under bilingual and culturally diverse conditions: literacy development does not unfold as a uniform transfer from oral language to print, but as a layered coordination between transferable metalinguistic infrastructure and language-bound semantic consolidation.

Phonological awareness demonstrated a cross-linguistic function that remained stable even when English-language predictors were introduced simultaneously. Its predictive value for both decoding and comprehension, coupled with the negative interaction with age, indicates that early disparities associated with lower phonological sensitivity do not crystallize into permanent stratification. Instead, growth curves show partial convergence. Such convergence suggests that phonological awareness functions less as a gatekeeping filter and more as an accelerative scaffold at school entry. Once formal instruction stabilizes grapheme–phoneme correspondences, children who began with lower phonological sensitivity appear to reorganize more rapidly, reducing initial differences. The mechanism resembles compensatory calibration rather than cumulative advantage.

Vocabulary displayed a contrasting profile. English lexical breadth predicted initial reading comprehension but did not transfer across languages in the same manner as phonological awareness. This asymmetry reinforces the interpretation that vocabulary is structurally embedded within the language of instruction. Lexical knowledge organizes semantic inference, syntactic integration, and textual coherence. When lexical depth is limited at school entry, comprehension begins at a lower intercept. Yet the negative interaction with age indicates that lexical gaps narrowed over time. This narrowing diverges from monolingual deficit models in which early vocabulary disparities frequently widen. In bilingual trajectories, school exposure increases majority-language lexical input intensity, altering slope parameters. The educational environment, therefore, recalibrates the predictive weight of initial vocabulary.

Print-related knowledge further complicates the picture. Concepts about print predicted initial decoding and comprehension status, yet did not permanently structure growth. The knowledge of reading directionality, word tracking, and book conventions appears to function as procedural readiness rather than as a long-term determinant. Children who enter school with limited print awareness rapidly acquire these conventions through systematic exposure. Early familiarity with print accelerates entry into decoding, but once formal instruction standardizes practice, its marginal effect diminishes. The diminishing slope interaction suggests that procedural literacy is quickly normalized across learners.

Letter recognition did not retain predictive significance once print knowledge was modeled. This does not indicate irrelevance of alphabet familiarity; rather, it implies overlap between graphemic knowledge and broader print orientation constructs. In bilingual contexts, children may acquire letter forms in one language and apply them in another, particularly when scripts are shared. The analytic separation of letter naming and conceptual print awareness thus becomes

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less meaningful when literacy instruction consolidates both within the first year of schooling.

Migration background introduces an additional structural dimension. Vocabulary and phonological awareness were negatively associated with minority-language status in preschool, yet their predictive functions diverged by linguistic context. For children with a migration background, vocabulary carried stronger predictive weight for early word reading than letter knowledge. This indicates that semantic familiarity can compensate for limited orthographic experience in majority-language settings. Inside-out and outside-in skills, therefore, interact differently depending on exposure configuration. The distinction between these domains remains analytically useful, but empirical trajectories reveal porous boundaries between them.

The bilingual condition itself modifies growth dynamics. Spanish phonological awareness predicted English reading outcomes even in samples that were predominantly English-dominant at school entry. This finding disrupts assumptions that cross-linguistic transfer depends on minority-language dominance. Metalinguistic operations acquired through experience in one phonological system appear accessible to the second system regardless of dominance hierarchy. The structural similarity of alphabetic scripts likely facilitates this transfer, yet the persistence of predictive effects after controlling for English phonological awareness indicates more than orthographic overlap. The transferable element resides in phonemic segmentation capacity and sound-symbol abstraction.

Visual processing findings from non-alphabetic contexts introduce a parallel structural logic. The mediating role of word detection skill between visual search and reading comprehension suggests that early perceptual efficiency influences literacy only through linguistic gateways. Direct visual–comprehension pathways were not observed. This mediated structure mirrors the phonological mediation observed in alphabetic bilingual samples. Across writing systems, foundational perceptual or phonological skills do not independently generate comprehension; they reorganize decoding efficiency, which in turn supports semantic integration. The architecture of literacy thus appears hierarchical rather than additive.

Strategic differences between bilingual and monolingual readers extend this hierarchy. Bilingual children often deploy inferential strategies to compensate for lexical uncertainty. Such a strategy use may initially depress decoding fluency yet strengthen comprehension flexibility over time. Adult bilingual profiles reveal stabilized strategic repertoires, indicating developmental reconfiguration rather than persistent disadvantage. Reading under bilingual conditions, therefore, involves adaptive redistribution of cognitive resources rather than uniform lag.

Home literacy exposure moderates lexical and print-related predictors. Shared reading time and access to multilingual materials correlate with vocabulary growth, yet digital book availability alone does not restructure decoding architecture without guided phonological engagement. Exposure quantity influences motivation and lexical expansion, whereas exposure quality shapes phonological calibration. The educational implication is clear: print access cannot substitute for structured sound–symbol training.

Developmental language disorder introduces a stress test for these mechanisms. Cross-linguistic phonological skills predicted early L2 literacy even under language impairment, indicating resilience of the phonological substrate. Vocabulary limitations constrained comprehension more sharply than decoding, reinforcing the dissociation between transferable metalinguistic skill and language-specific semantic depth. The presence of disorder thus amplifies structural distinctions already visible in typical bilingual trajectories.

The overall configuration suggests three interconnected propositions. The structural differentiation of literacy mechanisms is presented below (Table 2).

Table 2. Differentiation of structural mechanisms in bilingual reading development (compiled by the author based on Giguere et al., 2024; Valcárcel Jiménez et al., 2024; Verbeek et al., 2024; Vettori et al., 2023; Kim and Yim, 2024; Meng et al., 2024)

Analytical Dimension	Decoding (Word Reading)	Reading Comprehension
Primary Cognitive Base	Phonological segmentation	Lexical-semantic integration
Transfer Across Languages	Strong and systematic	Selective and mediated
Sensitivity to Vocabulary	Indirect	Direct
Sensitivity to Print Knowledge	Entry-stage structuring	Early-status support
Influence of Exposure Intensity	Moderate	High
Impact of Language Disorder	Reduced fluency but preserved transfer	Stronger semantic vulnerability
Developmental Dynamics	Early acceleration, later stabilization	Gradual semantic consolidation
Cross-System Stability	Robust across alphabetic systems	Dependent on the language of instruction

First, phonological awareness operates as a language-general competence that transfers across alphabetic systems and supports both decoding and comprehension at school entry. Second, vocabulary exerts language-specific influence primarily on comprehension and is dynamically recalibrated through exposure to the instructional language. Third, early print knowledge accelerates initial decoding but does not permanently stratify growth trajectories. These propositions are not parallel claims; they describe interacting layers of literacy architecture.

Several tensions remain unresolved. The attenuation of early vocabulary gaps contrasts with patterns frequently observed in monolingual populations, raising questions about instructional intensity, peer exposure, and socio-cultural adaptation effects. The stronger predictive weight of Spanish phonological awareness over English phonological awareness in combined models suggests measurement or timing factors that warrant further investigation. It remains unclear whether the transfer effect would replicate with typologically distant language pairs or in contexts where scripts differ.

Methodologically, the reliance on single measures for decoding and comprehension constrains interpretive range. Timed decoding assessments and deeper comprehension probes could differentiate fluency from accuracy effects. Vocabulary breadth was assessed without systematic measurement of lexical depth or

semantic network organization; the relative contribution of these dimensions remains undetermined. Nonetheless, the longitudinal modeling across five consecutive years provides a stable developmental frame within which structural relations become visible.

The specificity of reading development in bilingual and culturally diverse contexts lies not in uniform delay or uniform advantage, but in dynamic recalibration. Early differences are pronounced at school entry, particularly in vocabulary and phonological awareness. Growth trajectories reveal partial convergence rather than entrenchment. Transferable metalinguistic skills support early decoding, language-specific lexical knowledge scaffolds comprehension, and instructional exposure reshapes both. Literacy development under bilingual conditions, therefore, unfolds through interaction between transferable cognitive infrastructure and context-bound linguistic elaboration, moderated by exposure intensity and strategic adaptation. The structural interaction model is presented below (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Structural interaction model of bilingual reading development (compiled by the author based on Giguere et al., 2024; Kim and Yim, 2024; Meng et al., 2024)
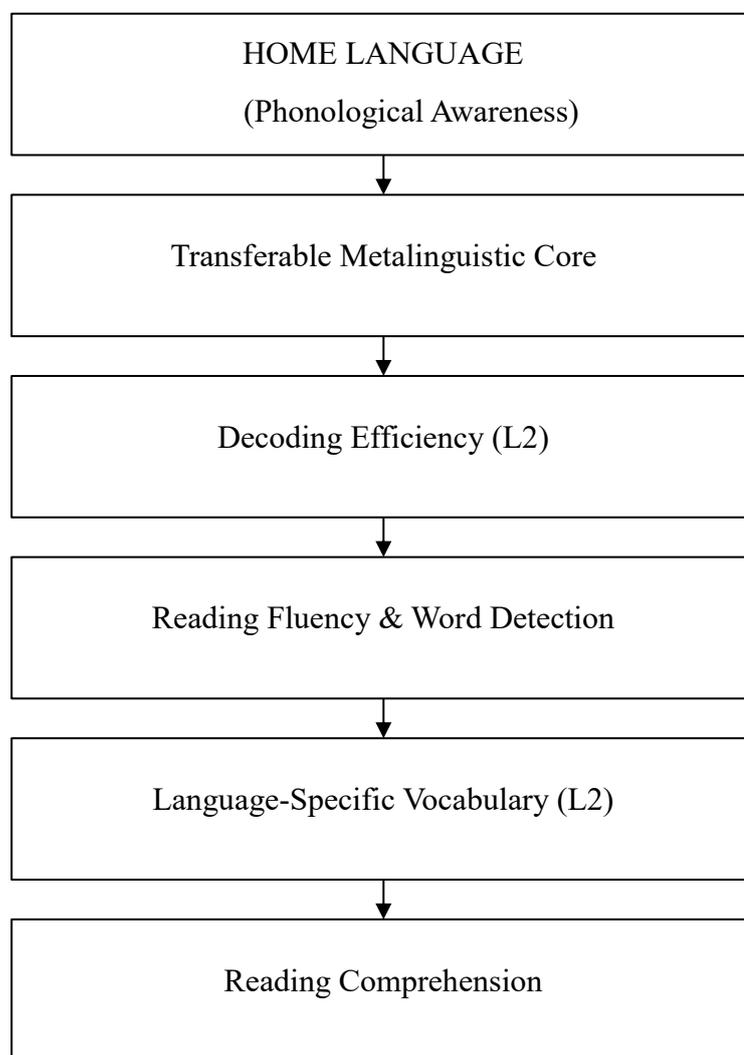
The structural configuration presented in Figure 1 demonstrates that bilingual reading development is organized around a transferable phonological core that supports decoding, while comprehension emerges through the integration of this metalinguistic foundation with language-specific lexical resources. The model indicates that exposure intensity and strategic adaptation do not function as independent determinants but modulate the interaction between decoding efficiency and semantic consolidation. This configuration confirms that literacy growth under bilingual conditions is mediated rather than additive, with foundational skills operating through structured hierarchical pathways rather than parallel accumulation.

Conclusion

The study achieved the stated objectives and clarified the structural specifics of reading development under bilingual and culturally diverse conditions. First, longitudinal evidence confirms differentiated growth trajectories for decoding and reading comprehension, with compensatory convergence over time. Second, cross-linguistic phonological awareness functions as a language-general predictor transferable across alphabetic systems, while vocabulary operates as a language-specific determinant primarily shaping comprehension. Third, environmental factors such as home literacy exposure and migration background moderate but do not override core cognitive mechanisms.

The findings demonstrate that bilingual literacy development follows a hierarchical organization in which phonological infrastructure supports decoding, lexical consolidation scaffolds comprehension, and exposure intensity dynamically recalibrates growth. Early disparities tend to attenuate rather than expand across primary school years. The results highlight the importance of integrating metalinguistic training and vocabulary enrichment within multilingual educational practice. The confirmation of the proposed hierarchical model underscores that bilingual literacy development is characterized by adaptive recalibration rather than persistent deficit, with important implications for multilingual educational policy and instructional design.

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