

BAR-ILAN UNIVERSITY

**Executive Functioning and Language of  
Foreign Workers and Refugees Children in  
a Multi-Linguistic Educational  
Environment.**

Adi Marom

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## **Absract**

Executive functions are identified as critical components for cognitive, emotional and social development, as well as for language and other skills required for learning. Studies show that bringing up a bilingual child supports, and even more so encourages, development of the executive functions.

The current research examines components which are linked to the level of exposure to a second language (the country's language, Hebrew), consisting of the duration of time living in Israel, the number of years the child was part of the Hebrew-speaking education system and the language spoken at home (whether it included Hebrew or not); their contribution to language skills; and the correlation between the level of exposure to the country's language and executive function abilities, such as working memory, inhibition ability and cognitive flexibility. In present study, population examined consisted of children to labor immigrants and children to refugees from different countries, all from weak socio-economic status, with diverse cultural-lingual background. The participants of this study are on their way to becoming bilingual and are studying in schools that are run in the country's language (Hebrew), being it their second, third or more, language. In their schools, most pupils attending are bilingual or multilingual.

The present study was conducted in two preschool kindergartens, located in two schools that administer this program. 64 children of five and one month to seven years of age participated. Each participant underwent a series of computerized tests to asses executive function abilities (Diamond, 2006), a language filtering test (Goralnick, 1995) and kindergarten teachers filled a demographic form regarding the participants and assessed different variables as to the bilinguality of each child.

Participants' language skills, as well as their performance on executive function tasks, were found to be higher on different measures, in accordance with the level of exposure to Hebrew. Meaning that children who lived more years in Israel and took part in the Hebrew-

speaking education system for a longer time, showed higher language skills in most language measures, as well as in teacher assessments, and their precision percentage in most of the executive function sub-tasks was higher. Furthermore, according to teacher assessments, children that spoke Hebrew in their homes (in addition to their first language), had better speaking abilities in their second language, Hebrew.

This research sheds light on the relationship between bilingualism, development of the child's executive functions and language skills. All the while, emphasizing the importance of the level of exposure to Hebrew, including the exposure to an educational program that is based on a different language than mother tongue, as an influential factor on achievements in these important domains. The value of these findings receives further validation given the unique background of the population examined – a population at risk for language and learning ability difficulties, due to low socio-economic status and its complex and particular social-environmental state.