Cross-language transfer in a bilingual school in Germany: The case of receptive grammar

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In Germany about 2% of all private and public schools are currently offering a bilingual program (FMKS, 2014). Such programs are particularly effective when several school subjects are taught in a foreign language (L2) for many years (e.g. Wesche 2002). Cross-language effects are of particular interest in such a context: So far, studies have focused on such effects for reading (e.g. Gebauer et al. 2013). Cross-language effects of grammar have not been examined in a bilingual school context yet, although there is an extensive literature on cross-language effects on grammar in general (e.g. Ellis 2008). This study, therefore, investigated cross-language transfer between first-language (L1) and L2 receptive grammar skills in a group of 50 German primary school students who were enrolled in a German-English bilingual program. In contrast to many other bilingual programs in Germany, the English teachers in this school are native speakers, and extracurricular activities are carried out not only in German but also in English. Students were tested at the beginning and end of grades 3 and 4, using the German and English version of the TROG (Test for Reception of Grammar; Bishop 2003, Fox 2010).

As expected, the results showed improvement for both tests as a function of time. Significant effects of gender, social and language background were not noted. In addition, cross-language effects were found, supporting previous findings which indicated reciprocal transfer effects between L1 and L2 (e.g. Gebauer et al. 2013). The effects from L2 to L1 may be attributable to the plentiful opportunities for academic input in the L2 at school. Hence, grammar skills, which provide the basis for successful participation in school, can evidently be acquired in an L2 context and transferred to the L1. These findings underline the importance of cross-language transfer between receptive grammar skills in bilingual programs.
References