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The Effects of Bilingualism on Context Sensitivity

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Abstract: Bilinguals must be sensitive to context cues in order to access the right language system for that moment. Consistent with this idea, a growing body of research suggests that bilinguals more effectively switch attention, following changing cues, in executive control tasks. The present study used a context-cued pattern perception task to more directly assess whether adult bilinguals are more sensitive to context than monolinguals, even in non-verbal contexts. If bilinguals attend to contextual information more efficiently than monolinguals, then they should recognize patterns faster when presented in the same context (attention to relevant cues facilitates recognition) and also when presented in different contexts (inhibition of irrelevant cues facilitates recognition). The results show that this is the case, suggesting that bilingualism enhances a context awareness that results in refined inhibition skills, a finding consistent with current research, and enhanced attention to relevant cues, a result not previously discussed in bilingualism research.