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Linguistic Control in Monolingual and Bilingual Language Learners

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Abstract: One of the difficulties in learning a new language is controlling competition from the language(s) already known. This interference resembles between-language competition in bilinguals, whose languages are both activated in parallel (Marian & Spivey, 2003). To test whether bilingualism confers an advantage in controlling competition during language learning, we compared monolinguals' and bilinguals' ability to manage interference from English while using a newly-learned language. Participants were taught an artificial vocabulary, then their eye-movements and mouse-movements were tracked in a visual world paradigm to assess activation of English competitors while processing the new language. We found that monolinguals, but not bilinguals, looked at interlingual competitors more than at controls, indicating greater interference from English. Similarly, monolinguals, but not bilinguals, demonstrated increased attraction to competitors compared to controls in mouse-movement trajectories. Results suggest that bilingual experience promotes efficient management of native language activation, with implications for linguistic control during language acquisition.