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Bilingualism in German-Born Immigrant Children
in New Zealand

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A Case Study

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree
of M.A. in Second Language Teaching
at
Massey University

Ute Walker

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Abstract

This study investigates the bilingualism of four German-background children in New Zealand. The aim of the research was to gain more in-depth information about the processes involved in a language contact situation to complement findings already made at the macro level with a focus on groups. A case study approach enabled the collection of rich qualitative data from a variety of sources which were examined from a sociolinguistic as well as a psychosocial perspective in order to address the questions of language choice and distribution, language attitudes and language and identity. The subjects' successful L1 maintenance after one to eight years in the host country did not correspond with the trend of rapid language shift found among many immigrant children. This was explained as a consequence of the availability of domains of language use where language choice was revealed to be predominantly participant orientated. Family members in particular were shown to have a strong influence on the choice of German as a code of shared intimacy that also extended into settings outside the home. While the children displayed social interaction patterns that indicated successful integration into the dominant culture they also maintained social networks with German speakers across domains which increased their exposure to L1 and ensured its continued use. This complementary distribution of German and English appeared to be supported by both the children's and parents' positive attitudes towards being bilingual and to the L1 itself. As a consequence, the children's situation was characterised by dual group membership and L1 maintenance instead of assimilation and total language shift to L2.

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