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EARLY BILINGUALISM AND SOCIO-EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING OF MIGRANT PRESCHOOL CHILDREN: A NARRATIVE REVIEW
РАННІЙ БІЛІНГВІЗМ ТА СОЦІАЛЬНО-ЕМОЦІЙНЕ БЛАГОПОЛУЧЧЯ ДОШКІЛЬНИКІВ-МІГРАНТІВ: НАРАТИВНИЙ ОГЛЯД

Summary. *This narrative review synthesises international and Ukrainian scholarship on early bilingualism among migrant preschool children and demonstrates that language development in this population is inseparable from socio-emotional adjustment. The literature was selected through targeted searches in Google Scholar and major education and social-science databases, focusing on peer-reviewed studies and policy-informed sources published between 2008 and 2024, with particular attention to evidence on Ukrainian displacement after 2022.*

The review conceptualises early bilingualism as either simultaneous or early successive acquisition and shows that children's trajectories are mediated by language status hierarchies and family language policy. In additive contexts, learning the societal language can coexist with sustained heritage-language competence, supporting identity continuity and family connectedness, whereas

subtractive shifts may undermine family communication and complicate adaptation. Importantly, the reviewed evidence suggests that the same linguistic transition can be experienced as either developmentally supportive or emotionally destabilising, depending on the quality of relational and institutional support surrounding the child. Early bilingualism therefore functions not only as a cognitive-linguistic process but also as a context-sensitive marker of belonging, security, and social inclusion. This highlights the need to interpret bilingual outcomes through the lens of the child's lived educational and family environment rather than through language proficiency alone.

Drawing on both large-scale and qualitative studies, the synthesis indicates that stable bilingual development is more likely when early childhood institutions legitimise multilingual practices, scaffold participation through visual and interactive supports, and sensitively validate children's migration experiences. The article concludes with evidence-based pedagogical strategies for emotionally safe multilingual classrooms and outlines system-level implications for teacher training and institutional support in migration-affected early childhood settings.

Key words: *early bilingualism, migrant children, preschool education, social and emotional well-being, family language policy, translanguaging, Ukraine, refugee children.*

Анотація. *У статті здійснено наративний огляд українських і міжнародних досліджень раннього білінгвізму у дітей дошкільного віку з міграційним досвідом та проаналізовано, як мовний розвиток пов'язаний із соціально-емоційним благополуччям у контексті переселення й вимушеного переміщення. Добір джерел здійснювався шляхом цільового пошуку в Google Scholar та академічних базах за ключовими словами, з фокусом на рецензовані публікації й нормативно-політичні матеріали 2008–2024 рр.,*

зокрема роботи, що описують мовні траєкторії українських дітей після 2022 року.

Ранній білінгвізм інтерпретується як одночасне або раннє послідовне засвоєння двох мов; показано, що його перебіг опосередковується статусною ієрархією мов, сімейною мовною політикою та інституційними режимами (монолінгвальні/багатомовні практики). В адитивних умовах оволодіння мовою суспільства може поєднуватися зі збереженням рідної мови, підтримуючи ідентичність, зв'язок із сім'єю та відчуття належності; натомість субтрактивні зсуви підвищують ризики втрати мови спадщини, порушення сімейної комунікації й ускладнення адаптації.

Узагальнені дані свідчать, що одна й та сама мовна зміна може переживатися як ресурс або як стресор залежно від якості емоційної підтримки дорослих і педагогічного супроводу. На основі синтезу запропоновано педагогічні стратегії для «емоційно безпечного» багатомовного середовища: легітимація мовного різноманіття, використання візуальних та інтерактивних опор, м'яке «скелетування» участі дитини в діяльності, партнерство з родиною щодо підтримки домашньої мови, а також елементи соціально-емоційного навчання в умовах трансмовлення. Окреслено імплікації для підготовки педагогів та інституційної підтримки закладів дошкільної освіти в ситуаціях міграції. Наголошено, що оцінювати білінгвізм слід через безпеку дитини.

Ключові слова: *ранній білінгвізм, діти-мігранти, дошкільна освіта, соціально-емоційне благополуччя, сімейна мовна політика, трансмовлення, Україна, діти-біженці.*

Relevance of the problem. Contemporary early childhood education is increasingly shaped by intensified mobility, migration, and growing linguistic diversity. A steadily rising share of young children now grow up in families

where the principal language of the home differs from the dominant language of the host society and the preschool environment. In such circumstances, early bilingualism should not be viewed as an elective enrichment resource; rather, it constitutes an everyday developmental reality that profoundly influences children's social relationships, identity construction, and longer-term educational pathways [2; 3; 14].

These processes are particularly visible in the Ukrainian context. Even before the full-scale Russian invasion, Ukraine was characterised by complex patterns of societal and familial bilingualism. Since 2022, however, millions of Ukrainian families with preschool-aged children have experienced internal displacement or cross-border migration to European countries, which has generated new bilingual and trilingual language ecologies in preschools across cities such as Warsaw, Berlin, and Dublin. Recent sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic studies illustrate how Ukrainian children negotiate the use of their heritage language, the language(s) of the host country, and in some cases English in everyday communication, while these multilingual practices remain closely connected to their emotional adaptation in the context of forced migration [10; 11].

Against this backdrop, a key task for early childhood education systems in both sending and receiving societies is to better understand the developmental trajectories of early bilingualism among migrant children and to determine which pedagogical approaches most effectively support both their linguistic progress and their psychosocial well-being [4; 5; 7].

The aim of the article is to synthesise current international and Ukrainian evidence on the development of early bilingualism in migrant children, with a focus on emotional well-being, and to formulate a set of pedagogical strategies and practical recommendations for preschool educators working in linguistically diverse, migration-affected settings.

Methodology of the study. The article is designed as a narrative literature review. Sources were identified through targeted keyword searches (e.g., early bilingualism, migrant preschool children, heritage language, family language policy, socio-emotional well-being, Ukrainian children in Poland) in Google Scholar and relevant international and Ukrainian academic repositories. The inclusion criteria covered: (a) focus on preschool age (approximately 0-6 years); (b) bilingual or multilingual development in migration or minority-language contexts; (c) explicit links to socio-emotional adjustment, well-being, or behavioural functioning; and (d) publication in peer-reviewed journals or official educational resources. The analytical procedure consisted of thematic content analysis, with findings grouped into four domains: developmental trajectories of early bilingualism, family language policy, institutional language regimes, and pedagogical strategies supporting both language and well-being.

Scientific novelty. The study offers an integrated synthesis that connects early bilingual development with socio-emotional well-being specifically in the context of forced migration and post-2022 Ukrainian displacement. Unlike fragmented discussions of bilingualism as either a linguistic or a purely psychosocial issue, the review articulates a coherent explanatory framework based on language status hierarchies and family language policy and translates it into a structured set of preschool-level pedagogical recommendations, including implications for curriculum guidance and teacher preparation.

Main body of the study. Early bilingualism refers to children's acquisition and regular everyday use of two languages in the first years of life, most often up to about six years of age [2; 3; 12]. Researchers usually describe two main routes. In simultaneous bilingualism, both languages are present from birth. In sequential (early successive) bilingualism, the second language enters the child's experience after the first, but still during the preschool period. Migrant children may follow either pattern. Some encounter the home language and the majority language from infancy because they are born in the host country, while others develop the

heritage language in the country of origin and begin learning the new societal language only after relocation [10].

Language development in migrant settings is closely tied to the social value attached to each language. The prestige, power, and symbolic status of the languages in contact shape what is encouraged, what is tolerated, and what is gradually abandoned. Scholars describe trajectories as additive when the majority language is learned without weakening the home language, and as subtractive when the majority language steadily replaces the heritage language or makes it socially undesirable. This is where family language policy becomes decisive, because parental beliefs, aims, and day-to-day routines organise children's exposure and practice. Strategies may range from «one parent-one language» or «minority language at home» to more flexible translanguaging practices that respond to context and children's preferences [2; 10; 11].

Evidence for these mechanisms is clearly illustrated in R. Chumak-Horbatsch's study of immigrant children in an English-language childcare centre in Toronto (Chumak-Horbatsch, 2008). She shows that children's dual-language behaviour mirrors parental language ideologies and everyday communicative habits. When families intentionally kept the heritage language for emotionally significant interactions, children more often developed stronger receptive and expressive abilities in both languages. By contrast, rapid shifts to English were frequently followed by early losses of active heritage-language skills, while English itself had not yet reached age-appropriate levels. Preschoolers in bilingual Ukrainian communities switch between languages with ease, yet they still depend on consistent adult support to achieve age-appropriate proficiency and emergent literacy in each language [10; 11].

Contemporary models also describe bilingual development as uneven and changeable rather than linear. Growth in vocabulary, grammar, and pragmatic competence may accelerate in one language while slowing in the other, depending on the amount and quality of input and on whether the language is

actively used in play, communication, and learning situations [2; 4; 10]. These accounts also emphasise that bilingualism develops through relationships. Children's language experiences are shaped by daily interactions with parents, siblings, peers, and educators. Positive moments support both language use and emotional stability. In contrast, repeated negative signals, such as harsh correction, accent-related ridicule, or restrictions on the home language, can trigger shame and lead children to avoid using one part of their bilingual repertoire [3; 5; 12].

For migrant children, preschool and school everyday life is where bilingualism is either validated or questioned. If an institution is organised around a monolingual expectation and signals that the home language should be suppressed, children may start treating their family language as «wrong,» inconvenient, or socially unwanted. Settings that actively support bilingualism create a different developmental climate. Practices such as translanguaging, the presence of multilingual books and labels, and the routine use of songs or games in children's home languages make bilingual repertoires visible and legitimate and help children build a more secure and positive sense of self [4; 5; 10; 13].

A substantial body of research has examined how bilingualism relates to children's emotional and behavioural functioning. Using a large dataset of over 12,000 children of Asian origin in the United States, W. Han reports that fluent bilinguals in the early school years show fewer internalising difficulties – such as anxiety and social withdrawal – as well as fewer externalising problems, including aggression and hyperactivity, compared with English-dominant or monolingual peers, even after accounting for socio-economic and family background factors [3]. Public-health oriented syntheses point in the same direction and argue that monolingualism may carry additional mental-health risks in migration contexts when it is accompanied by heritage-language loss and weaker ties to family and community networks [3; 12].

However, bilingualism does not function as a universal protective factor. Based on evidence from heritage-language families, P. Bonifacci et al. show that children's socio-emotional outcomes depend heavily on parental well-being and on how adults interpret multilingualism. When parents experience intense acculturative stress and hold ambivalent or negative attitudes toward bilingualism, children become more vulnerable to emotional and behavioural difficulties, irrespective of their measured competence in either language [1].

Children's emotional adjustment is also shaped by the broader realities of migration and resettlement, not only by the fact of speaking two languages. In a qualitative study of Japanese children in English-medium early education in Malaysia, J. Nakamura traces how well-being changes during the transition into a new linguistic and educational setting. Children who received steady, sensitive support from teachers and parents, and who were allowed to use the home language to express complex feelings, gradually developed confidence and a more positive orientation toward English. By contrast, peers exposed to strict «English-only» demands and limited recognition of emotional needs more often reacted with withdrawal, psychosomatic complaints, or disruptive behaviours [6].

Comparable dynamics have been reported for Ukrainian preschoolers displaced to Poland. In these circumstances, trilingual development (Ukrainian-Polish-English) can coincide with a heavy emotional load, as children must navigate unfamiliar environments, rebuild peer relations, and adjust to changed family routines. Studies indicate that adaptation is more successful when preschools treat Ukrainian and Polish as compatible resources and when educators acknowledge children's migration experiences in ways that communicate safety and inclusion. Under such conditions, children typically show higher participation and engagement in preschool life [10; 11; 17].

This sense of safety has clear developmental consequences. O. Popovych argues that emotional security in the preschool years supports exploration, imaginative play, and stable engagement in learning, while secure attachment,

peer interaction opportunities, and adults' attuned responses to children's emotions provide a basis for later mental health and school readiness [7]. Related arguments are advanced by L. Mortimore and H. Sun, who note that when language blocks children from expressing needs or forming friendships, the probability of socio-emotional difficulties rises. They therefore advocate pedagogical models that connect language development with emotional and relational support, rather than separating these tasks into unrelated classroom «domains» [5; 12]. Empirical research with first-generation refugee children further suggests that socioemotional wellbeing difficulties and adversity can constrain L2 outcomes [14].

Ukraine entered the post-2022 period with a long-standing background of societal bilingualism, most visibly in Ukrainian-Russian language use, shaped by regional variation and contested debates on language policy in education. In a series of studies, O. Shevchuk-Kliuzheva describes a broad range of bilingual child profiles, from relatively balanced competence across both languages to situations where one language is largely passive. Her findings show that everyday family routines – who speaks which language, in what situations, and with what emotional meaning – strongly affect both children's proficiency patterns and their attitudes toward each language [10].

Data from Kyiv families further reveal how situational bilingualism functions in daily preschool life. Many children grow up in households where language choice shifts depending on the conversation partner, the activity, and the emotional context. In such settings, children frequently use spontaneous translanguaging, drawing flexibly on both languages during play, storytelling, and ordinary talk. This bilingual mixing tends to remain unproblematic when adults respond with acceptance rather than correction or stigma [11].

The full-scale invasion introduced a sharp break in this linguistic ecology. Large numbers of families were displaced within Ukraine or resettled in European countries, and children who previously navigated Ukrainian-Russian

bilingualism were suddenly confronted with new majority languages such as Polish, German, or English, often under conditions of heightened stress. Studies on Ukrainian preschoolers in Poland report fast growth in Polish vocabulary, sometimes accompanied by partial weakening of Ukrainian, with outcomes depending on the density and quality of language exposure and on the family's language policy choices [10; 11; 15].

Shifts in family language policy under forced migration are analysed in detail by O. Shevchuk-Kliuzheva, who examines refugee mothers' narratives about language use at home and in early childhood institutions in Poland. Many mothers describe Ukrainian as a core identity marker and an emotionally protective «home base» for their children, while also recognising that Polish is essential for social participation and educational inclusion. Some families adopt explicit boundaries whereas others use more adaptive strategies and switch languages in response to context and children's preferences [11].

Polish early childhood institutions respond to these children in markedly different ways. O. Shevchuk-Kliuzheva reports that some preschools allow Ukrainian during the adaptation period and use bilingual staff or Ukrainian-speaking peers as communicative bridges. Other settings insist on a «Polish-only» approach, typically framed as necessary for avoiding language delay or maintaining classroom order. Empirical evidence from O. Shevchuk-Kliuzheva and M. Błasiak-Tytuła indicates that Ukrainian preschoolers show stronger adjustment where educators treat Ukrainian as a functional classroom resource. In these environments, Ukrainian supports comprehension of instructions, helps children express emotions, and facilitates participation in shared activities. The same studies underline the value of a gradual, scaffolded move into Polish rather than an abrupt substitution of the home language [10; 11].

Alongside migration-related changes, Ukraine has also been expanding bilingual early childhood initiatives oriented toward early foreign-language learning. The partial programme «Білінгвальне майбутнє. Дошкільна освіта»

targets children aged 3-4 and introduces English through play-based activities in Ukrainian-medium preschool settings [13]. Although this programme is not tailored specifically to migrant experiences, it reflects a broader shift toward framing bilingualism as a developmental resource.

In this direction, N. Konovalova synthesises practices from bilingual countries and outlines ways of adapting them for Ukrainian preschool pedagogy in order to develop foreign-language communicative competence from an early age. A central point in her argument is that effective implementation depends not only on methods of instruction, but also on the socio-emotional conditions of learning – especially supportive language environments and continuous professional development for educators [4].

Recent Ukrainian and European research provides enough empirical and conceptual grounding to design early childhood pedagogy that treats language growth and emotional adjustment as a single, interconnected task for migrant children [4; 10; 11]. This scholarship allows educators to formulate a coherent set of practices for bilingual and multilingual preschool groups, where linguistic learning must develop alongside children's sense of safety and belonging.

One major direction concerns the everyday organisation of classrooms that feel emotionally stable while also offering rich, accessible language input. O. Popovych links healthy socio-emotional development in the preschool years to warm and responsive adult-child relationships, predictable routines, and frequent opportunities for meaningful peer interaction – all of which also support later school readiness [7]. In multilingual groups, these conditions cannot be separated from how languages are positioned in classroom life. L. Mortimore and H. Sun argue that teachers need to treat every language represented in the group as legitimate rather than peripheral [5; 12]. Concrete steps include multilingual posters and storybooks, greetings and short routines in children's home languages, and systematic use of gestures and visual supports that reduce misunderstanding and anxiety. Such routines communicate that children do not

have to «leave» part of themselves outside the classroom door [5; 12]. The same logic applies to how educators respond to code-switching or non-standard forms. When teachers prioritise meaning, intention, and emotional content over strict formal accuracy, children receive a safer space for communication – an especially important condition for newly arrived migrants and refugees whose emotional security may already be fragile [3; 12].

A second focus concerns maintaining the home language while building competence in the majority language. International and Ukrainian evidence shows that heritage-language maintenance supports family cohesion and children's emotional well-being and, in supportive conditions, does not hinder acquisition of the societal language [2; 3; 12]. Research on Ukrainian families in Poland further suggests that institutional signals matter: when parents perceive preschool practices as respectful toward Ukrainian, they are more likely to sustain intentional family language policies and report less uncertainty around language choice, while children tend to display more positive attitudes toward both Ukrainian and Polish [10; 11]. For educators, this evidence translates into practical approaches such as involving families in home-language storytelling, allowing the heritage language during early adaptation, and using flexible multilingual scaffolding to support comprehension before guiding children toward reformulation in the majority language [4; 9].

A third cluster of strategies draws on the central role of play in early childhood learning. Findings from bilingual preschool research and content-and-language-integrated learning (CLIL) suggest that language develops more robustly when it is embedded in activities that matter to children emotionally, rather than taught through decontextualised repetition or drills [4; 5]. R. Chumak-Horbatsch therefore recommends that educators «begin where children are» and build instruction around children's existing experiences, using play as a bridge between home and school languages [9]. In practice, educators can set up role-play corners where children act out familiar scenarios – such as shops, homes, or

medical visits – using bilingual props and both languages. Another option is story-based project work in which narratives are first introduced in the home language (by parents or via recordings) and later expanded or retold in the majority language with teacher scaffolding. Songs, rhymes, and movement games in both languages can further support phonological awareness, rhythm, and emotional expression while keeping language use natural and enjoyable [9; 13].

Emergent biliteracy can be built through shared classroom projects in which children produce dual-language picture books. In this format, children contribute drawings, while short captions are dictated and recorded in each language. Literacy therefore grows out of personal content and lived emotion rather than abstract exercises, which strengthens motivation and supports communication at the same time [4]. In migration settings, narrative play and storytelling also create a safe symbolic space where children can express and reorganise experiences of separation, change, and future-oriented hope in age-appropriate ways.

Another element that requires explicit attention in bilingual preschool pedagogy is social and emotional learning (SEL). SEL concerns children's development of emotional awareness and regulation, their capacity to form and sustain relationships, and their ability to act in socially responsible and prosocial ways. In forced-migration contexts, SEL is often implemented together with trauma-informed and culturally responsive inclusion practices [15]. On the basis of early CLIL practice, L. Mortimore shows that emotional competences and language skills strengthen each other when they are taught through a single pedagogical design rather than separated into unrelated «blocks» [5]. Classroom work can therefore include bilingual emotion vocabulary activities (e.g., linking «happy / радий» or «worried / схвильований»), role-plays where children practise the perspective of a newcomer who is not yet easily understood, cooperative tasks that rely on turn-taking and negotiation in mixed-language

teams, and teacher-guided reflection on children's own feelings when speaking different languages (e.g., «When I speak Ukrainian/Polish/English, I feel…»).

The literature repeatedly points to another requirement: instructional approaches cannot be standardised across all migrant children. Differences in educational history, exposure to war-related stress, family resources, and the structure of children's linguistic repertoires make uniform solutions ineffective [1; 6]. Culturally responsive bilingual pedagogy starts with genuine partnership with families and includes purposeful conversations about home language use, migration experiences, and parental aspirations. It also means noticing how family composition shapes children's access to language input and emotional support [1; 10]. For Ukrainian families in the diaspora, educators additionally need to recognise the wartime status of Ukrainian as a language of belonging and resistance, while respecting parents' choices regarding how Ukrainian, the host-country language, and English are balanced in everyday life [11; 13].

Taken together, emotional safety, home-language maintenance, play-based bilingual learning, emergent biliteracy, and SEL-informed teaching function most effectively when implemented as an integrated approach rather than as separate techniques.

The same evidence base also raises requirements at the system level. Teacher education – both pre-service and in-service – needs strong research-informed content on child bilingualism, migration, and socio-emotional development. Without such preparation, educators may misinterpret migrant children's language behaviour through deficit framings instead of evidence-based developmental perspectives [4; 5; 7]. Training programmes should combine international research on bilingual development and SEL with context-rich cases, including studies of Ukrainian migrant children's trajectories in European preschools and the family language policies described in recent Ukrainian scholarship [6; 10; 11].

The reviewed studies also imply that national early childhood curricula should treat multilingualism and migration as ordinary features of contemporary childhood, not as exceptional or «problematic» deviations. This requires explicit guidance on bilingual pedagogy and on SEL integration within curriculum frameworks, in line with Ukrainian initiatives that position bilingualism as a resource for communicative and cognitive development rather than simply an additional language subject [4; 13]. At the same time, preschools serving large numbers of migrant and refugee children need dedicated support structures. Bilingual assistants, intercultural mediators, and psychologists trained in migration-related stress provide the language-sensitive and emotionally attuned adult presence that has been shown to improve children's adaptation and well-being [1; 6; 12].

Limitations. As a narrative review, the study does not claim exhaustive coverage of all publications on early bilingualism and migration, and it does not apply a full systematic-review protocol (e.g., PRISMA screening or meta-analytic synthesis). The evidence base on Ukrainian preschoolers displaced after 2022 remains emergent, which may limit the generalisability of some conclusions across countries and institutional models. In addition, the review prioritised English- and Ukrainian-language sources, which may underrepresent relevant findings published in other languages.

Conclusions and prospects for further research. Early bilingualism in migrant children develops through several interacting layers: everyday language choices in the family, expectations and routines within early childhood institutions, curriculum and policy signals, and the broader socio-political conditions that accompany migration. Research indicates that bilingual development tends to proceed without negative socio-emotional costs and can even support resilience, empathy, and cognitive flexibilitywhen children receive stable emotional support and sustained opportunities to use both languages in meaningful communication.

At the same time, findings from Ukrainian and other migrant preschool groups show that bilingualism may become a source of tension when the home language is pushed to the margins in educational or public settings, when children face prejudice or exclusion, or when families live under high acculturative stress and parents struggle with inconsistent or conflicted language beliefs.

The article proposes a set of educator-oriented strategies that treat linguistic growth and emotional well-being as interconnected goals. These strategies include building multilingual classroom spaces where children feel safe; maintaining the home language while systematically scaffolding the majority language; developing bilingual learning through play and emergent biliteracy; embedding social and emotional learning within bilingual practice; and adapting teaching to individual needs through culturally responsive work in partnership with families.

For preschool practitioners, especially those working in diverse and multilingual groups, this framework provides a clear rationale and practical direction for strengthening both language outcomes and children's sense of belonging. For policy makers and teacher educators, the evidence supports a shift in perspective. Bilingualism should be approached as a competence that expands educational opportunity, rather than as a difficulty to be managed, particularly in contexts shaped by displacement and high mobility.

Future research should track how specific pedagogical approaches influence long-term bilingual trajectories and mental health outcomes. It should also evaluate teacher education models that combine bilingual pedagogy with social-emotional learning. Finally, more attention is needed to children's own accounts of their language experiences across different forms of migration and resettlement.

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