

Fluency vs. Literacy in Multilingual College Students in the Central Valley

Melissa Nallely Rubio

B.A. Candidate, Department of Spanish, California State University Stanislaus, 1 University Circle, Turlock, CA 95382

Received October 18, 2023; accepted October 18, 2023

Abstract

As the title implies, the sole focus of this research study is to measure and record the percentage of fluency and literacy skills multilingual college students exhibit within the Central Valley with the very intent to reveal the challenges multilingual students face. Often enough the case being the conflicting competition between their foreign languages, native, or target languages they hone against the usage of the English language. In today's world, there is a constant usage of English among the globe. One can observe it in action through our surroundings from the education system, workforce, and social networks. As a result, student's literacy skills in their native and learnt foreign languages will significantly demonstrate a negative decline in comparison to their literacy skills in the English language due to the lack of need to practice literacy skills in these foreign languages. Whereas for their fluency skills on the other hand, it may not appear significantly affected because conversation is generally facile to convey due to repetition of common words, phrases, or expressions that one often comes to be confronted with on the daily. With the aforementioned, to carry on a tradition, maintaining native or learnt foreign language ensures the culture along with its tongue remains striving and alive. It is inevitable to avoid culture and all that enwraps around it when learning or speaking a language as both the existence of culture and language are codependent hand to hand to one another. With the data collected from this very research, I hope to promote and motivate participants and a much wider audience to continue or begin to hone a language they find themselves interested in or to further encapsulate oneself into a culture because we are to celebrate diversity of origins that carries thousands of stories, not uniformity.

Introduction

Through years of repetitive exposure to today's English-influenced speaking environment, students' literacy skills in Spanish and other learned foreign languages will significantly decrease due to the lack of practice of these literacy skills within these languages. Whereas their fluency skills on the other hand, will not appear to be as affected because conversation arises generally much easier; a skill that improves and becomes master through practice through repetition of common frequent phrases and expressions.

Languages, though many and all unique, all enable society to convey thoughts, feelings, ideas, and information across to others to ignite actions. Often communication is key for functions to occur, a simple error in a set of instructions can result in mishap, further issues, and prevention of moving forward; a concept that very much applies to beings in a social aspect, electronic devices, and much of life within itself. As impactful and wide language finds itself applicable to much of life, the research refers to the social aspect of language that society utilizes every day. Being that the case, to better understand language

means growth and the maintenance of culture that will soon be elaborated ahead.

Furthermore, with regards to the terminology within the title of the research, there is often a misconception between bilingual and multilingual that leads to misunderstanding. While the terms bilingual and multilingual may appear as synonymous, they are not completely synonymous with each other. The key distinction between these two terms is in their prefixes.

The prefix "bi-" means two such as biannual, bicycle, bilateral and the prefix "-multi" means many such as the words multimedia, multiplayer, and multiplier. A bilingual person hones their ability to read and write in only two languages while a multilingual person, on the other hand, hones the ability to both read and write in three or more languages.

According to some academics, trilingualism research is conducted in the theoretical vein of bilingualism, with no actual efforts to delimit trilingualism as a distinct entity (Aronin & Hufeisen, 2009; Hoffmann, 2001; Njurai, 2016). Although there are some striking similarities between bilinguals and trilinguals, there are distinguishing characteristics of trilingualism. It is best to understand the

distinguishing characteristics and some bilinguals' habits as it could be proven useful to further about through the exploration of those basic characteristics of trilingual practices; to develop an improved understanding of the concept.

Multilingualism, according to Aronin and Hufeisen (2009), is complex in several ways and facets. Multilingualism is becoming increasingly more complex than bilingualism in terms of complexity. While the evidence isn't conclusive, the findings from several studies may suggest that in many ways there are several significant differences between learning a third language and learning a second language (Aronin & Hufeisen, 2009). A bilingual or multilingual person may arrive at varied conclusions about his or her bilingualism or the multilingual self and his several personas in his quest to learn and acquire new languages (Lvovich, 1997).

Furthermore, fluency is the ability to effectively communicate and convey ideas. Literacy is the ability to comprehend while reading and writing. Now, to what extent or degree do multilingual college students or individuals possess both abilities in the languages learnt? The results and findings of this research study will share the answer to this question.

As mentioned before, language goes hand to hand with any culture. Through previous study, it has been proven both language and culture are inseparability to one another (Galante, 2022). Within the study, a Plurilingual and Pluricultural Competence (PPC) scale was utilized to further study multilingual individuals. Through the case study, they concluded a significant upward trend in culture in relations to language.

Culture, an umbrella term that manifests itself through daily rituals, objects, and language all share variation. Those variations of society should be cherished as they hold stories of upbringing, development, striving societies, and define individuals as uniquely one of a kind.

Though groups may share a culture, each has hundreds of roots that slowly begin to differentiate one another that bend slightly in a different direction. Without attending to these roots, the stories carried through these roots will wither away. To prevent such a terrible fortune, individuals must do more to preserve diversity, draw more attention and encourage diversity to nourish these roots rather than lose them to uniformity.

Methodology

A sample of fifty bilingual, trilingual, multilingual, and proclaimed participants who state they are proficient, all from various ethnicities were recruited, surveyed, and documented for this research. With the use of an online survey, all fifty participants answered 12 survey questions.

Some sample questions from the survey are the following: "How many languages do you speak?," "Do you feel that an English-speaking environment competes with the growth in both your fluency and literacy skills of the foreign languages you know?," "What language(s) do you use at home?," "What languages do you use amongst your friends?." For the interview portion, student participants were given the opportunity to participate in an interview either in-person or online. Their participation was voluntary. Those who decided to participate in an interview were mainly Spanish and Portuguese speakers. The interview questions were an extension of the survey and the purpose of the interview was to further assess the participants' fluency and literacy knowledge in their foreign language. Such was measured by having participants take a fluency test that required reading and engaging in conversation. For the literacy portion, participants were asked to demonstrate their writing abilities by writing down phrases said to them in the foreign language or by answering a prompt.

Results

The results were gathered: through questions, assessments, and further study conducted. The recorded data will not find individuals or students who speak a type of foreign language followed by Spanish in that order. As displayed in Figure 1, Languages Spoken Amongst College Students, this figure demonstrates that all students speak English. The other languages are shown within the figure: forty-three Spanish speaking students and seven other students who speak either Portuguese, Khmer, Korean, Japanese, and Punjabi. Figure 2, Fluency Survey Results, and Figure 3, Literacy Survey Results, demonstrate both the fluency and literacy levels in Spanish and the previous foreign languages in comparison with those skills in the English. In both the English fluency and literacy both Spanish-speaking students and foreign language speaking students scored a 5 indicating proficiency in the language. In Spanish fluency students scored an average of 3 proficiency and for literacy they scored an average of

3 as well. For foreign language speaking students, students scored an average of 2 for their fluency skills and an average of 1.5 for their literacy skills.

Discussion/Conclusion

The participants who participated within the questionnaire survey may perhaps speak excellent English, good in their native language, or have learned the language beyond intermediate to advanced standards. However, the participants will very much unlikely hold Spanish as one's second language which is very much interesting as many of the students and individuals surveyed state they speak Spanish. To achieve a breakthrough, the research will require many more multilingual college students or individuals who speak in three languages.

Which by itself comes to be a roadblock obstacle within the research study as the likelihood of individuals being multilingual college students or individuals have been proven to be low. With that being the situation, the research will array it finding among more college students perhaps of just one specific group within the Central Valley. If required, the study may even require additional outreaches toward a broader study group who are capable of speaking Spanish, English, and/or a different language for further inferences. In closing, through the

questionnaires, interviews, and involvements of students and individuals, it has resulted in a raise of self-awareness of one's fluency and literacy skills for those involved with the research study in both their native languages and foreign languages; encouraging the students and individuals to further improve one's skills in a native or foreign language that aligns with my mission to promote variety, not uniformity.

With the aforementioned, if a multilingual is an individual with the abilities to speak, read, write, and understand three or more languages, could there be a possibility that the multilingual college student might result more fluent and literate in a specific language compared to the other languages they claim to know? With this question in mind, this question poses further investigation in the areas of fluency and literacy. Which would lead to another question: what is the significance of these components when it comes to honing and learning a language? These are the questions I hope to further develop with future research, however, not only with college students of the Central Valley but in other regions such as cities in the bay or possibly in other states. Perhaps I might study specific linguistic backgrounds such as the Hmong, Mixtec, and Hindi-Urdu communities. I might also expand my research to include age diversity and make comparisons between children and adult language learners.

Figures

Figure 1. Survey groups

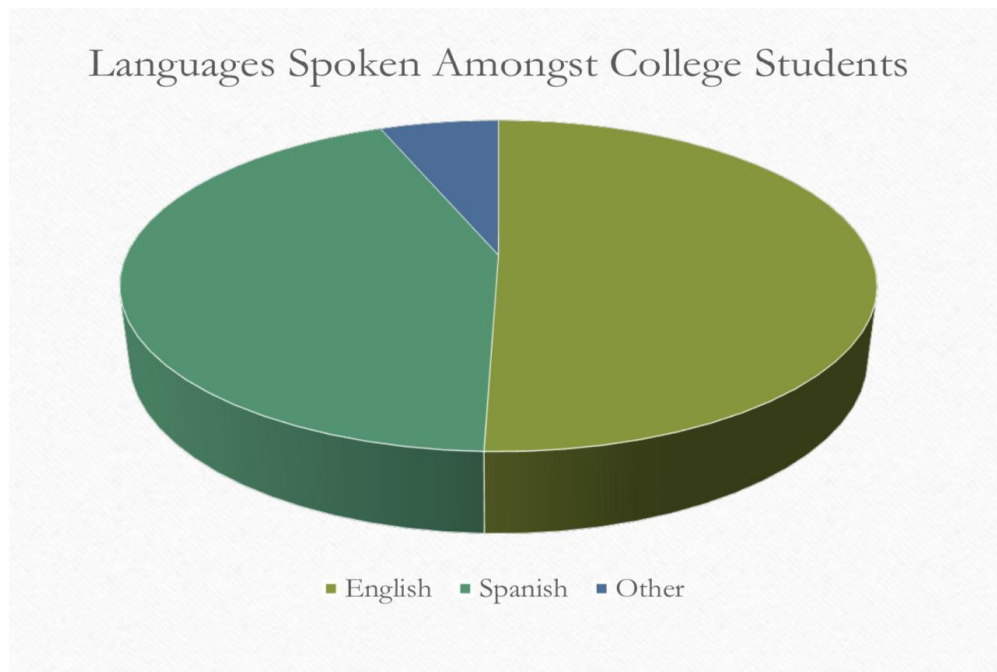


Figure 2. Fluency survey results

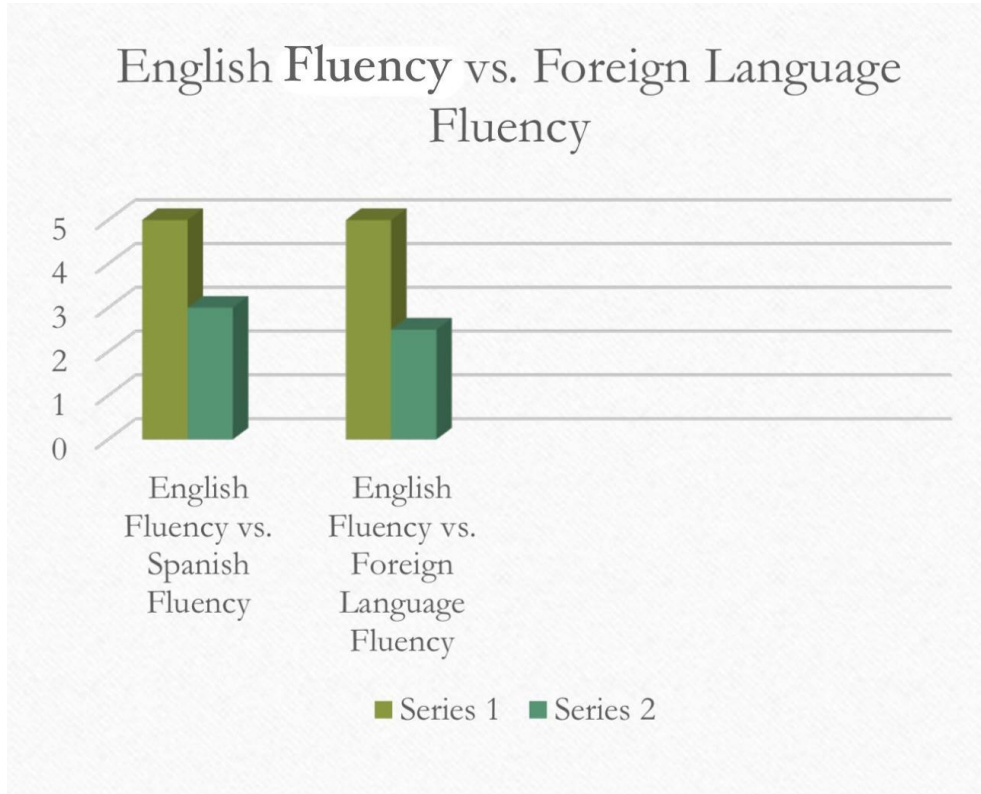
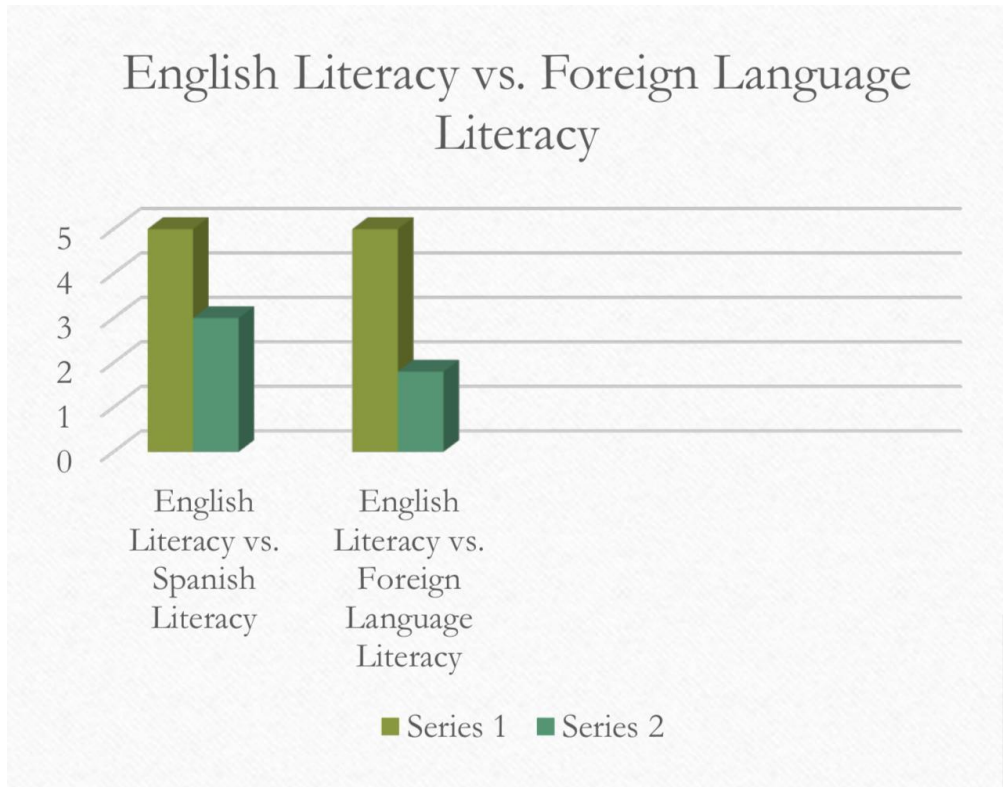


Figure 3. Literacy Survey Results



Acknowledgements

I would like to give a special and sincere thank you to my mentor, Profesora Sandra García Sanborn, for constantly supporting and motivating me to move forward despite several obstacles that came my way during the process of conducting and attaining this research for the outcome of my project. I am also undeniably grateful for such a wonderful and patient friend, Austin Mercado, for his disposition, editing skills, and big heart.

References

- Alsheikh, N. (2014). The perceived and actual use of metacognitive reading strategies by the UAE high school students, *Journal of ELT and Applied Linguistics (JELTAL)*, 2(1), 140-153.
- Galante, A. (2022). Plurilingual and pluricultural competence (PPC) scale: The inseparability of language and culture. *International Journal of Multilingualism*, 19(4), 477–498. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14790718.2020.1753747>
- Marx, N., & Hufeisen, B. (2004). Critical overview of research on third language acquisition and multilingualism published in the German language. *International Journal of Multilingualism*, 1(2), 141-154.
- Njurai, E. W. (2016). Language practices involving two languages among trilingual undergraduate students of Mathematics. *IMHOTEP: African Journal of Pure and Applied Mathematics*, 3(1), 45-68.
- Primavera, J. (2017). American need to learn a foreign language. (n.d). Retrieved from <https://dailycollegian.com/2017/04/americans-need-to-learn-foreign-languages/>
- Tokuhama-Espinosa, T. (2008). *Living languages: Multilingualism across the lifespan* (Vol. 1). Greenwood Publishing Group
- Vibrant Integrated Didactic Approach - VIDA. (2018). *English/Spanish bilingual and dual language/ESL Education*. VIDA Education. Retrieved from: <https://www.linkedin.com/company/vida-education/>
- Wang, L., & Kirkpatrick, A. (2015). Trilingual education in Hong Kong primary schools: an overview. *Multilingual Education*, 5(1), 3.
- Weaver, C. (2002). Teaching reading and developing literacy: Contrasting perspectives. *Reading process and practice*.