Understanding Language Proficiency in Second Language Learners

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Research on second language learners, both English language learners and foreign language learners, shows that these students often remain stuck at intermediate levels of second language proficiency. Part of the problem in understanding bilingual/second language proficiency lies in the lack of clarity in our definitions and descriptions of language proficiency and language competence, and this is particularly complex in discussions of bilingual proficiency where there are two languages and interactions between these languages to consider. A related problem is that there are limitations in our current measures of language proficiency, which is true for understanding English proficiency in English language learners and proficiency in other languages for foreign/second language learners and native speakers of those languages. However, this measurement concern is even more complicated when we consider the variety of different languages beyond the more commonly taught second languages in the US – English, Spanish, and French – such as Mandarin, Japanese, Russian, and German – that are taught at the elementary, secondary and higher education levels. Another problem is that we often fail to consider the learner and school demographic characteristics that can influence second language development.

This presentation will examine issues in the definition and measurement of language proficiency for ELL and second/foreign language learners and the variability in the language proficiency outcomes of second language learners (ELL and foreign language/immersion students) according to learner background and school demographic characteristics. Examples will be drawn from elementary and secondary dual language programs, but the overall discussion will have implications for broader theory, research, and program planning for second language learners.