

The long-term impact of subtractive schooling in the educational experiences of secondary English language learners

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This study examines a lesser-known population of students, called ‘long-term English language learners’ (LTELLs) in the USA, who now comprise one-third of all English language learners in New York City secondary schools. A major finding from our research, which explores the characteristics and educational needs of this student population, is that the students’ prior schooling has been subtractive, posing significant challenges for their academic literacy acquisition. Having attended school in the USA for seven years or more, LTELLs have experienced programming that has not provided sufficient opportunities to fully develop their native language literacy skills, in spite of research which states that such opportunities are correlated with school success. LTELLs thus arrive in high school with limited academic literacy in English or their native languages, in spite of their oral bilingualism, posing difficulties for them in all subject areas. As part of a three-year research project, we conducted qualitative research in three New York City high schools. This article draws upon interview data and document analyses to describe the interconnection between the students’ schooling experiences, language usage, and current academic challenges. We provide suggestions for how programming can be designed to address the needs of this often overlooked student population.

Keywords: long-term English language learners; English language learners; subtractive schooling; literacy; native language; secondary schools; programming

Long-term English language learners (LTELLs)¹ are students who have attended schools in the USA for seven or more years and still require language support services. Although these students comprise a significant portion of the secondary English language learner (ELL) population in the USA, very little research exists about them. In order to address this gap, our research explores the characteristics and educational needs of this population in New York City, where LTELLs currently comprise one-third of the ELL population at the secondary level (New York City Department of Education, Office of English Language Learners 2008). This article shares findings about the language and literacy usage of these students and analyzes their past and present educational programming while in the USA.

A salient finding from this research is that the students’ schooling in the USA has been subtractive, in that their native languages have not been fully developed in

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school and instead have been largely replaced by English.² Although LTELLs are orally bilingual when using language for social purposes, they typically have limited literacy skills in English or in their native languages. We argue in this article that the overwhelming emphasis on English in the students' schooling in the USA – over native language development and biliteracy – is a significant contributing factor to the length of time it takes them to acquire academic English, and particularly to develop literacy skills. Thus this article highlights the importance of offering ELLs opportunities for native language and literacy development in school. Moreover, our findings offer further support for research in bilingual education theory which suggests that subtractive schooling can have negative consequences for students' academic performance, and which argues that attaining academic proficiency in each language enables students to reap the full benefits of bilingualism (Baker 2006; Cummins 2000; Valenzuela 1999). We conclude by considering how secondary schools can better support LTELLs through educational programming tailored to their needs.

Literature review

From the moment that ELLs enter US schools, the educational programming they receive has a longstanding and significant impact on their language skills and academic performance, as programs can either promote language loss or language maintenance and development over time. There is ample support in the literature for the argument that ELL students who have the opportunity to develop and maintain their native languages in school are likely to outperform their counterparts in English-only programs and experience academic success (Baker 2006; Krashen and McField 2005; Thomas and Collier 1997, 2002). This is because the skills that students acquire in their native languages are found to transfer to English (Cummins 2000).

In spite of these research findings, the vast majority of immigrants to the USA receive instruction in English only. For those who do have the benefit of receiving bilingual education, whereby both their native language and English are used in instruction across content areas to varying degrees, most only enroll in 'weak' forms of bilingual education. Unlike 'strong' forms of bilingual education such as one and two-way bilingual immersion or dual language programs, which seek to develop full bilingualism and biliteracy (Lindholm-Leary 2000), the goal of 'weak' forms of bilingual education is English monolingualism (Baker 2006).³ In their research on immigrants to the USA, Faltis and Arias (1993, as cited in Cohen 2007) note how students who have attended 'weak' forms of bilingual education, such as transitional bilingual education programs, may have limited oral and/or written proficiency in their native language, and how students educated only in English are likely to have limited or no native language literacy skills. Thus, English-only and weak bilingual programs are found to be subtractive, in that the students' native language skills over time are eventually replaced with English (Baker 2006; García 1997). Because US schooling is characterized by an emphasis on English at the expense of native language development, the vast majority of immigrant groups in the USA will lose their native languages and shift entirely to English by the third generation (Fishman 1991, 2001), if not sooner (Fillmore 1991; Wright 2004).

The native languages of ELLs are often misperceived as liabilities to learning, and excluded from educational programming and the formal curriculum (Menken 2008;

Nieto and Bode 2008). In her research on subtractive schooling, Valenzuela (1999) explores how school decisions, often based on wider policies steeped in assimilationist views, negatively impact the education and academic achievement of recent immigrant and US-born Mexican students. She notes the importance of examining how students are schooled, rather than focusing only on how they learn, because, 'the organization of schooling can be just as consequential to the academic progress of minority youth' (Valenzuela 1999, 26–7). Schools have the potential to fail language minority students through programming and pedagogy that disregard and devalue students' languages and cultures, and thus fail to attend to their specialized learning needs.

When the native languages of ELLs are not developed in school, it becomes difficult for the students to benefit from their bilingualism. Threshold theory, a classic in bilingual education literature that was initially proposed by Toukomaa and Skutnabb-Kangas (1977), and subsequently elaborated by Cummins (2000), posits that there may in fact be certain thresholds of language proficiency that students must reach in order to experience cognitive benefits of bilingualism, especially in areas related to educational success. As Cummins states, 'continued academic development of both languages conferred cognitive/linguistic benefits whereas less well-developed academic proficiency in both languages limited children's ability to benefit cognitively and academically ...' (2000, 75). In response to criticisms of threshold theory for being oversimplified and negative in its potential portrayal of 'language deficiencies' (see for instance Edelsky et al. 1983; Fillmore 1991; MacSwan 2000; MacSwan, Rolstad, and Glass 2002; Valdés, MacSwan, and Martinez 2002), Cummins (2000, 173) clarifies that when making policy decisions it is best to turn to the ample research backing for the interdependence hypothesis, or the theory of linguistic transfer, that students who have developed their native language literacy skills 'will tend to make stronger progress in acquiring literacy in their L2 [second language].' Moreover, continued development of both languages into literate spheres is associated with academic, linguistic, and possibly cognitive advantages (Cummins 2000).

Threshold and interdependence hypotheses are especially applicable to ELL students who attended English-only programs or 'weak' forms of bilingual education in US schools. As Baker (2006) writes in his discussion of Canadian French immersion programs, located in an additive context where both English and French hold high status:

[A] child may acquire literacy through the second language at no cost to literacy through the first language. In contrast, in a subtractive environment (e.g., 'weak' forms of bilingual education), the transfer of literacy skills between the two languages may be impeded. (332)

Baker (2006) clarifies that native language literacy skills cannot be transferred to the majority language if the minority language has not been developed sufficiently. By contrast, students who reach a high threshold of bilingualism not only do better in the areas of literacy and metalinguistic awareness (Mohanty 1994), but also in other core content areas such as Mathematics (Dawe 1983).

The importance of native language development for literacy learning is a particularly salient point, which we apply in this article to the case of LTELLs, who have attended US schools for seven or more years. In his comprehensive review

of research on the education of ELLs, Goldenberg (2008) notes that in spite of controversies surrounding bilingual education in the USA, research in the field is conclusive that: ‘teaching students to read in their first language promotes higher levels of reading achievement in English’ (14). In their meta-analysis of studies conducted over the past 35 years that compare bilingual reading instruction to second language immersion, the US National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children and Youth conclude the following:

The studies reviewed provide ample research evidence that certain aspects of second-language literacy development . . . are related in important ways to performance on similar constructs in the first language; that common underlying abilities play a significant role in second-language development as they do in first-language literacy development; . . . [and] that well-developed literacy skills in the first language can facilitate second-language literacy development to some extent. (August and Shanahan 2006, 14)

In discussing classroom and school factors which impact second language literacy development, they clarify that: ‘Language-minority students who are literate in their first language are likely to be advantaged in the acquisition of English literacy’ (17). Yet, in spite of potential benefits, the native languages of ELLs are often overlooked resources in efforts to help them acquire literacy skills.

The acquisition of what is termed ‘academic literacy’ is found to be a great challenge for ELLs in the USA, particularly at the secondary level. The Adolescent English Language Learners Literacy Advisory Panel developed the following definition of ‘academic literacy’:

- Includes reading, writing, and oral discourse for school.
- Varies from subject to subject.
- Requires knowledge of multiple genres of text, purposes for text use, and text media.
- Is influenced by students’ literacies in contexts outside of school.
- Is influenced by students’ personal, social, and cultural experiences (Short and Fitzsimmons 2007, 2).

As these authors note, academic literacy includes oral as well as written language, and is extremely complex. Drawing attention to the poor overall performance of ELLs on reading assessments in the USA, Short and Fitzsimmons (2007) refer to a ‘literacy crisis’ among secondary ELLs because so many struggle to attain the academic literacy skills they need to succeed in school.

In his description of older ELLs who arrived in the USA of school age, or else were born in the USA but speak a language other than English at home, Thonus (2003) clarifies how subtractive schooling can result in limited academic literacy skills:

Because of the lack of maintenance bilingual education and the push towards cultural assimilation, these U.S.-educated students have lost or are in the process of losing their home language(s), without having learned their writing systems or academic registers. (18)

Referring to this student population as ‘Generation 1.5’,⁴ Thonus (2003) shows how the educational programming an ELL receives can lead to language loss over time,

when a student's native language is neither maintained nor developed in school. In this article, we extend this conclusion to our findings about LTELLs.

Prior research about long-term English language learners (LTELLs)

In our previous research (Menken, Kleyn, and Chae 2007), we described how LTELLs come from all over the world, and typically fall into one or both of two main categories: (1) transnational students, who move back and forth between the USA and their family's country of origin; and (2) students who – while attending US schools – have shifted between bilingual education, English as a second language (ESL) programs, and mainstream classrooms with no language support programming. Thus the students have experienced high degrees of inconsistency in their prior schooling, resulting in limited opportunities for academic language development in either English or their native languages. This manuscript focuses specifically on those students with inconsistent US schooling, in order to better understand the outcomes of intra-national disruptions in programming and to consider steps to directly impact this population through domestic policy changes.

Although we have found in our research that LTELLs are orally proficient for social purposes in English and their native language, their skills in these languages are several grade levels below in reading and writing, resulting in poor overall academic performance. Following the definition of academic literacy proposed by Short and Fitzsimmons (2007), LTELLs typically have limited academic literacy, which impacts their performance in language arts as well as content classes, where instruction is rooted in an assumption that high levels of academic literacy have previously been attained. Although in general very little research exists about this student population, our findings are consistent with research that has been conducted by others about LTELLs (Freeman, Freeman, and Mercuri 2002, 2003; Ruiz-de-Velasco and Fix 2000).

Methodology

The findings presented in this article are from an ongoing sponsored research project for which we have completed three years of study (the project is scheduled to be completed in December 2009).⁵ The findings shared here are guided by the following research questions:

- (1) (a) What are the past and present educational experiences of LTELLs in US schools?

(b) To what extent are the services they receive (d) well-matched to their specific educational needs?
- (2) What are the language and literacy preferences and abilities of LTELLs, both in English and their native language(s)?

Our team comprised six researchers: the principal investigator (Menken), a faculty consultant (Kleyn), and four research assistants.⁶ In order to answer these research

questions, we gathered data in three New York City high schools. The schools selected for participation all serve significant numbers of LTELLs, yet vary in size, organization, and location in order to reflect the range of services and programming being provided to these students in New York City (see Menken, Kleyn, and Chae 2007 for a more detailed description of the school sites).

To answer the preceding research questions, we conducted in-depth interviews of 29 LTELL students, five school administrators, and four teachers who work with LTELLs. The purpose of the student interviews was to learn about the students' past and present schooling experiences, and increase understanding of their language usage and preferences. The purposes of the teacher and administrator interviews were to determine the current educational programming provided to LTELLs, as well as perceptions of the students' strengths and weaknesses, and to learn which approaches educators feel are most successful in meeting the needs of this student population. Interviews were detailed and at times the same participant was interviewed more than once, following a semi-structured interview protocol. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, and analyzed to identify the most prevalent themes (Creswell 1998; Miles and Huberman 1994).

To triangulate qualitative data regarding the past and present schooling experiences of the students in our sample, we also examined their academic records. These included US schooling transcripts, report cards, test scores, birth certificates, home language identification surveys, and/or bilingual counseling progress reports. In order to gain a better understanding of students' literacy abilities, we analyzed students' grades in English (including English language arts and ESL courses), language courses in the native language (if any), and Math. To get a picture of the students' general performance in school, we looked at cumulative grade averages. When full transcripts were not available for some students, an average of grades in English, ESL, Native/Foreign language, and Mathematics was taken.

Together, the data collected from these schools offer a portrait of LTELLs and the services being provided to them in New York City schools. The 29 LTELLs who participated in this study are in Grades 9–12, range in age from 15 to 19 years old, and have been in the USA for an average of 10 years.⁷ The majority are speakers of Spanish, which matches citywide demographics for ELLs, though the student participants included speakers of other languages, such as Twi, Garífuna,⁸ and Mandarin.⁹

Findings: past and present educational programming provided to long-term English language learners (LTELLs)

In this section, we share findings about the students' educational experiences in the high schools they were attending at the time of our data collection, as well as those in the US schools they had attended previously for elementary and middle school. Overwhelmingly, the educational programming that the LTELLs we studied receive in the USA can be characterized as subtractive, due to the emphasis placed on literacy development in English only.¹⁰ Even though most students in our sample participated in bilingual education programs at some point in their education prior to entering high school, they attended 'weak' bilingual programs and did not do so consistently, as their schooling was typically interspersed with sustained periods attending English-only programs. Twenty-one students in our sample have received a combination of ESL and bilingual education, and seven have received only ESL.

As these numbers indicate, all of the students have attended ESL programs (in lieu of bilingual programs) for some or all of their US schooling – with just one exception. Interestingly, there was one student in our sample who has only been educated in bilingual programs while in the USA and, notably, he was also the highest performing student in our sample. This student consistently attended bilingual programs since his arrival in the fourth grade from the Dominican Republic, where he had received a strong foundation in Spanish. At the time of his interview, this student was at the start of his seventh year of school in the USA, and had a cumulative grade average of 90%, the highest of all the students in our sample. Soon after our interview, this student passed the statewide ESL test (the New York State ESL Achievement Test or NYSESLAT),¹¹ and exited his ELL status. What set this student apart from the other student participants was the consistency of his educational background, whereby English was added to Spanish, and academic skills were developed in both, without the eventual replacement of his home language by English.

Moreover, the vast majority of LTELL students have moved in and out of different programs, without systemic consistency. Not only have students moved between language programs, over half of our sample has had a complete gap in their ESL or bilingual services at some point while in the USA, when they instead received English-only programming in mainstream classrooms for a period of one to three years (for further discussion see Menken, Kley, and Chae 2007). As a result, the student participants in our study who attended bilingual programs in the USA only did so for a relatively small period of time, most for approximately one to three years. Compounding the subtractive nature of their schooling, these students attended ‘weak’ forms of bilingual education that did not seek to promote biliteracy.

This accounts for our finding that LTELLs are typically orally proficient in both English and their native language, yet feel more comfortable reading and writing in English; this finding is presented in the section that follows, which is about language preferences and proficiency. At the same time, we find that the students in our sample do not have strong academic literacy skills in either their native language or English; in fact, many students note that English literacy is their primary weakness in school. Taken together, these findings offer further support for bilingual education theory, which argues that first language literacy skills are a key predictor of successful second language literacy acquisition (Baker 2006; Krashen and McField 2005; Thomas and Collier 1997).

English literacy emphasis in school

In our interviews, we asked students whether the schools they attended have emphasized English or native language literacy overall. Of the 25 students who answered this interview question, 23 indicated that their schooling has primarily emphasized English literacy.¹² The following quotation offers an example (*please note that italicized text represents the voice of the interviewer*):

In the schools you have attended, have you learned reading and writing more in English or Spanish?

English for reading and writing because it's like more easier and they teach you more in English than Spanish.

If you had to think back to your whole education, what percent of the time would you say was in Spanish?

Like 30%. (Isabel, 9th Grade LTELL, School 1, interview transcript)

Like most other LTELLs who participated in this study, Isabel has received a combination of bilingual and ESL programming. As she notes, the primary goal of instruction throughout her schooling has been English acquisition. As she mentions in the preceding transcript, she now perceives of English literacy as 'easier,' because she has grown more accustomed to it. Meanwhile, in school she has rarely been exposed to academic literacy in her native language.

Isabel's experiences are indicative of most students, including those who have attended bilingual education programs. In our sample, the students who enrolled in bilingual programs at some point attended transitional programs that did not seek to maintain the native language or develop biliteracy. A theme that repeatedly arose in interviews was that within these bilingual programs, teachers would use the students' native language orally, while all reading and writing occurred only in English. As one student noted in describing his experiences in a Spanish/English bilingual program in middle school:

They gave it in English but sometimes they explain it in Spanish . . .

So the books, what . . .

Were in English.

. . . So it sounds like it was what is called a transitional program . . . it sounds like, what you're saying, it was a little more English than it was Spanish.

I think [the teachers] were the same, they used the same thing . . . Like they gave the material in English and then they explain it in Spanish – both languages.

Okay. So when you were doing your reading and writing it was all in English?

Yeah . . . They all used the same method. They just explain it in Spanish and they gave the material in English. They were all the same. (Francisco, 10th Grade LTELL, School 2, interview transcript)

As described in the preceding passage, students in Spanish/English transitional bilingual programs often receive written work in English, which their teachers then explain orally in Spanish to ensure student comprehension.¹³ While primary language support may be helpful, it still provides insufficient exposure to the native language to develop biliteracy. Moreover, unlike in programs where each language is used equally, in these cases the minority language is awarded a lesser status when compared to English (Baker 2006; García 1997). Thus students in this type of bilingual education programming had limited opportunities to develop their native language literacy skills, because reading and writing were primarily in English. Furthermore, students' experiences in transitional bilingual programs suggest implementation that does not adhere to the typical model, wherein a certain quantity of instruction is devoted to teaching content using native language materials. When we inquired about maintenance programs, such as dual language, none of the students in our sample reported attending such programs.

High school programming: disconnection to the needs of long-term English language learners (LTELLs)

At the high schools we studied, LTELLs take the same classes as all other ELLs and no services are specifically targeted to their needs. As a result, LTELLs in our sample are currently enrolled in ESL programs and/or bilingual education, with the majority only in ESL programs. Many also attend foreign language classes taught in their native language. Not only do LTELLs receive no specialized services, but also many of the services they do receive are mismatched to their actual language abilities and learning needs.

In specific, both the ESL and foreign language programs provided are inappropriate for LTELLs. Many students in our sample, who are orally proficient in English, maintain that ESL classes are ‘too easy;’ this theme was very strong in our data:

Which subject do you think is the least meaningful?

English.

English?

The ESL.

OK. Why?

Why? ‘Cause mostly the things we do there, I . . . I already know it. I . . . it’s like easy . . .

OK . . . so you think ESL is . . . it’s easy? It’s too easy?

Yeah. (Keila, 10th Grade LTELL, School 1, interview transcript)

Keila’s view that ESL class is too easy is a sentiment echoed by other LTELLs. Mariluz reiterates this point:

And do you receive ESL here?

Yeah. But I don’t . . . to tell you the truth, I’m being real honest with you. I don’t really go. It’s my last period class and I don’t really go because I feel I don’t need ESL. You know, and my mother believes that, so I don’t really go to ESL. Like that’s for people that don’t know English. (Mariluz, 9th Grade LTELL, School 1, interview transcript)

As shown in the two preceding quotations, the ESL classes that the students receive in high school were intended for new arrivals whose oral English proficiency skills are not as developed as those of LTELLs. Often what happens is that LTELLs are placed into lower level ESL classes due to their limited literacy skills, which further intensifies the gap between their oral abilities and those of the other students in their classes, who have recently arrived in the USA. As a result, the programming LTELLs receive most often fails to engage them or serve their needs.

The following quotation from an ESL teacher identifies this mismatch between the students’ needs and the language proficiency expectations of the ESL courses in which they are enrolled:

What grades have LTELLs received in their ESL classes?

[F]or example [Azucena] doesn’t do any work, but she can do very well . . . The problem for them is it’s easy for them to throw a decent grade without really learning that much,

you know. Where the other kids have to, you know, really struggle to get a decent grade whereas they don't. And they generally don't, they generally don't push themselves to do extraordinarily well. [Azucena] can get an 80% without opening her eyes basically. And generally does. (Mr J, ESL Teacher, School 1, interview transcript)

As the teacher notes, his class is best suited for a new arrival who is at the earlier stages of learning English. Meanwhile, the LTELLs in his class who have had seven or more years of US schooling are not being challenged, so they can succeed without working hard. As a result, as he notes in the case of Azucena, many students respond to these low expectations by disengaging.

When students in high school receive native language supports, it is often in a foreign language class where LTELLs – who are native speakers – are mixed with non-native speakers, and instruction focuses on basic grammar and vocabulary development. Several students in our sample reported receiving Spanish classes in middle and/or high school. Because LTELLs have usually not received strong native language instruction in their past schooling, they often find native language literacy to be a great challenge. At the same time, it is not appropriate to place them into Spanish foreign language courses where instruction is grammar-based and no proficiency is assumed.

This tension is clarified in the following quotation:

Oh my classes are in English . . . even my Spanish class is in English. So besides that, all my classes are in English. I don't even have one class in Spanish . . . And my Spanish class is in English, with people that does not speak Spanish at all.

Why are you in that class then?

I don't know. They put me in that class because when I went to the Spanish, that theirs was real people from Colombia and all of them come here. I don't even know a word. I don't even know what the hell they were doing. [The teacher] put me to read something and I was like, nah, what's this? And she's like, 'ay,' and write like a paragraph, and she's like 'you can't be in this class, you don't know how to write obviously.' So she put me in the other class. I got so many mistakes in Spanish that when I start reading, then after, I don't understand what I just read . . . Like my Spanish teacher, she gave me uh, she told us to write a poem, and so I started writing, and she wrote like in green marker, all the mistake I had, and it was like the whole page, full of mistakes . . . It's too complicated, Spanish is too complicated. (Alicia, 11th Grade LTELL, School 3, interview transcript)

As Alicia points out in this interview, she was at first placed into a 'Spanish for Native Speakers' course with new arrivals who possess higher levels of Spanish literacy than Alicia does. The Spanish class she now attends is primarily instructed through the medium of English, with written work in Spanish focusing on grammar. The course curriculum was primarily intended for students learning Spanish as a foreign language, who are native-English speakers and have little to no oral or written Spanish proficiency. Even so, the Spanish literacy skills that the course demands are still difficult for Alicia. Like most students in our sample, she has not yet mastered basic mechanics of writing in English or her native language, and reading comprehension and writing are challenging in both languages.

Failing to build upon the students' oral foundation in their home language is a missed opportunity, as appropriate native language classes, intended for students who have experienced some language loss but have oral skills in a language other than English, could offer students the chance to develop their native language

literacy skills and thereby improve their English literacy as well. Only students at School 2 in our study enroll in such courses, as native language enrichment is central to the school's curriculum. Accordingly, students at School 2 are exposed to Spanish literature and texts, and literacy is infused into all classes regardless of the content area; however, this school primarily accepts new arrivals so few LTELLs are enrolled. At Schools 1 and 3, on the other hand, where large proportions of ELLs are LTELLs, only some of the students receive foreign language courses and, when they do, these classes are often inappropriate for them. Moreover, most LTELLs are receiving language support services in high schools that are mismatched to their actual language learning needs.

Language preferences and proficiency of long-term English language learner (LTELL) students

As described in this section, most students in our sample use both English and their native language for oral communication, yet are found to favor academic literacy in English – even though English literacy is one of the greatest challenges they face in school. We attribute this preference for English academic literacy to the schooling experiences of LTELLs, which emphasized English over their native language, as described in the preceding section.

Students are evenly divided between those who come from homes where only their native language is used and those from homes where both English and their native language are used. When speaking in English, LTELLs often sound like native-English speakers because of their strong oral English proficiency when language is used for social purposes. In spite of this bilingual oral proficiency, LTELLs are characterized by limited academic literacy skills in both English and their native language, which affects their performance in school. At the same time, students overwhelmingly prefer to read and write in English, because this is what they have predominantly been prepared to do in school.

Oral language

The students interviewed for this study usually use both English and their native language for oral communication.¹⁴ The majority of the students (62.1%) say that they use both languages equally in conversation. A small percentage of our informants (20.7%) report a preference for speaking English, while 17.2% prefer to speak in their native language. Context is typically a factor in language choice among bilingual individuals (Baker 2006), and the language spoken by the interlocutor often determines the medium of conversation, as the following excerpt describes:

What language do you speak with your friends?

Both. 'Cause, like, I've got black friends, and we talk English.

And then with friends who speak Spanish, you speak ...

I speak Spanish with them. (Mariluz, 9th Grade LTELL, School 1, interview transcript)

While speaking both languages can be contingent upon their conversational partner's language abilities, many students describe frequent codeswitching¹⁵ between English

and their native language. For instance, the term ‘Spanglish’ was often used by students in interviews (the native language of 90% of our participants is Spanish), as students described what most linguists would label codeswitching between English and Spanish. Of the students who expressed a specific preference for either English or their native language in oral communication, they too reported codeswitching in the classroom or at home.

In this interview excerpt, Alina explains how both languages are used in her home:

How much would you say, percentage-wise, you speak Spanish vs. English?

I don’t know. I speak more English than Spanish . . . ‘Cause my sister doesn’t understand Spanish.

Oh . . . OK. And you speak Spanish or English with your mom?

Both.

And whom else do you live with?

I live with my mom, my sister, my stepdad.

And does he speak Spanish or English?

Spanish.

Only Spanish?

Yeah. (Alina, 9th Grade LTELL, School 2, interview transcript)

As the quote indicates, Alina is one of the students in our sample who speaks both English and her native language at home. Alina’s family situation highlights how individual family members can affect the quantity of English and/or native language that is spoken at home. Although there are differences that the students in our sample report regarding their oral language practices, they identify much greater uniformity in their literacy practices, as detailed in the section that follows.

Literacy

In spite of variances in oral language proficiency and usage outside of school, literacy emerged in this study as a major challenge faced by LTELLs in school. Our findings indicate that all of the LTELL students in our sample are characterized by limited literacy skills in both English and their native language, in spite of their oral bilingualism. Many educators and students cite reading and writing in English as the greatest challenge that LTELLs face in school. This point is clarified in the following quotation, when a school administrator discusses LTELLs at her school who are bilingual in Spanish:

I think the challenge lies in the [English] reading and writing. You’ll find the students are verbal but when it comes to academic language, that’s where the problem lies. If you examine the writing scores in the NYSESLAT,¹⁶ this is the most challenging part. For speaking, the social speaking part is their strength so you wouldn’t recognize when you see them that they are even ELLs . . . I think one of the things is when the kids started the

program in bilingual ed and they haven't developed well either one, Spanish or English. And that's been one of the issues, they haven't developed the reading and writing in either language. You speak to them in Spanish it's the same thing, they speak well but they can't read and write. (Ms J, Assistant Principal, School 1, interview transcript)

As Ms J notes, LTELLs typically have strong oral skills when language is used for social purposes, but struggle with their academic literacy development. As she explains, this is largely because the educational programs they have attended in the past, including transitional bilingual programs, typically emphasized English acquisition rather than bilingualism and biliteracy development. As a result of their strong oral skills, the students are often misperceived as native-English speakers; meanwhile they struggle to acquire sufficient literacy skills to pass their courses.

The challenges LTELLs face in developing English literacy skills are further supported by the students themselves in interview data, as exemplified in the following excerpt:

For example like my test scores, you know, when I take a test, you know, it comes back it's not that good, you know, the result that I have. It's not my fault, maybe I won't understand something, you know, they try to say, or maybe I don't understand the big words. So that's why I don't feel that much comfortable in English, you know. Because I'm pretty bad in tests. Yeah. (Akosua, 12th Grade LTELL, School 1, interview transcript)

As Akosua notes, it is often difficult for her to understand test items, many of which require high levels of academic English proficiency and were intended for native speakers of English (Menken 2008). Her challenges with academic literacy in English are reflected in the low test scores she typically receives.

Even though it is difficult for them, the LTELL students we studied generally prefer to read and write in English. In specific, 23 of the 29 student participants report a clear preference for reading and writing in English. As Jemina explains in an interview, she feels more proficient reading and writing in English:

I guess I've learned how to write in English and how to read in English and I only spend, like, a few years of my life in Honduras so I didn't get to know how to write. How to write the whole system and everything in Spanish. It's easier for me in English. (Jemina, 10th Grade LTELL, School 1, interview transcript)

As Jemina explains, her imbalanced literacy skills are the result of having mainly been educated in the USA, in school programs where all of her instruction was in English only. Jemina's English literacy dominance is shared by Karly, even though Karly attended both ESL and bilingual programs in US schools:

Like, when I'm reading, I like to read English better, 'cause I understand it better, 'cause since I'm used to like always talk in English, and in school. It's better. But when I speak, I prefer to speak Spanish 'cause when I read in Spanish, I don't, I'm . . . I could read it but I don't understand what I'm reading. You understand? (Karly, 12th Grade LTELL, School 1, interview transcript)

Both students quoted here favor English literacy and feel that their English literacy skills are stronger than their native language literacy skills. Although both students feel comfortable speaking in their native language, like many LTELLs they do not

have well-developed native language literacy skills, as they have had more practice with and exposure in American schools to English literacy.

School performance of long-term English language learners (LTELLs)

The overall performance of LTELLs in school reflects their limited academic literacy skills, which are demanded in all of the courses they take. When LTELL students were given the Academic Language and Literacy Diagnostic (ALLD) in English and Spanish, we found that they read and write several grade levels below (three years in English and 3.5 years in Spanish) their actual grade level in both English and their native languages. The cumulative high school grade average for all of the students in our sample is very low. It is 69.2%, which is equivalent to a D+ average, and means the students are barely passing overall, and likely failing certain subjects. In fact, six students in our sample have F (failing) averages in high school.

For many LTELLs, their poor academic performance leads to grade retention. Many students in our sample have been retained in grade at some point in their schooling history – some repeatedly. This, in turn, can contribute to loss of confidence, as exemplified in the following quotation:

Um, I wanna tell you that I don't belong in 10th grade as you can see 'cause I just hit 18 [years old]. I'm supposed to be in 12th and I had got left back in seventh and eighth, so like sometimes I feel embarrassed to be in a class you know that I don't supposed to be in. (Gaby, 10th Grade LTELL, School 1, interview transcript)

As Gaby explains in this quotation, at 18 years old she is old enough to be in 12th grade, but instead is only in 10th grade because she was retained in the seventh and eighth grades. She reports that her experiences as an overage LTELL cause her to withdraw in the classroom. As Gaby explains, failure often leads to further failure in school, as students lose confidence in their abilities.

ELLs in New York City high schools have the highest dropout rate of all students (New York City Department of Education, Office of English Language Learners 2008). Grade retention is also found to increase the likelihood of eventual dropout (Roderick 1994). Similarly, students who fail their coursework and are unlikely to meet the high school graduation requirements are more likely to leave school. Therefore, although no data are available regarding the number of LTELLs who drop out of high school in New York or elsewhere, it would seem these students are disproportionately likely to do so, given their ELL status in combination with their high rates of grade retention and course failure.

Discussion and recommendations

In addition to increasing understandings of the characteristics of LTELLs and their needs in school, our findings highlight the importance of offering students consistent opportunities in school to develop their native languages as well as English. The students in our sample are oral bilinguals when language is used for social purposes, and are able to move easily from one language to another in daily life. However, their schooling has largely been subtractive, with English being taught and developed instead of their native languages.

As a result, the students in our sample have not been able to experience the academic benefits that come when their native languages are developed in schools (Cummins 2000; García 2009), because they do not have the advantage of a strong academic literacy foundation established in their native language upon which to build as they acquire English. This is part and parcel of their experiences moving in and out of bilingual education, ESL, and mainstream classrooms, which, when taken together, have prolonged the length of time it takes these students to acquire sufficient academic English to succeed in school. This places LTELLs in a linguistic bind, where on one hand they learn to favor English literacy over their native language, yet on the other hand are unable to master it. In school this is particularly complicated, as LTELLs are found to lack the academic literacy skills upon which their performance so heavily relies, and the courses in which they enroll are typically mismatched to their actual language proficiency and learning needs.

Therefore, our first recommendation is that English learners be offered the opportunity to develop their native languages in US schools in programs with clear and consistent language policies, which seek to develop bilingualism and biliteracy.¹⁷ When transitional forms of bilingual education are in place, they should have clearly developed language allocation policies that not only include oracy in the native language, but literacy as well. Likewise, movement in and out of ESL, bilingual, and mainstream classrooms must be curtailed to increase programming consistency. In addition to offering consistent, ‘strong’ forms of bilingual education in the earlier grades, we must also meet the large numbers of LTELLs currently attending US high schools.

Our second recommendation is that high schools be prepared to teach LTELLs very explicitly the academic literacy skills they need, rather than simply assuming that students arrive in high school with literacy skills that have already been developed. Though literacy is more commonly incorporated into elementary instruction, research indicates that literacy needs to be explicitly instructed to ELLs at the secondary level as well (Callahan 2006). For example, one suggested strategy is to infuse literacy instruction across content-area subjects (Meltzer and Hamann 2005). A study of secondary LTELLs conducted by Newell and Smith (1999) employed a biliteracy approach, teaching literature in the students’ native languages and English, with positive results. Literacy was taught explicitly in both ESL and native language arts courses, using leveled readers and clear strategies for breaking down academic literacy into concrete pieces (e.g. by teaching students note-taking skills and plans for organizing their thoughts).

To address the needs of the large numbers of LTELLs currently attending New York City high schools, we designed and implemented a new biliteracy program for Spanish-speaking LTELLs in two city high schools during the 2008–2009 academic year. The program has three characteristics that set it apart from the programming LTELLs generally receive. First, all courses have two foci – course content and the literacy skills needed to attain it. Therefore, teachers of all areas, including Math, Science and Social Studies, now explicitly address literacy in their instruction; this is different to what the teachers in our program have done in the past, when little attention was paid to setting language or literacy goals in instructional planning. Second, LTELL students take a Spanish Native Language Arts course sequence that focuses on the development of foundational academic literacy skills in their native language. The students begin this course sequence at the onset of high school, with initial courses seeking to establish a basic foundation, with the goal that students will

work their way up to Advanced Placement Spanish language and literature courses within two years. The third part of our program involves all students enrolling in an ‘Academic English Literacy’ course where the students are given additional support and scaffolding that directly connects to the content in their English Language Arts class. While the ESL teacher teaches this course, it differs from a typical ESL class in that the LTELLs are separated from new arrivals, and the course focuses explicitly on increasing the students’ academic literacy skills in English, rather than language skills for social purposes. As this manuscript goes to press, we are currently evaluating the degree to which this course of study designed specifically for LTELLs has impacted their acquisition of academic literacy in English and Spanish, if at all, as well as their overall academic achievement.

As our research suggests, the education of these students must be additive, particularly in the area of academic literacy, so that we can provide students with a strong foundation as they move to higher grades, where literacy demands only increase. At the same time, at the secondary level we must move beyond homogeneous pedagogy, by providing a greater focus on this population and their specialized learning needs. Given the large numbers of LTELLs currently attending secondary schools, it is imperative that we seek to improve the educational opportunities provided to these students, through expanded research and improved practices.

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Notes

1. It is worth noting from the outset that we are concerned that the term ‘Long-term English language learners’ can lend to the students being perceived through a deficit paradigm, merely for taking longer than average to acquire English. We use the term for descriptive purposes, rather than intending its use as a label, in order for readers to understand the reference, because it is what is currently used in the USA.
2. As García (2009, 51) clarifies in her definition of subtractive bilingualism and schooling: ‘When monoglossic ideologies persist, and monolingualism and monolingual schools are the norm, it is generally believed that children who speak a language other than that of the state should be encouraged to abandon that language and instead take up only the dominant language. . . In this model, the student speaks a first language and a second one is added while the first is subtracted.’
3. Programs that fall under the umbrella of bilingual education have been characterized in a variety of ways. Drawing on Baker (2006), we use the terms ‘weak’ and ‘strong’ to distinguish between two types of programs. ‘Weak’ models are also referred to in the literature as subtractive and transitional while ‘strong’ models are also called additive, maintenance, enrichment, and developmental programs.
4. ‘Generation 1.5’ is a term recently used in multiple fields with somewhat divergent definitions. In citing Thonus (2003), it is used to describe students who immigrated to the USA when of school age, or were born in the USA but speak a language other than English at home, and are familiar with US culture and schools yet, ‘are usually less skilled in the academic language associated with school achievement, especially in the area of writing’ (Harklau 2003, 1; as cited in Menken, Kleyn, and Chae 2007). Though not all

- ‘Generation 1.5’ students are classified as English learners by the schools they attend, a large number are. Thus this body of research holds implications for LTELLs as well.
5. This study is funded by the New York City Department of Education, Office of English Language Learners.
 6. We thank Nabin Chae, Alexander Funk, Jeremy Rafal, Nelson Flores, and Laura Ascenzi-Moreno, all of whom are doctoral students at the City University of New York Graduate Center, for their assistance on this research project.
 7. For a detailed chart of each student participant, including age, grade, native language, country of birth, total years in USA, years in US schools, types of programming, and cumulative grade averages; see Menken, Kleyn, and Chae (2007).
 8. Twi is a language spoken in Ghana, and Garífuna is an Afro-indigenous language used in parts of Central America.
 9. LTELLs with learning dis/abilities were not included in our sample of students. In our research, we have found that the prevalence of LTELLs entitled to special education services is proportional to that of the overall population.
 10. While subtractive schooling can be taken in a literal sense – taking away one’s oracy and literacy in a language – we take a broader approach. We view schooling as subtractive when it denies students the opportunity to build on their native language and promotes ideologies of monolingualism, as is commonly the case in US schools (García 2009).
 11. This is a test of English proficiency taken annually by ELLs to determine ELL status.
 12. While the primary focus of this article is on the educational programming LTELLs receive while in the USA, it is important to keep in mind that 12 out of the 29 students in our sample have moved back and forth between the USA and their family’s country of origin, and attended school outside the USA in a language other than English, for at least one academic year and possibly up to eight years altogether. However, these experiences appear to have been too short or inconsistent for students to have fully developed their native language literacy skills (the experiences of this group are described further in Menken, Kleyn, and Chae 2007). Thus, when we asked all the students to consider their schooling as a whole, they still reported that English was what had been emphasized overall.
 13. While it would be difficult to interpret this finding without conducting further research, this is perhaps due to the shortage of minority language materials in New York and elsewhere in the USA.
 14. In our study, most students self-report being orally bilingual for social purposes, and their teachers agreed with this description. However, language use for social purposes encompasses a wide range of registers and discourses such as speaking with peers and adults, chatting online, sending text messages or emails, and attending religious ceremonies. Due to our limited data collection in this area, we feel that additional research around social language use would better characterize the oral bilingualism of these students.
 15. Codeswitching is defined as changing from language to language within the same utterance (Spolsky 1998).
 16. It is a statewide language proficiency test that includes listening, speaking, reading, and writing components.
 17. Toward this end, the New York City Department of Education’s Office of ELLs recently developed Language Allocation Policy Guidelines for school administrators, to support their development of school language policies. Each school administrator must now develop a language allocation policy, which – if enforced – is a promising step towards increasing programming quality and consistency.

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