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Second Language Learning: Functional Literacy vs. Mastery

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The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the author.

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“Second Language Learning: Functional Literacy vs. Mastery”

Introduction

In the modern era of increasing globalization, technology has infiltrated various sectors of society, allowing geographical boundaries to be dismantled, and thus, a more liberated flow of ideas, products, services, and peoples. While not a discourse on globalization, it is important to note that sociologists conclude that globalization is a real phenomenon occurring in the present, yet its impact has not been the same across the globe (Albrow 1996; Beck 1992, 2000; Giddens 1990). With “an increased demand [for goods], countries and companies are working hard to produce goods that will feed the markets and remain competitive” (Steger 2009). Regardless of where thinkers stand on the matter, an undoubtedly essential component of the ability of these goods, services, and people to interact is through language to achieve a common understanding. As scholars David Block and Deborah Cameron outline, language is the primary means of human interaction, and this interaction forges social relations and societal meaning (Block and Cameron, 2002). Fundamentally, globalization has commodified many aspects of contemporary life, but most importantly it has increased the demand on workers’ language skills (Block and Cameron, 2002). As a result, individuals have been, and will continue to learn and be exposed to a variety of different languages, even as indigenous languages disappear at an alarming rate. In fact, “communication skills’ and the new literacies demanded by new technologies, as well as competence in one or more second/foreign languages, all represent valuable ‘linguistic capital’”

(Black and Cameron 2002; Bourdieu 1991). Currently, “nine out of 10 U.S. employers report a reliance on U.S.-based employees who have skills in languages other than English, with 32 percent relying “a lot” and 58 percent “some” (ACTFL 2019). Such a notion raises questions about the current state of language education, and more specifically, second language acquisition. Language is inherently a tool for communication, and if one is to assume that communication is a goal in learning a new language, what should the structure and practices of our educational policies look like to achieve such a goal? What level, or standards of communication should individuals strive for when learning a new language? In this paper I will argue that pedagogies based on functional proficiency that include student-centered learning, progress check-ins, and cultural awareness are more successful teaching pedagogies because they promote intercultural competencies, achieve the cognitive, social, and economic benefits associated with learning a second language, and are more productive for schools, and encourage lifelong learning.

The commodification of language skill has not been evenly distributed across all languages, and the emphasis has been predominantly on English as common currency (Block and Cameron, 2002). This is a result of global economic, social, and cultural patterns that result in the prioritization of English language learning. The underlying pressure to learn English to excel in a global marketplace replaces other international languages of culture such as French, Mandarin, Hindi etc., regardless of location. The decision to learn any language impacts local and national institutions across the public and private sectors of society, requiring resources to be allocated for language learning (Block and Cameron, 2002). As a result of the heavily valued skill that is English language proficiency, many of the case studies I present will focus on English language learners as the language of choice, especially for those in Spain.

Regardless of the language being learned, the language acquisition process will have impacts on the individual's brain. This is especially true for individuals learning languages other than their first language (L1). While some studies argue that bilingualism negatively impacts the brain via delays in lexical acquisition and results in a smaller vocabulary (Pearson, Fernandez, & Oller, 1993; Umbel & Oller, 1995), numerous studies contradict this notion and highlight bilingualism's positive impacts. The positive impacts of bilingualism spans a wide scope, including social, economic, and cognitive impacts. For example, Marian *et al.* (2019) examined the cognitive impacts of bilingualism and found that "bilinguals may be able to inhibit irrelevant verbal and nonverbal information with greater ease than monolinguals" and that "inhibitory control ability is slower to decline with age in bilinguals than in monolinguals" (Marian *et al.*, 2019). In addition, the onset of dementia was discovered to be later in bilinguals than monolinguals, and "bilingual children [were] found to exhibit superior performance in divergent thinking, figure-ground discrimination, and other related meta-cognitive skills" (Marian *et al.*, 2019). The idea that bilingual individuals are better able to deal with executive functioning tasks, specifically problem solving, was introduced in the Crivello *et al.* (2015) study. This study examined whether growth in bilingual proficiency improved executive functioning over a seven month period, and concluded that "the superior performance on these conflict tasks appears to be due to bilinguals' strengthened cognitive flexibility and selective attention abilities as they have increased experience in switching across languages in expressive vocabulary" (Crivello *et al.*, 2015). Also, as Yudhijit Bhattacharjee states in his work *Why Bilinguals are Smarter*, "the bilingual experience improves the brain's so-called executive function" and "these processes include ignoring distractions to stay focused, switching attention willfully from one thing to another and holding information in mind — like remembering a sequence of directions while

driving” (Bhattacharjee 2012) Furthermore, these findings were isolated to individuals learning a second language across all age groups, and did not include individuals' performance in learning other subjects (Bak et al., 2016). In terms of social advantages, Guiora et al. (1972) is the most heavily-cited research study that looks at the relationship between language learning and empathy. The study “confirms the original hypothesis that empathy... is positively related to the ability to authentically pronounce a second language” (Woll and Wei 2019; Guiora et al., 1972). Furthermore, many studies have highlighted the importance of second language acquisition for the numerous positive cognitive benefits it provides.

More recently, however, there have been more studies to gauge the impact of second language learning on various sectors of society such as health and economics. It is widely assumed that individuals that learn a second language can increase their job opportunities, and or salaries in industries such as tourism, international relations, diplomacy and business. It can also increase an individual's cultural competence, allowing them to communicate with people from diverse backgrounds, making them viable employees in the eyes of their employers. This presumed competitive advantage, stemming from second language acquisition, was specifically studied by researcher Mark Hugo Lopez. Lopez analyzed data from the U.S. Department of Education's National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS) of 1992 to examine the patterns of bilingualism in the U.S. population and to measure the impact of speaking two languages proficiently on an individual's earnings. Lopez manipulated the data to isolate 5,157 male workers aged 24-65, his findings concluded that “bilingual individuals earn a slight premium compared to English monolinguals. Further, individuals residing in states with English Only laws do not see this premium mitigated” (Lopez 1999). As a result, Lopez's research suggests that due to the economic advantage associated with bilingualism, “policies that seek to make English the

official language of the U.S. or emphasize English proficiency over other languages may inadvertently minimize the development of important human capital, namely bilingualism”(Lopez 1999). The study also reinforced the cognitive advantages, and pointed out social advantages within labor markets, such as the “ability to generate more and better contacts with a wider range of customers” (Lopez 1999; Gándara 2015). Though Lopez’s research successfully associated bilingualism with economic advantages for individuals, it is important to note that the data used analyzed individuals who maintained their L1 and developed proficiency in English. In addition, the individuals studied were all male, and those identifying as women systematically make less than their male counterparts for the same jobs. As a result, further research should be conducted to include women in the sample.

In sum, the latest studies have gone beyond cognitive and executive functioning research to include measures such as health, economics, and education. In terms of cognitive and executive functioning, bilingual individuals experienced increased empathy (Guiora et al., 1972), better performance on tasks that involved divergent thinking (Marian *et al.*, 2019), and health measures such as a later onset of dementia (Marian *et al.*, 2019). In terms of economic outcomes, bilingual individuals earned a slight premium (Lopez 1999), compared to their monolingual counterparts. Finally, and not surprisingly, there are also perceived educational benefits to language learners. Steele et al., 2017 found that individuals who were enrolled in immersion programs received certain academic advantages, outperforming their peers on state reading exams (Steele et al., 2017). As a result, of the numerous concrete benefits of bilingual education, educators and policymakers should utilize this data to entice families and students to partake in second language learning programs as essential not extracurricular activities. In addition, the

studies serve as concrete evidence for the argument that functional literacy be prioritized over mastery because of the academic, cognitive, economic and health advantages associated.

Given the advantageous impacts of bilingual education, it is important to examine the current climate surrounding bilingual education programs. What are individual programs prioritizing in language education in terms of mastery or working proficiency? What kind of programs are students more inclined to gravitate toward? The functional literacy versus mastery debate is critical to the workings of bilingual education programs, as programs will inherently operate to produce one of the two outcomes. Scholars from the respective sides each underline important considerations when seeking to answer the question of mastery versus functional literacy. Proponents of the prioritization of functional proficiency emphasize its functional use and ability to “insure realistic, varied practice” (Guntermann 1979; Thompson 1991). On the other hand, supporters of the mastery approach argue that both vocab, stock phrases, grammar and phonology must all be mastered to avoid “socially dysfunctional oral communication” (Celce-Murcia 2007). Furthermore they insist that “the systematic, formulaic, and interactional aspects of language must all be addressed in effective language instruction” (Celce-Murcia 2007).

In order to properly analyze the mastery vs functional literacy/cultural competency debate for teaching a second language, it is critical that both of the terms be quantified. For the purpose of this debate, I will use the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and the American Council on the Teaching a Foreign Languages (ACTFL) guidelines to define functional literacy and mastery, according to their corresponding descriptors. Both organizations remain the gold standard in the United States and across Europe for foreign language education, teaching, and testing. Together, they have provided crucial guidance for

foreign language education across the world. “The CEFR provides scales of descriptors for different aspects of the descriptive scheme, which are intended to be used to define needs profiles for groups and individuals, plus proficiency profiles of what a person can currently do in a language” (North and Piccardo 2019). Similarly, ACTFL’s *proficiency Guidelines 2012* are a description of what individuals can do with language in terms of speaking, writing, listening, and reading in real-world situations in a spontaneous and non-rehearsed context” (ACTFL, 2012). Both organizations have been crucial to the establishment of foreign language courses throughout the world. For the purposes of this argument, I analyzed the descriptors for speaking proficiency, in order to best match them with definitions of functional language and mastery.

Functional language, or working proficiency, “can help to focus students and teachers on meaning-making”(Graphin and Lee, 2022). One of the goals of functional language proficiency is to focus on a limited set of vocabulary that is commonly used in the target language, in order to do work in that language. “The vocabulary range is narrow and grammar is minimalist. The most important task is to transfer accurate meaning between stakeholders” (Foster 2016). Given the emphasis on working proficiency for communication, the previously stated goals of working proficiency or functional proficiency align closely with ACTFL’s novice level for speaking. According to their guidelines, “novice-level speakers can communicate short messages on highly predictable, everyday topics that affect them directly. They do so primarily through the use of isolated words and phrases that have been encountered, memorized, and recalled. Novice-level speakers may be difficult to understand even by the most sympathetic interlocutors accustomed to non-native speech” (ACTFL 2012). Furthermore, the pronunciation of the speaker is strongly impacted by the speaker’s first language and their speech may be difficult to understand (ACTFL 2012). The ACTFL novice level emphasizes the ability to speak about everyday, basic topics and

the usage of the language to convey memorized, and frequently used expressions. These benchmarks are also highlighted in the CEFR guidelines for A1/A2 reference levels. The European guidelines have 6 reference levels that range from A1 (Basic User) -C2 (Proficient User). The language skills that embody the description of working proficiency, are closely aligned with CEFR's A1 and A2 statuses. For example, A1 users, "can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type. [They] can introduce him/herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has. [They] can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help" (Council of Europe 2001). The A2 level goes a bit further to encompass individuals who "can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate Basic need" (Council of Europe 2001). The two user A levels combine to give a perfect overview of someone who has achieved working proficiency in the language, highlighting their ability to use frequently used expressions, provide basic information about themselves, and engage with others about basic details and situations.

On the other hand, language mastery often denotes the highest category on language proficiency scales, and can be compared to ACTFL's level of "Distinguished," and CEFR's C2/C1 levels of proficiency. According to ACTFL, "speakers at the Distinguished level produce highly sophisticated and tightly organized extended discourse", they are able to "tailor [the]

language to a variety of audiences by adapting their speech and register in ways that are culturally authentic” (ACTFL 2012). Correspondingly, on the CEFR scale, the highest level of language proficiency embodying mastery are the C1/C2 levels. Following these descriptions, the speaker “can produce clear, smoothly flowing, well-structured discourse with an effective logical structure which helps the recipient to notice and remember significant points” (CEFR 2020). In addition, at this level the speaker “can give detailed descriptions and presentations on complex subjects, integrating sub-themes, developing particular points and rounding off with an appropriate conclusion” (CEFR 2020). In conclusion, the distinction of mastery requires the speaker to be detailed, sophisticated, clear and culturally authentic.

Functional proficiency and mastery have valid uses that bring them into the debate because when teaching a second language, the instructor’s approach to the course and implementation of course material relies heavily on both their expectations of students, and students’ expectations regarding learning a second language. While there is certainly a spectrum of potential outcomes, the sides of the spectrum may be simplified for the purposes of this debate to mastery or fluency in the language, and working proficiency. According to some scholars, mastery is preferred in order to fully comprehend a language and be able to use it in an unlimited number of situations. Critics such as Michael Canale, author of *From Communicative Competence to Communicative Language Pedagogy*, argue that individuals wanting to become fluent in a new language “must, in addition to acquiring a new vocabulary and a new set of phonological and syntactic rules, learn what Hymes calls the rules of speaking: the patterns of sociolinguistic behaviour of the target language” (Canale 2014). According to Canale’s rationale and scholars in support of language mastery over proficiency, only after intensely studying the

linguistics and patterns, can learners then “communicate effectively with native speakers of the language they are learning” (Canale 2014).

In contrast, scholars prioritizing working proficiency, as opposed to functional proficiency, during the language learning process, highlight the approach’s practicality due to the ability of the learner to communicate effectively while meeting learners’ needs. Furthermore, supporters of pedagogy aligned with the goal of working proficiency believe that “creating L2 speakers who are efficient is more accessible than attempting to imitate the native speakers. It is harder to create L2 speakers who are as efficient as native speakers are because they speak in a different way” (Aljohani 2016). As a result, “creating an original L2 speaker is accessible as compared to trying to imitate the native speakers” (Aljohani 2016). Thus, scholars encouraging teaching to achieve proficiency in a second language underline the accessibility of their approach.

Ultimately, the choice to teach a second language with the goal of either working proficiency or mastery relies on numerous factors including available resources, situational contexts, students’ desires, and teacher training. Regardless of the approach, bilingual education is undoubtedly essential in today's globalized society, and as previously mentioned, has many positive impacts. After reviewing both sides of the mastery versus functional literacy debate, it is evident that the latter is essential to the longevity and success of learning a second language. This project uses case study evidence from bilingual education programs in Spain, to conclude that functional literacy should be of utmost importance in bilingual education programs, in order to encourage and retain learners of L2. Prioritizing functional, working proficiency will result in all the benefits (social, cultural, economic) of learning a second language as well as promote

intercultural competencies and a more inclusive space in which more students and more teachers are engaged in the learning of second or foreign languages.

In order to evaluate the success and future directions of bilingual education programs in Spain, it is necessary to briefly touch upon the history of bilingual education in the country. Given the nature of the ethnic and racial diversity of Spain's inhabitants, Spain is a wealth of linguistic diversity. The outbreak of the Spanish Civil War and Franco's consolidation of power meant disaster for the Spanish education system as a whole. "Spanish illiteracy rates remained among the highest in Europe," when an emphasis was placed only on "basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic" (Maddox 1994). A series of national reforms aimed at advancing Spain's modernity status included the Education Act of 1970. In the act, "basic education was to be free and obligatory" and provided an "opening to Liberalism" in which instruction was mandated in "art, music, foreign language, and civic and physical education, as well as more traditional subjects" (Maddox 1994). After Franco's death and Spain's establishment of a democracy, "the 1978 Spanish Constitution established a decentralized and symmetrical state model that distribute[d] the exercise of educational competences among all administrative levels, so that all the autonomous communities basically have the same competences" (European Commission 2023). The Spanish government through the Ministerio de Educación y Formación Profesional (MEFP) was and remains responsible for the "general organization of the Spanish Education System" and the "establishment of the basic aspects of the curriculum" (Mullis et al. 2016) Each autonomous region subsequently has the jurisdiction over the regulation of non-basic elements of the education system, and the structure and functioning of their establishments. As a result, the curriculum for the Spanish education system has some aspects of the common framework and then is developed independently by each region (Mullis et al. 2016). Regarding language

education, the 1978 Spanish Constitution outlined Castilian as the official language of the Spanish (Vila et al. 2017). In addition, the constitution noted “Spain’s multilingual character and, accordingly, confers legislative powers to the autonomous communities – by means of their statutes of autonomy – among others, in the areas of language policy and education”(Vila et al. 2017). Consequently, each autonomous community set out implementing “its statute in a different way: Catalonia is officially trilingual, whereas Galicia, Navarre, the Balearic Islands, the Basque Country, and the Valencian Community are officially bilingual” (Vila et al. 2017). Later on, with the Language Normalization Act of 1983, certain regions, such as Galicia, launched models for bilingual education. The model utilized regional as well as national dialects for language instruction across all levels of education. Another region with a “zeal for bilingualism” was Madrid, where an official order declared bilingualism “imperative for students to be effective and integrated participants in the European Union” (Gerena and Ramirez Verdugo, 2014). Thus, in the Madrid community, bilingual programs were launched beginning in 2004, aimed at “providing schools with the necessary tools so that students can build sufficient communication skills in a foreign language to access any training and employment opportunities available” (Datos y Cifras de la Educación 2022-2023, 2022). These programs have been implemented in 51% of secondary education institutes and 46.6% of all public schools in the Community of Madrid. Since then, Spain’s multilingual autonomous regions have supported bilingual education efforts, as endorsed by central authorities, and their goal has even evolved to generalized trilingualism (Vila et al. 2017). In order to evaluate the effectiveness and longevity of such programs, it is important to look at present day case studies under the current policies of Spain’s bilingual education programs.

Currently, many school systems in Spain have opted for Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) programs (Cañado 2016). “CLIL is a dual focus approach whose aim is to foster students’ foreign language and content learning while the development of their first language (L1) is not impaired” (Isidro 2019). They incorporate teaching non-linguistic subjects, such as math and science, with the teaching of a foreign language. Such an approach mimics Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory of education, which describes human learning as a “social process and the origination of human intelligence in society and culture” (Vygotsky 1995). The goal of these CLIL programs is to use the target language, or L2, in settings other than foreign language classrooms in order to increase opportunities for language skill development. The “approach has received widespread endorsement at an international level from all stakeholders (teachers, students, parents, politicians, institutions) and is ‘regarded as one of the central topics in the realm of present-day foreign language education’ and ‘an advantageous setting for intense cognitive activity’” (Isidro 2019). Although CLIL promotes a language-diversity oriented approach, “English has become the foreign language most widely used in its implementation” (Isidro 2019). A study, conducted by the University of Jaén, evaluated CLIL programs on a large scale across three Spanish autonomous regions. The regions, Andalusia, Extremadura, and the Canary Islands have historically had the least tradition of bilingual education (Cañado 2019). The study had 2,245 students and 333 teachers from public, private, and charter schools across the regions. The project found that students enrolled in the CLIL cohorts, the bilingual cohorts studying English and Spanish, had greater outcomes in English language competencies (reading, writing, listening, speaking, grammar use, and vocabulary) and content knowledge than their non-CLIL peers. The greater the exposure to English, the higher the linguistic achievement (Cañado 2019). In addition, the study showed that CLIL is successful across different

socioeconomic statuses and encouraged students to seek exposure to English language (Cañado 2019). Most importantly however, is the finding that increasing language exposure, specifically through content classes where there is an emphasis on meaningful communication, had a more positive outcome on language achievement. This finding strongly supports the teaching of a second language for proficiency rather than mastery, as exposure and meaningful communication are prioritized. On the other hand, the study contradicts foreign language teaching that emphasizes mastery, and more formal usage finding “that exposure to the foreign language through formal English classes (e.g., in academies) does not exert such a positive effect as increasing exposure to the language through content classes where input is more communicative, meaningful, and unconscious” (Cañado 2019). As a result, functional proficiency in language learning should be emphasized where possible, and CLIL programs are a perfect vessel to utilize when teaching a second language.

In another study, conducted by researchers Linda Gerena and M. Dolores Ramírez-Verdugo, key findings on the effective pedagogy in bilingual schools in the Region of Madrid is discussed. In their study, which was a collaboration with a local Fulbright Scholar, the attitudes of teachers, language assistants, and students towards bilingual education and bilingualism is analyzed. In addition, the study outlined effective teaching strategies in bilingual contexts (Gerena and Ramirez-Verdugo, 2014). It was observed that the programs, whose goals were based upon the European Commission’s philosophy that multilingualism was the “ability to communicate in at least two foreign languages”, practiced pedagogy based in “comprehensible input”, “vocabulary development”, and the establishment of “relationships with native English Speakers” (Gerena and Ramirez Verdugo, 2014). Teaching practices less commonly encountered were “activating prior knowledge before teaching the main lesson”, “use of higher order thinking

questions and activities”, and “student-centered instruction”. The ability to use higher order thinking in L2 is closely associated with Mastery, and ACTFL’s categorization for Distinguished speaker, as one who can engage in “highly sophisticated and tightly organized extended discourse” (ACTFL 2012). However, Madrid’s schools are promoting bilingual education via practices aimed at achieving a functional/working proficiency status, not mastery. As a result, students indicated that “they were aware of the benefits of bilingualism and felt a sense of pride and comfort when speaking English and they were not afraid to make mistakes” (Gerena and Ramirez Verdugo, 2014). Thus, prioritization of curriculum that emphasizes students’ ability to communicate (working proficiency), over mastery, will be highly successful.

Another critical component of the mastery versus functional proficiency debate is the role of teachers. Looking at teachers’ roles, preferences, credentials and attitudes towards the two learning goals within foreign language programs sheds insight on the success and failure of these programs. In a study conducted by the European Commission on *Key Data on Teaching Languages at Schools in Europe*, the report found that “there are no top-level recommendations on the degree of subject specialisation of foreign language teachers in primary education” (European Commission, 2023). However, as the level of the student increases, “teachers commonly need to prove that they have sufficient knowledge of the language in question. The minimum foreign language proficiency required usually corresponds to either level B2 or level C1 of the Council of Europe’s Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)” (European Commission, 2023). Specifically in Spain, a “certificate and/or examination proving thorough knowledge of the target language [is] (required in most autonomous communities). The minimum level required is usually CEFR level B2, but there is some variation across the autonomous communities” (European Commission, 2023). Some schools require the

achievement of the C1 distinction, which outlines competencies associated with language mastery. Teachers, in order to be hired, are held to these mastery standards, but then not given adequate resources to continue their training and improvement of the foreign language. For example, in a study conducted by a University of Salamanca professor, Durán-Martínez et al. (2020), the researchers found that “teachers stress the need to achieve proficiency in their use of English. In their own words, ‘to be able to teach in a bilingual program we need a high level of English’ (subject 53) or ‘it is necessary for teachers to possess and to keep high-quality language standards’ (subject 27)” (Durán-Martínez et al 2020). However, educational authorities are not investing in the training required by the programs, and thus the linguistic and didactic demands of the CLIL approach are not being met (Durán-Martínez et al 2020). The lack of teacher training to achieve, maintain, and progress language competence and methodologies strongly suggests that the emphasis on mastery is not sustainable, nor practical. Rather, functional language proficiency, and the achievement of B2 level, should be prioritized in order to ensure teacher and student success. Furthermore, the language used in academic settings differs from the everyday language and often features a “specialised vocabulary or complex sentences with clause connectors” (European Commission 2019). Acquiring this high level of proficiency “in the language of schooling may be challenging for all students, [but] it is particularly so for those who do not speak the language of schooling at home” (European Commission 2019). Due to the lack of suitable resources for teachers to maintain and achieve the high standards of language, it is imperative that functional language proficiency be stressed and adequate resources be dispersed. Teachers are already tasked with linguistic competence and subject content knowledge as well as the job of “scaffold[ing] and ground[ing] the curricular content experientially to make it truly meaningful.” (Durán-Martínez and Beltrán-Llavador 2017). Thus, “bilingual programs

could benefit from enhancing the collaboration between novice and expert teachers (Durán, Beltrán, and Martínez 2016), something which has already been successfully attempted in Catalonia” (Durán-Martínez and Beltrán-Llavador 2017). Hiring novice teachers who may not have achieved mastery, according to CEFR guidelines, still benefits bilingual education programs and their students.

Another crucial component to foreign language education is the role of testing and examinations. Overall, foreign language testing is often responsible for measuring an individual’s language ability, leading to significant implications for education, career, and personal goals. Currently across European Countries, there is no requirement for education systems to administer diagnostic tests for students’ full language repertoire (European Commission 2019). Regardless, many students take exams with national certifications by the end of their secondary education. These exams include “English, French and German, which are tested through national tests (when they exist) in the vast majority of education systems, closely followed by Russian, Spanish and Italian, which are also tested in most of them” (European Commission 2019). Critics and supporters of testing during language acquisition have long debated their respective sides, however for the purpose of the mastery versus functional proficiency debate, it is important to highlight J Charles Alderson and Jayanti Banerjee’s work, *Language Testing and Assessment*. In their comprehensive work that touches upon the Bachman and Palmer account of test usefulness and the six critical qualities of tests, including practicality, they point out some considerations for test developers. The researchers Alderson and Banerjee conclude that “individuals responding to test items do so in a complex and interacting variety of different ways, that experts judging test items are not well placed to predict how learners, whose language proficiency is quite different from that of the experts, might actually respond to test

items, and that therefore generalisations about what skills reading test items might be testing are fatally flawed” (Alderson and Banerjee 2002). Given the complexity and variability in language proficiency, it is essential for test makers, in this case teachers, to coordinate their testing strategies accordingly. In place of a heavy reliance upon traditional written exams or passages focused on grammar, teachers should consider including a range of assessments that measure various aspects of language proficiency, and above all are practical. Moreover, teachers should pay close attention to the construction of their assessments in order to ensure they reflect the intended learning outcomes and are accurately evaluating students' work. Creating practical exams that test the span of language competencies and are tailored to students' desired outcomes will create well-rounded, successful students.

The development of foreign language curriculum has recently paralleled the development of new curriculum geared towards students with special needs. Although there is a lack of sufficient research that examines the relationship between the two curricula, certain generalizations can be surmised from the research that exists. For example, teaching a foreign language, with an emphasis on working proficiency, can be a powerful tool for supporting students with special needs due to the incorporation of collaborative problem-solving. Collaborative problem-solving is a key aspect of CLIL pedagogies and many other language learning pedagogies, and can provide students with options to access their learning. As Marsh, Mephisto, Wolff, and Frigols-Martin (2010) note, instructional strategies that take into account social constructivist theory can promote dialogic teaching and learning, which enables students to synthesize ideas and build upon previous learning (Marsh 2013). Through collaborative problem-solving, “peers can help provide appropriate scaffolding that may be individualized according to need within a specific group”, supporting students with special needs as well as

those without (Marsh 2013). Furthermore, CLIL provides teachers with support to identify specific student needs, allowing them to tailor their instruction to better meet the needs of individual students. Overall, teaching a foreign language for proficiency is a valuable asset for promoting inclusivity within education and supporting the diverse learning needs of all students.

In addition to the positives that foreign language education curricula provides for students requiring special education accommodations, studies have shown that teaching a foreign language fosters cultural diversity and promotes intercultural competence. In the previously mentioned study by Durán-Martínez et al. (2020) that examined the key issues in teachers' assessment of primary education bilingual programs in Spain, teachers observed that foreign language education fosters linguistic and intercultural communicative competences (Durán-Martínez et al. 2020). In addition, the CLIL curriculum, which emphasizes exposure and meaningful communication in the target language, "cuts across barriers that traditionally separate the use of the language as a vehicle for teaching and as a learning target, teachers become aware that these programs have the potential of overcoming cultural barriers and promoting intercultural competence" (Durán-Martínez et al 2020). Empathy, or intercultural competence is absolutely essential to the day to day interactions and understandings of others. In fact, Dr. Benjamin Allar in his article on health disparities and clinician bias states that simple fluency does not facilitate the understanding of others. Although his research explores cultural competencies within the field of medicine and not education, his research demonstrates a slower recovery rate and higher recidivism for lower-level english speakers paired with doctors who do not have a cultural understanding of the patient's language (Allar 2023). Moreover, "patients primarily valued positive engagement, information and involvement, compassionate, kind and respectful treatment, and the negotiated involvement of their family" (Garrett Wish et al. 2008).

This finding regarding the importance of providers that demonstrate cross-cultural competencies mimics the results in education, that “Multicultural Education can be taught successfully to all children/students while enhancing and increasing student academic achievement”(Coggins and Campbell 2008). Furthermore, minority students benefit greatly from a curriculum that reflects their culture and identities (Coggins and Campbell 2008). Both Coggins and Campbell research, as well as Dr. Allar’s research validates the importance of cross-cultural understanding and empathy, regardless of field, while also maintaining that simple fluency is not enough. The present studies argue that programming and curricula such as CLIL, that emphasize intercultural competencies, should be prioritized in foreign language education (Ruiz et al., 2022). Additionally, a curriculum that emphasizes mastery is not sufficient for achieving cross-cultural competencies, and thus functional proficiency should be the goal.

Having addressed the current research that supports prioritizing functional proficiency over language mastery, it is crucial to consider implications and future directions for bilingual education based on working proficiency. Gerena and Ramírez-Verdugo’s (2014) study, that analyzed bilingual teaching in Madrid, reinforces that the best classroom strategies and practices for effective teaching in bilingual classrooms includes the “integration of content and language, active teaching, student engagement, scaffolding, developing cognitively challenging and higher order thinking skills, providing comprehensible input through the use of visuals, graphic organizers and other student centered materials, and monitoring and assessing student progress” (Gerena and Ramírez-Verdugo 2014). Building off of these effective classroom practices, a future study should analyze the impact of such methods in the U.S and other contexts. Nevertheless, these effective practices are suggestions to help students implement the language for use in the real world, as opposed to simply mastering concepts in isolation, without

application. Furthermore, the use of student centered materials and monitoring of student's progress emphasizes the importance of language use in context, further advertising the teaching of a foreign language for working proficiency.

Teaching a foreign language, just like any other subject or curriculum, has limitations. One of the principal limitations facing foreign language education is the lack of training opportunities for current teachers, especially those involved in CLIL programs. School systems need to provide the appropriate resources and training to teach subject content in a foreign language effectively (Durán-Martínez and Beltrán-Llavador 2017). The success of the CLIL practices, and other foreign language curricula are associated with organizational practices that impact the entire school community. In addition, teachers involved in bilingual programs need to be supported with the proper resources, especially resources that incorporate diversity and inclusion. Regarding teacher's concern for priorities in training, they stated concern over both their improvement of their foreign language competence and methodological issues (Durán-Martínez and Beltrán-Llavador 2017). Teachers expressed concern over their ability to achieve proficiency in the language they are teaching, as well as to maintain high-quality language standards (Durán-Martínez and Beltrán-Llavador 2017). As a result, teachers must be supported through training and resources. One resource that has proven to be valuable to both teachers and students is the availability of language assistants. In the Gerena and Ramírez-Verdugo Madrid case study, "students believed the language assistants were very important to their mastering English and credited them with being kind, sensitive, and extremely helpful" (Gerena and Ramírez-Verdugo 2014). Furthermore, they were attributed to holding extremely important roles in bilingual program implementation, and thought of as irreplaceable and responsible for students' advancement both linguistically and culturally (Gerena and

Ramírez-Verdugo 2014). Resources such as language assistants provide important support for bilingual education teachers, however, school systems need to prioritize the proper support and continued training of their educators, in order to achieve the desired goals.

When teaching a second language for functional proficiency, it is important to touch upon crucial learning outcomes and how they differ between mastery and functional proficiency. Students learning for functional proficiency will be able to incorporate cross-cultural competencies, such as the management of attitudes, formulation of cultural explanations, take cultural perspectives, and engage in reflection and feedback seeking (Rasmussen and Sieck 2015). The learners will be able to communicate meaningfully about everyday things and concepts. Additionally, learners should be able to demonstrate empathy towards others and emerge as leaders in their own education journeys. Pedagogies adhering to the focus on working proficiency reinforce the relationship between L1 and L2 whereas pedagogy emphasizing mastery focuses only on L2. As a result, students aiming to achieve functional proficiency develop competencies and achieve goals that impact them holistically.

In summary, bilingual education is a field that is becoming increasingly accepted and appreciated. As the world becomes progressively more globalized, the demand for language education increases as well. The ability to communicate clearly and effectively with people across different cultures has put foreign language education in high demand. In addition the numerous benefits of learning a second language that span across cognitive, social, and economic advantages add to the desire of individuals to learn a new language. Those learning a second language have demonstrated superior abilities for empathy, cultural competency, and executive functioning tasks. In this context, it is important to develop language education that focuses on students' ability to communicate and convey meaning. It is not sufficient to simply

master grammatical rules or sentence structure, rather emphasis should be placed on the ability to use the language in real life situations. Correspondingly, this means that teachers should prioritize functional language skills or working proficiency. Effective teaching practices such as active teaching, student-centered learning, scaffolding, and testing student's progress should be implemented. Moreover, the success of foreign language education programs is not a responsibility that falls solely on teachers or students, however it is subject to the organization and functioning of entire school systems at large. Consequently, it is essential that school systems provide suitable resources and training opportunities for their staff. The proper implementation and distribution of resources such as diversity and inclusion training, and use of language assistants, has proven invaluable for both teacher and student success. Overall, the significance of language skills in today's globalized world underlines the importance of evaluating foreign language education programs for their successes and their shortcomings. Effective language education provides individuals with the tools necessary to succeed culturally and linguistically. The usage of pedagogy based on achieving functional proficiency creates lifelong learners as opposed to pedagogy based in mastery. This is due to the sense of finality that encompasses reaching the distinguished level. This distinction implies mastery, and ultimately may inhibit the individual to continue their learning. In contrast to this, are the individuals learning languages for functional proficiency. These individuals are constantly striving to learn, improve, and use their language, which is crucial to be able to interact with others. Inherent in this approach is the notion that there is always more to be learned, which enables students to continue learning for life. Thus, teaching a second language for functional proficiency is significantly more impactful than emphasizing mastery. As a result, language education programs should take into consideration the broader social, cultural, and economic

connections to language skills and emphasize the materials and resources necessary to achieve functional proficiency in the target language.

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