

Dixie Dixit: What Really Leads to Proficiency in English Language Learners?

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Have you ever wondered which of the many factors involved in language learning leads to greater proficiency? I did, and so I decided to find out. If you ask yourself, or the teachers you work with, what leads to proficiency for your students, you might receive a variety of answers. Some people might say that it depends on when students began to study. They will argue that students who began their language studies at a young age will be more proficient. However, several important studies have shown that this is not necessarily true. Munoz (2006) carried out a large study on this area in Spain and found that:

...late starters outperform early starters on most...oral fluency measures...and support the view that an early start does not necessarily imply an advantage in the acquisition of a second language in the formal learning context. (p. ix)

Other people would say that it depends on what kind of school students have gone to. They also argue that students learn better in private schools than in public schools. A study by Davies (2009) compared ELT in public and private schools in Mexico, and found that private schools tend to do better. One important reason for this may be that public schools usually have a greater number of students per group.

Of course, other people would say that success in language learning depends on individual factors in each student, such as intelligence, aptitude, or motivation. Still others would mention that the only real way to achieve proficiency is to spend some time in a country where the language is spoken. They believe interaction with native speakers is the key.

Considering all these factors, I decided to do a small-scale research at my university. Here, English is a requirement, so incoming students take a placement exam in the first week of their first semester. We use the WebCAPE placement test. This is a computer-adaptive test offered by Perpetual Works (www.perpetualworks.com) and it is used by universities around the world as a way to place students in various languages. In its English language version, it includes grammar, reading, and listening comprehension.

We had about 800 students coming in last August, so after they had taken the placement test, I sent out a questionnaire to all of them. This included questions such as how long they had been studying English, what kind of school they had gone to (private vs. public), what their motivation was to study English, and if they liked to read in English. I finally asked questions concerning how they perceived their language abilities: did they think they could read, write, speak and understand English well or not well, etc. I received 218 complete responses; that is, they had answered the complete questionnaire and had given identifying information that I could use to compare with their scores on the placement tests.

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Before I tell you the results, I need to mention that my university offers eight different levels of English, and they range from A1 to C1 on the Common European Framework of Reference. A little over 80% of the incoming students placed at the B2 level or above. You might find this surprising, but the fact is that most of the student population has access to bilingual schools, semesters abroad or gap years. You would probably find a similar phenomenon among students of similar private universities in Mexico.

A colleague helped me with the statistics. He carried out an ANOVA and a multiple linear regression to find out which of the factors account for the results on the placement test. I will not include the statistical analysis here, but if you are interested, you can find all the information in article by my colleagues and myself (Santana, García, & Escalera, 2016).

What my colleague found is that there are three variables which are significant. That is, there are three factors which contribute more than others to proficiency in English among the participants in this study. The first of these is instruction hours. In other words, the longer someone has studied English, the higher their score on the placement test will be. Note that this does not necessarily mean starting at an earlier age. The second significant variable was the type of school the student had attended previous to coming to the university. Students from private schools scored significantly higher than students from public schools, as Davies (2009) had found. The final significant factor was reading. Students who said they liked to read scored significantly higher on the placement test than others who said they did not like to read.

So, what do these results mean? First, they are not altogether surprising. Experience, as well as other studies, has shown us that the longer students have language classes, the more they will learn. We have also seen that, for a variety of reasons, in second language education, private schools usually have better results than public schools. However, if you consider that 90% or more of my students come from private schools and that most have studied English for ten years or more, we find that only one of these variables is truly significant. The one thing that makes a difference between proficient and less proficient students is the amount of reading they do in English.

As a matter of fact, Krashen (2004) has been arguing for many years about the power of reading. However, it was interesting to see such a clear impact. Also, the implications are interesting. We have all heard about –or experienced– the difficulties of implementing a communicative approach to language learning in large classrooms. Perhaps we have been going about it wrong. Maybe, if we want our students to really become proficient in English, we should be encouraging them to read more. I do not mean doing the kind of reading comprehension included in most textbooks. I am referring, rather, to encouraging our students to sit down and read for pleasure, possibly through the implementation of reading corners in the classroom.

I realize of course, that this is a very small study among a very homogenous population. There are many other factors which could be making a difference, and which were not considered in the questionnaire. In order to implement any important changes in the classroom, we would need to see if the results hold true for a larger number of students from a variety of backgrounds and learning situations.

If you are interested in taking the study further and applying these same instruments to your students, I would enjoy hearing from you. Both the placement test and the questionnaire are delivered online, so it would be relatively easy to deliver to your school.

It would be important to include larger populations of more diverse students to understand if these results are replicable. If so, we could be making an important contribution to language learning and teaching in Mexico.

References

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