

Lolita Ghadimian

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English as a Second Language: The Struggles and How It Has an Impact on Bilingual and  
Multilingual Students

**Abstract**

This research paper examines how learning English as a second language affects the academic success of both bilingual and multilingual students at the University of California, Davis. This paper will focus on the struggles these students face when speaking, writing, and reading in English as well as the way they engage and communicate in classrooms and with people around them. To understand the point of this research, a survey of twelve questions was published on Qualtrics for international students to respond through. The goal for this research is to enlighten native English speakers and professors alike on the challenges a new language brings to international students. This research paper will also create a comfortable environment for both bilingual and multilingual students to make them feel involved and encouraged to collaborate more both in and out of the lecture hall. [139]

**Introduction**

Each individual comes from a specific and unique cultural background. With a multicultural background, an individual will grow up with multiple languages, cultures, and

traditions surrounding their everyday lives. Vouching for these individuals who experience this, I can say that growing up with two different cultures, religions and languages, life can become challenging.

Switching between dialects can be a problem at times since each language has its own grammar rules and lexicon. The switching between dialects requires a greater sense of “cognitive mechanisms” which are abilities such as maintaining, focusing, and processing information. Bilingual and multilingual persons “rely on cognitive control mechanisms like selective activation and inhibition of lexical entries to prevent intrusions from the non-target language” (Kirk 2018). In reality, the more languages an individual learns, the more their cognitive mechanisms strengthen because more information is being processed and this amount of knowledge contributes to a greater understanding of other cultures, as well as enhance the brain.

As a child, I was faced with many different situations. I had to pay attention to the languages spoken in the house to realize what was being said and how to respond. I struggled to explain to my peers that I was something like a “hybrid.” Not many would understand that I was growing up in a household not only with two different cultures and two different religions but also with two different languages. At some points, I thought that coming from two different backgrounds would affect the way I would engage with others and I saw it as a weakness. As the years went by, however, I saw that coming from a multicultural background benefited me and I came to cope with the difference.

When my parents talk to me in their primary language, I take what they say and translate it into English in my head, then decide how to answer depending on the language. For example, if my mother was speaking to me in Farsi, depending on the difficulty of my answer, I would either respond back in English or Farsi. If my father was talking to me in Armenian, I would

respond back in English since I am not as fluent in the language. Sometimes, it would be difficult for them to absorb what I say and I would have to do my best to translate. According to Cheatham and Ho (2011), “Parents who may have a limited proficiency in the second language face challenges to understand semantic and pragmatic aspects of English” (paragraph 1).

This study focuses on the struggles bilingual and multilingual students at the University of California, Davis face when switching between their primary and secondary languages as well as how they have achieved academic success. With every struggle, comes an achievement and multilingual students have proven that boundaries, such as language barriers, cannot influence their academic success at a four-year, research university. [477]

### **Methods**

For this research topic, the methodology for evaluating international students was done through a survey. I surveyed twenty students attending the University of California, Davis coming from different parts of the world. The survey was done on Qualtrics through UC Davis and the link was published on the Undergraduate Class of 2022 Facebook page, but it did not receive much attention. Taking this into account, I resolved to generate individual and unique links to my survey and sent them out via email and text. Even though this process was tedious and took up a majority of my time, I was able to get a decent amount of responses to support my research topic and question.

The survey consisted of twelve questions; a mix of multiple-choice and free-response questions. Demographic questions were asked to get a sense of where my responders originated from, what language they primarily speak, and which cultures they were part of. I then asked questions such as “When did you learn English?” and I asked them to state the challenges as well

as the benefits they have witnessed while learning English and living in the United States of America.

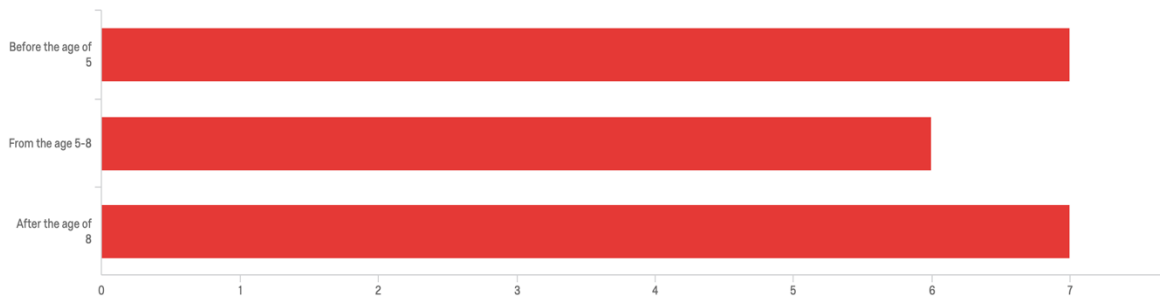
The goal of my survey was to see the diverseness among a small sample of UC Davis students, as well as how learning English as a second language posed as a challenge and how they overcame that obstacle in their lives. [233]

### Results - Survey through Qualtrics

The majority of the responders were sophomores at the University of California, Davis, majoring in the STEM field. Responders originated from countries in Southern Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. Seven of the responders learned English before the age of five. Six responded that they learned English between the ages of five to eight, and seven responded that they learned English after the age of eight.

Q6 - When did you learn English?

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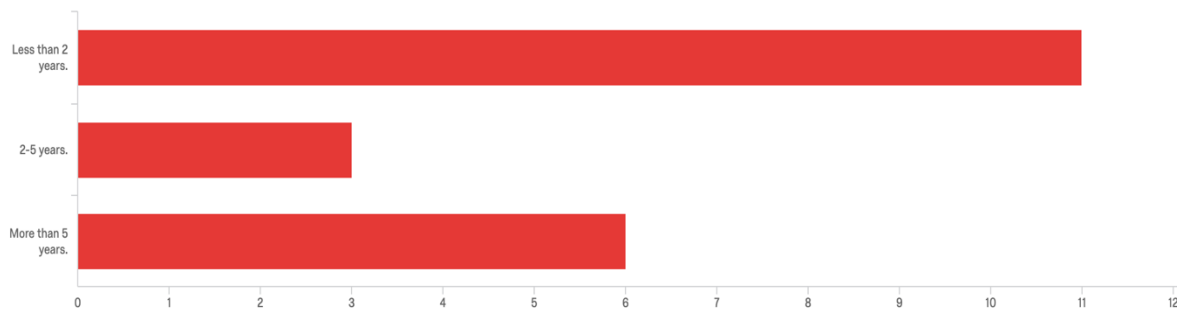


#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	When did you learn English?	1.00	3.00	2.00	0.84	0.70	20

The seven who responded that they learned English before the age of five, 71.4% responded that they have lived in the United States for less than 2 years, while the 28.6% responded that they lived in the USA for more than five years. The six who responded that they learned English between the ages of five to eight, 66.7% responded that they have lived in the USA between two to five years, while 33.3% responded that they lived in the USA for more than five years. Lastly, the seven who responded that they learned English after the age of eight, 28.6% responded that they lived in the USA for more than five years, 42.9% responded that they lived in the USA between two to five years, and the last 28.6% responded that they lived in the USA for less than two years.

Q7 - How long have you lived in the United States of America?

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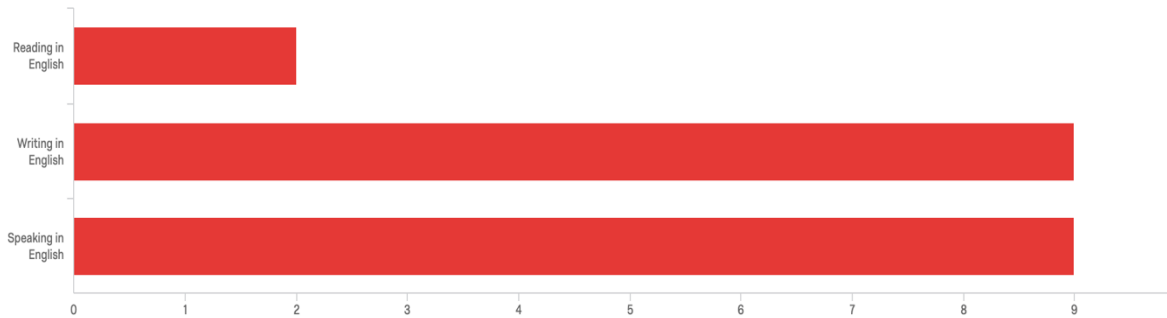
#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	How long have you lived in the United States of America?	1.00	3.00	1.75	0.89	0.79	20

Forty-five percent of the responses indicated that writing in English was the subject these international students struggled with the most, and another 45% said that they struggled with

speaking in English. Ten percent indicated that they struggled most with reading in English.[250]

Q8 - What do you struggle with most?

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#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	What do you struggle with most?	1.00	3.00	2.35	0.65	0.43	20

## Discussion

From the survey results, I can conclude that the majority of the respondents struggle with writing and speaking in English as opposed to the other option: reading in English. This might tie into the reason that 61.1% of the responders learned English later into their primary school years and did not have access to the same resources the 38.9% of responders had when they learned English before the age of five. Norris and Manchón (2012) describe second language (L2) writing development and factors that influence it as “multivariate, multi-factorial, socially embedded, emergent, and cognitive phenomena” (Evans, 222). L2 writing involves the process of mastering rhetorical skills and it also takes a great amount of effort to learn a language and write papers of all sorts. These skills must be taught in the early stages of a scholar since they will become useful when they enroll in university writing courses.

Another aspect to consider would be that these international students are required to either pass an exam or enroll in a writing class in order to take the general writing courses offered at UC Davis. Evans argues that having this requirement acts as a burden for these students because they struggle with the new language. However, UC Davis offers numerous English Level Writing Requirement fulfillments “meant to bolster new Aggie writers so they feel prepared for the writing tasks they will be asked to complete...designed to help you feel even more prepared...” (UC Davis ELWR 2019). ELWR fulfillments are meant to help international students improve their writing skills so that they are prepared for their lower and upper division writing courses. [270]

### **Conclusion**

The survey results indicate that international students face most of their challenges in the field of composition and in their writing classes as well as communicating with peers in their surroundings.

UC Davis requires their undergraduate students to enroll in two writing classes as a requirement for graduating. For lower-division requirements, UWP 1, ENL 3, COM 1, and NAT 5 are offered to satisfy the requirement for a freshman and sophomore. For upper-division requirements, there is an option to take a writing exam after 70 units of completion or to enroll in UWP 101 or 102. However, if an international student does not meet the prerequisite for the lower-division course, they must meet the Entry Level Writing Requirement fulfillments. ELWR offers many courses such as UWP 7, UWP 7m, UWP 1A, ENL 3A, and NAT 5A. Through this program, students with different cultural backgrounds and languages can find many opportunities to improve their writing as well as reach out to peer educators trained to provide quality support for those who seek and need it in ELWR courses. This program helps multilingual students enter

their future with a strong background in reading and writing and it will help them succeed at a four-year university.

From the results and visuals provided, this research can infer that international students have seen an improvement in their English speaking and writing skills. They have also seen benefits from learning English as a second language and it has made them feel more comfortable with their surroundings. They can now participate in conversations with native English speakers and participate in class discussions. [265]

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