Assessing and Exploring the Oral Proficiency of Young Mandarin Immersion Learners

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Study Purpose and Research Questions

Purpose. This study examines Mandarin Immersion (MI) students’ second language (L2) oral proficiency outcomes in Mandarin

Research questions
1. How do median scores for oral fluency, grammar, vocabulary, and listening comprehension compare across kindergarten, Grade 2, and Grade 5?
2. To what extent do median oral proficiency scores differ between kindergarten and Grade 2, and Grades 2 and 5?
3. What changes occur in the linguistic complexity of Mandarin oral language produced by one kindergarten, one Grade 2, and one Grade 5 immersion learner during a proficiency assessment interview?

Study Design

Study Context and Participants. 277 kindergarten, Grade 2 and Grade 5 students from three Mandarin immersion programs in two suburban districts.

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Table 1. Number of MI Students Assessed by School Year (Spring of 2010 – 2013)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2012</th>
<th>2013</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 2</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 5</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>362</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Assessment Instruments. Two task-based, criterion-referenced oral proficiency assessments developed by the Center for Applied Linguistics (Thompson, Boyson, & Rhodes, 2006):
1. Student Oral Proficiency Assessment (SOPA), and
2. CAL Oral Proficiency Exam (COPE)

Table 2. Percentage of Oral Range by Tier Across Learners

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tier</th>
<th>Senior Elementary</th>
<th>Intermediate Elementary</th>
<th>Early</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tier 1</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tier 2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tier 3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion and Implications

Discussion

• L2 oral proficiency outcomes of young MI students resemble trends for Spanish immersion students using the same tools at the same grades.

• MI students’ proficiency ratings were consistently at least one sublevel lower than those of Spanish immersion students in all domains at all grades.

• Follow-up comparison of the percentage of ratings in the Jr. Advanced range by grade level and proficiency domain indicated that lower advanced-level ratings were achieved in vocabulary in Grades 2 and 5 compared with oral fluency and grammar.

• In general, a wide range of complexity metrics confirmed a noticeable difference in the degree of grammatical and lexical complexity between oral language produced by young kindergarten and the other two students, Connor (Grade 2) and Dana (Grade 5).

Implications

• Paying close attention to ongoing, systematic development of word knowledge is essential for pushing MI learners towards advanced-level L2 oral proficiency. In Mandarin, this involves an explicit focus on character knowledge and word-formation skills.

• To increase MI students’ use of more complex, commonplace syntactic structures such as the pronoun relative clause, MI teachers need to target these structures as they develop their content-based lessons and units.

• Additional linguistic complexity studies that analyze MI students’ oral language production at various intermediate proficiency levels are needed to further inform the development of new L2 proficiency assessments and improve existing rating scales and tools.

Conclusion

Results indicate significant differences in median scores between kindergarten and Grade 2 in all domains; however, no median score differences were found between Grades 2 and 5. An exploratory complexity analysis of three speech samples revealed increasingly higher levels of grammatical complexity across grades. Measures of lexical complexity for the Grade 5 sample, while higher than those in kindergarten, were lower than those of Grade 2. Study findings question the efficacy of existing proficiency assessments at capturing the multimodality of oral proficiency in the intermediate and pre-advanced range. They also highlight the important role finely grained complexity measures can play in informing curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices.

References

