Evaluating the Accuracy of Spanish-English Bilinguals’ Self-Reported Bilingualism

Sammi Banh
Denise Tamashiro

Undergraduate Students, Department of Child and Adolescent Studies
Mentor: Dr. Natsuki Atagi

Although psycholinguistic studies of bilingualism typically rely on self-reported measures of bilingualism, little is known about whether such measures correlate with objective measures of language skill. This study thus compares Spanish-English bilinguals’ self-reported bilingualism to objective measures of language skill. Participants recruited through flyers from Southern California universities are asked to complete tasks that measure Spanish and English language skills. To measure language skills objectively, participants complete (1) a verbal fluency task—a measure of expressive vocabulary—in which they name words within a category (e.g., “fruits”) and (2) the Receptive One-Word Picture Vocabulary Test, a standardized measure of Spanish-English bilinguals’ receptive vocabulary. Participants also complete a Language History Questionnaire, in which they self-report their frequency of Spanish and English use. We aim to understand how this self-reported bilingualism correlates with language measures. Pilot data show that participants’ self-reported bilingualism ranged widely, from English-dominant to balance between the two languages to Spanish-dominant. In contrast, the expressive vocabulary measure showed participants ranged from English-dominant to balance between the two languages, whereas the receptive vocabulary measure showed participants to be English-dominant. These results suggest that bilinguals’ self-assessments of their language skill differ from their performance on objective language measures. Due to factors such as generational differences as well as, age and frequency of exposure, and frequency of exposure, our scientific understanding of perceived bilingualism may differ from actual language skill. These results also suggest that supporting students’ home language may be critical for maintaining and promoting bilingualism. This study will help us understand diversity among bilinguals and how minority-serving universities and the surrounding communities can support bilingual students. Promoting bilingualism in this manner will eventually allow for communities to be more linguistically inclusive and supportive of cultural diversity.