The Interlanguage Continuum of Spanish Speaking Second Language Learners acquiring English and Effective Educational Pedagogy

A Research Paper

By

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Abstract

This research provides an effective method of integrating technology to improve the academic skills of students through authentic assessment. An overview of second language development, errors as viewed from the behaviorists, sociolinguistics, and psycholinguistics' points of view are presented as well as models of language proficiency and communicative competence. Additionally, the English grammar competency of fourteen second language students is analyzed through a computer-assisted text analysis program that has been found effective with English Language Learners. The results, although a small sample, indicate that all second language learners have varying levels of proficiency as assessed through their writing. These findings provide suggestions for effective pedagogical practices of second language learners.

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It is common knowledge that there is a significant High School dropout rate among the Hispanic population especially in the South Texas-Mexico border. There are many factors that attribute to this high dropout rate, such as low social economic status, teenage pregnancies, drugs, lack of motivation and specifically the acquisition of the English language to a proficient level that enables students to become successful learners. The dilemmas are many and it would be a monumental task to research all of them within the scope of a short-term research project. However, with this in mind, only one factor, second language acquisition, will be addressed in this research.

Based upon various sources, and taking into consideration the targeted population, certain key factors could be identified as needing a special focus. One of the most obvious factors of the population served is the common duality of languages, the minority language, the majority language and the number of years in the U.S. school system. This population now identified as Generation 1.5 (Harklau, Losey & Segal, 1999) is very existent and these students vary in language competence. Hispanic students have a rich cultural and language background that makes them unique from other students that share one common language. For the English Language Learner (ELL), it becomes a double demand(Gersten, 1998). One goal is the acquisition of the English language and the other is the acquisition of academic knowledge and skills. The double demands for the ELL and the lack of appropriate assessments to measure language proficiency has created an educational gap for these students. As ELLs attempt to meet the academic standards

of public schools and institutions of higher education in their second language, they become the Generation 1.5 students.

Varying degrees of language proficiency exist within the mother tongue language and the English language being the second language. Although these varying levels of language exist, once the student enters public schools they are placed in different types of classroom environments. Some public schools address the language situation with bilingual programs. These programs vary in design. Some known as transitional programs, allow students a period of two to three years in a program where they are able to receive instruction in a language that they understand. Other schools place students in a *sink or swim* environment (Diaz-Rico, 2004) which means that the Spanish dominant student will be surrounded with the sounds of the English language only. Still other programs such as dual language and two-way programs are utilized to maximize language acquisition and instruction. All these types of programs differ, and yield varying academic results.

Generation 1.5 students that survive the educational process and acquire some degree of knowledge in the English language, begin working at minimum wage jobs, enter a vocational institution, or enter a four-year degree program in institutions of higher education. These students that enter a four year degree program are expected to meet the same entry criteria in reading, writing, and math as required by the Texas Higher Education Assessment (THEA). This is criteria that many Hispanic students in the South Texas Border region are not able to meet. A probable conclusion for the varying degrees of language proficiency could be that regardless of the program, each of these programs

addresses different components of the language in discrete forms rather than integratively.

Theories on how second language develops, indicate that the second language learners (SLL) enter an interlanguage (Selinker, 1972), the continuum between the beginning of second language acquisition and the maximum degree of second language proficiency. The continuum of second language acquisition begins with context-embeddedness and reaches the context-reduced proficiency levels, (Cummins, 1984), which is the desired optimum level in language acquisition. The discrete language skills within the continuum have not been clearly defined by researchers and theorists; however, they are apparent when second language learners demonstrate varying levels of proficiency in listening, speaking, reading and writing.

The identification of the language errors that exist within the continuum and strategies to help SLL students acquire the second language could become an integral part of the instructional process. It could also provide evidence of how colleges and universities can work together for the benefit of its students and that continuity is without a doubt a high probability. Institutions of higher education (IHE), just like language, are not isolated entities, but are parts of a whole. IHE's share a common goal with public schools and are committed to providing students with academic success in order that they can become a viable part of America's workforce. Addressing language as an integrative process and developing a mechanism to determine the varying degrees of proficiency in the different areas will further assist all public school personnel and university programs, such as the reading and writing center to engage in effective strategies for reading and writing.

In the study of second language acquisition (SLA), linguists, psycholinguists, and sociolinguists have all contributed to the current trend in the study of SLA but have also established a basis for further inquiry. Questions pertaining to the stages of development, as well as the influence of internal and external factors, have provided an impetus to research in the area of SLA. This is an area of high concern for public schools teachers who work with Hispanic student populations with Spanish as the native language targeting the acquisition of the English Language. This population, known as the English Language Learners (ELL), have had difficulty acquiring the language as measured by state criterion referenced tests. Additionally, the ELL population is increasing with no solution in sight to address the lack of SLA in the English language. In order to identify the probable causes of this lack of language proficiency, a review of the literature on error analysis, communicative competence and the interlanguage is presented in the following sections.

Historical Overview of the Study of Error Analysis

In the late sixties, a new awareness known as Error Analysis (EA) was developed with the work of Corder (1967) in regards to learners' errors. Up until to then, Lado's (1964) Contrastive Analysis (CA) had been used by linguists to make predictions on language differences in second language learning. This behaviorist approach was used to analyze language systems to determine differences and make predictions on language performance of second language learners. The goal of CA was to predict the errors in order to prevent errors from occurring in the second language learner (Wardhaugh, 1970). Two of the key principles of the behaviorist theory were that language was a set of habits and that all languages were different.

The prevention of errors was necessary in order to develop the set of habits in the second language. There were two versions of the CA approach. The strong version that involved predicting errors in L2 was based upon *a priori* CA of L1 & L2 (Freeman & Long, 1992). Language subsystems such as phonology, morphology, lexicon, and syntax of both languages were analyzed and compared to determine similarities and differences. Language systems with similarities were determined as having a close "fit" and therefore the degree of difficulty in acquiring the targeted language was low as compared to those systems that had more linguistic differences.

The *a priori* CA of two languages predicted, within each of the subsystems of the language, where the problem areas would occur. Based on this information, the practitioner could develop a set of language lessons that targeted the problematic discrete language elements. Taking the phonology subsystems of the English and the Spanish languages, the s-clusters such as **s**tove and **s**tar, would present difficulty for the Spanish speaker due to the fact that the Spanish vowel ***e*** *is placed before the* **s** in Spanish words, such as ***e****stufa* and ***e****strella.* The prediction would be that the Spanish speaker would produce ***e****stove* and ***e****star* when speaking in English. Additional examples are included in Table 1.1. Although, *a priori,* was used as an indicator of problematic linguistic items, it was found that not all L2 learners performed in the same predictive manner.

The weak version did not have a predictive nature. Its purpose was to analyze the errors that were produced and used *CA* to make a determination as to the cause of the error (see Table 1.2) This was the a *posteriori approach of CA.* This version was a more useful tool in identifying individual differences. However, the attempt to prevent errors was solely based on the environment as a key factor on second language learning. The

identification of errors was based on the comparison of the second language system to the first, taking into account the grammatical performance.

However, as previously stated, not all L2 learners will exhibit the same language performances as predicted in the strong version of CA. Individual differences occur as the L2 learner is acquiring a second language and those differences occur because of internal mental abilities, which neither the strong or the weak version of CA took into account. This is mainly due to the behaviorist approach of CA and its goal, which focused on the prevention of errors rather than the identification of errors (Ellis, 1985).

However, this method of error identification, whether weak or strong, became de-emphasized with Corder's (1974) introduction of Error Analysis (EA). The goal was pedagogical in that it focused on the process of acquisition from the perspective of the learner's competence and limitations. The process of EA addressed the identification, classification, causes and evaluation of errors (Ellis, 1985). The identification and classification of errors was an attempt to distinguish between occurrences in speech performance that were not systematic. At times, even native speakers of the language

Table 1.1

Examples of the CA *a priori* Approach using the Linguistic Subsystems of the English & Spanish languages

Language Subsytem: Phonology		
English	**Spanish**	**CA a priori**
s-clusters Examples star, stove, state, step, sponge, sneeze, stamp	The "e" is used at the beginning of s-clusters Examples *estrella, estufa, estado, escalon, esponja, estornudar, estampa*	**Prediction**: The Spanish dominant learner will have problems producing English s-cluster words and will have a tendency to superimpose the Spanish vowel "*e*" at the beginning of the s-cluster words such as: *estar, estove, estate, estep,esponge, esneeze, estamp*

Language Subsytem: Morphology		
English nouns are inflected for two categories as opposed to one in Spanish (Stockwell, Bowen, & Martin, 1965). Examples •horse-horses (regular) •wife-wives (irregular with modification for plurality) •man-men (irregular with modification in the stem)	Spanish nouns are inflected in one category **(**Stockwell, Bowen, & Martin, 1965). Examples •*caballo-caballos* (regular) •*esposa-esposas* (regular) •*hombre-hombres* (regular)	**Prediction:** The Spanish dominant learner will have difficulty inflecting irregular forms in nouns. The productions resulting such as: •spelling of plural nouns without modifications for plurality- **wifes, lifes,** •irregular plural without modification in the stem- **mans**
Language Subsytem: Syntax		
•Subject must be specified. Example They gave me the ball.	•Subject may be specified, or may be explicit only in verb suffixes Example *Me dieron la pelota.* *Ellos me dieron la pelota.*	•**Prediction:** The omission of the subject pronoun and the use of the 'of the' possessive appear to be due to Spanish interference (Freeman & Long, 1992, pg.59). Example *Is the book of my friend*
• Adjectives are placed before the noun. Example The red dress….	•Adjectives are placed after the noun Example *El vestido rojo*	•**Prediction:** Rule application for adjectives of the first language is superimposed over the second language rule for adjective placement. Example The dress red….

make mistakes in oral language and not necessarily because of the lack of competence, but rather because of other factors such as the *slip of the tongue*. Hence, this awareness brought focus to the field of second language acquisition and the need to further examine oral language errors.

Corder (1974) proposed two types of errors, systematic and unsystematic. Systematic errors were a reflection of competence, or internalized knowledge of the rules of the language and unsystematic errors are those that occurred once in a while. Unsystematic errors did not follow a pattern and various factors such as anxiety, stress vocal apparatus,

motivation, and others affected performance. Later on, Ellis (1985) used the term *performance variability* to identify variations that occurred in language production that were due to emotional or physical conditions that led to slips, hesitations, and repetitions. Other similar terms included systematic and non-systematic variability. Systematic variability refers to the part of the internalized system in the language and non-systematic variability refers to free variability, or rather no existent pattern.

Table 1.2
Examples of the CA *a posteriori* Approach using the Linguistic Subsystems of the English & Spanish languages

Language Subsystem: Morphology (Politzer & Ramirez, 1973)		
Types of errors	**Explanation**	**L2 Examples Monolingual Spanish with English as the target language**
Indefinite article	*a* and *an* used incorrectly before a vowel	a ant *an little ant*
Smple past tense	**Regular past tense** a. omission of *–ed* b. adding *–ed* to past already formed **Irregular past tense** a. regularization by adding *–ed* b. substitution of simple non-past	 *a. .The bird he save him.* *b. He calleded.* *a. He putted the cookie there.* *b. He fall in the water.* .

Richards (1974), also following a non-contrastive approach to error analysis introduced two psycholinguistic categories of errors. One type was the intralingual, or developmental, which resulted from the learner's incomplete application of rules. Richards (1974) explains this as a process in which the learner creates deviant structures on the basis of experience with other structures in the targeted language, i.e., *I wonder where are you going* (Freeman & Long, 1992, p.59). The speaker has probably overgeneralized the rule of subject-auxiliary inversion and applied it here to an embedded

WH-question incorrectly. The other type of errors, interlingual, were errors caused by first language interference.

Interlingual errors are those that refer to L2 errors that reflect the native language structure, regardless of internal or external factors. Utterances such as, Is *the book of my friend,* where the omission of the subject pronoun and the use of the 'of the' possessive appear to be due to Spanish interference (Freeman & Long, 1992, p. 59; & Dulay & Burt, 1974, p.2). Both the interlingual and the intralingual were part of the L1 and L2 interlanguage continuum, a term that will be discussed in another section.

However, EA did not present information on the developmental sequence, but rather it presented information on single points in time as the learner's language developed. Furthermore, the second language learner's performance within a given time identified errors and classified them, but not as descriptions of probable stages of L1 to L2 language acquisition. Nonetheless, error identification and classification paved the way for additional studies on SLA.

Chomsky's (1968) Generative Grammar, which referred to the *speaker's* internalized, unconsciousness knowledge and to the professional linguist's representation of this internalized and intuitive system of rules, was also an earlier model of the study of language acquisition. Cross-sectional studies on the natural order of morpheme acquisition by Dulay and Burt (1975) and longitudinal studies (Ellis, 1984; Schumann, 1978, & Cazden, 1986) produced data that supported the notion of language universals. Even though research on the natural order of morphemes to identify language development was promising, research in this area still continues.

Longitudinal studies advanced the study of second language acquisition, especially in the area of variations within the interlanguage. Error identification and the classification of errors were viewed as necessary to determine SLA development. Furthermore, the progression, or rather the development of a second language, was viewed as sequential. The attempt to identify errors and consideration of the influential factors resulted in a major contribution in the area of psycholinguistics, the view that internal factors contribute to second language development.

Other theorists with this earlier model according to Power & Hubbard (1996) included Wexler & Culicover in 1980 and Bresnan, 1982, with lexical functional grammar. These models focused on the syntax rather than on the interconnectedness of grammatical forms to the meanings of individual words. However, it is necessary to call attention to language competence in areas other than the identification of grammatical forms. The interlanguage system of SLLs represents more than isolated parts of grammar. It is an integral part of language competence. This concept is further developed in the following section.

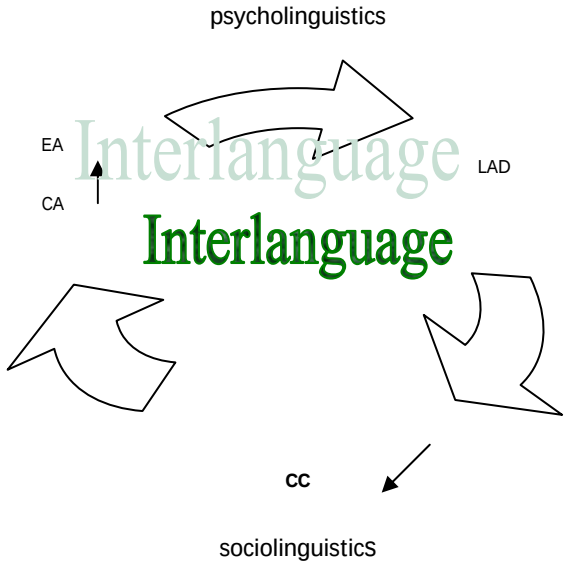
Communicative Competence

The field of psycholinguistics was dominated by Chomsky's theory of language acquisition. Lado was to Chomsky as Locke was to Rousseau. Locke's *tabula raza* (Blank slate) theory was based on the environment as being key to the learning process, while Rousseau placed emphasis on the individual's ability rather than the environment to acquire knowledge. Two opposing views on learning. One school of thought focused on the environment, the other on the innate mental abilities, however, a third factor was

introduced with the study of sociolinguistics. The theory that the environment, social factors, and mental operations produced language competence (see Fig.1).

A term that developed with the integrative-sociolinguistic movement was communicative competence (CC). It was introduced by Hymes (1972) to refer to the communicative functions of language in real situations. Littlewood (1981), suggests that communicative competence gives a wider perspective on language by focusing on the function of language rather than on its structure (see Fig. 2).

Fig. 1



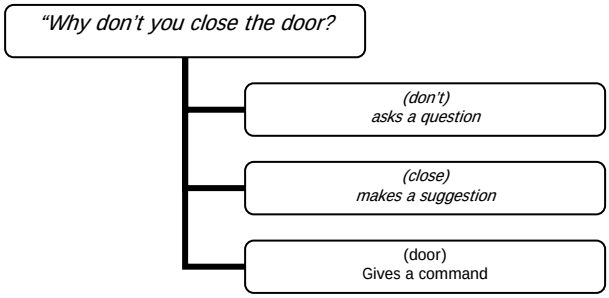
Communicative competence addresses the functional view of language rather than its predecessors that focused on discrete components of the language. Savignon (1972), proposed that communicative competence with the following five different characteristics:

1. **CC** depends on the negotiation of meaning between two or more individuals who

share some knowledge of the language.

2. **CC** applies to both written and oral language.
3. **CC** is a context specific and the user knows how to make the appropriate choices in registers and style to fit the circumstance.
4. **CC** is what the individual knows and it can be developed, maintained and evaluated only through performance.
5. **CC** is relative and is dependent on the cooperation of those involved.

Fig.2



These characteristics provided a wider perspective, however, Canale (1983), proposed four varying categories of language functions. Besides the grammatical competence that had been the focus of language acquisition, three other competencies were identified. Sociolinguistic competence, involved the ability to use language in various social settings; Strategic competence included the use of language skills that enhanced communication whenever a break down in communication occurred; and Discourse, the fourth competence, included the ability to use spoken and written utterances into meaningful messages.

Bachman (1990) also identified similar distinctions. The two major categories were organizational competence which included grammatical components and textual which addressed oral cohesion and written expression. The other category was pragmatics,

which included illocutionary or speech strategies, and sociolinguistics, which included dialect and cultural figures of speech. Both Canale (1983) and Bachman (1990) identified several competencies that broaden the study of SLA beyond just the study of grammar and identified language functions in which second language learners vary in proficiency.

Thus, in light of the awareness of the various language functions, a more current definition of CC that addresses the different types of competencies was provided by Harris and Hodges (1995). Communicative competence is ability to use any form of language appropriate to the demands of the situation and includes linguistic knowledge, cultural knowledge, and interaction skills. This idea of CC has also had variations. Finch (1998), identifies four competencies, grammatical, communicative, creative and textual competencies. These four competencies fall under the major category of linguistic competence. Communicative competence includes the interpersonal language functions. This is a different view, but nonetheless, an essential part of language that is recognized as existent in individuals acquiring a second language.

Proficiency

An important aspect of Bachman's model was performance. In addition to the theory of the varying language competencies, it also presented performance features. The salient feature of this model was that it presented concrete elements that could be assessed in order to determine proficiency. According to Baker (1993), proficiency is synonymous with language ability and language ability in a competence, such as grammatical competence, can be assessed through skills within any language component. Traditional language assessments targeted proficiency in each of the four language

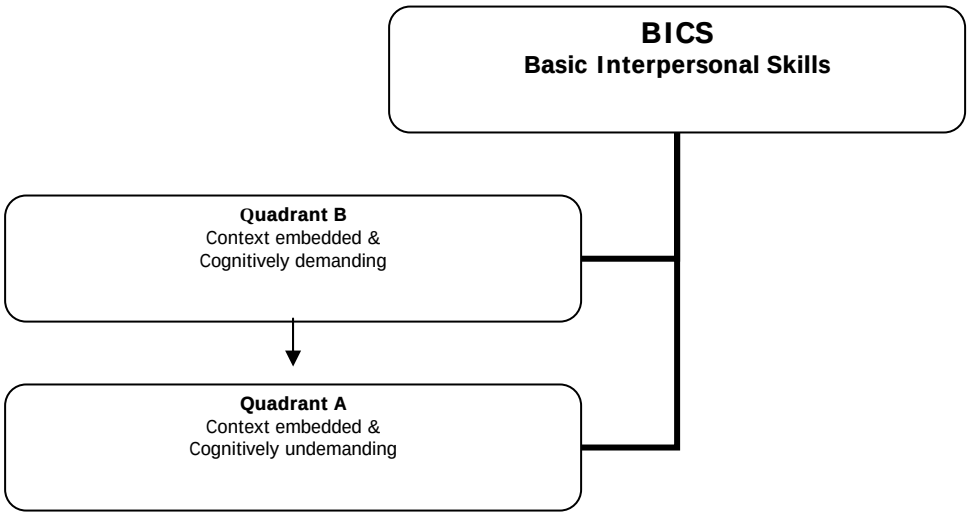
components, listening, speaking reading and writing. A set of discrete skills for each component detailed the expectations for proficiency in the targeted language.

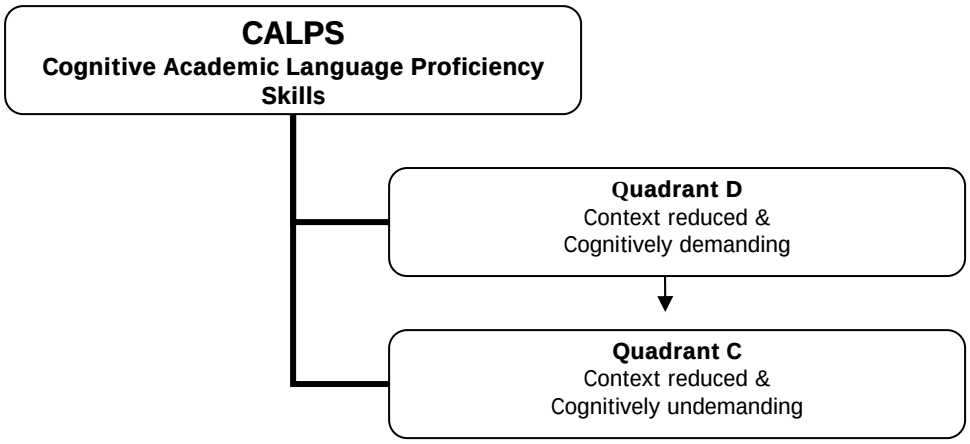
However, traditional assessments designed to assess isolated skills in the language components to determine proficiency levels were not always effective for dominant Spanish speaking learners acquiring English as a second language. According to Cummins (1984), second language learners are able to demonstrate proficiency in grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation which are basic skills acquired within two years. His framework (Cummins, 1981), offers an explanation of the varying levels of language proficiency levels that are classified as the Basic Interpersonal Communications Skills as the learners progresses to optimum levels.

Besides the proficiency levels in each category, the thinking processes are also important. Cummins' (1981) framework addressed this fifth component as part of horizontal and vertical continuums. The horizontal continuum begins at a context-embeddedness level where the SLL needs paralinguistic clues such as gestures, body movements and facial expressions to understand communication. Simultaneously, as language is becoming differentiated through exposure and practice in the language and the degree of difficulty in understanding L2 begins to move from a cognitively demanding level to a cognitively undemanding level. This vertical continuum applies to both the context-embedded level and the context reduced level, which includes differentiation in cognitive maturity, and higher order cognitive skills such as the ability to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate. These levels take longer to acquire since it takes into consideration developmental stages of cognition as well.

Cummins' framework is demonstrated through four quadrants (see Fig. 3). The beginning quadrant is quadrant B that is context embedded and cognitively demanding level. As the SLL begins to acquire the basic language skills known as the *Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS),* the learner progresses to quadrant A. The learner in quadrant A is still functioning at the context embedded level, but a t a cognitively undemanding level. It is at this quadrant that learners appear to be speaking the second language and are exited from bilingual programs. However, fluency, does not equate with the ability to think in the language, which are context-reduced as in quadrants C and D (see Fig. 3).

Fig. 3





The ideal level for the SLL is the cognitively undemanding and context-reduced proficiency level, which is the optimum level in language acquisition. Cummin's breakthrough in developing a framework to explain language acquisition for the SLL takes into consideration what language is and how the factor of cognitive maturity is crucial to continued differentiation and academic proficiency in a language. However, although his framework has received criticism in respect to the lack of empirical support and the terms over-simplified reality (Baker, 1993), it offers a logical explanation for the internal structures that develop as second language acquisition evolves. Nevertheless, this theory has extended the concept of language differentiation and varying proficiency levels that develop from L1 to L2.

Approximations in the Interlanguage System

The discrete language skills within the continuum have not been clearly defined by researchers and theorists, however, they are apparent when second language learners demonstrate varying levels of proficiency in listening, speaking, reading, writing and critical thinking. The SLL continuum would be the identification of stages that SLLs go

through in order to acquire L2, however this is problematic. Each learner is different and various factors determine the level of proficiency. Furthermore, and the acquisition of a second language is an evolving process.

Therefore, for each SLL, there exists an approximate system (Nemser, 1971), an SLL's system that differs from L1 and L2 system. The individual's approximate system consists of all the competencies and the maturity level that has been acquired in L1. However, in acquiring L2, all factors that affect learning are part of the differentiation process (Werner & Kaplan, 1964), that determines language ability and acquisition in the second language.

Public schools with a high percentage of ELLs use language assessments to determine levels of proficiency in their students. Examples of the different stages and brief descriptions of each are presented on Table 2. Nonetheless, Spanish dominant students acquiring English are having difficulty with academic tasks. Perhaps a solution lies in identifying approximations, a term used by Chomsky (1968), to establish a baseline of L2 language expectations. In addition, meaningful performance based activities would be a way of measuring progression in L2 acquisition. In the section that follows, the concept of approximation is extended and a method of authentic assessment that has met the validity and reliability criteria will be elaborated.

Table 2
Stages of SLA Oral Language Development

Author	Oral Language Stages in SLA	Description
Gonzalez (1994)	•1 Preproduction •2 Early production •3 Speech emergence •4 Intermediate Fluency •5 Independent Usage	• Little or none L2 • Memorized L2 phrases • Uses short sentences • Occasional pattern errors • Uses subordinate clauses in speech

Gottlieb, M. (2004)	•1 Entering- L1 •2 Beginning- L2 •3 Developing- L3 •4 Expanding- L4 •5 Bridging- L5	Phonological, syntactic/semantic errors occur Linguistic complexity observed in oral interaction/writing Comprehension and the use of technical language of the content areas
Virginia Dept. of Ed. (2002)	•1 L1-Oral language-------- Reading Writing •2 L2-Oral language-------- Reading Writing •3 L3-Oral language ------- Reading Writing •4 L4- Oral language------- Reading Writing	-------Face to face Communication & basic Vocabulary ---------Comprehend short Conversations -------Understand standard Speech in most settings -------Understand high degree of Fluency and accuracy when Speaking

The interlanguage of the SLL has varying approximations as the English language develops. These approximations are points within the continuum from L1 to L2 and they are representative of a language system that is evolving as language is practiced and new levels of understanding are reached. New developments in the acquisition process are the approximations within the L1 and L2 continuum and are difficult to identify with standardized assessments that are designed with multiple-choice questions. Multiple-choice questions that are designed to assess language skills in isolation fail to assess language, which is an integrative process.

Language develops, as Cummins theorizes (1984), along a horizontal continuum as well as vertically beginning at a cognitively demanding level to a cognitively undemanding level. Second language acquisition, at any given point, is representative of the interlanguage system or approximations to the second language. Errors are the mirrors to the learner's IL. Teachers of SLLs are aware of the varying proficiency levels, however, it would be a monumental task to address each learner's language needs with the current educational pedagogy.

Educational Pedagogy

Current educational pedagogy appears to be teacher-oriented rather than learner-oriented and focus more on teaching language skills in isolation rather than interactively. Reading is taught as a separate subject from writing and the testing of these subjects is also discrete. Furthermore, teaching to the test strengthens the problematic situation. More appropriate assessments are needed to 1.) identify the approximate system of learners and 2.) provide a mechanism in which the learners are held responsible for their own learning. Furthermore these assessments should be valid and reliable and free of biases, whether gender or cultural. Accountability is crucial in education for the assurance of academic success for it populous.

A language component that can be used to identify the approximate system of a second language learner is writing. Writing is an integrative process that is performance based. It is an integrative process that involves knowledge of the language as well as the ability to think in the language. The ability to organize thoughts and select the appropriate vocabulary, are two of the language skills that can be used to identify the approximate system of individual second language learners. As all approximate systems

vary, only through performance-based measures such as demonstrations, can language proficiency levels be identified.

An effective tool that was found to be effective in identifying linguistic errors for the English as a Second Language (ESL) was the Writer's WorkBench (WWB) software, a computer-assisted technological tool that analyses linguistic elements in the English grammar. Although, the grammar aspect is only one of the communicative competencies that were mentioned on the historical portion of this paper, it is a basic language competency required for academic success. The software was also used for the Title V collaborative program between TAMIU and LCC entitled the Hispanic Student Success Initiative: Preparing Tomorrow's Teachers Today. In a small sample of first time freshmen enrolling at TAMIU participating in the program and in a research to help identify a commonality of errors found in 1.5 generation, examples of the individual approximate systems are identifiable. The charts that follow, Tables 3.1 and 3.2, eight (8) linguistic elements in the English grammar of fourteen (14) students and the differences, were used to indicate the individual approximate systems.

Table 3.1 (Vargas, 2006) provides the data for the fourteen (14) compositions based on content. Only expository and persuasive compositions were used. The categories were organization and development, diversity of content vocabulary, vague and abstract vocabulary. Organization and development was analyzed according to the standard number of words required for the introductory paragraph, body paragraphs and concluding paragraphs. A description of each paragraph was analyzed for each of the compositions that were submitted for research and the number of words and the number of paragraphs needing development were recorded. The diversity of words provided

information on the focus of the paper. The words that were mentioned for the topics and subject of the composition were listed as well as the number of times that those words were used.

Table 3.1
Types of Content Errors in found in First Year University Students

Student Code	**Number of Words**	**#Paragraphs Needing Development**	**Diversity Level**	**Vague Vocabulary**	**Abstract Vocabulary**
383	354	3/4	65%	18.35%	3.80%
263	397	1/3	54.9%	13.97%	3.63%
203	467	3/5	49.0%	9.59%	3.36%
223	757	0/5	55.8%	11.70%	3.90%
213	454	3/5	73. %	6.45%	5.71%
233	457	4/5	68.6%	10.24%	5.24%
253	506	1/5	71.7%	6.22%	1.72%
273	353	3/4	72.4%	7.84%	4.39%
283	477	1/4	61.4%	4.67%	6.67%
293	485	4/5	62.4%	5.40%	3.52%
323	391	4/5	54.9%	9.14%	2.86%
333	524	1/4	54.5%	5.00%	5.21%
343	508	6/6	70.4%	5.18%	4.75%
363	482	1/4	65.0%	10.42%	2.55%

The standard diversity level was 59% and anything above was too high. Other standard ratios that were used were 3% for vague vocabulary and 2% for abstract vocabulary.

Table 3.2 (Vargas, 2006) illustrates the number of helping verb and modal errors, split infinitives and article errors and the number of problematic words or phrases found in their essays. Each of these linguistic components in the Writers WorkBench assists in identifying the individual approximations within each student's IL. The helping verb category identified verbs with correct usage or those that needed to be modified. Modals errors included the modal helping verbs, may, might, must, can, shall, will, could, should, would that were used with the wrong form of the main verb and modals that were used in a way that English speakers would not use. Split infinitives and articles *a* and *an,* the

third category, identified incorrect usage. The last category, diction alerts, identified words and or phrases that were used incorrectly or inappropriately.

Table 3.2
Type of Grammar Errors in found in First Year University Students

Student Code	Helping Verbs	Modal	Split Infinitives& Articles	Diction Alerts (Problematic words/phrases)
383	0	0	0	7
263	1	0	0	10
203	3	0	0	6
223	1	0	0	8
213	0	0	0	3
233	0	0	0	10
253	0	2	0	3
273	0	1	0	5
283	1	0	0	6
293	1	0	1	13
323	2	1	0	5
333	1	0	0	7
343	0	0	0	9
363	0	0	0	14

It was observed that ninety-three percent (93%) of the students demonstrated the correct usage of split infinitives and articles while seventy-three (71%) demonstrated correct usage of modals. Fifty percent (50%) of the students used helping verbs appropriately and one hundred percent (100%) of the students indicated problematic words and or phrases. The percentages from Tables 3.1 and 3.2 serve to identify the differences in each of the fourteen students' compositions. All students had similarities, however, all had variances in knowledge of the eight linguistic elements. The WWB software contains twenty-five (25) linguistic elements and only eight were compared in this research to illustrate the varying approximate systems of each student. The student sample essays and the WWB analysis of the twenty-five linguistic elements are included as supportive documentation.

Current State of Education

The second language learner will have varying degrees of language proficiency and it becomes difficult for the classroom teacher to work with all the individual differences of the ELL in the classroom. Additionally, it is also difficult to assess language proficiency levels and subsequently plan for these differences. However, at the current time, the dropout rate continues to climb. According to a newspaper article in the Laredo Times, that appeared in August 27, 2006, *at Laredo Independent School District, some forty percent (40%) of all freshmen do not finish senior year at their high school. At United Independent School District, that figure is closer to thirty percent (30%), according to data provided by both school districts for the last five senior classes* (Cortez, 2006).

School districts with a high population of ELLs need to address this problem and simultaneously maintain the state's academic standards. While there are varying factors contributing to the dropout rate, the issue of how to assess language proficiency authentically and designing appropriate instruction cannot be ignored. One solution is to design and implement curriculums with researched approaches that work best for the ELL at the public school levels and align with institutions of higher education. Another solution is to measure language proficiency through authentic assessments besides the state's criterion referenced test.

Criterion referenced tests measure language skills in isolation and through multiple choice tests that provide a limited awareness of the learner's proficiency (O'Malley, & Pierce, 1996). On the other hand, authentic tests provide teachers with a wider perspective of the learner's language ability. They are based directly on classroom instruction and students demonstrate their knowledge and skills. Instead of completing

a multiple-choice test by bubbling the correct response, the student demonstrates the acquired knowledge and skills. One example of authentic assessment that is performance based is writing. Through writing, the learner is able to demonstrate various language skills integratively rather than in isolation.

The awareness of the different approximations of the ELLs as identified through the WWB text analysis, provides a visual of the learner's instructional needs. Additionally, it provides the ELLs with immediate feedback and offers suggestions for improvement. The learner is held responsible for reading, editing, evaluating and revising if needed. The WWB text-analysis software was first used in 1982 at Colorado State University Intensive English Program to determine the practicality and effectiveness with English as a Second Language Learners (ESL). The results indicated that the students had benefited from the use of the computer-assisted program (Reid et al, 1983). Continued research by the Exxon Education Foundation continued researching the effectiveness of the computer-assisted text analysis programs and the findings indicated that statistically significant improvement in writing of second language students (Reid, 1987).

Through the use of technology, the learner is able to receive immediate feedback and is able to engage effectively in the editing process. The learner is receiving information objectively and making the necessary revisions if needed. The teacher, as a facilitator, is able to engage in the conferencing process with individual students, once they have their feedback printouts. The teacher as a facilitator plays an important role in the process. Although the grammatical elements are assessed effectively through the software, the teacher needs to assess the content. The WWB only assess the English grammar.

Conclusions

Research has provided a wealth of information on the acquisition of a second language from analyzing ELLs to presenting models of language stages as the learner begins to acquire a second language. Complex and thought provoking issues regarding the second language learner's individual IL and the issues with the assessment of these learners continues to expand. Theories about proficiency, language competence, language as an integrative process and the assessment of ELLs all add to expanded knowledge, however, the dropout rates continue to rise. This is an alarming situation for the entire community as the workforce of the future will lack the necessary knowledge and skills for social, economic and political mobilization.

This research provides examples of effective and immediate educational practices that can be used to improve language ability through writing. Writing is a performance based skills that allows the teacher to identify the individual differences in language grammar. Additionally, through writing and the use of computer-assisted technology, teachers are able to guide the learner into becoming responsible for their own learning. The learner engages in self-assessment as technology is providing objective feedback and the learner is able to make decisions on the writing activity. Self-assessment is a type of authentic assessment that guides the learner to become self-directed. The goal of education is for students to gain knowledge and skills, but not just a recipients of knowledge, but as active participants in the learning process. It is hopeful that this research contributes to the quest for solutions to this monumental dilemma of the current times. It is further hoped that the idea of using computer-assisted text analysis will become a part of educational practice at all levels.

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