

Research Brief

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- [*Examining Current and Proposed Home Language Surveys in California in Relation to Initial English Language Proficiency Assessment Results: An Exploratory Study*](#)

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Redefining and Re-examining the Home Language Survey in the Context of Initial English Language Proficiency Results

Different Kinds of Home Language Surveys

In response to the evolving multilingual landscape of California's K–12 student population, this study from 2015 critically assesses the accuracy and efficacy of the current Home Language Survey (HLS) against a newly proposed version, which includes more detailed questions about language use. As demographic shifts see a rise in students from non-English-speaking backgrounds, the importance of accurately identifying English learners (ELs) to provide appropriate educational support has never been more significant. Misclassifications due to inadequate survey design or measurement errors in proficiency assessments can lead to inappropriate educational placements, impacting student success.

Why examine different kinds of home language surveys?

California, reflecting broader national trends, has experienced substantial growth in its multilingual student population, with 1.074 million students identified as ELs in the 2023-24 school year alone. The HLS is a critical first step in determining a student's need for specialized language instruction. However, concerns about its design potentially leading to significant misidentification prompted this examination back in 2015. The summarized study by Haas et al. (2015) aims to address

these concerns by proposing a revised HLS that could better capture the nuanced language environment of students, thus improving the accuracy of EL identification and ensuring appropriate educational support. This newly proposed HLS includes more detailed questions that address the complexity of language use in multilingual families. It seeks to differentiate between passive language exposure and active language use, potentially reducing the misclassification of students who are exposed to another language but are proficient in English. The new survey includes questions about language proficiency in reading, writing, speaking, and comprehension, providing a comprehensive view of the student's language capabilities.

Identifying Potential English Learners Using the Home Language Survey

The identification of English learners begins with a home language survey, which varies by state in terms of its design and implementation. In California, the survey is a pivotal first step in deciding whether a student requires further assessment for English proficiency. This survey includes questions about the language(s) spoken at home by the child and other household members. Responses indicating a language other than English can trigger further assessments to determine a student's English language proficiency level, leading to either specialized instructional support for those who need it or mainstream classroom placement for fluent English speakers.

This exploratory study analyzed responses from the current and a newly proposed home language survey among students enrolled in 15 California schools (see Appendix A for the questions used in each survey). It assessed how these surveys correlate with the results from the initial California English Language Development Test (CELDT), aiming to discern the accuracy and effectiveness of each survey in identifying true English learners versus multilingual students who do not require additional language support.

Key Findings

Predictive Accuracy:

- **The existing HLS showed a high predictive accuracy, correctly identifying 90% of the students as ELs as confirmed by subsequent CELDT scores.**
- The proposed survey, while identifying an additional 14% of students as ELs over the current survey, displayed a slightly reduced accuracy. This suggests a broader catchment but at the potential cost of precision.

Response Analysis:

- A notable finding was the increased sensitivity of the proposed survey to multilingualism. **Nearly 40% of the responses in the new survey indicated bilingual language use, significantly higher than the 6% identified by the current HLS.** This suggests that the newly proposed HLS could better recognize students who are fluent in both English and another language.

Implications for Policy Practice

Survey Effectiveness:

- The results affirm the need for a **more nuanced approach to identifying EL students through HLS.** The proposed survey's ability to detect a broader array of language skills could lead to more tailored educational support, reducing the risk of misclassification.
- However, the study also highlights a crucial balance between sensitivity and specificity. While the proposed HLS captures more potential EL students, it must not compromise on the accuracy needed to prevent unnecessary or incorrect placements.

Refinement of Survey Tools:

- The findings suggest that revising the home language survey to more accurately reflect students' actual language use – by including questions about language environments and independent language activities, such as reading preferences and social language use both inside and out of school – could significantly enhance the precision of English learner identification.
- Such enhancements could prevent the unnecessary classification of students as English learners, allowing for more targeted support and resource allocation.

Strategic Recommendations:

- Policymakers should consider broader implementation of the proposed survey, subject to modifications based on ongoing feedback and research to ensure it meets the diverse needs of the student population.
 - While findings for the proposed survey showed a slight over-identification of EL students, the recommendation for its broader implementation is based on its enhanced sensitivity to diverse language environments. This over-identification can be seen as an initial step towards refining the support systems for ELs, ensuring that no student in need of language assistance is overlooked. The broader data collection enabled by the proposed survey also offers valuable insights into the multilingual capabilities of students, which can inform future educational strategies and policy adjustments.
- Future research should expand the study to include a larger, more varied sample size across multiple school years to validate these findings and refine the survey tools further.

Operational Considerations:

- The feasibility of implementing new survey practices should be carefully evaluated against the backdrop of administrative burden and the potential need for additional training for school staff.

The Future in Promoting Linguistic Equity, Diversity, and Identity in Education

In conclusion, this study underscores the importance of robust and responsive identification tools in the educational landscape of California, where linguistic diversity is vast and growing. By improving how we identify English learners, we can ensure that all students receive the support they need to succeed academically without the misallocation of critical educational resources. This shift not only aligns with legal mandates but also advances educational equity and supports the academic and social integration of multilingual students.