

# **Learning Climates for English Language Learners: A Case of Fourth-Grade Students in California**

Yuko Goto Butler  
University of Pennsylvania

Michele Bousquet Gutiérrez  
Stanford University

## **Abstract**

This study investigates “learning climates” among fourth-grade students in an English-only school district in California. A student’s learning climate is defined here as (a) a learner’s perceptions of his or her own abilities and behaviors, as well as (b) the learner’s perceptions of others’ beliefs about his or her abilities and behaviors (or “externalized perceptions,” as we have termed this throughout this paper). This study aims to understand how such learning climates may relate to students’ reading performance among English language learners (ELLs) as well as native English-speaking (NE) students. A structured interview was conducted. Positive perceptions toward bilingualism were observed by both students who read English well and those who struggled with reading English. However, these two groups differed in their: (a) language-mixing behavior; (b) first-language literacy skills; (c) fathers’ level of English proficiency; and (d) views of the influence of their first language on their English reading. Strong ELL readers tended to have more positive externalized perceptions of NE peers’ attitudes toward their first languages and their language-mixing behavior. NE students’ perceptions toward bilingualism were also revealed.

## **Introduction**

This study investigates young readers’ perceptions of language use, bilingualism, and reading activities in order to better understand how these perceptions might be related to their reading comprehension. The present study is part of a larger project that examined young readers’ (fourth graders’) cognitive and metacognitive processes and strategies in reading

comprehension. As has been suggested, this examination calls for the integration of multiple perspectives, such as psychological, linguistic, educational, and sociocultural, in order to better understand students' problems with reading comprehension (RAND Reading Study Group, 2001).

In an attempt to examine the factors that differentiate reading comprehension between struggling and strong readers and between English language learners (ELLs) and native English-speaking (NE) students, a number of assessments were administered. Some of the assessments were standardized measurements such as the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test-Revised, the Basic Phonetics Skills Test, the Johnson Primary Spelling Inventory, and the Raven's Progressive Matrices Test. Other assessments were developed for the study, including an assessment to examine students' ability to infer the meaning of unknown words in context and an assessment to measure oral academic English proficiency. Some other assessments were qualitative measurements, such as interviews with students.

The present paper presents the results of the interviews. The interview study was designed to understand the sociopsychological factors (e.g., students' perceptions of bilingualism, language use, and reading activities) that may relate to their reading comprehension. We consider this interview data to be a preliminary study for planning a more systematic and comprehensive investigation in the future on the relationship between socio psychological factors and young students' reading performance.

### Purpose of the Interview Study

It has been noted that individual difference variables, such as attitude and motivation, are important in learning a second language (L2). Clément and Gardner (2001) classify such variables into three categories: (a) cognitive characteristics, (b) attitude and motivation, and (c) personality variables. Attitude and motivation can be further classified into subcategories: integrativeness, attitude toward the learning situation, and motivation. The integrativeness category includes variables such as learners' perception toward the target language and the target language groups. The attitudes toward the learning situation include learners' perceptions of teachers, curriculum, and programs.

Different models have been proposed to show the relationship between these variables and L2 acquisition. Some of the major models include the Social Psychological Model (Lambert, 1987), the Acculturational Model (Schumann, 1978), the Socio-Educational Model of Second Language Acquisition (Gardner, 1985), the Social Context Model (Clément, 1980), and the Self-Determination Model (Noels, Clément, & Pelletier, 1999). Although positive relationships between attitudes, motivation, and L2 proficiency have been reported, the causal relationships among these variables have not yet

been well understood. Many of these studies used surveys to show correlation among variables, but they are limited in their ability to explain causal relationships among variables, even with their recent effort to employ Causal Modeling (Gardner, 2000). One's attitudes may affect one's formal and informal language learning, and that may affect bilingual proficiency. However, as McLaughlin (1987) suggests, one's bilingual proficiency may also affect one's attitudes. In other words, the nature of the relationship between one's attitudes and one's bilingual proficiency might be circular.

Moreover, in many of the previous studies, the composition of attitudes seemed to vary from researcher to researcher; even within the same model, constructs that defined attitudes changed over time. For example, in Gardner's study (1985), motivation, which is composed of "integrative motivation" and "instrumental motivation," was distinguished from attitude. However, Tremblay and Gardner (1995) included both integrative and instrumental motivation in their definition of attitude. Furthering this inconsistency, Gardner, Tremblay, and Masgoret (1997) did not include instrumental motivation as an attitudinal variable. Herbert Blumer's (1955) critique of attitudinal studies that was made a half century ago still seems to apply: "There is no concept of attitude in attitude measurement studies" (p. 65). Some studies have stated that the term "attitude" tends to be narrowly defined and that such definitions are too different from the notions of attitude and motivation commonly used by L2 teachers (e.g., Crookes & Schmidt, 1991). "Attitude" may need to be considered in broader sociocultural contexts in order to better understand their relationship with students' language learning. For example, variables such as both learners' parental perceptions of the target language and culture and the target language group's perceptions of the learners' language and culture may need to be examined in order to better understand learners' attitudes toward L2 learning.

The purpose of the present study is not to prove or validate any existing theoretical models that explain the relationship among one's attitudes, other individual variables (such as motivation), and one's L2 proficiency. Rather, in an attempt to take a broader approach to "attitude," the purpose of this study is to gain information on students' "learning climates," as defined by learners' perceptions in a given sociocultural context, and to see how such learning climates may relate to learners' reading performance. We consider a learning climate to be a student's internal and psychological climate—the learner's perceptions of his or her own abilities and behaviors—as well as a student's external climate, that is, the learner's perceptions of others' beliefs about his or her abilities and behaviors. Such perceptions may be based on one's own experience, as well as stereotypes and idealizations. We also consider learning climates that are situated within multiple groups' perceptions toward the learners' abilities and behaviors—that is, perceptions of groups such as learners' parents, siblings, peers, teachers, community, and society. By investigating such learning climates, we hope to better understand

sociopsychological factors in relation to students' language learning that occurs within larger and dynamic living contexts.

More specifically, there were two motivations for conducting this interview study. First, we wanted to investigate two types of perceptions about bilingualism and reading among fourth-grade students. We wanted to explore not only fourth-grade ELLs' perceptions about their own abilities and behaviors, but also their perceptions about how others may perceive ELLs' abilities and behaviors. We have termed the latter "externalized perceptions." The sample questions below are provided in order to illustrate the differences between these two types of perceptions.

Internalized Perception (perception about oneself): "How do you feel about yourself being able to speak two languages?"

Externalized perception (perception about others' beliefs): "How do you think other people who speak only English feel about you being able to speak two languages?"

In previous studies, much effort has been made to understand the attitudes and perceptions of language learners in general (and adult language learners in particular) toward their target language, their target culture, target groups, and language learning in general. However, such learners' perceptions must be examined in relation to the targeted group, as Accommodation Theory predicts that such learners' perceptual social distance is important for the learners' language learning (Giles & Byrne, 1982). One can thus hypothesize that learners' perceptions are uniquely related to the way they perceive the target language groups' views toward their own language, culture, and language group, and that such learners' perceptions may also uniquely relate to their language learning.

Secondly, as mentioned previously, we consider that learners' perceptions, or learning climates, are situated in multiple groups' perceptions toward the learners' abilities and behaviors. Such groups include their parents, siblings, teachers, peers, communities, and societies. In this study, we focus on the perceptions of the English learners' peers who belong to the language-majority group in their school contexts. We conducted interviews to understand the perceptions regarding bilingualism and reading among majority-group members (i.e., NE children) as well as minority-group members (ELL children). In a Canadian context, Anisfeld and Lambert (1964) found that 10-year-old bilingual children showed less stereotyped attitudes toward French and English speakers than did monolingual English-speaking children. Similar results were obtained in the case of bilingual Welsh-English speakers and monolingual English speakers in Wales (Bourhis, Giles, & Tajfel, 1973). In our case, we were interested in discovering what perceptions ELLs (the language-minority group) and NE students (the target group) have regarding the issues of bilingualism

and reading when both groups existed in the same English-only environment in California. We were also interested in finding out how such perceptions might differ depending on the students' reading performance in English.

Therefore, the research questions of the interview study were as follows:

1. What perceptions do ELL readers and NE readers have toward bilingualism, biliteracy, and language mixing?
2. What are ELL readers' perceptions about NE readers' views toward bilingualism, biliteracy, and language mixing?
3. What are ELL readers' and NE readers' perceptions about reading activities?
4. Is there any difference between strong and struggling ELL readers' perceptions and externalized perceptions?

## Method

### Participants

The participants in this study were 61 fourth graders who had been in an English-only school district in the San Francisco Bay Area of California since kindergarten. Of the district's English learners, 40% are Spanish speakers and 32% are Vietnamese speakers. ELLs comprise 29% of the district's student body, and students who were formerly in English as a Second Language (ESL) programs but who have been redesignated as Fluent English Proficient (FEP) comprise an additional 11%. Another 12% of the district's students have a primary language that is not English but were classified as FEP upon initial district identification. As this is an English-only district, students with limited English proficiency are pulled out from regular classrooms and receive ESL instruction. The district has not offered students any systematic native-language instruction.

There were 37 ELL readers from either Spanish- or Vietnamese-speaking homes and 24 NE readers in this study. Both ELL and NE readers were further classified into two groups—strong or struggling readers—based on their reading levels in English. Reading levels for ELL readers were gauged by their performance on the following measurements: (a) the San Diego Quick, a reading diagnostic used by the district that is designed to assess students' reading levels by asking them to read aloud a list of words; (b) the Stanford 9 (SAT-9), a standardized reading, writing, and mathematics test required by the state (in the present study, SAT-9 scores of 40 in normal curve equivalents and below indicated struggling readers, and scores of 60 and higher in NCE indicated strong readers); (c) a district-administered reading assessment called Running Record, an assessment widely used at the elementary school level, that prompts students to orally read passages, after which teachers analyze students' miscues and repair patterns; and (d) a recommendation from district English

Language Development teachers, who instruct non-native English speakers. Because any other relevant information was unavailable to the researchers for NE students, the SAT-9 was the only criterion used to gauge the reading level of native English speakers, using the same NCE criteria noted above. The participants were randomly selected from the students who met these criteria.

There were 18 strong ELL readers of English (referred to as ELL+ hereafter, composed of 3 Spanish-speaking and 15 Vietnamese-speaking students), and 19 struggling ELL readers (ELL-, composed of 11 Spanish-speaking and 8 Vietnamese-speaking students). At the time of their participation in the present study (while they were enrolled in the fourth grade), all ELL+ readers were classified as FEP students, while all ELL- readers were still classified as limited English proficient (LEP). However, all ELL readers from both groups had acquired sufficient oral skills in English based on the IDEA Oral Language Proficiency Test (IPT). The IPT was developed in 1979 in order to identify non-English-speaking students and has been widely used for assessing English proficiency in many schools in the United States. In the present study, the district has also used the IPT to assess the need to redesignate English-language support services. All the ELLs in the present study had already reached the “fluent speakers” level based on the IPT (i.e., they had already acquired sufficient oral communicative skills in English required for district redesignation). ELL- readers in the present study were still classified as LEP students because they had not yet met the district’s criteria in reading and writing, but they had already acquired enough oral fluency in English, based on the district criteria, to be admitted for redesignation. For NE students, 12 strong readers (NE+) and 12 struggling readers (NE-) were identified. The majority of the students came from Title I schools; they came from lower and lower-middle socioeconomic backgrounds. A questionnaire distributed to their parents also indicated that the participants’ socioeconomic backgrounds were similar across groups.

## Methodology

Each student was individually interviewed for 15 to 20 minutes in English by one of the project’s two trained interviewers. Interviewers were given a scripted list of questions and were trained to prompt students in an effort to elicit useful information. The interview questions were designed to elicit students’ perceptions of bilingualism, language mixing, first-language (L1) issues, and reading activities. (The interview questions are shown in the results section and in Appendix A.) We employed this method because we hoped interviews would allow us to obtain more information about students’ perceived learning climates than would be captured through survey questions, which previous studies have primarily used. In addition to conducting interviews, we asked ELL readers to self-evaluate their L1 proficiency. The students were asked to self-evaluate their abilities to use their L1 (i.e., either

Spanish or Vietnamese) to conduct 16 activities in the areas of listening, speaking, reading, and writing using a 3-point scale.

## Results and Discussion

Before discussing the detailed results of the interview study, we need to mention that some ELL- readers showed difficulty understanding some of the questions about their externalized perceptions (their perceptions of others' views and beliefs). As such, despite the interviewers' prompts, it was possible that these students might not have fully understood the nature of the questions on externalized perceptions and were unable to articulate their thoughts well. In contrast, ELL+ readers were better able to correctly interpret these questions and articulate their responses. It is unclear whether this difference was simply due to the students' level of English proficiency or was related to some other reason(s). Remember, however, that all ELL participants had already achieved sufficient oral English skills for district redesignation as measured by the IPT. In any case, in order to minimize bias in our interpretation of the students' responses, and also due to the relatively small sample sizes, no statistical analysis was conducted. Therefore, readers should keep in mind that the following discussion of the results is based on the tendencies of the students' responses. The students' perceptions will be discussed in the following order: (a) bilingualism, (b) language mixing, (c) L1 issues, and (d) reading activities and beliefs. Overall results of the students' responses (frequency counts) are summarized in Appendix A.

### Bilingualism

First, we examined how ELL readers perceive NE readers' ideas about bilingualism (namely, externalized perceptions). We asked students, Question 1: "How do you think other people, who only speak English, feel about you being able to speak two languages?" As one can see in the students' responses (see Appendix A), ELL readers in our sample, regardless of their reading levels, thought that NE readers were favorable toward their bilingual abilities in general. Here are some sample responses:

ELL+: I think they [native English speakers] think it's cool, because you can learn more and you can understand other people.

ELL+: They think I'm lucky.

ELL+: They think it's kind of cool because if one person from another classroom doesn't know how to speak any English but they know another language, when you know that language, you can help them.

ELL-: They feel jealous, because they can speak only one language, and I can speak two languages.

Many previous studies suggest that younger learners tend to have positive perceptions toward learning an L2 (e.g., Gardner, 1985). The results in the present study indicate that externalized perceptions among our fourth-grade ELLs were also positive regardless of their reading performance levels in English.

However, even in an environment in which ELL readers perceived that their native English-speaking peers had positive views towards their bilingual abilities in general, some negative responses were observed when we asked ELL readers about their externalized perceptions of how NE readers specifically felt about the ELLs' primary languages (and/or the people who speak the languages). We asked ELLs, Question 2: "What do you think other people, who only speak English, think about Spanish (or Vietnamese)?"

As can be seen from Appendix A, 4 out of 19 struggling readers were less likely than strong readers (11 of 18) to believe that NE readers had positive impressions toward Spanish or Vietnamese. A Vietnamese ELL- student expressed that some students in her class imitate Vietnamese sounds and make fun of Vietnamese-speaking students. She said, "They [native English speakers] laugh. They make fun of my language, my culture." A Spanish ELL-student said, "They don't really like the idea about Spanish people sometimes. Some people, they don't want to be Spanish because Spanish is not that good and English is better."

This result indicates a tendency similar to that found in Baker's (1992) studies among secondary school students in Wales, which found that one's attitudes toward bilingualism are distinct from his or her attitudes toward a specific language. Our data suggest that the same may hold true in younger children's perceptions about others' beliefs toward bilingualism and a specific language. More importantly, it suggests that such externalized perceptions toward their primary language may be different between successful L2 readers and struggling L2 readers. However, one should be careful not to make a definite conclusion here, since half of ELL-struggling readers said, "I don't know," or made no response (see Appendix A).

What, then, were the NE readers' perceptions about bilingualism? Notably, the majority of our NE readers did not know what "bilingual" meant, so the interviewer had to explain this term. In contrast, all of the ELL readers knew the meaning of this word. This might imply that bilingualism is a much more familiar concept for ELL readers than NE readers. We asked NE readers, Question 3: "How do you feel when you hear your bilingual friends speaking another language at school?" Overall, we found that NE readers, consistent with both strong and struggling ELLs' responses, expressed somewhat positive



perceptions toward bilingualism (some were more positive than others). Here are some examples of responses:

NE+: I feel amazed, because they speak two languages. I wish I could, too.

NE-: I wish I could understand them; that's why I want to learn how to speak Vietnamese.

NE-: I feel jealous, because I only know one language, and they know two.

NE-: I feel good for my friends.

NE-: It doesn't really matter, because whatever language they speak, it's their language, and I don't have any proper right to make fun of that.

However, NE readers in our sample felt that bilingualism was an asset as long as English was the dominant language, given the difficult time they think ELL readers have learning English. One NE- said that being able to speak two languages is "cool" and wanted to learn Spanish, but thought that knowing another language would make it hard to acquire English. The student said, "[Knowing Spanish] makes it hard because Spanish speakers have an accent, and it's hard for other people to understand you."

One can see similar responses in the following comments as well:

NE-: [Knowing Spanish] makes it harder . . . because if I keep on doing Spanish a lot, I maybe forget the English words or something.

NE+: [Knowing Spanish] makes it harder, because if I was Spanish and just came from Mexico, it would be hard to read in English because I would be used to reading in Spanish.

### Language-Mixing Behavior

"Language mixing" in the present study refers to general code-alternating behaviors among bilingual individuals, including code switching, code mixing, and borrowing. We decided to use the term "language mixing" because this was a familiar term among the students who participated in our study. Also, definitions of code switching, code mixing, and borrowing are not necessarily agreed upon among researchers, and precise distinction of these terms are not necessary for the purpose of the present study. (For a detailed discussion on notions of "code switching," "code mixing," and "borrowing," see Hamers & Blanc, 2000.)

Language-mixing activities were considered evidence of bilinguals' linguistic incompetence until the 1970s. Since then, much research has focused on syntactic and pragmatic aspects of language mixing, as well as its societal

meaning, and researchers now recognize that language mixing is a sophisticated communicative strategy among bilingual individuals. However, attitudes toward language mixing among children and their relationship with academic language skills such as reading are still little understood.

In our study, we asked ELL readers to describe their perceptions about their own language-mixing activities. Remember that what we were interested in was the students' perception about their own language-mixing activities, and thus their responses may not necessarily reflect their actual language-mixing behavior. We asked students, Question 4: "Do you mix two languages when you speak to your parents or somebody who speaks Spanish (or Vietnamese)?" As Appendix A shows, the majority of ELLs from both reading groups (16 of 18 ELL+ and 14 of 19 ELL-) said they engage in language mixing. Both strong and struggling readers were aware that they mix languages to compensate for unknown words in both their L1 and L2. Strong ELL readers also tended to find language mixing enjoyable. A Vietnamese ELL+ student said, "Yes. It's fun. My dad says, 'If you want to talk in English, talk in English, but don't mix the languages! Can you repeat that in one language, please?' [Laugh.]"

There seemed to be a positive relationship between ELLs' English proficiency and their perceptions about their language-mixing behavior. However, more systematic data collection from wider contexts is necessary to confirm this. Perhaps ELL+ readers' positive perceptions of their language-mixing behavior influence the way they perceive social and psychological climate toward language-mixing behavior, and vice versa.

Thus, we examined whether or not there is a difference between ELL- and ELL+ readers' perceptions of NE readers' views toward their language mixing (namely, ELL readers' externalized perceptions of language mixing). Since peer pressure is a very powerful factor that may influence children's various physical and psychological behaviors, one can expect that ELLs' externalized perceptions about their own language-mixing activities may be different between ELL+ readers and ELL- readers. We asked students, Question 5: "If you mix languages, how do you think other friends, who speak only English, feel when they hear you mixing two languages?" We found that more ELL+ readers showed somewhat positive externalized perceptions toward language-mixing (Appendix A). Both ELL+ readers and ELL- readers expressed that they usually do not mix two languages when speaking to NE speakers. There is no guarantee, however, that what the students said is consistent with their actual language-mixing behavior, as previous studies have often found that bilingual individuals offer self-contradictory reports about their own language mixing behavior (e.g., Swigart, 1992). However, it is interesting to see that the ELLs in the present study (i.e., ELLs in an English-only school district) articulated that they did not mix languages in the presence of NEs. Some of our participants explained that this was because they believed that NE speakers are confused by their language mixing. An ELL+ student said, "They might feel confused and might not understand what I'm trying to say."

However, even among the students who expressed this concern, strong readers in our sample tended not to think that this confusion necessarily meant that NE readers would have a negative impression of language mixing:

ELL+: I think they [NE students] would be amazed and would like to be taught other languages so they would know what other people are saying.

ELL+: They [NE students] think it's kind of funny. They are all like "Why are you talking two languages?" They like it.

No ELL+ readers showed negative externalized perceptions toward language mixing. However, a couple of ELL- readers overtly expressed negative externalized perceptions, such as, "[NE students] say, 'You should study Spanish more'" (indicating that language mixing is being used as a compensatory measure) and, "[NE students] tell me, 'Stop mixing.'" For future research, it is important to understand how such externalized perceptions toward language mixing originated, and how they may change over time.

### First-Language Issues

In his Interdependence Hypothesis, Cummins (1981, 2000) hypothesized that there are strong correlations between bilingual students' academic language proficiency in their L1 and L2 if the students' environments allow them to develop literacy and other academic language skills in both languages. Given this, we then asked ELL readers to self-evaluate their primary language skills in four language domains (listening, speaking, reading, and writing). The ELL readers were asked to answer four questions in each domain using a 3-point scale (in which 1 = "I can't do X," 2 = "I can do X a little," and 3 = "I can do X well"). The questions are listed in Appendix B. The total scores for each domain were calculated and compared across groups. Admittedly, this did not cover a wide range of linguistic activities in each domain. However, it did give us some information about how these students perceived their linguistic abilities in Spanish or in Vietnamese. There were statistically significant differences between strong and struggling ELL readers' self-evaluations of their reading and writing abilities in their L1 ( $F [1, 35] = 11.89, p < .005$  for reading and  $F [1, 35] = 5.15, p < .05$  for writing), but not in their listening and speaking abilities ( $F [1, 35] = .026, p = .87$  for listening and  $F [1, 35] = .015, p = .90$ ). As shown in Figure 1, strong ELL readers rated themselves higher in their L1 literacy skills than struggling ELL readers did, but we did not find any significant differences in listening and speaking skills between the groups. This is notable because the students' perceptions regarding their L1 literacy skills seemed to be related to their L2 (i.e., English) literacy skills. Unfortunately, there is no objective measure in this study that verified the students' self-evaluations. However, our findings seemingly illustrate the importance of having developed L1 literacy skills when attempting to master reading and writing in another language.

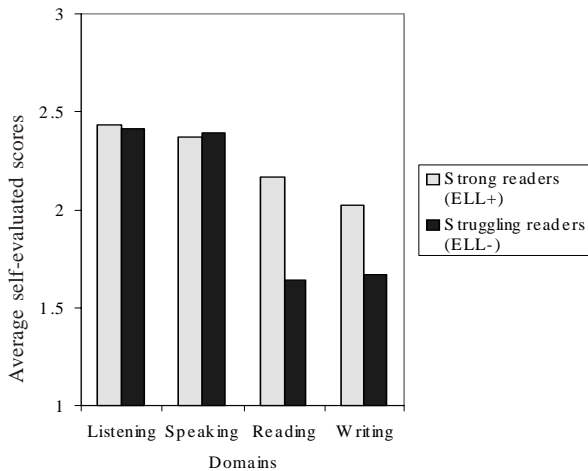


Figure 1. English learners' self-evaluation of their primary language proficiency (Spanish or Vietnamese).

We also asked ELL readers how they thought their L1 influences their reading in English, Question 6: "Do you think knowing Spanish (or Vietnamese) helps you to be a better reader in English or does it make it harder? Tell me why." As Appendix A shows, more ELL- readers (14 of 19) than ELL+ readers (8 of 18) stated that knowing their L1 did not help them to read in English. For example:

ELL-: No. It does make it harder. 'Cause I mix stuff together, and I get so confused.

ELL-: Harder, because you pronounce the words differently.

In contrast, half of the ELL+ readers thought that knowing their L1 *could* help them to be better readers in English:

ELL+: [Knowing Vietnamese] makes [reading English] better because letters in Vietnamese are the same as English.

ELL+: It makes [it] sometimes easier because if you don't know a word in English, but if you know the word in Vietnamese, that's the very moment that you can remember what the word is for.

As seen in the above examples, students' interpretations of "whether or not L1 helps" seemed to differ between struggling and strong readers. One could see different levels of awareness concerning the role of L1 in English reading between these two groups as well. ELL- readers seemed to simply attribute their difficulties with English to the fact that they were learning English as their second language. Namely, simply having another language as their L1 made it harder for them to learn English. In contrast, ELL+ readers, seemed to

be aware that there were commonalities and differences among languages and that one can apply certain aspects of linguistic knowledge in their L1 to learning another language. Therefore, ELL+ readers seemed to be aware that knowing another language gives them advantages for learning English.

We also asked ELL readers whether or not they rely on their L1 when they read difficult texts in English, Question 7: “When you read something difficult in English (for example, a science book), do you find it easier to understand if you think about it in Spanish (or in Vietnamese)?” As Appendix A indicates, more ELL- readers (10 of 19) than ELL+ readers (5 of 18) in our sample stated that thinking in their L1 helped them to understand difficult texts in English. Conversely, more ELL+ readers indicated that they do not think in their L1 when they read in English. The following quotes illustrate this difference:

ELL-: Yes. Well, I take my ideas from Vietnam, right? And then I pretend that it’s a Vietnam book in science, and then I know it and transfer it to English, and I get better at reading.

ELL+: No. I just think . . . to see . . . if there is connection to other words.

One has to remember that none of the students in this study had received any systematic instruction in their L1 from the school district; translation was never used as an instructional method, nor as a reading strategy. Also, as we have seen in the previous section, our ELL+ readers rated reading and writing proficiency in their L1 higher than ELL-readers did. It is unclear from this data what “thinking in L1” means when they read English. Perhaps ELL+ readers thought they relied less on their L1 when they read English than ELL- readers did simply because of their ease of processing English. For future studies, it is important to examine how such students’ perceptions about the role of L1 in L2 reading may relate to their actual reading performance and their actual use of L1 as an L2 reading strategy.

### Reading Activities

Regarding reading activities, we first asked both ELL readers and NE readers about their reading activities at home, Question 8: [For ELL readers] “Does anyone at home read to you in English? If yes, who? Does anyone at home read to you in Spanish/Vietnamese? If yes, who?” [For NE readers] “Does anyone at home read to you in English? If yes, who?” As Appendix A shows, ELL readers were more likely to have their parents or other family members read to them than NE readers. Also, the majority of ELL readers (both strong and struggling readers) have someone in their family who reads to them in their L1 as well as in English.

Interestingly, among our ELL+ readers, fathers seem to be the primary figure in the family who reads to them in English, whereas among our ELL-readers, mothers seem to read to them in English most. It is possible that this

reported behavior is related to ELLs' perceptions of their fathers' levels of English proficiency. We asked ELL readers to evaluate their parents' oral English proficiency (i.e., the students' perceptions about their parents' English proficiency). Their responses were coded using 4-point scales (1 = speaks very little, 2 = not so well, 3 = well, and 4 = very well). The mean scores for the observation of their mothers' English proficiency were 2.50 for ELL+ and 2.42 for ELL-. There was no difference between these two groups ( $F [1, 35] = .05, p > .8$ ). In contrast, for the students' observation of their fathers' English proficiency, mean scores were 3.33 for ELL+ and 2.37 for ELL-, and a difference was found between strong and struggling reading groups ( $F [1, 35] = 6.22, p < .05$ ). Namely, ELL+ readers in our sample rated their fathers' English proficiency higher than did ELL- readers. It should be noted that the fathers' role in family literacy activities among language-minority students has not been fully investigated and needs to be further examined. In addition to the parents, sisters and grandparents were mentioned by some ELLs as family members who read to them (they mentioned sisters mainly for English reading, and grandparents mainly for L1 reading).

Compared with ELL readers, NE readers reported being read to less frequently by their parents or other family members at home. Interestingly, it turned out that more NE readers (both strong and struggling readers) expressed that they no longer need to be read to by their parents and prefer to read by themselves. Thus, it is accurate to say that fewer NE readers than ELL readers reported being read to at the time of the study because NE readers believed they could already read independently:

NE-: I read by myself. I know how to sound words out.

NE-: My mom did when I was little. Now I read to myself.

NE+: I read myself. I'd rather read by myself.

Finally, we were interested in hearing students' ideas about what makes someone a good reader. We asked students, Question 9: "Can you think of a friend in your class who is a good reader? If YES, then what makes you think that this person is a good reader?" One of the popular responses for the best indicator of a good reader was someone who "reads a lot." This response was particularly popular among ELL+ readers (see Appendix A). Other factors addressed by the students included "someone who can read fast" (speed of reading), "someone who knows many words" (vocabulary size), "someone who can read difficult books" (readability of difficult texts), "someone who can concentrate on reading" (concentration), and "somebody who works hard" (effort). Interestingly, decoding skills (sounding words out well) was occasionally expressed by ELL readers and NE struggling readers, but none of the NE strong readers in the present study mentioned this quality. Also, "smartness" was expressed as an important quality for good readers by the students. This response seemed to be more frequently expressed by NE+

readers and ELL- readers, although we need more data to confirm this observation. Also, it is not clear from our data where this perception originated.

## Conclusion

The purpose of the present study was to understand ELLs' learning climates as defined by their perceptions of bilingualism, their L1, language use, and reading activities. As part of a larger study that attempted to understand ELLs' reading difficulty issues, we hoped that the sociopsychological information collected from our student interviews, combined with the results of our cognitive-metacognitive measures, would help us to better understand individual differences in reading performance. In this study, we were interested in understanding two types of ELLs' perceptions: first, perceptions about their own abilities and behaviors, and, second, ELLs' externalized perceptions (i.e., ELLs' perceptions about majority-group members' views towards their abilities and behaviors). We also examined both NE students' and ELLs' perceptions toward ELLs' native languages, language behavior, and reading activities. This study does not attempt to test the validity of any existing sociopsychological models in L2 acquisition and bilingualism *per se*. However, we believe that the present data provided us with interesting information on students' learning climates, in an attempt to better understand the nature of sociopsychological factors in L2 reading within a given sociocultural context.

The students in our sample, both English learners (ELL readers) and native English speakers (NE readers) had positive perceptions about bilingualism in general. However, among ELL readers, strong readers tended to have more positive perceptions than struggling readers toward: (a) their own language-mixing activities; (b) their own L1 literacy skills; (c) their fathers' level of English proficiency; and (d) the influence of their L1 on their English reading. ELL+ readers also tended to have more positive perceptions of native English-speaking peers' views (externalized perceptions) toward: (a) their L1s and (b) their language-mixing activities. In other words, when compared with ELL- readers, ELL+ readers tended to feel more confident about their proficiency in their L1, and they saw the utility of having and being able to draw upon their L1 in the context of their classroom environments. The ELL+ readers were also likely to think that their native English-speaking peers value their language and their language use.

Lambert (1974) claimed that a bilingual individual can develop L2 proficiency without losing L1 proficiency (becoming an "additive bilingual") if the society values both of his or her languages. The present data show that those who had strong reading ability in their L2 tended to perceive that the surrounding learning environment had positive perceptions toward their L1 and their language behavior. The self-evaluation of their own reading and

writing abilities in their L1 was also higher than that of struggling ELL readers. Since academic language proficiency is primarily developed in school settings and is closely related to school success (Cummins, 2000), we believe that it is very important for us to better understand how such perceptions toward a learning environment (i.e., learning climates) originate and are developed in a given social-cultural context and how such learning climates relate to the development of academic proficiencies among L2 learners.

One possible factor that may lead to differences in perceptions among ELLs is literacy support in their L1. Although all of the participants in the present study were enrolled in English-only schools, and no structured literacy instruction was available at their schools in a language other than English, some of the students received some degree of systematic literacy instruction in their L1 outside of school. Though not explicitly asked, a few of the Vietnamese-speaking ELL students who were strong English readers mentioned during the interview process that they were attending Vietnamese-language schools supported by local Vietnamese churches. Unfortunately, we do not know how many of our participants received such literacy instruction in their L1, nor the amount of instruction that they received. However, such L1 literacy instruction could be a powerful factor that contributes to students' positive perceptions and externalized perceptions toward bilingualism, language-mixing behaviors, and their L1, and enhances the development of English literacy skills. If this were indeed the case, schools need to make an effort to help ELLs create positive learning climates by encouraging students' L1 literacy development as well as their English development. It would be valuable to closely investigate how the perceptions of various sociocultural issues by both native English speakers and ELLs are related to students' English-language development. It would also be interesting to determine how these perceptions relate specifically to students' literacy development, particularly in certain bilingual programs, such as dual-immersion programs, in which a supportive environment and respect for both the majority and minority cultures and languages are emphasized.

We consider the present study to be a preliminary effort, suggesting the importance of examining students' learning climates in order to better understand the relationship between sociopsychological constructs and language learning (reading, in this study). Due to the relatively small sample size in this study, a systematic comparison between the learning climates of Vietnamese- and Spanish-speaking students was not feasible. However, such comparison among different L1 groups may be very important to investigate.

The present data suggest that ELLs' perceptions and externalized perceptions seem to relate to their L2 reading proficiencies. It is important, then, to systematically investigate the relationship between these perceptions and students' reading development in both the L1 and the L2. It is also beneficial to systematically examine the perceptions of various groups with



whom students are engaged—including parents, peers, teachers, and communities—and to explore how these groups' perceptions of ELLs' abilities and behaviors may relate to the development of students' learning climates and, ultimately, to their reading performance. This broader perspective should be incorporated into a sociopsychological model in the field of language learning. On a practical level, we also believe that understanding students' learning climates will give teachers additional information to aid their understanding of individual differences in performance and to better help each student with his or her reading difficulties.

## References

- Anisfeld, E., & Lambert, W. E. (1964). Evaluation reactions to bilingual and monolingual children to spoken language. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, *59*, 89–97.
- Baker, C. (1992). *Attitudes and language*. Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters.
- Blumer, H. (1955). Attitudes and the social act. *Social Problems*, *3*, 59–65.
- Bourhis, R. Y., Giles, H., & Tajfel, H. (1973). Language as a determinant of Welsh identity. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, *3*, 447–460.
- Clément, R. (1980). Ethnicity, contact and communicative competence in second language. In H. Giles, W. P. Robinson, & P. M. Smith (Eds.), *Language: Social psychological perspectives* (pp. 147–159). Oxford, England: Pergamon Press.
- Clément, R., & Gardner, R. C. (2001). Second language mastery. In W. P. Robinson & H. Giles (Eds.), *The new handbook of language and social psychology* (pp. 439–504). Chichester, England: J. Wiley.
- Crookes, G., & Schmidt, R. W. (1991). Motivation: Reopening the research agenda. *Language Learning*, *41*(4), 469–512.
- Cummins, J. (1981). The role of primary language development in promoting educational success for language minority students. In California State Department of Education (Ed.), *Schooling and language minority students: A theoretical framework* (pp. 3–49). Los Angeles: Evaluation, Dissemination and Assessment Center, California State University.
- Cummins, J. (2000). *Language, power and pedagogy: Bilingual children in the crossfire*. Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters.
- Gardner, R. C. (1985). *Social psychology and second language learning: The role of attitudes and motivation*. London: Arnold.
- Gardner, R. C. (2000). Correlation, causation, motivation, and second language acquisition. *Canadian Psychology*, *41*(1), 10–24.

- Gardner, R. C., Tremblay, P. F., & Masgoret, A. M. (1997). Toward a full model of second language acquisition. *The Modern Language Journal*, 81, 344–362.
- Giles, H., & Byrne, J. L. (1982). An intergroup approach to second language acquisition. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 3, 17–40.
- Hamers, J. F., & Blanc, M. H. (2000). *Bilinguality and bilingualism* (2nd ed.). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Lambert, W. E. (1974). Culture and language as factors in learning and education. In F. F. Aboud & R. D. Meade (Eds.), *Cultural factors in learning and education* (pp. 91–122). Bellingham: Western Washington State University.
- McLaughlin, B. (1987). *Theories of second language learning*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Noels, K. A., Clément, R., & Pelletier, L. G. (1999). Perceptions of teachers' communicative style and students' intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. *The Modern Language Journal*, 83, 23–34.
- RAND Reading Study Group. (2001). *Reading for understanding: Towards an R & D program in reading comprehension*. Retrieved May 2003 from <http://www.rand.org/scitech>
- Schumann, J. (1978). *The pidginization process: A model for second language acquisition*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Swigart, L. (1992). Two codes or one? The insiders' view and the description of codeswitching in Dakar. In C. M. Eastman (Ed.), *Codeswitching* (pp. 71–82). Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters.
- Tremblay, P. F., & Gardner, R. C. (1995). Expanding the motivation construct in language learning. *The Modern Language Journal*, 79, 505–520.

### Acknowledgments

This study was partially supported by a grant from the James S. McDonnell Foundation (99-14-CS-EDU.03). We are grateful to the editors and the three anonymous reviewers who gave us helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

## Appendix A

### Students' responses to interview questions

Question 1: How do you think other people who only speak English feel about you being able to speak two languages?				
	NE+ ( <u>n</u> = 12)	NE- ( <u>n</u> = 12)	ELL+ ( <u>n</u> = 18)	ELL- ( <u>n</u> = 19)
Positive	n/a	n/a	15	13
Negative	n/a	n/a	0	1
Neutral	n/a	n/a	1	2
Don't know/ no response	n/a	n/a	2	3
Question 2: What do you think other people who only speak English think about Spanish (or Vietnamese)?				
	NE+ ( <u>n</u> = 12)	NE- ( <u>n</u> = 12)	ELL+ ( <u>n</u> = 18)	ELL- ( <u>n</u> = 19)
Positive	n/a	n/a	11	4
Negative	n/a	n/a	3	4
Neutral	n/a	n/a	0	1
Don't know/ no response	n/a	n/a	4	10
Question 3: How do you feel when you hear your bilingual friends speaking another language at school?				
	NE+ ( <u>n</u> = 12)	NE- ( <u>n</u> = 12)	ELL+ ( <u>n</u> = 18)	ELL- ( <u>n</u> = 19)
Positive	7	7	n/a	n/a
Negative	2	1	n/a	n/a
Neutral	1	3	n/a	n/a
Don't know/ no response	2	1	n/a	n/a

Question 4: Do you mix two languages when you speak to your parents or somebody who speaks Spanish (or Vietnamese)?				
	NE+ ( <u>n</u> = 12)	NE- ( <u>n</u> = 12)	ELL+ ( <u>n</u> = 18)	ELL- ( <u>n</u> = 19)
Question 4: yes for code mixing	n/a	n/a	16	14
Question 5: If you mix languages, how do you think other friends who speak only English feel when they hear you mixing two languages?				
	NE+ ( <u>n</u> = 12)	NE- ( <u>n</u> = 12)	ELL+ ( <u>n</u> = 18)	ELL- ( <u>n</u> = 19)
Positive	n/a	n/a	8	2
Negative	n/a	n/a	0	3
English speakers are confused	n/a	n/a	7	7
Don't know/ no response	n/a	n/a	1	2
Question 6: Do you think knowing Spanish (or Vietnamese) helps you to be a better reader in English or does it make it harder?				
	NE+ ( <u>n</u> = 12)	NE- ( <u>n</u> = 12)	ELL+ ( <u>n</u> = 18)	ELL- ( <u>n</u> = 19)
Yes	n/a	n/a	8	3
No	n/a	n/a	8	14
Don't know/ no response	n/a	n/a	2	2

Question 7: When you read something difficult in English (for example, a science book), do you find it easier to understand if you think about it in Spanish (or Vietnamese)?				
	NE+ ( <u>n</u> = 12)	NE- ( <u>n</u> = 12)	ELL+ ( <u>n</u> = 18)	ELL- ( <u>n</u> = 19)
Yes	n/a	n/a	5	10
No	n/a	n/a	11	7
Neither	n/a	n/a	2	1
Don't know/ no reponse	n/a	n/a	0	1
Question 8: [For ELL readers:] Does anyone at home read to you in English? If yes, who? Does anyone at home read to you in Spanish/Vietnamese? If yes, who?				
Does somebody read to you?	NE+ ( <u>n</u> = 12)	NE- ( <u>n</u> = 12)	ELL+ ( <u>n</u> = 18)	ELL- ( <u>n</u> = 19)
Somebody reads to the child in English	4	7	13	14
Somebody reads to the child in L1 (Spanish or Vietnamese)	n/a	n/a	15	14
Who reads to you? (ELL students only)	ELL+ ( <u>n</u> = 18)		ELL- ( <u>n</u> = 19)	
	In English	In L1	In English	In L1
Father	10	6	4	4
Mother	4	9	9	6
Sister	4	0	4	0
Grandparent(s)	1	1	0	4
Others	1	2	4	1
Nobody	5	3	5	5

*Note.* Multiple entries were possible for Question 8.

Question 9: can you think of a friend in your class who is a good reader? If YES, then what makes you think that this person is a good reader?				
	NE+ ( <u>n</u> = 12)	NE- ( <u>n</u> = 12)	ELL+ ( <u>n</u> = 18)	ELL- ( <u>n</u> = 19)
Reads a lot of books	4	4	12	4
Can read fast	3	0	1	2
Knows many words	3	2	2	1
Can accurately sound out words	0	4	3	5
Is smart	5	3	1	6
Can read hard books	3	0	2	2
Can concentrate on reading	1	0	2	1
Makes effort (words hard)	0	0	2	2
Other qualities	0	0	1	4

*Note.* Multiple entries were possible for Question 9.

## Appendix B

### Self-evaluation of students' primary-language proficiency (sample for Vietnamese participants)

Let's think about what you can do in Vietnamese. Please circle one of the numbers for each statement.

Can't do	Can do a little	Can do well	
			Listening
1	2	3	(1) When my parents or friends tell me names of things (such as "a zoo," "a cat," "flowers," "school," and "vegetables") in Vietnamese, I can understand them.
1	2	3	(2) I can listen and understand when my parents or friends give me directions to a store in Vietnamese.
1	2	3	(3) I can understand a short message on the answering machine in Vietnamese.
1	2	3	(4) I can understand Vietnamese TV programs.
			Speaking
1	2	3	(5) I can say some names of things in Vietnamese.
1	2	3	(6) I can give my parents or friends directions to a store in Vietnamese.
1	2	3	(7) I can leave a short message on the answering machine in Vietnamese.
1	2	3	(8) I can explain the rules of my favorite game to someone in Vietnamese.

Can't do	Can do a little	Can do well	
			Reading
1	2	3	(9) I can read all the letters in Vietnamese.
1	2	3	(10) I can read some signs on the streets in Vietnamese (for example, names of stores).
1	2	3	(11) I can read a short note from my parents or friends in Vietnamese.
1	2	3	(12) I can read some (picture) books in Vietnamese.
			Writing
1	2	3	(13) I can write all the letters in Vietnamese.
1	2	3	(14) I can list the things in my school bag (such as "a book," "a pen," "a lunch box," and "paper") in Vietnamese.
1	2	3	(15) I can write a short note to my parents or friends in Vietnamese.
1	2	3	(16) I can write a letter to a newspaper in Vietnamese.