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*Effects of Americanization on the Immigrant
Student Population*

Jose Lopez

Spring 2024

Senior Capstone

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Abstract

This senior capstone study aims to investigate the impact of Americanization on immigrant students whose first language is not English and the effects of Proposition 227. This law, which cut all state funding for bilingual programs, prompted significant changes in language education policies. Through surveys, this research seeks to determine whether Proposition 227 has influenced students' cultural identity or academic success. Additionally, this study examines California education standards to understand how they influence language education practices. Interviews with teachers will provide insights into their approaches to teaching immigrant students and fostering cultural inclusivity in the classroom. This capstone aims to shed light on the consequences of Americanization policies on immigrant students and inform recommendations for more effective and inclusive language education strategies.

Introduction and Background

Following independence from England, the United States aimed to establish distinct national symbols and identities to foster pride among its citizens. Economic growth brought waves of immigrants, prompting efforts to instill American values in immigrant children. "Americanization," defined by Gutek, refers to the public school ideology devaluing immigrants' native heritage and language, advocating instead for assimilation into American English and Protestant values to foster a connection to the new homeland. Education in the United States was for three things: 1. Prepare for citizenship, 2. utilitarian and scientific knowledge to develop a nation, and 3. Purge itself from European attitudes and values to create a new American culture(Gutek, 2006). Presently, States have the majority of control over educational practices and policies. Even California, known for its educational leadership and cultural diversity, has been a state that reinforced the Americanization process. In 1998, Proposition 227 was passed, which limited state funds for non-English language learning, effectively ending dual immersion programs. The primary objective was to make immigrant students proficient in English, often at the cost of losing their mother tongue. This law exemplified a form of Americanization. However, it was repealed in 2016, prompting an exploration of whether California has shifted away from this process.

My personal experience inspired this research. I was impacted by Proposition 227 when I was removed from a dual immersion program. Furthermore, although the law stated that state funds could not be used for other language teaching, teachers enforced an English-only rule even in Spanish-speaking classrooms. Many of my peers lost their native language skills to the extent that they struggled to communicate with their parents. Luckily, I can visit my native country, Mexico, regularly, and I have retained my cultural identity. This study seeks to examine

California's departure from Americanization by gathering data through surveys from past immigrant students who completed K-12 education in the state, conducting interviews with current teachers about their views and teaching strategies for immigrants, and analyzing California's State Standards. Additionally, this paper will provide recommendations based on the research findings. Therefore, this study aims to address the following questions. 1. What is the Americanization process? How has it evolved? Do the California State standards require and prioritize the English language over all other subject matters? 2. What does the research say about the effects of Americanization on the immigrant student population? And to what extent? 3. Has the process of Americanization been embedded into the curriculum? How do teachers incorporate the process into the curriculum and implement it in the classrooms? 4. Does the process of Americanization affect the cultural identity of immigrant students? If so, in what ways, according to teachers and immigrant students? 5. Are there alternative ways to change the curricula to maintain the immigrant students' languages and cultures?

Literature Review

Why is knowing two languages important in the first place? There are numerous advantages for bilingual speakers compared to their monolingual peers. A collection of 100 empirical studies conducted in multiple countries documents the benefits correlating educational advantages and cognitive benefits later in life. The survey conducted by Fox, Corretjer, and Webb (2019) for the College of Education and Human Development at George Mason University studied 1,365 articles. It reduced that number to 100 empirical studies that qualified to be verified for the efficacy of their findings. Seventy-one of the hundred studies listed improved cognitive abilities divided into the following subsets: inhibitory control, working memory, attention control, cognitive flexibility, metalinguistic awareness, cognitive flexibility, linguistic

processing, and spatial reasoning. Another ten of the 100 empirical studies researched touched on the theme of “aging and health.” Most of the findings concluded that lifelong bilingual linguistic advantages include higher cognitive reserve in advanced age, delays in the onset of dementia and cognitive delays, and building cognitive reserve to support older citizens’ positive aging. Two of the 100 studies found no improved cognitive benefits. With overwhelming research concluding that it benefits children in the K-12 environment, why have we not implemented dual language learning in more K-12 schools?

Learning a new language at an earlier age becomes more attainable the younger the learner starts. A study conducted by Hartshorne, Tenenbaum, and Pinker (2018) for combined research from Cambridge, Boston, and Harvard Universities concluded a critical period for second language acquisition. The study featured an enormous number of 669,498 native and non-native English speakers. The test was administered to participants aged 7-89 as anything younger or older might have had age-related implications. The critical period is cut off at about 17.4 years old when grammar-learning ability steadily declines. Not only did those who learned a language at an early age do so easier, but they also tended to have less of a foreign accent when conversing in the second language. Rich in graphical charts, the study showed steep curbs in downward mobility for complete language acquisition after the critical period. The test had high reliability using Cronbach’s alpha, a mathematical reliability equation that placed it at 0.86 (anything above .70 is good). The study did mention that it did not delve into the neurological theory of why the critical age declines after age 17, as this is still hypothesized. Studies have shown multiple benefits of learning a new language.

Compared to other countries, such as Europe, the United States severely needs more bilingual people. Per Pew Research Center (2018), a nonpartisan fact tank surveyed more than 20

European countries and found that a medium of 92% of students learn a foreign language. We see only 20% of students enrolled in a foreign language class in the United States. Another significant difference is that European countries begin teaching a new language during primary school. In the United States, the states with the highest number of student participants studying a new language as a graduation requirement in secondary schools, such as California, make taking a second language class only once a graduation requirement. That means that a foreign language class is taken just once in the K-12 education tenure of Californians.

What do California's state standards say about immigrants and language learning? While the standards themselves are long and challenging to read, a report from the Department of Education of the State of California highlighted everything the state is doing to improve education for students who are multilingual and English learners. The report itself highlights the benefits of multilingualism in K-12 education. The challenges passing Proposition 227 had on bilingual education and the future path of K-12 education for linguistically diverse learners. In 2012, California adopted new ELD standards and translated these standards into Spanish. The state also established the State Seal of Biliteracy, which aligns with its Global California goal to have more bilingual students succeed in the global economy. California seeks to expand access to more world language programs and hire more bilingual teachers than ever. They cite a program called "mini-corps," which produced over 3,500 bilingual teachers and aim to double it by 2030. California seeks to have at least half of all students proficient in two languages by 2030 and three out of four by 2040 (Faulkner et al., 2020). Once seen as a challenge to California's education system, immigrant students are now being seen as assets.

California does have much work to do to fill teacher positions with bilingual teachers. Doctor Christina Alfaro (2018), Professor and Chair of the Dual Language and English Learner

Education Department at San Diego State University, who also leads the most extensive bilingual credential program in California, examined the long-term effects of Proposition 227. As her department chair, Alfaro's program was almost eliminated because of Proposition 227. Few schools sought bilingual teachers, meaning students saw no need to pursue a bilingual credential and, therefore, enrolled in the English-only credential program. After the passage of Proposition 58, Dr. Alfaro's program saw a one-and-a-half enrollment increase for the credential program. Nevertheless, there still seems to be a significant shortage of qualified teachers. The recommendation section of this paper will focus on what can be done to fill this gap.

Methods and Procedures

Having personally experienced how my early education discouraged using my first language, I chose to use my own story as a case study to design a survey. This survey targeted individuals who met two criteria: 1) completed their K-12 education in California and 2) had a first language other than English. The survey included questions such as the year of graduation (refer to Appendix A) to explore if individuals closer to my age (32) shared similar experiences and whether those who graduated after the law was repealed had more positive experiences. Additionally, I aimed to identify if anyone else felt discouraged from speaking their native language. Furthermore, I planned to conduct two interviews with teachers: one whose first language was not English and another who only spoke English without any other language proficiency. Alongside this, I delved into the California State Standards regarding language education for immigrants to understand how these standards influence teaching practices.

Results, Findings, and Discussion

What is the Americanization process? How has it evolved? Do the California State standards require and prioritize the English language over all other subject matters?

The Americanization process is an ideology of imposing the American identity above others to create more nationalistic citizens. In the nineteenth century, it was used after the United States acquired the Western territories from Mexico. It was used on European immigrants in the 1920's to separate immigrant children from their ethnicities (Guttek, 2006). It was used in 1998 for Proposition 227. Immigration has always been a politicized topic, and there is always the debate between assimilation and multiculturalism. The number of English learners in California had increased by 254%, and by 1997, one in four students required language assistance. Proponents of Proposition 227 argued that bilingual classes were causing a strain on California's education system (Kinney, 2018). With the passage of Proposition 227, most bilingual programs ended and were replaced with an intensive English program with the sole goal of having students learn English and learn it quickly.

Some cities decided to fund their bilingual education programs. However, since school districts in California are led locally, bilingual education looked different from district to district that still offered bilingual education. One example is the San Francisco Unified School District, which refused to implement Proposition 227 and offered a district-wide waiver with other Bay Area districts following San Francisco's lead (Schirling et al., 2000). When parents and school districts united, they fought a type of Americanization process that affected California's education policy based on a politicalized view of multiculturalism vs assimilation.

To see if the California State Standards prioritized English learning over all other subjects, I researched the California English Language Development Standards adopted by the California State Board of Education to see what they said about non-native English speakers.

The California State Standards are designed to give educators expectations of their students, set benchmarks, and provide a framework to guide development. The most recent update (2012) emphasizes prioritizing “English Literacy” and “Linguistic Processes,” in other words, how to read and speak English (CDE, 2012). So, California does prioritize English learning at the expense of other subjects. Students are expected to master the English skills required for core subjects, but another solution could be explored in this paper's recommendations.

What does the research say about the effects of Americanization on the immigrant student population? And to what extent?

As stated in the literature review, the cognitive benefits of multilingualism cannot be denied. Cutting bilingual programs in California deprived those benefits from the immigrant student population. Proposition 227 cut funding for bilingual programs and replaced them with a year-long intensive English immersion program. A study ordered by the California Department of Education to determine if Proposition 227 had a positive or negative effect did show positive effects. The impacts were minimal to the extent that it was unclear whether Proposition 227 was responsible. Sat-9 test scores were compared to students designated as English learners compared to native English speakers. Before Proposition 227, the reading achievement for ELs and native English speakers in the third grade was 40 points; in 2002, it was 38. The same trend could be seen for other grades and subjects. The same study looked to see if English learners were being reclassified as fluent in English after the year-long intensive English immersion program, and it found that just under half met the redesignation criteria. The majority took over three years to meet the criteria, citing academic performance in core subjects (Linguanti et al., 2002). An overwhelming majority of immigrant students are overdiagnosed as having a learning

disability. In a few teacher interviews conducted by Dangling Fu, teachers tested older students who had received 2nd or 3rd-grade reading levels, so students were given lower-grade textbooks (Fu et al., 2019). The teacher in question did not know the student's native language.

Does the process of Americanization affect the cultural identity of immigrant students? If so, in what ways, according to teachers and immigrant students?

To see if California's education system was impacting students' cultural identity and native language, a short survey was crafted (see Appendix A). The survey was to see if there was a trend. The survey was only for first-generation students whose first language was not English and who did their entire K-12 education in California. The first question was the year that they graduated. If they went to school during the period Proposition 227 was in effect, fewer students would retain their first language. If they went to school after Proposition 227, did they have more access to language resources? What language did they first speak? In order to see the population California's K-12 system serves. Since most first-gen students would be Spanish speakers, it was imperative to see if students from other languages had fewer resources. How well can they still speak their first language? If they had teachers that spoke their first language. How strongly did they identify with their cultural identity? If they felt like California's school system wanted them to retain their language, did they feel discouraged or encouraged to speak their first language in school? Also, if they took classes in their native language or if they felt the need to focus only on English over their native language. Proposition 227 aimed to replace their native language with English or, in other words, a form of Americanization. The survey also asked to see how much their parents spoke English to see if they spoke their native language the majority of the time at home.

The survey received 19 responses, but three had to be removed because they did not meet the qualifications. For one, the students said their first language was English, another had yet to graduate, and the last did not complete all their K-12 education in California. For the years respondents graduated, the survey had a wide range from 2005 to 2023. The year with the most responses was 2018, with three students (Figure 1).

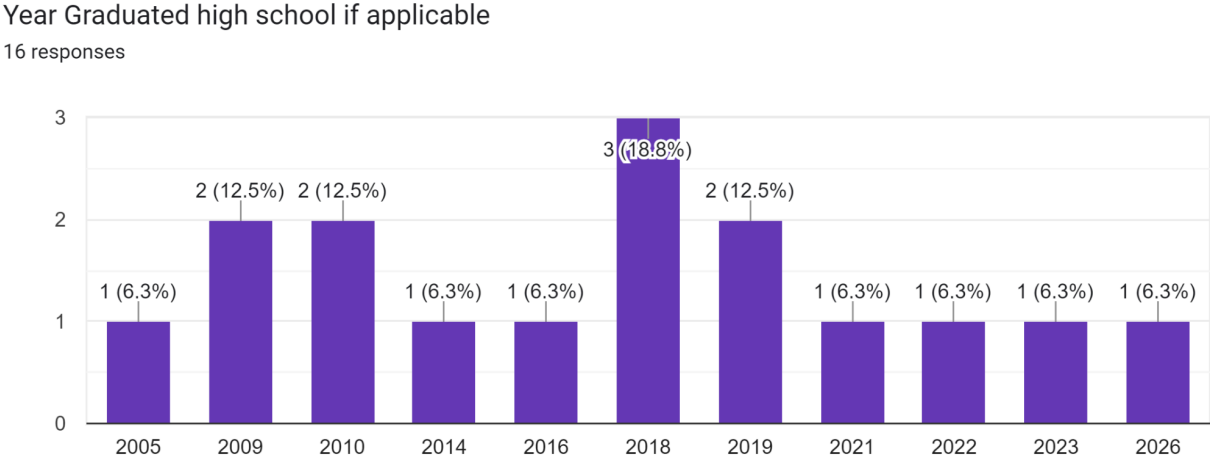


Figure 1: Year graduated

As expected, the most spoken native language was Spanish, with 81.3% of all survey responses; there was one Japanese, Tagalog, and Turkish native speaker (Figure 2). These three students experienced having no teachers who knew their native language. For Spanish speakers, only three of the 13 experience having no teachers who knew their language.

First language spoken

16 responses

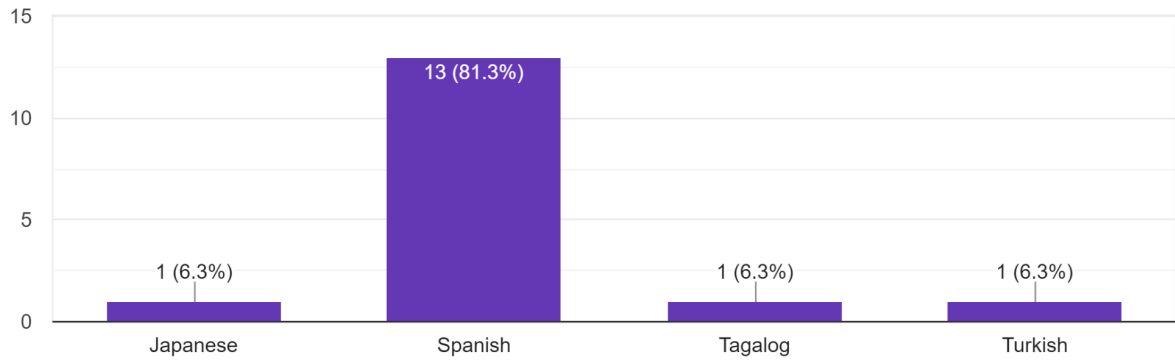


Figure 2: First language spoken

While most Spanish speakers did have Spanish-speaking teachers, they said the number of Spanish-speaking teachers was relatively low, under 50% (Figure 3).

Did any of your teachers speak your first language in K-12

16 responses

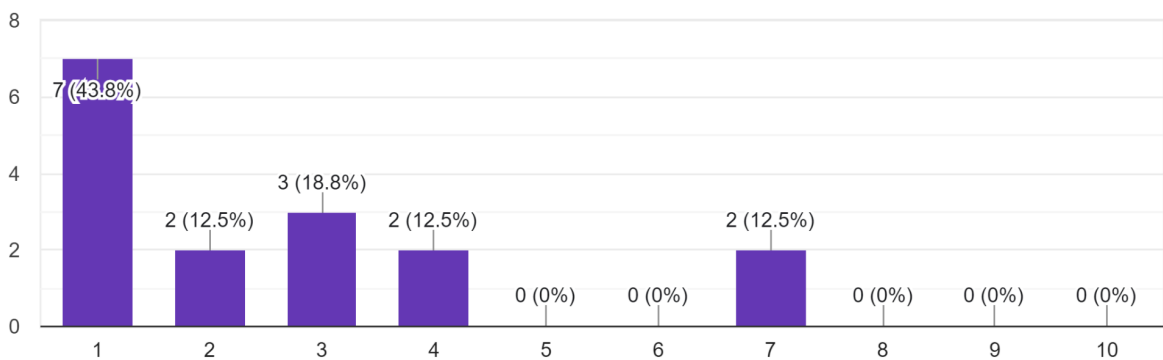


Figure 3: Number of teachers who spoke the same language as immigrant students

Only two students had more than 50% of Spanish-speaking teachers. The majority of those surveyed, 87.40%, identified strongly with the cultural background of their home countries (Figure 4).

How strongly do you identify with your cultural background from your home country?

16 responses

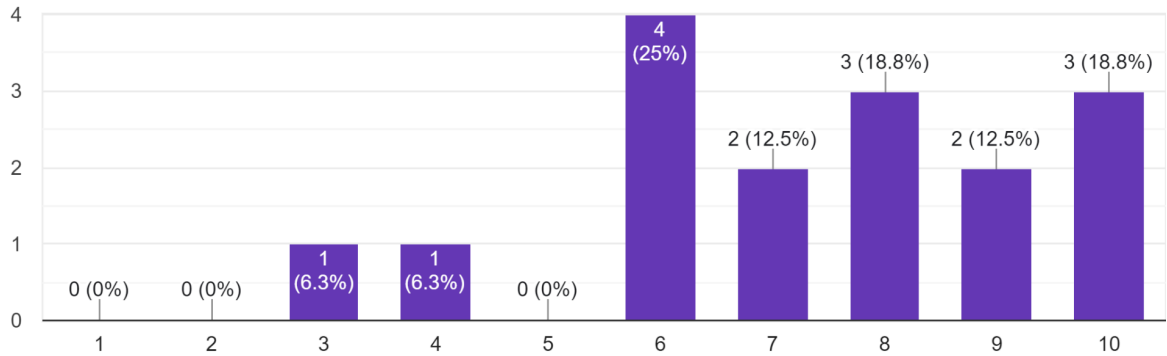


Figure 4: Cultural identity to the student's home country

The two students who did not feel they had strong cultural ties also felt they were not allowed to speak their native language at school. They also answered that they did not retain their native language, so well under 50% retention (Figure 5).

How well can you still speak your native language?

16 responses

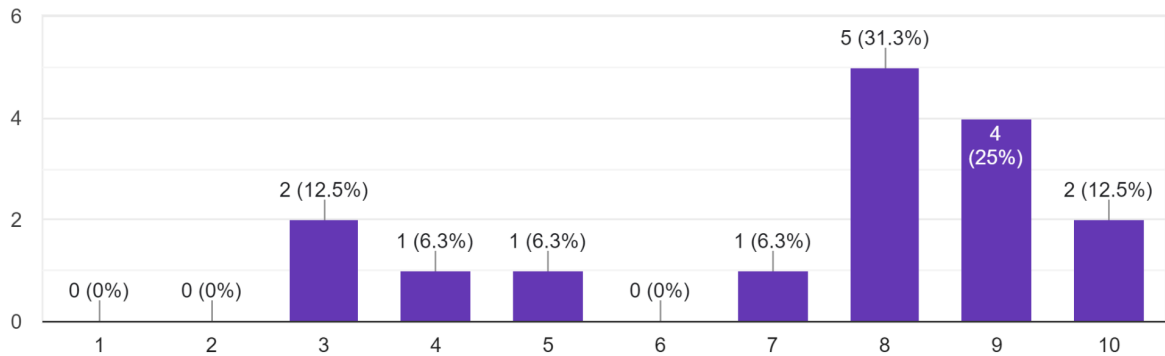


Figure 5: Language retention

Most students felt like they had retained their native language, and 76.4% responded that they had a tremendous positive retention rate in their native language. All students who felt like they did not feel they retained their native language also took zero classes in their native language (Figure 7).

Did you take any classes in your first language?

16 responses

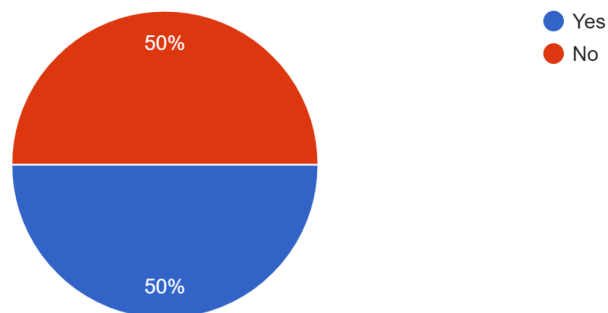


Figure 7: If the student took a class in their native language

Half of all students took at least one class in their native language throughout their entire K-12 education. When asked if they felt pressured to focus on English over their native language, only 3 or 18.8% of students felt like they were not pressured to focus solely on English (Figure 8).

Did you feel pressure to solely focus on English at the expense of your native language?

16 responses

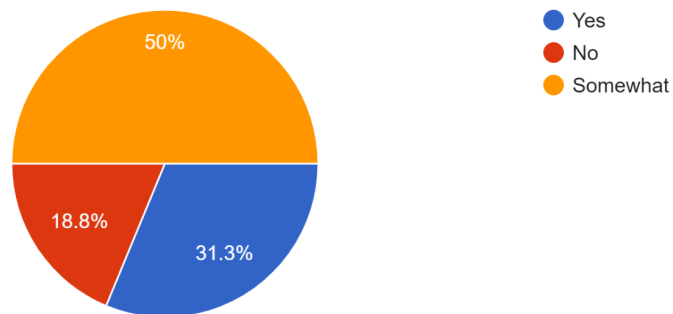


Figure 8: If a student felt pressured to focus on English over native language

The rest of the majority felt they had to put English above their native language. When asked if they were allowed to speak their native language at school, 31.3% said they were not allowed. Half, 50%, felt like they could somewhat use their first language, and 31.3% percent said the school ultimately allowed them to use their first language (Figure 9).

Were you allowed to use your first language in school?

16 responses

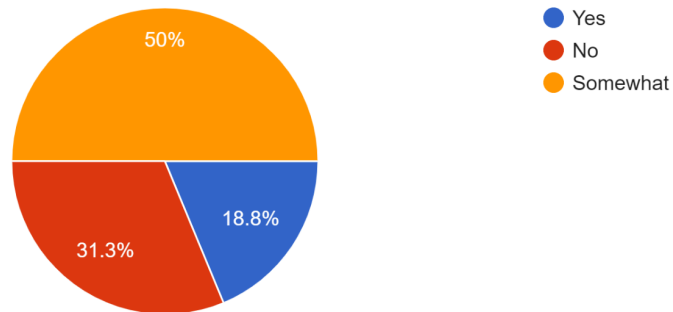


Figure 9: If the student was allowed to speak their native language in school

Those who felt they could not use their first language at school had lower rates of native language-speaking teachers; two of the five reported having a lower connection to their cultural background and had a lower native language retaining percentage. All of them felt pressured to focus on English over their native language, and all of their parents were not fluent in English; only one reported that their parents knew a small amount of English. Four of the five were in school while Proposition 227 was still in effect. Only one student in the survey mentioned they had a parent who was fully bilingual in English. The majority, 56.3%, said their parents knew some English, and 37.5% said they knew no English (Figure 10).

Do your parents speak English?

16 responses

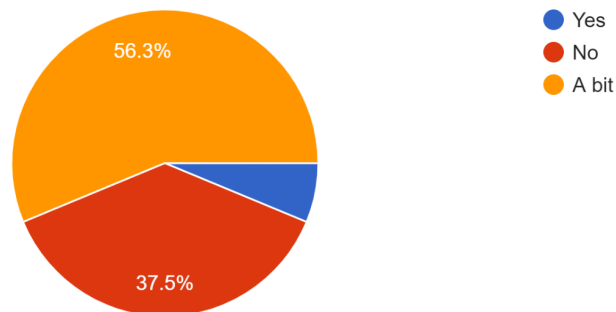


Figure 10: Percentage of parents who speak English

When asked their opinion on whether California wants students to retain their first language, 17.6% percent said no, and 23.5% said yes. Those who said yes also had higher levels of native language retention rates. Three of the four felt like they could freely use their native language and took classes in their native language. Two of them graduated after Proposition 227 was repealed.

Are there alternative ways to change the curricula to maintain the immigrant students' languages and cultures?

A great way to implement future bilingual education for immigrant students would be to use translanguaging pedagogy. Translanguaging in the classroom allows immigrant students to use their full linguistic abilities in whatever language they can for educational purposes instead of treating each language as a monolingual subject and placing one language as hierarchically

superior. Immigrant students should also be placed with native English speakers in bilingual education classrooms. Statistics show that immigrant students attend schools where 30% or more speak the same language and are also expected to learn English as the primary language (Fix & Passel, 2003). All these students are placed in the same classrooms, and the monolingual setting deprives them of practicing, socializing, and studying with native English speakers.

Problems and Limitations

There were two problems while conducting research with the capstone project. One was with the survey, and the other was with the teacher interviews. The biggest problem with the research was the questions asked in the study. There are so many different factors that influence language and culture. The research focused solely on California's education system and overlooked other factors affecting culture and language. A study of Asian American and Latino immigrant students found that 88% of those polled preferred speaking English over their native language in order to identify with the dominant culture or as a method to avoid being discriminated against (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). This study should have included those factors in asking students if they felt outside factors did more to retain the language and if they felt like their schooling system should consist of factors that they tend to see outside of school inside of school.

Another problem and limitation of the research survey was the lack of diversity it received. Most of those who responded, 81.3%, were of Latino heritage. However, this trend is consistent with California's population since the majority of immigrant students are of Latino origins. A 2021 census found that 1,127,627 are considered English learners, with Spanish speakers totaling 81.90% of all English learners (U.S.D.E, 2021). Still, there are communities where Latinos are not the majority, and it is essential to see how all immigrants feel about the

education system. It would have been beneficial to see if there is a divide in how people from different backgrounds feel. Maybe one ethnic group feels more excluded. What happens when the immigrant is in an environment where no one else speaks their language in their classrooms?

Another problem I encountered while conducting the research was finding a monolingual teacher willing to conduct an interview. There was no trouble finding a bilingual teacher. Still, they were recent graduates with about five years of teaching experience. This research would have benefited from a teacher who had more teaching experience and was around when Proposition 227 came into effect and was overturned. To see firsthand how bilingual education changed in that time frame. Also, after finding articles from teachers who greatly opposed Proposition 227, how it was handled locally in our community. The one interview I received only helped the study conclude how strongly they felt about the positive effects of bilingualism.

Recommendations

The cognitive benefits of bilingualism cannot be argued. If California aims to achieve its Global California goal, all students should be enrolled in bilingual education for the entirety of their K-12 education, just like their European counterparts. The literature review highlighted examples that starting bilingual education at an earlier age had higher chances of success (Hartshorne et al., 2018). Pairing language and geography allows students to learn a language and learn about different countries to expand multicultural views. The students should also have the right to choose a language they wish to study.

California should continue with its goal of hiring 7,000 more bilingual teachers, but it should set that standard higher if it wants to have three out of four students be multilingual by 2040 (Faulkner et al., 2020). All teachers, even monolingual teachers, should implement

translanguaging in their curriculum. The material learning outcomes at California State University Monterey Bay include diversity and multicultural scholars. These courses offer instruction in how to serve the community. Teachers should take the time to learn about the students they serve. Immigrants tend to be grouped into categories such as Latinos and Asian Americans. Still, there is so much ethnic diversity inside those socially constructed categories, which should all be celebrated.

Multiculturalism is a path to social justice and should be encouraged. Assimilation became the method of maintaining a dominant position and continues to occur today. Through assimilation, the ethnocentric attitude is still present, but instead of killing foreigners or overthrowing governments, members of dominant cultures simply change others to be more like them (Suttmeier, 2011). All school districts, teachers, students, and parents should take action against what they see as unjust, such as San Francisco's Unified School District's refusal to implement Proposition 227.

Conclusion

Immigrant students are an asset to California's education system. They bring with them a different language and culture that increases multiculturalism. Despite the repeal of Proposition 227, the enduring impact of the Americanization process persists. As long as immigration is a political talking point, there will always be a threat of policies affecting the student immigrant population. This capstone study serves as a call to policymakers and voters not to politicize education. If California follows its global goal, it will have the opportunity to forge a more inclusive education system that celebrates the linguistic and cultural richness of the immigrant

student population, which the rest of the country can then follow. If Europeans can learn two or more languages, we can do so here in the United States.

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Appendix A

Year Graduated high school if applicable

16 responses

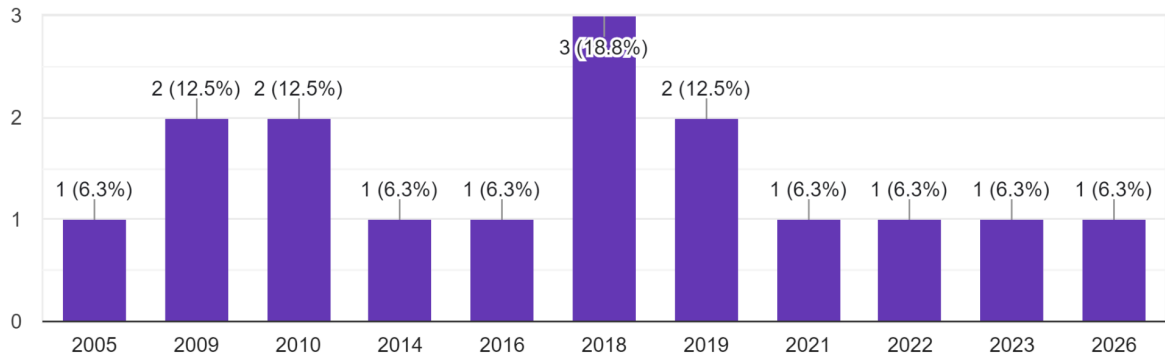


Figure 1: Year graduated

First language spoken

16 responses

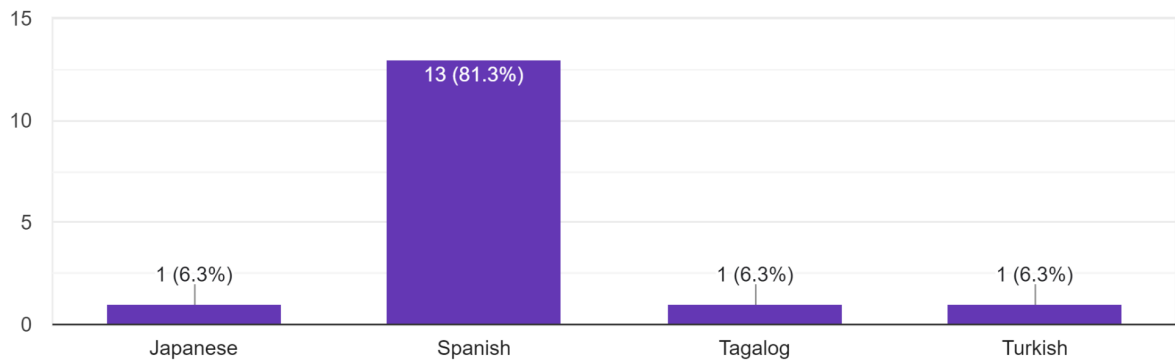


Figure 2: First language spoken

Did any of your teachers speak your first language in K-12

16 responses

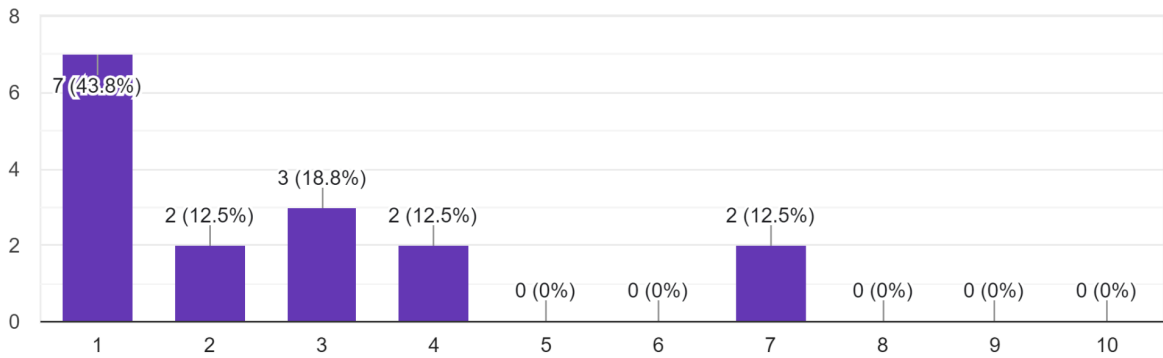


Figure 3: Number of teachers who spoke the same language as immigrant students

How strongly do you identify with your cultural background from your home country?

16 responses

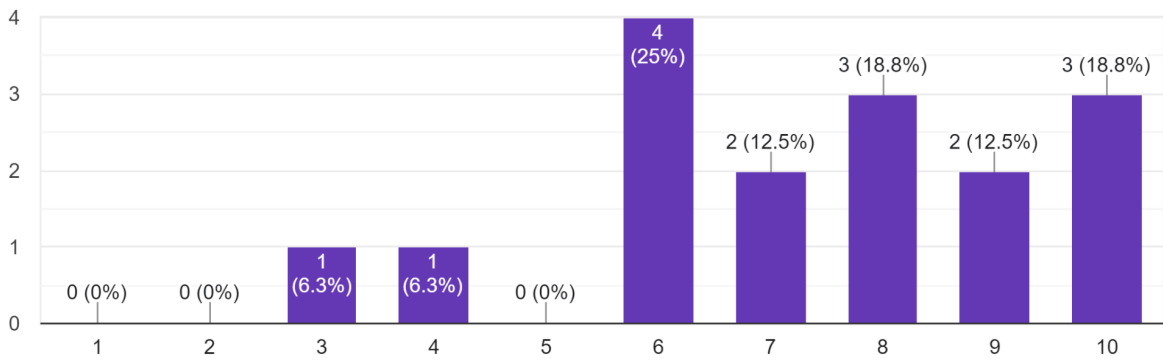


Figure 4: Cultural identity to student's home country

How well can you still speak your native language?

16 responses

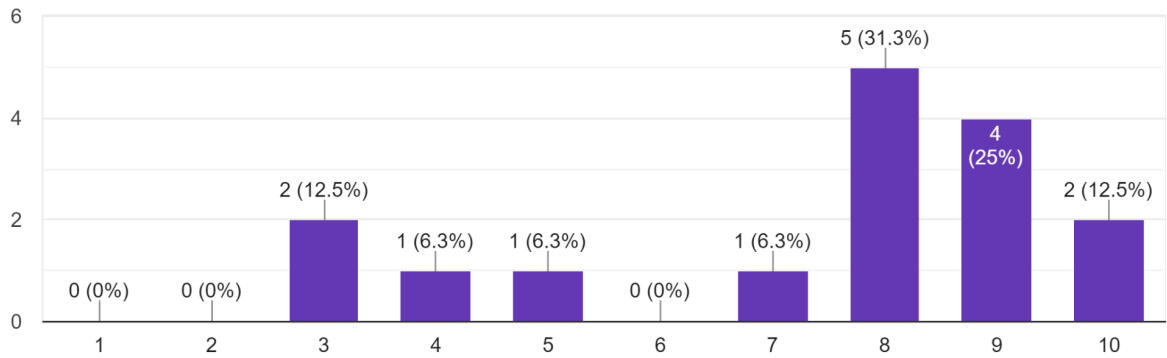


Figure 5: Language retention

Do you believe your education impacted the answer to the last question?

16 responses

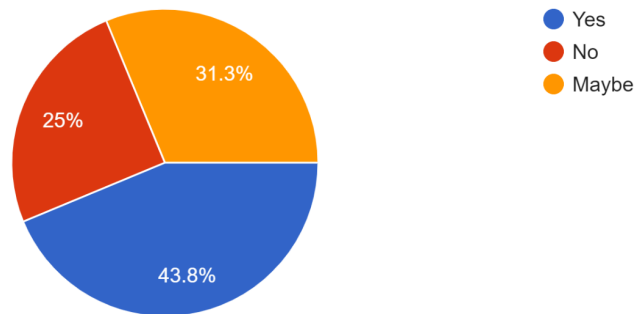


Figure 6: Did school affect language retention

Did you take any classes in your first language?

16 responses

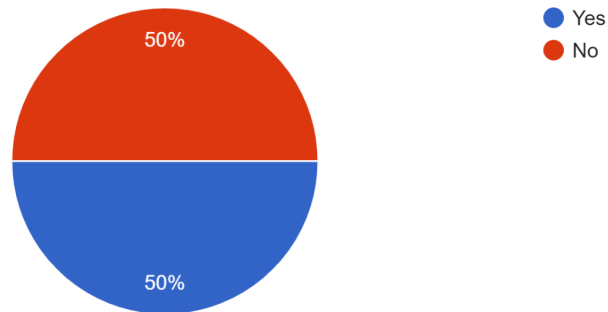


Figure 7: If the student took a class in their native language

Did you feel pressure to solely focus on English at the expense of your native language?

16 responses

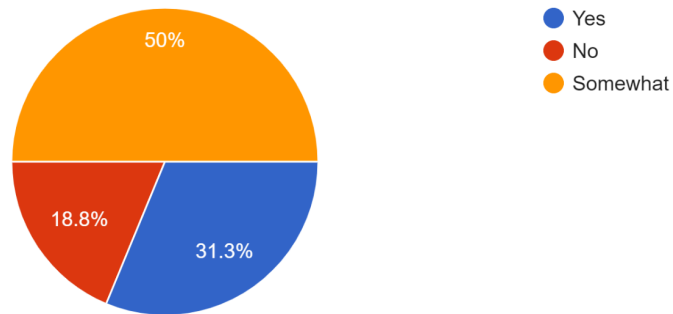


Figure 8: If a student felt pressured to focus on English over native language

Were you allowed to use your first language in school?

16 responses

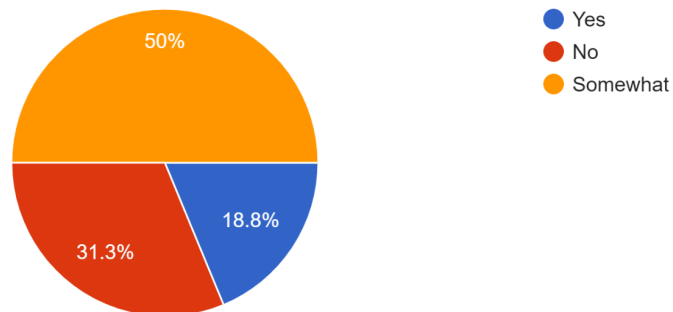


Figure 9: If the student was allowed to speak their native language in school

Do your parents speak English?

16 responses

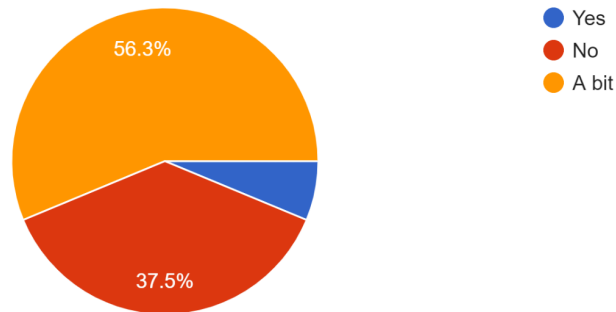


Figure 10: Percentage of parents who speak English

Do you feel like California school systems want students to retain their first language?

16 responses

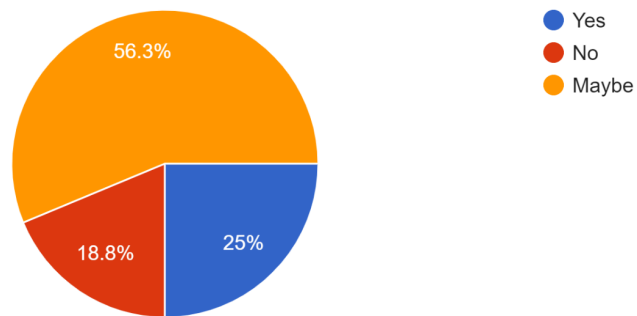


Figure 11: If students felt like California school systems encourage native language retention