In Search of the Right Questions:
Language Background Profiling at Ontario Public Schools

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Abstract

This article examines some of the challenges that the notion of a (monolingual) native speaker faces in a global context of increasing awareness that bilingualism and multilingualism are the norm rather than the exception. It also discusses the distinction between two child language acquisition environments, bilingual first language acquisition and early second language acquisition, which can lead to bilingual or multilingual outcomes early on in life. This serves as a backdrop for a study of language profiling practices in public schools across the province of Ontario. Student registration forms from 44 district school boards were analysed with regard to the number, type and combination patterns of language background questions. The findings indicate that school boards are aware of the potentially diverse linguistic backgrounds of incoming students, but may not be conceptually or methodologically equipped to recognize the full spectrum of linguistic complexity involved. Some degree of standardization of language background profiling across different districts is recommended as a measure that may benefit the province.

Résumé

Cet article examine certains défis auxquels la notion d'un locuteur natif (monolingue) fait face dans un contexte mondial où il existe une reconnaissance croissante que le bilinguisme et le multilinguisme représentent la norme plutôt que l'exception. L'article aborde également la distinction entre deux contextes d'acquisition de la langue chez les enfants, ceux-ci étant l'acquisition bilingue de la langue première et l'acquisition précoce de la langue seconde, qui peuvent mener à des résultats bilingues ou multilingues tôt dans la vie. Ceci sert de toile de fond pour une étude des pratiques de profilage linguistique dans des écoles publiques à travers la province de l'Ontario. Des formulaires d'inscription d'élèves provenant de 44 conseils scolaires ont été analysés en termes du nombre, du type et des modèles de combinaisons des questions par rapport à leur profil linguistique. Les résultats indiquent que les conseils scolaires sont conscients des profils linguistiques potentiellement divers d'élèves entrants. Cependant, les conseils ne sont pas nécessairement munis d'un cadre conceptuel ou méthodologique qui leur permettrait de reconnaître toute la gamme de la complexité linguistique impliquée. Un certain degré de standardisation de profilage linguistique à travers les régions différentes est recommandé en tant qu'une mesure dont pourrait bénéficier la province.

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Introduction

Over the past few decades there has been an increasing awareness that bilingualism and multilingualism are common around the world and should thus be viewed as the norm rather than the exception (e.g., Baker, 2011; Crystal, 1987, 2003; Dewaele, Housen, & Wei, 2003; Romaine, 1995). Researchers have typically estimated that more than half of the world's population is at least bilingual (Auer & Wei, 2007).[1] In addition, various authors have provided specific examples of countries or regions in the world where people regularly engage in personal, social and institutional interactions in multiple languages (e.g., Ansaldo, 2010; LaDousa, 2010). Along with an increased awareness that bilingualism and multilingualism need not be viewed as marked or exotic phenomena, it has also been proposed that the very concept of monolingualism reflects a somewhat unnatural or normative worldview imposed by occidental societies, which tend to place a strong emphasis on the notion of a native speaker and the related terms *native language*, *mother tongue* or *first language* (Love & Ansaldo, 2010).[2] These concepts, however, are currently being challenged in various ways. On the one hand, due to technological advances and increased travel opportunities in a globalized world, the idea of a monolingual speaker living in a vacuum and avoiding contact with and influence from additional languages is becoming somewhat difficult to entertain. On the other hand, due to immigration and inter-marriage, traditionally monolingual societies are becoming linguistically more diverse. In this general context, traditional terms relating to a (single) native language need to be reconsidered and their usefulness re-evaluated. For example, children who are born in a family where two parents have different native languages, and are exposed to regular input in those two languages from birth, are considered to have two "first" languages (De Houwer, 1990, 2009). International adoptees may forget their original mother tongue completely, and become "native" speakers of a new language in the family or country of adoption (Isurin, 2000; Nicoladis & Grabois, 2002). Children who are born to immigrant parents and who initially speak a heritage language at home but subsequently transition to another language through schooling and social exposure may become "native" speakers of their second language and lose their facility in the original one (e.g., Garcia, 2009; Hakuta & D'Andrea 1992; B. E. Lambert, 2008; W. E. Lambert, 1974; Landry, Alard, & Theberge, 1991).

This paper relates some of the above issues to the public education system in the province of Ontario and provides a discussion that is potentially generalizable to the rest of Canada and beyond. It argues that the modern-day complexity of the Canadian linguistic landscape calls for an analysis and discussion of the use(fulness) and appropriateness of concepts such as native language, mother tongue, or first language within a school context. The objective is to broaden the conceptual, methodological and empirical horizons of the public education system, suggest ways of increasing the accuracy and thoroughness of student language profiles generated by schools, and ultimately identify opportunities for offering even better services to students. Such discussion is apt in the context of Ontario where public schools have some of the most multilingual student populations in the world, with about 20% of children registered in English schools having another "first" language (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010).

The rest of this paper is organized as follows: In the background section, I summarize some of the current research on the concept of the native speaker and then discuss different types of language input environments and acquisition settings in childhood; then, in the context, methodology, results, discussion, and conclusion sections, I provide more details on the rationale, procedures, findings and implications of a research study investigating the language profiling practices of public schools in Ontario. In particular, I focus on language background questions included in public school registration forms across the province.

Background

The Notion of the Native Speaker in Theoretical and Applied Linguistics

Bloomfield (1933) is often cited as the source of the concept of a native speaker in modern linguistics: "The first language a human being learns to speak is his native language; he is a native speaker of this language" (p. 43). This has been referred to as a bio-developmental definition (Davies, 1991) or an unalterable historical fact (Cook, 1999). In this sense, once a person has a first language, they may never become a native speaker of another. The purely chronological basis of the concept is also coupled with the idea that the native speaker is in possession of a perfect competence of the abstract properties of the first language. By contrast, the underlying competence one has in other languages (second, third, and so on) is considered incomplete or even defective. The intuitions that a speaker has about the syntax, phonology, et cetera, of languages other than the native one are assumed to be weaker, less accurate or invalid. Thus, when investigating the abstract properties of language as a system, linguists typically consult only native speakers of the particular language that they are examining. Nonnative speakers, no matter how proficient, are typically excluded as informants. These sets of assumptions and methodological practices became widely accepted with Chomsky's (1957) early work and have for the most part remained firmly in place in the field of theoretical linguistics.

However, over the past few decades alternative views have also started to emerge. For example, Singh (2010, and earlier work) argued that a theory of language based on the idealized notion of a monolingual native speaker is too narrow and ultimately misguided; he proposed that embracing multilingualism as an underlying assumption would afford linguistic theory better insights into the universal principles of human language than focusing on the internalized linguistic knowledge of a native speaker in an idealized, completely homogenous, monolingual speech community. Similarly, Ferguson (1983) argued that linguists have traditionally designated the native speaker as the only reliable source of language data, even though a great deal of the world's verbal communication does not occur in speakers' first but rather second, third, and so on, languages. Thus, according to Ferguson, the conceptualization of the native speaker as an ultimate data source in linguistics should be dispensed with.

The above views receive further support from the fact that English as a global language is spoken by a larger number of nonnative speakers than native speakers around the world (Crystal, 2003; Y. Kachru & Smith, 2008). Thus, the underlying properties of this global variety are not "owned" by its native speakers but by bilinguals or multilinguals who speak it as an additional language.[3] Furthermore, the emerging recognition of New Englishes, that is, varieties of English that have stabilized in various parts of the former

British Empire (e.g., India, Nigeria) and are spoken natively by bilingual or multilingual individuals, also challenges the traditional concept of a monolingual native speaker (B. B. Kachru, 1983; Mesthrie, 2010).

In the field of language teaching and learning, the role of the native speaker has also been questioned in various ways. For example, in the teaching of English as a second or foreign language, nonnative-speaking teachers have begun to emerge from their somewhat marginalized position, and a body of literature presently supports and validates their role as equal to (monolingual) native-speaking English teachers (Amin, 2004; Kamhi-Stein, 2014; Velasco-Martin, 2004). In addition, from the perspective of language learning, the target of becoming a native-like speaker of an additional language has been recognized as unrealistic and unnecessary. For instance, drawing on the idea that being a native speaker is a chronological fact that cannot be altered in an individual's life, and referring to the "compound state" of a mind with two or more languages, Cook (1991, 1999) proposed the term *multicompetence* to describe nonnative speakers. As he explained, very few second language users can be mistaken for native speakers and thus many resign themselves to the idea of failing to reach the target. Cook argued that the idea of multicompetence frees second language users from this unfair and unrealistic comparison. That is, second language users are people who have acquired functional knowledge of a given additional language, and that knowledge serves their specific communicative purposes at hand;[4] these users, multicompetent in two or more languages, should be considered in their own right, as opposed to being viewed as deficient speakers who have not reached and are not likely to reach the native speaker target.[5]

Cook's (1991, 1999) notions of multicompetence and a second language user can be viewed as what I will call a synchronic-functional conceptualization of a person's status as a language speaker of an additional language. Such a conceptualization is based on the individual's current abilities to function in two or more languages, without making reference to an idealized native speaker target for the languages that the individual did not acquire from birth, and without drawing attention to the individual's (single) first language. On the other end of the spectrum is what I will call a chronological-nativist view, where the speaker's profile is necessarily grounded in a traditional framework that includes identification of a (single) first language and a native-speaker second language target, as a point of reference and a goal to be pursued. It could be argued that while elements of both conceptionalizations can be traced in multiple domains of scientific study and everyday life, the chronological-nativist one is more traditional and the synchronic-functional one more recent and currently gaining more recognition and support.

A useful example of a shift along the above-mentioned continuum is Pattanayak's (1981) discussion of how the notion of a mother tongue developed in successive Indian census questionnaires from the late 19th to the mid 20th centuries. As the author explained, the definition of the term evolved over time from "the language spoken by the individual from the cradle" to "parent tongue" to ''language ordinarily spoken in the household" and to "language ordinarily used" (Pattanayak, 1981, pp. 47-48; see also LaDousa, 2010). Clearly, the earlier conceptualization of mother tongue was chronologically nativist as it focused on the individual's language spoken from infanthood, while the later ones became progressively more synchronic-functional as they focused on the individual's current ability to use a language.

Another example worth mentioning is the current definition of the term *mother tongue* adopted by Statistics Canada (2009):

Mother tongue refers to the first language learned at home in childhood and still understood by the person at the time the data was [*sic*] collected. If the person no longer understands the first language learned, the mother tongue is the second language learned. For a person who learned two languages at the same time in early childhood, the mother tongue is the language this person spoke most often at home before starting school. The person has two mother tongues only if the two languages were used equally often and are still understood by the person. For a child who has not yet learned to speak, the mother tongue is the language spoken most often to this child at home. The child has two mother tongues only if both languages are spoken equally often so that the child learns both languages at the same time. (n.p.)

This definition is a combination of synchronic-functional and chronological-nativist elements. It still refers to an individual's first language learned at home or in childhood, but it stipulates that a person must currently be able to understand a language, in order for it to qualify as a mother tongue; furthermore, the possibility of having more than one first language is also explicitly recognized and described.

To summarize, this brief overview of the concept of the native speaker, and the related terms *first language*, *mother tongue* and *native language*, demonstrates that it is difficult to understand and accurately portray the complex linguistic landscapes around us. While the notion of the native speaker has been traditionally framed as mostly chronological and monolingually-centered, recent reconceptualizations have added more functional, multilingual and sociolinguistically relevant aspects, foregrounding the individual's current language abilities and potential to use multiple languages. These ideas will serve as a background to the study of language-related questions asked on registration forms for public schools in Ontario, and will be revisited in the results and discussion sections below. In what follows immediately, I turn to the question of language input environments and describe two different child language acquisition settings.

Acquisition Settings in Childhood Bilingualism

Two general types of settings are usually distinguished in childhood bilingualism: bilingual first language acquisition (BFLA) and early second language acquisition (ESLA).[6] A situation where a child is exposed to two languages from birth or very early on in infanthood is referred to as BFLA (De Houwer, 1990, 2009; Meisel, 1989; Swain, 1976). This often occurs in families where two parents speak different languages at home but, of course, other contexts such as a single parent speaking two languages to the child, a caregiver speaking a different language from the parent(s), et cetera, are possible. On the other hand, ESLA refers to cases where children start hearing a second language later on during their childhood, usually by age 6 (De Houwer, 1990, 2009, 2011).

Studies at the preliterate stage have generally indicated that there are considerable differences between ESLA children and their monolingual peers who have heard a given language from birth. Naturally, ESLA children have been exposed to their second language for a shorter period of time than age-matched monolingual first language speakers, and thus it may take some time for an ESLA child to start using the second language with an age-appropriate level of proficiency. Studies have shown that it may take a year or even longer

between the first exposure to the new language and the onset of productive second language use in ESLA (Schlyter & Granfeldt, 2008). Even for children who use the second language productively within the first year of exposure, qualitative differences on the morphosyntactic level have been found (e.g., Meisel, 2008). Furthermore, Meisel (2009) found that inter-individual variation existed in the mean length of utterance of ESLA children, in addition to the fact that they as a group differed from children who had been exposed to the same language from birth. In general, the literature has demonstrated that the length of time that children have been exposed to a second language before age 4.5 shows a particularly strong link with their level of development in all domains of that language (for further discussion see De Houwer, 2011).

The above findings are not surprising, considering that second language acquisition is generally subject to a high degree of variation in comparison with monolingual first language acquisition. However, with regard to BFLA, studies have shown that a lot of variation exists in these settings as well, even though the two languages are acquired from birth; that is, BFLA also seems to be subject to a higher degree of variability than monolingual first language acquisition. On the one end of the spectrum, there are BFLA children who have relatively equal command of both languages (similar but not necessarily identical to monolingual native speakers of each of those two languages). On the other end of the spectrum are those who speak only one of the two languages, but usually understand the other. Finally, there are cases in the middle, where children speak both languages but with markedly different levels of proficiency (see De Houwer 2009, 2011 for an overview). An additional layer of complexity is brought into the picture because bilingualism is not a static but rather a dynamic phenomenon, and children may undergo various shifts between passive and active bilingualism, especially in the preschool years (see Slavkov 2015 for a recent overview). The dynamic nature of bilingualism may also be reflected in changes of language dominance over time.

Why should there be so much variation in both BFLA and ESLA settings? In discussing this issue, De Houwer (2011) argued that some important factors that might be at play include the number of utterances children hear in a language, the length of time children have heard a language, the way languages are distributed among parents in a bilingual family, and the way parents respond to children's choice of language (i.e., what types of language maintenance strategies parents use in response to bilingual children's code-mixing in favour of one of their languages, or in response to children resisting to speak one of their languages). In essence, these are typically a combination of input frequency variables and family socialization patterns that are very different from family to family and from one child to another, and thus yield variable outcomes. Therefore, it should be no surprise that both BFLA and ESLA children exhibit a high degree of variation with regard to the proficiency with which they speak a given language.

Overall, young monolingual speakers show less variation in their language acquisition patterns than bilingual children. Thus, when monolingual children reach school age, assuming typical development, they have achieved relatively uniform language proficiency. However, because of the larger degree of variation in language input environments and proficiency outcomes that BFLA and ESLA children exhibit, it is more challenging to predict what their language proficiency would be when they reach school age. That is, some ESLA children may not be proficient enough in their second language yet, and some BFLA children may be more dominant in one of their languages. In such situations, it may not be useful for a school to ask questions regarding a given child's first

language, as this elicits chronological but not necessarily current information about the child's abilities in different languages. It may be useful to replace or supplement such questions with more specific questions about the child's current abilities in a given language as well as about specific dominance patterns with regard to the child's two (or potentially multiple) languages. Furthermore, it may be helpful to include specific questions about home language use patterns that ask about what languages the child is exposed to and how often, what languages the child is able to understand, and the languages in which the child has production abilities. I will return to these issues in the results and discussion sections below.

The Study

Context and Research Questions

This study was designed to investigate how some of the complexities of the questions of native language and acquisition settings involving more than one language in early childhood are understood and reflected in school registration forms in the public education system of the province of Ontario. Ontario's population is over 13.5 million, which represents about 40% of Canada's population. In 2013-2014, the province's total investment in the public education system was $21 billion (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014). Public schools in Ontario are grouped in districts and administered by local school boards. There are 83 boards in total, including 31 English public, 29 English Catholic, four French public, eight French Catholic, and 11 special authorities for geographically isolated and hospital-based boards.[7] According to Ontario's Ministry of Education (2010), public schools in the province have some of the most multilingual student populations in the world with about 20% of children registered in English schools having another first language.[8] The province has categorized these languages as First Nation, Inuit, Métis, African, Asian, and European, as well as varieties of English that differ significantly from the variety of English required for Ontario schools. Apart from having recognized multilingual and multicultural diversity, the Ministry of Education has also been explicitly committed to providing support and services for students whose first language may be different from English and at the same time has encouraged them to maintain their linguistic and cultural heritage (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010).

Within the above context, it is important for schools in the province to maintain and continuously improve their student language profiling in order to achieve an understanding of students' backgrounds and ultimately be able to provide high-level services. This profiling is done in different ways, one of which is asking language background questions on student registration forms upon entry into the school system (see also the implications section below). Since schools are managed by district school boards, each district typically uses the same school registration form template for all of its schools. However, variation exists within the province with regard to the specific questions and formulations adopted by each school board. Keeping in mind the earlier discussion of the complexity of the notion of a native language and the intricacies involved in the distinction between BFLA and ESLA children, the following research questions are pursued:

1. Do school board registration forms reflect recognition of the phenomenon of bilingual first language acquisition (i.e., two first languages acquired from birth) and do they distinguish it from early second language acquisition (i.e., a second language acquired early on in childhood but after the first language)?
2. Do language profiling questions asked on school board registration forms reflect a chronological-nativist orientation or a synchronic-functional orientation (i.e., focus on first language vs. focus on current language[s] spoken)?
3. How much variation is there in the type and level of detail of language profiling across different school districts?
4. To what extent are the complexities of bilingualism and multilingualism captured by the (combinations) of language background questions on school registration forms across the province?

Methodology

To address the above questions, primary school registration forms were collected from across the province. The data collection procedures were as follows: A list of the web pages and contact information of all English school boards (total of 71) was created. Each school board's webpage was consulted and if the registration form(s) were available online, they were downloaded and entered into a research database. If the registration forms were not available online, the school boards were contacted by email and telephone. For school boards that did not respond, several follow-up attempts were made and if there still was no response or if the school board was not willing to provide a copy of the forms, it was excluded from the sample. French school boards were excluded, as the focus of this study was English as the majority language in Ontario. Registration forms from a total of 44 school boards were collected, representing more than 60% of the English boards in the province.

All language background questions were extracted from the forms and the resulting data were coded and analyzed in terms of number and types of questions. The coding procedures were as follows: All questions with distinct wording, even if minimally different, received an initial individual code resulting in 53 distinct codes. The coding was verified by two raters for consistency. Questions with distinct wording but equivalent meaning (e.g., "main language at home," "primary language spoken at home,") were identified and grouped in nine different categories, some of which were retained for analysis while others were excluded (see next section for more details). Some degree of overlap exists among the categories retained for analysis. For example, questions using the wordings "language spoken at home" and "primary language spoken at home" both refer to home language use, but questions using the latter wording also refer to dominance or frequency of use, which was considered an important distinction; thus, these two types of questions were placed in separate categories (see next section for more details and discussion of other overlapping categories). Further analysis within certain categories was also conducted to determine whether the word *language* was used in the singular, plural or optional plural (the significance of this aspect will also become relevant in the following section).

Before proceeding with the results, it is important to note that even though the data for this study are publicly available, I will not identify specific school boards in the results presentation below, as the ultimate purpose of the study is not to single out specific districts

but to comment on the public education system's language profiling practices in the province as a whole.

Results

A total of 123 language background questions were extracted from the registration forms of the 44 school boards. The average number of such questions per school board was 2.80 (median = 3; mode = 2). Two boards in the sample did not ask any language background questions on their registration forms and seven boards asked five or more questions, as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1
Number of Language-Related Questions by School Board

Number of language-related questions asked	Number of boards
0	2
1	8
2	11
3	10
4	6
5	5
6	1
7	0
8	1
Total	44

As already indicated, of the 123 questions extracted, 53 had distinct wording. However, many of the formulations were minimally different and pertained to the same general concepts. Thus, the questions were divided into nine general categories. The labels of the categories and the percentage of boards that asked a question from a given category are provided in Figure 1.
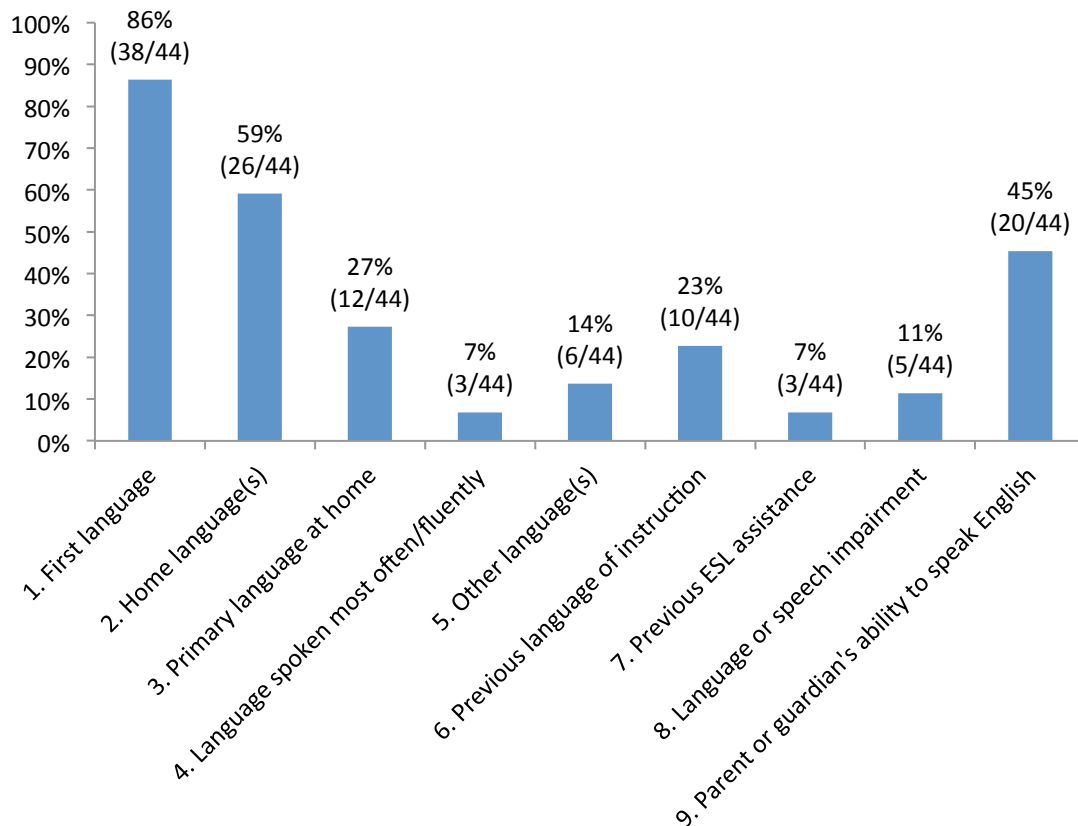
Figure 1. Labels of the question categories and the percentage of boards that asked a question from a given category.

As illustrated, questions in the first category were related to the first language of an incoming student, and were asked by 86% of the 44 boards. These questions were most frequently formulated as "first language _____" but other wordings, such as "mother tongue," "first language spoken," "student's first language," "the language the student first learned to speak," et cetera, were also attested.

The second category included various formulations of questions relating to the language or languages currently spoken at the student's home. Sample questions in this category are as follows: "language spoken at home," "language(s) spoken at home," "languages student speaks at home," "language at home," et cetera. As indicated, some of these included plural -*s* on the noun *language* and thus assumed or allowed for the possibility of a bilingual or multilingual household, while others did not (see below for further discussion of questions using the plural). Furthermore, some of the questions specifically referred to the student's home language while others referred to home language in general, which could be interpreted as the overall language of the household environment but not necessarily the language the student speaks (e.g., in the case of a receptive bilingual or multilingual).

The third category of questions overlaps with the second one as it also relates to the student's current home language(s) but was considered distinct because questions included in it specifically made reference to the primary language at home. Thus, in addition to allowing for the possibility of a bilingual or a multilingual household, this category also

made specific reference to language dominance, understood in terms of frequency (i.e., primary or main language was assumed to mean the language spoken most often). Sample formulations of questions in this category include "the main language spoken by the student at home," "primary language spoken at home," and "primary language spoken most often at home."

The fourth category overlaps with the third one as it also pertains to the concepts of proficiency and dominance. However, it was coded as distinct from category 3 as it was not specifically restricted to the domain of home language use. That is, here parents can report the language that their child speaks most frequently and fluently in general, without referring to the household. This category contains three formulations, "language spoken most often," "language most used," and "primary language (in) which student is most fluent," asked a by a total of three boards (7%).[9] It should be noted that two of the formulations define proficiency or dominance in terms of frequency of use, like some of the questions in category 3, while the third one adopts a fluency-based definition, which is unique in the entire sample.

Moving on to the fifth category, questions that were included here had formulations such as "other language(s) spoken," "other languages," "language used," "2nd language spoken," et cetera. Some of these contained plural -s allowing for bilingualism and multilingualism, while others allowed for bilingualism but not multilingualism by referring to a second language specifically. Note that the meaning of the question "language used" is somewhat unclear, but since it appeared on a form in combination with a question from category 1 and a question from category 2, it was assumed that it meant roughly "language used other than the first language or the home language" (see below for further discussion of the combination patterns of the different categories).

The remaining four categories (6-9) are not discussed in any more detail in this article, as they do not pertain to students' language backgrounds but to their educational history, special needs, or the language profiles of their parents or guardians, which are topics that fall outside of the scope of this research.

Apart from reporting on the individual questions asked by the 44 boards and dividing them into general categories, it is also important to provide data with regard to the combination patterns of questions attested on the different registration forms (recall that most boards asked between two and three questions, as indicated in Table 1). Such patterns provide a better context for interpreting the boards' overall understanding of and implicit assumptions about phenomena such as bilingualism and multilingualism. These data are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2
Combination Patterns of Questions and Number of Boards

Pattern #	# Of Boards	1. First Language	2. Home Language(s)	3. Primary Language at Home	4. Language Spoken Most Often/Fluently	5. Other Language(s)
Pattern 1	15 Boards	√	√			
Pattern 2	8 Boards	√				
Pattern 3	3 Boards	√		√		
Pattern 4	3 Boards	√	√			√
Pattern 5	2 Boards		√			
Pattern 6	2 Boards			√		
Pattern 7	2 Boards	√				√
Pattern 8	2 Boards	√	√	√		
Pattern 9	1 Boards	√			√	
Pattern 10	1 Boards		√	√		
Pattern 11	1 Boards	√	√		√	
Pattern 12	1 Boards	√		√		√
Pattern 13	1 Boards	√		√	√	

Thirteen different combination patterns were found for questions from the previously established categories (recall that categories 6-9 are not discussed). The patterns are listed in descending order of the frequency with which they occurred among the 44 boards. I will refer to patterns where more than one type of question is asked as complex, and to patterns where only one type of question is asked as simple.

Ten complex and three simple patterns were attested. To begin with the complex patterns, pattern 1 is the most frequently occurring one and includes a question about the student's first language and a question about home language(s). This pattern is used by 15 boards in the sample and allows for the possibility of bilingualism or multilingualism because parents could list a different first language and current home language for their child. Thus, the pattern is consistent with the notion of ESLA where a child grows up with one first language but starts acquiring another one early on in childhood. The pattern is also consistent with language shift and subtractive bilingualism, which are well-known phenomena in countries with high immigration rates (B. E. Lambert, 2008; W. E. Lambert, 1974; Landry et al., 1991; see also Garcia, 2009; Hakuta & D'Andrea 1992). That is, a child may be initially exposed to an immigrant (or Indigenous) language but subsequently transition to a majority language (English in this case). Patterns 4, 8 and 11 are similar to pattern 1 in that they contain the same questions as the latter but also ask an additional question from another category: pattern 4 asks about other languages that the child may speak, possibly outside of the household; pattern 11 asks which language the child is most fluent in or speaks most frequently; and pattern 8 assumes that multiple languages may be spoken at the student's home and asks which one of them might be primary. Thus, this last pattern allows not only for synchronic bilingualism or multilingualism, but also lets the family identify the registering child's strongest language. Patterns 3, 12, and 13 ask a question from category 1 (first language) and 3 (primary language at home). In addition, patterns 12 and 13 ask a question from category 5 and category 4, respectively; thus, they allow parents to report on additional languages (other than the primary language spoken at

home) and on the child's strongest language. Pattern 10 (attested only for one board) asks about the languages spoken in the student's home and also which one of them is primary. This allows parents to report both multilingualism and dominance in their child's language profile. The remaining two complex patterns are 7 and 9, both asking a question from category 1, and additionally from category 5 (other languages) and 4 (language spoken most often/fluently), respectively. These patterns allow for the possibility of bilingualism and multilingualism, and the latter in particular allows for designation of a dominant language for a bilingual or multilingual child.

      Turning to the simple patterns, the most common one was 2, asked by eight boards, followed by patterns 5 and 6, asked by two boards each. Pattern 2 reflects a chronological-nativist orientation while 5 and 6 focus on a synchronic-functional orientation. This represents opposing language profiling approaches, as discussed earlier. That is, patterns 5 and 6 collect no information about the students' native language, while pattern 1 collects information about students' native language only. Further discussion of this will be offered in the next section.

      As mentioned earlier, certain questions in the sample contained (optional) plural -*s* on the noun *language* while others were restricted to the singular. This grammatical differentiation is particularly important to questions in categories 1, 2, and 5. The questions in categories 3 and 4 conceptually refer to a single language (i.e., main language at home or primary language in general) and were thus all in the singular. Figure 2 focuses on categories 1, 2, and 5, and reports on the number and percentage of questions in each category that used either the singular, the plural, or were ambiguous with regard to (grammatical) number.
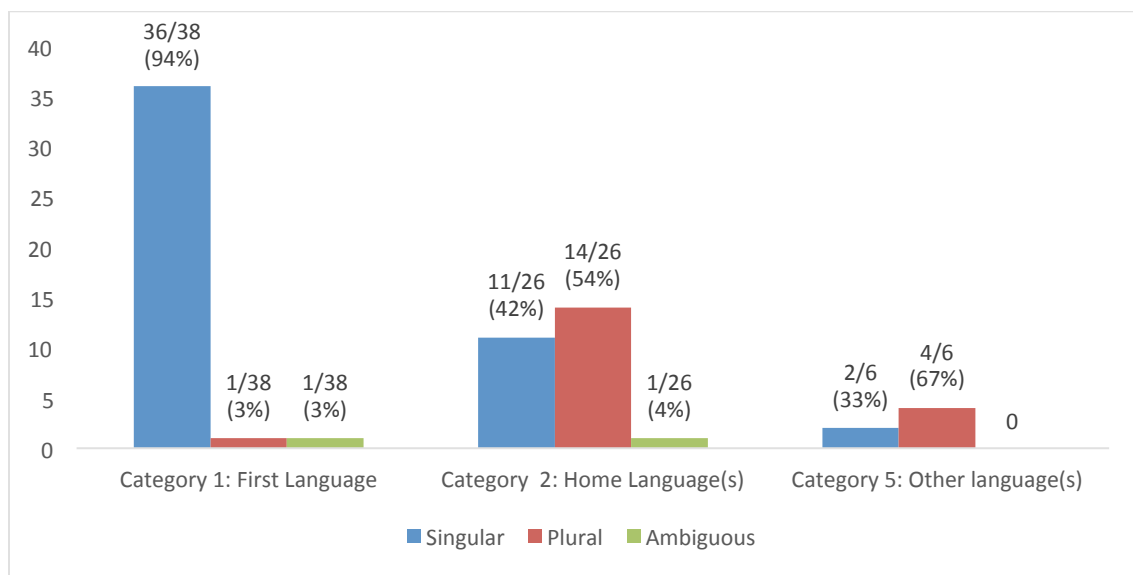

Figure 2. Singular versus plural use of the word *language* in questions in categories 1, 2, and 5.

      Beginning with category 1 (first language), 94% of the 38 boards that asked this type of question used the singular form and only one used the plural.[10] The label *ambiguous* was created because one board in this category used the singular but included the question

about first language in a section entitled "Student Languages" on the registration form; thus, one could assume that either a single or multiple first languages could be reported. Moving on to category 2, the picture here is quite different. The majority of the boards (54%) that asked a question from this category used plural -s (often included in brackets). The one ambiguous entry was again in a section entitled "Student Languages" that allowed for either a singular or a plural interpretation of the home language question. Finally, category 5 (other languages) was used by six boards in the sample (14%), as indicated earlier in Figure 1. Here most of the questions included plural -s and there were no ambiguous entries.

Before moving on to a general discussion of the results presented above, it should be mentioned that some questions listed on the registration forms contained inconsistencies, repetitions, and typos, or were unclear. For example, one board used the question "first language" followed by a clarification in parentheses ("language spoken at home"); this can be viewed as an internal contradiction, as the first language of a student may not necessarily be the language spoken at home. In such cases, it would be up to parents to seek further guidance from the school as to the meaning of the question, or just answer to the best of their ability and potentially not provide exactly the information that the school board is looking for. Another example is the question "language used," which, as mentioned previously, I interpreted as "language used other than the first language or the home language." However, this interpretation is somewhat difficult to access and may not necessarily be what the board intended. Again, as mentioned previously, one question contained a typo (missing preposition): "primary language [in] which student is most fluent." Finally, a number of boards used a question from category 2 (home language) but because of different formulations within this category (e.g., "language spoken at home," "languages student speaks at home," "language at home") it is often unclear whether they refer to the student's home language or the overall language of the household. This is problematic for families with receptive bilingual or multilingual children where parents may consistently use one language to address the children (usually a minority language) but the children may consistently respond in another language (usually the majority language). Furthermore, families using the one-parent-one-language method may not be able to answer such questions if language use is split relatively equally between two languages.

Finally, it should be pointed out that one board in the sample uses specific disambiguating questions with regard to receptive and productive bilingualism and language dominance, although some of the questions are repetitive: "language the student FIRST [original emphasis] learned to speak," "PRIMARY [original emphasis] language [in] which student is most fluent," "primary HOME [original emphasis] language spoken in student's home," "main language spoken to the student by adults in the home," "main language spoken by the student at home," and "main language spoken by adults at home." Such high level of detail and awareness of the potential complexity of bilingual or multilingual households was indicated only by a handful of boards (recall that only seven boards of the 44 surveyed included five or more language-related questions on their registration forms).

Discussion

In this section, I discuss the results presented above in relation to the research questions of the study and move on to more general issues. To begin with research question

1, regarding the distinction between BFLA and ESLA, the results clearly indicate that the concept of a single native language strongly dominates the boards' understanding of a student linguistic profile. As mentioned earlier, only one of the 38 boards that included a question from this category explicitly recognized the possibility of a child having more than one first language, and one other board asked a question that can be compatible with BFLA, although it was not clear if that was intentional. The lack of overt recognition of simultaneous bilingualism in childhood is a surprising finding in a country that is officially bilingual and in a province with a large Francophone minority, high level of immigration, and presence of an Indigenous population. That is, the potential of finding BFLA children in the context of the boards that were surveyed is relatively high because of the possibility of parents with different language backgrounds speaking to their children in different languages. Lack of awareness of the concept of bilingual first language acquisition may be part of the reason why most of the registration forms were not compatible with BFLA. Another factor could be that BFLA children do not automatically speak both languages equally well: As mentioned earlier, some have only receptive knowledge of one of the languages, others may speak both languages but show clear dominance patterns in one of them, and still others may be more or less equally proficient in both languages (i.e., balanced bilinguals). Therefore, from a school board's point of view, even if general awareness of the possibility of simultaneous bilingualism exists, it may be simpler to just ask parents what they consider to be their child's "first" language, in the sense of a dominant, primary, or strongest language.

　　　　The above approach, however, is problematic for several reasons. First, such interpretation of the notion of first language needs to be explicitly stated, so that there would be no confusion on the parents' part. Second, the interpretation seems unlikely for registration forms using patterns 3, 8, 12, and 13 (recall Table 2) as these include a question about both the first and the primary or strongest language of the child. Third, bilingualism and multilingualism are not static phenomena and dominance patterns in young children can sometimes change in a short period of time. For example, a BFLA child can shift between active and passive bilingualism several times before reaching school age, as recently pointed out by Slavkov (2015; see also Berman, 1979; Dahl, Rice, Steffensen, & Amundsen, 2010; De Houwer, 2009; Slobin, Dasinger, Kuntay, & Toupin, 1993; Tomiyama, 2000, 2009; Uribe de Kellet, 2002; Yukawa 1998). Thus, explicitly allowing parents to list more than one first language for their child, and potentially ranking languages in terms of dominance, if applicable, would seem to be a better alternative for the single most frequently asked question among the 44 boards included in this study. A relatively simple change like this would ultimately allow for more accuracy and depth of the language profiling practices in the province overall (see also next section for further recommendations).

　　　　Turning to research question 2, which asked whether the registration forms reflected a chronological-nativist or a synchronic-functional orientation to language profiling, the results were less categorical than with regard to the first research question. On the one end of the spectrum, eight boards in the sample asked a question from category 1 (first language) as the single language-related question. This represents the second most frequently occurring pattern in the sample (recall Table 2) and reflects a clear chronological-nativist approach (i.e., focusing only on the first language of the students and not collecting any information about their current languages). On the other end of the spectrum are five boards that only asked questions about students' current language(s)

without eliciting any information about the native language (patterns 5, 6, and 10). This reflects a clear synchronic-functional orientation. Finally, there were 29 boards that used questions reflecting both orientations (patterns 1, 3, 4, 7-9, 11-13). Thus, more than two thirds of the registration forms in the sample reflect a mixture of the two different profiling orientations. This finding is interesting as it indicates a degree of awareness of the complexity of bilingualism and multilingualism on the part of these school boards. That is, by asking combinations of questions with regard to both the current and the native language of the students, boards have the potential of collecting valuable information about language shift (e.g., if a student's current language is different from the one reported as first), proficiency (e.g., through the various questions from categories 3 and 4), and receptive versus productive skills (e.g., for forms that explicitly ask what languages are spoken by adults and what languages are spoken by children in the household). In this regard, a higher degree of clarity, explicitness, and uniformity should be sought. Improving some of the formulations used, eliminating ambiguities and potential contradictions, and perhaps determining an optimal number of questions and combination patterns would benefit the province as a whole. This brings me to the third research question of the study.

Research question 3 relates to the degree of variation and the level of detail of language profiling across the different school districts. As already indicated, a high degree of variation was found in several respects, including the number of questions asked per board, the specific wording of questions referring to identical concepts, the categories of questions asked, and the number and types of combination patterns in which the questions occurred. This is indicative of the high level of autonomy of the individual school boards with regard to designing their own registration questionnaires, which could be beneficial in many respects. For example, depending on the geographic location of the district, the population that is served by the local educational institutions may be more or less homogeneous, or have specific demographic characteristics (e.g., high concentration of immigrants, Indigenous people) that may require linguistic profiling tailored to their specific situations. At the same time, the high degree of variation observed in the different questionnaires creates conditions for inaccuracies and inconsistencies in the breadth and depth of the language profiling across the province. Thus, as already mentioned above, a degree of standardization may help determine the optimal number, types, combinations, and formulations of questions and at the same time eliminate errors, redundancies, and ambiguities. As it stands, based on the registration forms collected in the sample, one has to wonder about the reliability of the information collected even for the single most frequently asked question (first language of the student) because not all boards ask that question, some of the formulations differ, and the precise meaning also varies occasionally (recall that one of the boards equates first language with the language currently spoken in the home). Overall, standardization would not only eliminate errors and contradictions but also ensure that the profiling orientation is consistent (i.e., chronological-nativist, synchronic-functional, or a mixture of both).

The last research question of the study, research question 4, relates to the extent the complexities of bilingualism and multilingualism are captured by the different school boards' language profiling practices across the province. Various aspects of this issue were already discussed, both in the results section and in the preceding paragraphs relating to research questions 1 through 3. Looking at the fourth research question as an overarching one and aiming to paint a broader picture of the numerous issues emerging from this study, one must acknowledge that many of the school boards demonstrate a high degree of

awareness of issues related to bilingualism and multilingualism. This was evidenced by the numerous formulations of individual questions and combinations of patterns displaying both nativist and current orientations toward language profiling. At the same time, some conceptual and methodological gaps were identified with regard to lack of recognition of simultaneous bilingualism as well as lack of clarity, precision, and consistency both within and across the various registration forms analyzed. Ultimately, this shows that the school boards in the sample are aware of the complexities of bilingualism and multilingualism to a high degree, but are not theoretically or methodologically fully equipped to tackle these in a way that would produce accurate, thorough, and consistent student language profiles.

Implications

Since, to my knowledge, no previous research on this specific topic is available in Canada, the primary purpose of this study was exploratory. Therefore, it is not possible to discuss immediate implications or offer definitive solutions to some of the issues identified above. Nonetheless, the study is a useful first step in beginning to understand language profiling practices at public schools across the province of Ontario, and has the potential of extending beyond the domain of scholarly discussions in at least two important respects. The first one is pedagogical and relates to proper identification of students who may require language support to succeed in the Ontario school system. If registration forms are to be used for identifying English language learners (ELLs) and allocating resources for specific school support and services for them, then more accurate profiling would be helpful.[11] For example, boards that have a purely chronological-nativist orientation (i.e., use only questions from category 1) run the risk of casting the net too widely and including children who, despite having a first language other than English, may already be dominant, and indeed proficient enough to function in a school setting in English by the time of school entry (see Bailey & Kelly, 2013, for a similar argument for language survey practices at U.S. schools). Conversely, the net may be cast too narrowly if a form asks only questions from category 2 (language[s] at home), as English may be included in that category without necessarily giving an indication if that is the primary or most frequently used language in the household. Thus, it is important to ask a question about the primary, most frequently used, or dominant language of the child, in order to obtain information relevant to potential ELL support needs.

It must be acknowledged that, in addition to registration forms, Ontario schools and boards may use other means of language profiling. For example, some schools use supplementary intake forms and/or interviews with students and parents, so that a school teacher or administrator can obtain a more direct impression and overall better picture of the household's linguistic landscape. Such practices, although more resource demanding, may be better suited for identifying ELL needs. Furthermore, some school boards have special welcome centres where new immigrants to Canada are assessed, briefed about, and eased into the educational system. Such practices vary across the province and examining them in more detail is a potentially fruitful avenue for future research. Nonetheless, better designed registration forms will help as an initial step leading to such procedures, where available, and will constitute a significant improvement in other cases where supplementary profiling is not done.

The second way in which this study can have a potential impact is that more consistent and accurate language profiles at school entry can lead to better reporting of

educational demographics at both the local and provincial levels, and ultimately contribute to a more informed society. While a few issues were already identified in the previous sections of this article, here I focus specifically on the distinction between active and passive bilingualism or multilingualism. Questions from categories 2 and 3 relate to home language use and primary language at home, as indicated earlier. However, these general categories are somewhat difficult to interpret, as some of the questions within them do not specify whether they refer to the student's language use or the surrounding household members' language use. For example, "languages student speaks at home" clearly refers to the student's productive skills, while "language(s) spoken at home" may refer to the language spoken in general in the household but not by the student; that is, the student could have only passive understanding of some language(s) [see Slavkov, 2015, for a general discussion].

This distinction is important in terms of reporting language diversity. Many Ontario schools provide such demographics through fact sheets or school profiles that can be found on individual school websites or are distributed in print. While a systematic analysis of information disseminated in this way is beyond the scope of this study, a preliminary examination shows that some schools use general formulas of the type, "students at our school speak *x* number of languages." Depending on the specific wording and types of language profiling questions asked on the registration forms for that school, such formulations run the risk of being inaccurate. A similar question applies at the provincial level. As already indicated, since school boards across the province administer registration forms with a high degree of variation in language profiling questions, it is possible that important distinctions between the number of languages that students in Ontario are exposed to and the number of languages that they actually speak is sometimes blurred. Such distinctions, however, are important to keep in mind in general, since the public may wish to know to what extent linguistic diversity at schools and households is maintained, as opposed to students being exposed to linguistic diversity but not continuing to carry it themselves.

Based on these two broad areas of the current study's implications, the following preliminary recommendations for improving language profiling through registration forms can be offered:

1. Allow explicitly for parents to list more than one first (native) language for their child. This can be done by either including in the question an optional plural -*s* (i.e., "language[s]") and/or by providing several distinct answer slots for this question.
2. Move away from a purely chronological-nativist orientation on registration forms (i.e., category 1 questions only) and include more questions underlying the synchronic-functional orientation (i.e., questions about current language abilities).
3. Include questions related to students' dominance, primary language, or most frequently used language, as these represent a relative measure of language proficiency.
4. Distinguish explicitly between exposure to a language and spoken abilities in a language. If space considerations are involved, focusing on the latter may be preferable as it taps into productive abilities, which generally indicate a higher proficiency level.

While the above recommendations are only preliminary, they are a useful starting point to be considered by school boards or province officials interested in potential registration form enhancements.[12] In addition to the recommendations for improving language profiling, this paper also touches on the issue of whether new terminology should be proposed in general with regard to people's language use. One can argue that the terms first, native, or mother language may in some cases need to be replaced by terms such as primary or strongest language; this could potentially help reconceptualize monolingually and chronologically centred views about people's language profiles. I leave this issue for future work when more data and discussion on this topic become available.

Conclusion

One of the goals of this paper was to examine how the Ontario public education system, which serves various culturally and linguistically diverse populations, conceptualizes and profiles students' language backgrounds. Due to the high degree of autonomy that individual school boards have with respect to incoming students' registration forms and the resulting variation in the number and types of language-related questions asked, it is difficult to comment on the province's overall understanding of or approach to issues related to the profiling of bilingualism and multilingualism. Nonetheless, the questions asked by many individual boards reflected a high level of awareness that incoming students potentially grow up with languages different from their school language and that some may currently speak or be exposed to languages other than their school language.

How does this general observation fit within the global context of a lessened importance of the concept of a (monolingual) native speaker and a heightened recognition of the bilingual and multilingual realities discussed in the beginning of this paper? On the one hand, some school boards in Ontario still lean toward a traditional view of a single native language and a preoccupation with the students' backgrounds in chronological terms. From an educational perspective, such an orientation is perhaps not particularly useful, as it does not focus on students' current and real language abilities at the time of registration. One could even argue that since the question of a first language has a tight connection with a person's identity, ethnic, religious, and racial background, boards should consider designating it as voluntary if its purpose is not to identify current language abilities but only historical facts about a student's situation at birth. A parallel with aboriginal self-identification is apt in this regard, as such questions, including questions about language, are clearly designated as voluntary on all forms in the sample. To sum up, if aboriginal ethnic and linguistic self-identification is voluntary, one must wonder if other ethnic and linguistic self-identification should also be voluntary (especially if related to historical and not current information about the student's linguistic abilities).

On the other hand, questions about students' current language and/or multiple languages could be considered more pertinent to the students' performance in the educational system. Such a view is related to the idea of multicompetence, discussed earlier in this paper, where second language users or multilingual individuals are not compared with (monolingual) native speakers but considered in their own right. It is interesting to note that a few school boards' forms were compatible only with this type of orientation, because they did not include any questions about students' first language but only questions

about their current language(s). One might wonder if this is indicative of a future trend that will be taken up by other boards as well.

        To conclude, although the public education system in the province of Ontario still has work to do in terms of improving the quality of language profiling, a number of positive indications of a shift away from a traditionally monolingual and toward a bilingual or multilingual worldview can be observed. Further research is needed to determine whether such trends will continue to develop and how the results from Ontario presented in this study compare with the situation in other provinces in the country.

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Notes

[1] The claim that more than 50% of the word's population is bilingual represents a conservative estimate (see Grosjean, 2014). Baker and Jones (1998) estimated that about two thirds of the world's population is bilingual. This higher estimate was based on data collected through the authoritative *Ethnologue* web site but at the time of sampling the data available was less complete than today. Furthermore, Baker and Jones took into account second and foreign language learners, including English language learners. This amounts to millions of people with various levels of proficiency who may not necessarily fit the commonly used definition of a bilingual as a person who uses two languages or dialects in everyday life (Grosjean, 2014). Producing a more reliable and specific percentage remains a challenge due to, among other factors, the lack of relevant or uniform indicators across the national censuses of the different countries of the world, as well as combining such data where available.

[2] Throughout this article, I use the terms *native language, first language*, and *mother tongue* interchangeably. Even though in light of the discussion that ensues, in some cases it may be more accurate to use the terms *primary language* or *strongest language*, I have not made the switch for the sake of consistency with the literature reviewed. That is, if an author referred to in this article used the terms *native language*, *first language*, et cetera, I have made an effort to remain true to the source and have used the original terminology. An anonymous reviewer pointed out that this paper may be used as an opportunity to propose

new terminology and reframe many of the issues in more accurate terms. I would like to leave this task for a future publication.

[3] In this article I use the terms *additional language* and *second language* interchangeably. That is, both terms refer to a second, third, and so on, language learned or used. Since there is no uniformity in the literature, when referring to different authors' work, I have made an effort to use their original terminology.

[4] This idea is also related to the concept of *plurilingualism*, which has become popular in recent years and has engendered a growing body of literature.

[5] Note that Cook (1991, 1999) distinguished between second language learners, who are still in the process of learning an additional language, and second language users, who have reached a stable stage in their second language development, and are no longer learners.

[6] The respective terms *simultaneous* and *sequential bilingualism* are also commonly used in the literature. Although these terms were conceived in the context of bilingualism, they could in principle apply to multilingual settings as well (i.e., simultaneous multilingualism vs. sequential multilingualism), and are meant in this broader sense throughout this paper.

[7] Catholic school boards in Ontario are publicly funded and administered.

[8] French immersion programs (or schools) are included in this calculation because they are offered by the English school boards.

[9] The second question was missing the preposition *in*, which was deemed to be a typo and thus I have inserted the preposition.

[10] In fact, the latter did not use the plural -*s* but the registration form had three empty slots for this question and thus allowed for up to three first languages to be listed. Therefore, the assumption that a child may have more than one first language was explicit.

[11] The issue of identifying English language learners is complex and extends well beyond the scope of this article. The purpose of raising it here is to highlight its importance on the one hand, and demonstrate that it is related to student language profiling through registration forms at school entry, on the other.

[12] An additional study analyzing data from two other English-speaking Canadian provinces is currently underway. Further recommendations with regard to registration form design may be available based on this broader set of data.

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