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English Language Fluency:
Performance Expectations and Participation

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ABSTRACT*

An increasing number of California students are English language learners. Previous research has determined that low fluency students generally perform worse academically than their fluent peers. I propose that status associated with fluency level is a significant factor preventing low fluency students from performing better academically. I observed a small sample of 35 fifth-grade students over a period of approximately two weeks. Rates and quality of student participation were recorded and analyzed by fluency level. Fluency did operate as a significant status characteristic, influencing group interaction and participation rates. Low fluency subjects rarely participated and were given the lowest status assignments in task-oriented group work. High fluency students held the highest status in the classroom, assuming authoritative roles as task leaders in group interaction. Directions for future research and practical implications for education policy are briefly discussed.

As funding for bilingual education dwindles and immigration continues to rise, an increasing number of English language learners are being placed in mainstream classrooms before they have reached an acceptable fluency level. California state law requires that all instruction be conducted in English, so students who have a difficult time understanding oral and written directions or comfortably conversing in English are at a severe disadvantage relative to their fluent counterparts. Clearly, if some students cannot understand the teacher's instruction, not through lack of cognitive capability to grasp the concepts, but because of their inability to comprehend the teacher's words and phrases, those students are more likely to struggle academically. However, the achievement gap between fluent speakers and low fluency students is too large to explain by language comprehension alone. Even if the teacher were to use only the most elementary vocabulary, speak slowly and repeat herself as often as possible (all techniques used by many teachers of English-language learners), low fluency students will still perform significantly worse overall (Rosenthal, Baker and Ginsburg 1983; Rumberger and Larson 1998; Schmid 2001). Any robust explanation for the correlation between fluency level and academic performance in elementary school must include a detailed examination of status in the classroom.

The status characteristics branch of expectation states theory provides a lucid account of how fluency could be related to status in the classroom. Status characteristics theory, first

* I wish to thank Professor Kathy Kuipers for her helpful comments and criticisms, as well as the Sociology 200 student reviewers, especially Ann Taylor and Alison Francone, for their insightful suggestions.
postulated by Berger, Cohen and Zelditch (1966, 1972), principally states that “external
status differences among members of a task group determine the distribution of power and
prestige within the group” (Berger, et al. 1966, p.43). These “external status differences” are
called status characteristics, defined as any attribute possessed by members of a group that
could be considered relevant to the task at hand (Balkwell 1994). There are two types of
status characteristics: diffuse and specific. Diffuse status characteristics are socially
recognized distinctions, such as age, race and gender, which typically have widespread
connotations for performance (Berger, et al. 1972). Conversely, specific status characteristics
are attributes that imply competence in explicit endeavors only. Typical examples include
algebra ability or talent for ballet dancing (Balkwell 1994). Like many characteristics,
English fluency could potentially be a specific or a diffuse status characteristic, depending on
the situation. For example, if the collective task were reading a short story and answering
questions about plot details, most people would expect high fluency students to be more
useful to the group than low fluency students. In this situation, English fluency would
operate as a specific status characteristic. Alternatively, if the collective task were sketching
a map of California, English fluency would have little relevance. However, if a widely
shared belief exists that high-fluency students are generally more competent than those with
low fluency levels, fluency could operate as a diffuse status characteristic similar to race or
age. Fluency meets the requirements of the definition because it is associated in most
people’s minds with specific beliefs involving competence. These beliefs inform general
expectations about how well actors will perform across many different types of situations
(Cohen and Roper 1972).
Significantly, the theory says nothing about the cultural beliefs associated with status characteristics being objectively true. The theory relies on the “Thomas theorem,” which holds that if people believe something to be true, it will usually be true in its consequences (Thomas 1923). Of course, English fluency could be completely unrelated to intelligence or academic achievement. However, since a workable knowledge of English is required to converse with the instructor, contribute to classroom and small group discussions, and understand oral and written directions, California schools, inadvertently or otherwise, define English fluency as a desirable skill. At this point, a critical precondition has been met in establishing English fluency as a status belief (Weber 1968; Ridgeway, et al. 1998). A recognizable segment of the population (high-fluency students) has acquired a material advantage over another segment of the population (low-fluency students). As students interact in this environment, they will learn that resource-rich actors (high-fluency students) are better able to perform certain tasks required for successful academic performance (Ridgeway 1991). According to the theory, in such an environment, all students, regardless of personal fluency level, will view high-fluency actors as being more competent in academic endeavors. Significantly, actors in all categories concede one group’s superiority to the other (Ridgeway, et al. 1998). Thus, high and low-fluency students alike will form similar status beliefs defining English fluency as a favorable status characteristic.

These beliefs will have serious implications for group participation and academic performance in general. Expectation states theory provides an explanation of how these status characteristics, formed early in the school year, can be translated into observable behavior. Expectation states defines several terms that will be used extensively in this study. They include action opportunities, performance outputs, and reward actions, all of which are
well defined in the literature (Berger and Connor 1969; Berger et al. 1977). For the purposes of this study, the most interesting insight provided by expectation states is the cognitive concept of performance expectations. This refers to an unobservable mental state that predicts the quality of a performance output from a group member (Berger and Conner 1969; Meeker 1994). Upon entering a task-oriented group, all members form performance expectations for self and others. These expectations are formed before any performance output occurs, and are based on known status characteristics. A performance expectation can be “high,” predicting successful performance, or “low,” predicting poor performance. After a performance output has been given, members immediately form a unit evaluation, or an unobservable evaluation of the quality of the performance output. Members may or may not disclose their unit evaluations by using reward actions.

Performance expectations are important because they strongly influence the number of action opportunities a group member receives and the unit evaluations assigned to his or her performance output (Berger and Connor 1974; Meeker 1994). It may seem counterintuitive that performance expectations, which preexist performance outputs, can have a significant impact on unit evaluations, which are formed after the performance output. This is another example of the Thomas principle (1923). There is considerable empirical data that shows group members tend to exaggerate the quality of performance outputs from high status members and underestimate the quality of outputs from low status members (Whyte 1945; Harvey 1953; Sherif, White and Harvey 1955). Once performance expectations exist, they have the effect of a self-fulfilling prophecy, as both self and others tend to act in accordance with the expectations and perpetuate them (Meeker 1994). This is critical, because even as low-level language learners improve fluency levels over the course
of the year, established status hierarchies and performance expectations could prevent them from contributing more frequently to classroom tasks. Further, the low self-expectations formed at the beginning of the year may continue to operate despite any progress made toward fluency, affecting academic confidence, effort and academic progress in all disciplines.

This study examines the status hierarchies and performance expectations operating in a mainstream classroom in San Jose, California. While much research has been done in the status characteristics field, there is little research specifically examining fluency. Similarly, much research has been done both inside and outside the field of sociology investigating the link between fluency and academic performance, but most of this research does not focus on classroom status as a determining variable in academic success (Rosenthal, Baker and Ginsburg 1983; Rumberger and Larson 1998; Schmid 2001). This study aims to identify English fluency as an important status characteristic, relying on expectation states theory to account for how these status characteristics could influence participation and academic achievement in general. The study chronicles the experiences of low-level English speakers in various classroom settings, first defining the status hierarchies and performance expectations in place during the time of observation. Using this data, the study seeks to determine to what extent fluency levels are correlated with performance expectations and how these performance expectations affect classroom participation. I predict that fluency will be an important status characteristic strongly related to performance expectations and participation rates.

METHODS
Field study was conducted between April 26, 2003 and May 14, 2003 at an elementary school in San Jose, California. The sample consisted of thirty-five fifth graders (sixteen boys, eighteen girls) of varying English language fluency. The sample was largely Latino, with three Vietnamese students. Eight students were native English language speakers, while three were in a mainstream English-only classroom for the first time. One student joined the class just a few weeks before the study began; prior to this she had been in bilingual classes since immigrating to the United States. This sample is unrepresentative of typical classrooms with respect to the sample’s linguistic homogeneity. Outside of select regions of California and the American Southwest, there are unlikely to be many classrooms where less than a quarter of the students are native speakers of the country’s primary language. Although unrepresentative of typical populations, it was an ideal sample for my purposes, as the large number of English language learners provided many subjects for study. The relative homogeneity of the sample with respect to typical diffuse status characteristics, i.e., age, race, socioeconomic status, was also beneficial because I had fewer confounding influences to consider when examining fluency as a status characteristic.

While the study consisted primarily of observation, I interviewed the teacher before I conducted formal research in the classroom. She provided me with fluency ratings for each student by separating the class into quintiles of proficiency: each of the five quintiles had seven students. All native English speakers were placed in one of the highest two quintiles, while the three students new to mainstream classes were placed in the lowest quintile. Fluency was defined as the ability to converse intelligibly in English in an academic setting. Although related, fluency scores were not perfectly correlated with grades or intelligence. Several students in the lowest quintiles outperformed their more fluent counterparts
academically in all disciplines, including language arts. To produce these ratings, the teacher depended on a combination of objective and subjective criteria. The objective criteria were fluency scores from two standardized tests. The first, provided by the State of California, is administered every six weeks. Students read a short passage while a proctor counts the number of words they read correctly in one minute. Incorrect pronunciations are subtracted from the total to yield a total score. The California State standard for the end of fifth grade is 125 words per minute. The second, called the Indexed Reading Inventory, is a more comprehensive measure administered less frequently which tests both the students' reading speed and comprehension. In addition to correctly reading as many words as possible in one minute, students are required to retell the story they have read to ensure they understand the words they are reading and not just decoding pronunciations. The teacher indicated that only about fifteen percent of her students were at or above the standard according to State goals.

In addition to these objective criteria, the teacher also relied on her own subjective evaluations, based on seven months of classroom interaction with these students. While this measure may not appear to be scientifically rigorous, some additional criteria must supplement the objective measures because the standardized tests are not perfect measures of fluency. This determination is based on five fourth and fifth grade teachers' opinions and my own experience, as I have administered several of these tests in the past. The tests have a tendency to score the very low students too high and the high students too low. This is because lower students completely skip difficult words while higher students spend too much time attempting to correctly sound out words. A suitable example comes from a test passage about Betsy Ross. Many students had difficulty correctly pronouncing the word "seamstress." Lower quintile students would often skip this word all together and read every
three letter word in the passage, while higher quintile students would waste several seconds trying to enunciate the word, and often still end up reading it incorrectly. The teacher noted that her supplementary subjective evaluations generally lowered students’ overall fluency ratings.

Observations lasted between two and four hours. Classroom activities were divided into two types: teacher-centered lessons (activities led by the teacher involving the entire class) and student-centered lessons (small group work). For both classroom situations, I focused observations on participation rates across fluency levels. Therefore, the independent variable was fluency level while rate and quality of participation was the dependent variable.

During teacher-centered lessons, I sat at the teacher’s desk in the back of the classroom and primarily recorded participation rates. The teacher furnished me with a class roster and seating chart (both used first names and last initial only), allowing me to identify each student. While I used real first names for recording data, they only appear in my field notebook, which I did not allow others to see to ensure the subjects’ confidentiality. All names appearing in this paper are fictitious. For each teacher-centered lesson, I recorded several items. First, I took note of the topic of the lesson and some details about the teacher’s actions and general class response. For each student I recorded each time the student raised his hand, each time the student was called on by the teacher, and each time the teacher called on the student when his hand was not raised. For the purposes of this study, the above participation types will be referred to as follows:

Raised hand (but teacher does not call on student): “desired action opportunity”
Called on by teacher: “actual action opportunity”
Called on by teacher (without raised hand): “forced action opportunity”
This language connects my observations of teacher-centered lessons to previously conducted research on status and allows for discussion between different types of classroom interaction. If fluency is a salient status characteristic, low-fluency students will participate at lower rates than high-fluency students across all academic subjects. The action opportunity discrepancy between high and low fluency students should be greatest in language arts activities, in which English fluency is a specific status characteristic, but should also be noticeable in other academic subjects, in which English fluency becomes a diffuse status characteristic. This includes all types of action opportunities described above except "forced action opportunities." The teacher uses this method occasionally in an attempt to involve non-participants into the discussion. Therefore, if fluency is a salient status characteristic, lower quintile students should dominate this category.

Observation of small groups was less straightforward. During each lesson, I chose a group that fulfilled criteria elucidated in previous expectation states research (Berger and Conner, 1969). Specifically, the group had to be task-oriented and heterogeneous according to a status characteristic, in this case, fluency. To maximize the amount of data collected and to be as unobtrusive as possible, I used a video camcorder to record small group interactions. I set the camera on a tripod in the back of the room before students entered the classroom, and used the zoom feature on the camera lens to focus on one or two groups at a time. I then sat in the group's vicinity and inconspicuously listened to their dialogue and noted any relevant commentary. By allowing the camera to record all the visual information, I could be much less conspicuous in observing interaction, as I only had to be within earshot of the group. Since I began recording before the students started the lesson, and because the camera was often up to thirty feet away from the group, the subjects' behavior was not
noticeably altered in response to the camera’s presence. After the observation, I reviewed the tape and took detailed notes, recording instances of action opportunities and performance outputs, specifically from lower quintile students. Characteristics commonly recorded included frequency of participation, approximate length of participation, and group members’ reactions to participation. I relied exclusively on visible reward actions, such as eye contact, nodding, and verbal response. I did not survey or interview students concerning their unit evaluations of their classmates. Data from student-centered activities was predominately qualitative. I did not attempt to systematically quantify action opportunities, performance outputs, or reward actions for these types of activities. As with the teacher-centered lessons, if English fluency is a salient status characteristic, lower quintile students should participate less often and for shorter periods of time, and upper quintile students should react to low-fluency students’ comments less favorably than to those of their high-fluency peers.

It could be objected that the close scrutiny involved in recording such data could bias the results and particularly, make lower quintile students less willing to participate. While this may be true to some extent, I do not consider this a significant problem for several reasons. First, during the time of observation, the teacher was in the process of earning her credential and therefore had visitors evaluating her teaching performance on a regular basis. These evaluations often included measures similar to my research methods, including video recording. Additionally, prior to the time of observation I had chaperoned field trips, assisted with science projects, administered fluency tests, graded assignments and gave a talk to the class. The students were well acquainted with me and as far as I could tell, were not surprised or anxious by my presence in the classroom. Students were not specifically informed of the purpose of my presence. Since I had been in the classroom on several
occasions before, students did not seem curious as to why I was there, and probably assumed that I was helping the teacher with something.

RESULTS

As stated, classroom activities were of two kinds: teacher-centered, whole class activities and student-centered, small group work activities. I will present quantitative results from teacher-centered activities first and qualitative results from student-centered activities second to illustrate and support the quantitative data.

Teacher-Centered Activities

Teacher-centered activities usually took the form of the teacher posing questions to the entire class. Typical activities included geography lessons in which students were asked to name state capitals, reading lessons in which students were required to remember plot details or make connections from the story to their daily lives, and math lessons in which students explained their answers to area and volume problems. For each activity, rates of participation varied substantially according to fluency level, with the lower quintile students (Quintile 1 and 2) participating at much lower rates than their higher quintile counterparts (Quintile 4 and 5). As Table 1 shows, students in the lowest quintile rarely raised their hands

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fluency</th>
<th>Desired Action Opportunity (raised hand)</th>
<th>Actual Action opportunity (called on)</th>
<th>Forced Action Opportunity (called on w/o raising hand)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quintile 1</td>
<td>.067</td>
<td>.113</td>
<td>.308</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quintile 2</td>
<td>.181</td>
<td>.206</td>
<td>.462</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quintile 3</td>
<td>.181</td>
<td>.196</td>
<td>.154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quintile 4</td>
<td>.278</td>
<td>.217</td>
<td>.077</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quintile 5</td>
<td>.292</td>
<td>.268</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>1.000</td>
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to participate. Most participation from the lowest quintile was coerced, as the teacher forced lower quintile students to contribute by calling on them when they had not volunteered. Many of these forced contributions from the lowest quintile were not quality participation, as students frequently replied with "I don’t know," or a similar response. Higher quintile students were more likely to want to participate, yielding higher desired and actual action opportunity rates and much lower forced action opportunity rates. Additionally, the disparity in actual action opportunity rates between the lowest and highest quintiles is probably smaller that it could be. This is because the teacher was much more likely to call on a Quintile 1 student who raised his hand than a Quintile 5 student when both were volunteering to answer the same question. Thus, the higher quintile students show a higher desired action opportunity rate and a lower actual opportunity rate, while lower quintile students are called on more frequently when they volunteer. As expected, students with a higher English fluency level are more willing to participate in teacher-centered classroom settings, when their responses are available for scrutiny by the teacher and all of their peers. Lower quintile students commonly must be forced to participate, yielding high forced action opportunity rates among the first and second quintiles.

From this data, it seems clear that fluency operates as a status characteristic that transfers to low self-expectations for low fluency students. However, it could be possible that participation rates vary with fluency only when English fluency is a specific status characteristic, i.e. during language arts activities. For example, it may be that lower quintile students participate at rates similar to their fluent counterparts for geography or mathematics lessons, but hardly participate at all when they are required to read long passages or communicate complex ideas in English. If this were the case, the hypothesis that English
fluency acts as a diffuse status characteristic, similar to gender or age, would not be supported, since fluency only affects academic status when it is salient to the task at hand. Table 2 displays the participation rates by fluency for non-language arts activities only. As shown, participation rates for non-language arts activities are still significantly lower for students in the lowest quintile. Students in the highest quintile volunteer and participate at almost double the rate of the lowest students. The same effects observed in the overall data do not seem to hold for Quintile 2 students, who participate in non-language arts activities at a higher rate than all but top quintile students. However, forced action opportunities for this group remain at similarly high levels, indicating that the teacher still feels that many Quintile 2 students are not participating. This discrepancy can be explained by one anomaly in Quintile 2, who participates at rates far exceeding her low fluency peers, as well as virtually everyone else in the classroom, for non-language arts activities. This student, Trinh, accounted for over 62 percent of her quintile’s desired action opportunities and 40 percent of their actual action opportunities. Thus, without her, Quintile 2’s participation rates would be similar to those of Quintile 1. To emphasize this, Table 3 displays adjusted participation rates that have replaced Trinh’s scores with the mean of the other six students in the quintile. Trinh immigrated to the United States from Vietnam just eleven months ago. She is usually

<table>
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<tr>
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<th>Forced Action Opportunity (called on w/o raising hand)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quintile 1</td>
<td>.143</td>
<td>.136</td>
<td>.364</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quintile 2</td>
<td>.228</td>
<td>.227</td>
<td>.454</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quintile 3</td>
<td>.171</td>
<td>.182</td>
<td>.091</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quintile 4</td>
<td>.228</td>
<td>.159</td>
<td>.091</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quintile 5</td>
<td>.228</td>
<td>.295</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3 – Adjusted Participation Rates for Non-Language Arts Activities Only (Anomaly Removed)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fluency</th>
<th>Desired Action Opportunity (raised hand)</th>
<th>Actual Action opportunity (called on)</th>
<th>Forced Action Opportunity (called on w/o raising hand)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quintile 1</td>
<td>.164</td>
<td>.143</td>
<td>.364</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quintile 2</td>
<td>.115</td>
<td>.167</td>
<td>.454</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quintile 3</td>
<td>.196</td>
<td>.190</td>
<td>.091</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quintile 4</td>
<td>.262</td>
<td>.167</td>
<td>.091</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quintile 5</td>
<td>.262</td>
<td>.310</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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the first student to arrive in the morning and spends time before school asking questions about homework and conversing with the teacher. While her low English fluency certainly affects her academic confidence and status in language arts activities and small group work, her self-expectations seem unaffected when English fluency is not specifically salient.

Given the data for non-language arts activities, it is not surprising that higher quintile students participate at much greater rates than their less fluent counterparts during language arts activities too. However, the size of the disparity is so remarkable that it warrants attention. Table 4 displays the participation rates by fluency for language arts lessons only. Note that the higher quintile students volunteer and participate at rates up to fourteen times

Table 4 – Participation Rates for Language Arts Activities Only

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fluency</th>
<th>Desired Action Opportunity (raised hand)</th>
<th>Actual Action opportunity (called on)</th>
<th>Forced Action Opportunity (called on w/o raising hand)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quintile 1</td>
<td>.025</td>
<td>.069</td>
<td>--**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quintile 2</td>
<td>.150</td>
<td>.116</td>
<td>.500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quintile 3</td>
<td>.175</td>
<td>.209</td>
<td>.500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quintile 4</td>
<td>.350</td>
<td>.349</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quintile 5</td>
<td>.300</td>
<td>.256</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** The lack of forced action opportunities for Quintile 1 students seems counterintuitive. However, this is explained by the teacher’s reluctance to use this method during language arts activities. She feels forcing low fluency students to participate during these activities would accomplish little, and would embarrass them more than anything else.
higher than students with the lowest fluency ratings. Obviously, a discrepancy is to be expected, since language arts activities presumably require a level of English language proficiency, but with such a large gap between top and bottom, it is not difficult to imagine how status associated with language arts skills can be transferred to other academic areas.

**Student-Centered Activities**

Student-centered activities usually took place in groups of four students. The teacher, Ms. Simms, had carefully arranged the seating chart so students of varying fluency levels worked together. Most of the data presented below comes from observations of a long-term geography project in which students were assigned a state and required to construct a large poster to present to the class. Ms. Simms designed the project such that students with varying types of abilities could productively contribute to the group. Students were required to find specified demographic information about their state, (i.e., population, largest city, etc.), historical information, (i.e., year the state entered the Union, major occurrences, etc.), and draw a scaled map of the state with topographical details and major cities, among other tasks.

The most common observation I noted about these groups was the systematic variance in types of roles assumed by different group members. In virtually every group, there were one or two students who played the role of facilitator, delegating tasks and instructing other students as to how to complete the various phases of the project. Without exception, these students were in the higher fluency quintiles. I observed an even more interesting trend among students with lower fluency levels. Many students in the lower quintiles physically withdrew from the group after a short period of time. One poignant example involves a girl named Irene, who joined the class just a few months ago after being
in bilingual classes since immigrating to the United States. Irene is completely silent in the classroom at all times, speaking just a couple times over the many hours I was observing the class. In group work, she seems even more uncomfortable. For the first five minutes of group interaction, Irene had situated her chair perpendicular to the other group members, so that she wasn’t facing the group. She had a pencil firmly clinched in her mouth, and seemed to take cues from the other students, smiling when they smiled and laughing when everyone else did. I watched this group intently for over an hour, but Irene didn’t speak once. No one in her group seemed to even acknowledge her presence. The interesting thing is Irene isn’t nearly as shy around adults. On several occasions I saw her showing photographs she had taken to Ms. Simms, or talking to her during recess. However, in the classroom, she has such low status that she seems afraid to speak.

Other examples are less extreme, but nevertheless are very interesting. Irene has such a low fluency level that she has difficulty understanding instructions and does not even attempt to complete assignments. Others, such as Juan, attempt to complete assignments while physically separating themselves from the group. In Juan’s group, a Quintile 4 student, Katherine, was the obvious facilitator. Almost immediately after group work began, she grabbed the assignment instructions out of Juan’s hand, pointed to a passage, and said, “You do that part.” Juan was given the job of copying demographic statistics onto a sheet of paper to paste onto the final poster. Katherine took the more difficult tasks of finding historical information about their state in the encyclopedia and drawing the map. Juan is a rather emotionally demonstrative boy, and it was clear that he was unhappy with this assignment. He turned his chair away from the group, and began work on the assignment at another table.
While he was still on-task, he was clearly the low-status member in the group, getting the easiest and least desirable job, and instead of objecting, physically withdrew from the group.

Other students chose more subtle ways to distance themselves from their group members. Carlos, a Quintile 2 student, stared blankly at an atlas for several minutes, while Trinh, the student from Vietnam mentioned in the previous section, spent much of the group time rummaging through the classroom library. Trinh is an interesting case, because she speaks neither English nor Spanish fluently. Other lower quintile students commonly use Spanish to consult with their higher fluency counterparts when they don’t understand something, but Trinh cannot do that. Additionally, she has a thick accent that clearly embarrasses her, and sometimes other students have difficulty understanding her. Consequently, she spent much of the time standing above the rest of her group, monitoring their work and attempting to correct them if they went wrong somewhere. Trinh is a very intelligent girl, and through conversations I have had with the teacher I have learned that Trinh gets frustrated when she cannot explain her reasoning and justify an answer she knows is right to her classmates. She quickly gets agitated and exasperated, and commonly withdraws to the library to quietly do her own work.

One group was composed of two boys from the lower quintiles and two girls from the higher quintiles. While the girls worked diligently, the boys, Andy and James, talked about cars and other unrelated topics. After a few minutes, the boys figured they should get involved in the activity, but the poster, books, markers, and all other resources needed to do the project were on the girls’ side of the table. Andy had to peer over Karen’s shoulder to see the work their group had completed. Andy started working, copying sentences Karen had written on her worksheet onto his own. Karen did not trust Andy’s skills enough to give him
a job that would actually produce new material helpful to the group. To have him actually working on anything was enough.

Of all the group interactions I observed, no one made as concerted an effort to avoid the group as Vincent did. Vincent is an extremely low fluency student who is in a mainstream classroom for the first time. Almost immediately after group work began, Vincent asked Ms. Simms if he could go to the restroom. He was gone for almost ten minutes, and upon his return, finds that his group has been doing well without him. He sits and stares at the half-finished poster in the middle of the table for a few seconds, and then turns to Tina, a Quintile 5 student who is clearly the group’s leader. “I’ll be back, alright Tina?” Tina ignores Vincent at first, but after he calls her name again, she nods. Vincent collects some colored pencils sitting on the desk and takes them to the pencil sharpener, where he sharpens each to a lethal point. He then spends some time at the water fountain, at which time the teacher notices him meandering around the classroom and follows him back to his seat. Ms. Simms tells the group that Vincent needs to contribute to the poster, so Tina gives him the job of copying demographic statistics onto a sheet of paper. Vincent writes two words, then stops, and looks to Tina, “Tina, Tina, Tina!” When she glances up from the encyclopedia, Vincent asks, “Is this big enough?” Tina considers the question for a moment, and then decides that his letters are indeed too small to see from the back of the classroom. Vincent, apparently unfazed, vigorously erases his work and starts again. After he finishes a sentence, he realizes that while the letters were slightly bigger at first, by the end of the sentence they return to their diminutive size. He copies the sentence again, and immediately repeats his refrain, “Tina, Tina! How’s this?” Tina gazes at the sentence, clearly irked by the constant interruptions. The group is running out of time to complete the poster, and her
encyclopedia research is comparatively more important that the statistics Vincent is copying. When she realizes that Vincent has forgotten a word, she loses her patience, "No! You forgot to write this!" Tina grabs the pencil from Vincent’s hand and erases the last part of his sentence, inserting the correct word and finishing the sentence in a fraction of the time it took Vincent. Using Tina’s handwriting size as a model, Vincent finishes the passage on his own. Vincent proudly displays his labors to Tina, who quickly inspects the work and nods in approval. “Yey!” Vincent exclaims, “I did something good for you!”

While Vincent’s story is an extreme example of the dynamics between high and low fluency students in small group work, the status hierarchy that dictates these interactions is not. Incidentally, Vincent’s status outside the classroom is not nearly as low. Some days, I played basketball with the students during recess and observed that Vincent is one of the best basketball players in the class. On the court, he has higher status than anyone. He dictates the rules of the game, is always a team captain when teams are being formed, and handles the ball more than anyone else during games. On the playground, it is the other kids who call out “Vincent, Vincent, Vincent!” to be on his team. But his relatively high status on the playground cannot compensate for his extremely low academic status. In the classroom, his strategy, like most of his low fluency counterparts, is to avoid potential scrutiny and ridicule by withdrawing from the group.

DISCUSSION

This study sought to determine the extent to which fluency operates as a status characteristic and affects performance expectations and participation in one fifth-grade classroom. The data strongly support the hypothesis that fluency is a very important status characteristic in virtually all classroom situations. Even during activities in which fluency was not salient,
i.e., drawing a scaled map or naming state capitals, low-status students initiated few performance outputs and were consigned to the simplest tasks. In these non-language arts activities, fluency operated as the most important diffuse status characteristic. This is unsurprising, since the sample was homogeneous across many typical diffuse characteristics, particularly age and race. In the absence of these typical distinctions, fluency operated as a status characteristic similar to age. In student-centered activities, students with a second grade reading level were treated as if they were second graders, whereas high status students were treated as if they were adults. High status students instructed low status students to complete the simplest assignments, and low status students repeatedly deferred to the higher status students for approval. In situations where fluency was salient, it operated as a dominant specific status characteristic, as low status students rarely participated. In all situations, low status students initiated fewer performance outputs and, when forced, declined more action opportunities than their high status counterparts. High status students participated at rates far exceeding low status students and dominated small group interaction, often assuming an authoritative role and delegating tasks to group members.

A particularly interesting finding was low status students’ common behavior of withdrawing from group interaction, by either physically separating themselves from the group or silently working on individual subtasks and ignoring the group’s collaborative efforts toward the overall task. While this behavior was not predicted, it easily fits within the expectation states literature. These low fluency students were essentially accepting their low status within the group and rather than countering the negative expectations, concurred with the low performance expectations that higher status members held. This is unsurprising, since observation began several months into the school year. Presumably, the low status
students had received numerous negative reward actions from their peers since the beginning of the year, and had formed permanent self-expectations that were aligned with their peers’ low performance expectations.

Thus, the fact that observation took place late in the school year was one significant limitation of the study. Combined with the necessarily short period of research, this late start prevented examination of the status hierarchies as they were forming and as they have existed over time. Significantly, fluency is different from other status characteristics like race or sex in that it changes. Low fluency students undoubtedly had higher fluency levels at the end of the school year than they did nine months earlier. While this study strongly suggests that fluency operates as a critical status characteristic, the research design could not examine changes in performance expectations over time as fluency levels change. Further research is necessary to determine the malleability of performance expectations for self and others over repeated task-oriented interaction. Much of the expectation states literature focuses on *ad hoc* interaction among unacquainted subjects. While this is interesting and provides important information about how people rely on diffuse status characteristics in forming performance expectations, most task-oriented social interaction occurs between acquaintances in school, at work, or at home. Thus, more research is needed to examine how performance expectations change over repeated task interactions, especially in response to changes in a key status characteristic.

Due to the sample’s small size and its relatively unusual ethnic demographic composition, these findings cannot be generalized to other populations. Nevertheless, the severity of status differences between low and high fluency students, combined with the practical importance of the findings of this study, justify further research. If comparable data
is collected in similar studies of other populations, the implications are serious. Bilingual education is one of the significant issues facing educators and lawmakers today. Recently, the trend has been toward cutting bilingual education in favor of total English immersion in mainstream classrooms, like that described in this study. While this option may result in students learning English more quickly, this study provides a powerful counterargument. If English fluency comes at the price of academic confidence, is learning English as quickly as possible really that important? The three students in this sample new to English-only instruction provide examples of the potential hazards of the prevailing policy. Each of these students displayed such low academic status that they participated in classroom activities only when forced, and performed only the simplest of assignments in task-oriented group interaction. Since performance expectations have self-fulfilling effects, it is very likely that their low status hindered their academic progress over the course of the year. Thus, in the future they will be doubly disadvantaged, in that they will have poor English skills and they will be behind academically. Perhaps in a bilingual classroom, where their low English fluency did not confer low status, they would be more engaged in the material and would understand it more easily. Even if it took more time for students to master English, at least when they finally did enter a mainstream classroom they would not be so markedly disadvantaged relative to their fluent peers.
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