

Generation 1.5 Students and College Writing

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An increasing number of U.S. high school graduates enter college while still in the process of learning English. Referred to as generation 1.5 students because they share characteristics of both first- and second-generation immigrants (Rumbaut & Ima, 1988), they do not fit into any of the traditional categories of nonnative English speakers enrolled in college writing courses, nor have they been the focus of much research on students learning to write in English as a second language (Harklau, Losey, & Siegal, 1999). Familiar with U.S. culture and schooling, generation 1.5 students have different learning needs from other English language learners, such as immigrants with limited English proficiency and international students who travel to the United States for the express purpose of earning an American college degree. This digest discusses some of the special needs of generation 1.5 students in the area of writing instruction and explores issues faced by English as a second language (ESL) and college writing programs in providing these students with appropriate writing instruction at the college level.

Generation 1.5. Students

Generation 1.5 students are U.S.-educated English language learners. There is great diversity among them in terms of their prior educational experience, native and English language proficiency, language dominance, and academic literacy. Some of these students immigrated to the United States while they were in elementary school; others arrived during high school. Still others were born in this country but grew up speaking a language other than English at home. They may see themselves as bilingual, but English may be the only language in which they have academic preparation or in which they can read and write. At the same time, these students may not feel that they have a full command of English, having grown up speaking another language at home or in their community. Equipped with social skills in English, generation 1.5 students often appear in conversation to be native English speakers. However, they are usually less skilled in the academic language associated with school achievement, especially in the area of writing. Academic writing requires familiarity with complex linguistic structures and rhetorical styles that are not typically used in everyday social interactions.

One of the most common traits among generation 1.5 students is limited or no literacy in the first language. According to Thonus (2003, p.18), many of these students "have lost or are in the process of losing their home languages without having learned their writing systems or academic registers. Unlike international students, gen-

eration 1.5 students lack a basis of comparison in fully developed oral, written, or both systems of a first language."

Placement in College Writing Courses

Placing generation 1.5 students in appropriate college writing courses presents a challenge. Many students who were mainstreamed in high school may find themselves placed in an ESL composition course in college because their writing exhibits characteristics of second language writers. Unfortunately, most instruction in ESL composition courses is designed either for international students who have learned English formally, are literate in their native language, and are accomplished students in their home countries; or for ESL students who have had limited exposure to English and to U.S. culture and education. Neither of these options is a good fit for generation 1.5 students.

Nor do regular freshman composition or remedial courses serve these students well. In mainstream writing courses, students are likely to encounter teachers who lack training in how to work with students from non-English-language backgrounds and who are unaware of their specific needs and how best to help them develop their writing skills.

Valdés (1992) argues that it is crucial for institutions of higher education to devise criteria to distinguish between students who are not fluent in English and therefore need ESL instruction and students who may have problems with academic English but do not need ESL classes. She refers to these two nonnative groups as "incipient bilinguals" and "functional bilinguals." Incipient bilinguals are still in the process of learning English. Their writing contains many grammatical errors, and they can benefit from ESL classes in which they will receive specialized instruction. In contrast, functional bilinguals are no longer considered English language learners, but they may have learned nonstandard forms of English that persist in their writing. Such "fossilized" forms include, for example, past tense verbs or past participles with missing *-ed* endings or present tense verbs lacking agreement with third person singular subjects (e.g., missing *-s* endings). Valdés (1992) suggests that functional bilingual students should be placed in mainstream classes and taught to identify the fossilized features of their written English and given guidance in and opportunities for editing their writing.

Instructional Issues

While some generation 1.5 students come to college prepared for the academic writing required in a college context, many do not. Difficulties in writing seem to stem from a lack of prior instruction in the kinds of writing needed for academic domains and a lack of attention to

the problems that interfere with students' ability to show what they know in writing. To work effectively with generation 1.5 students, college writing faculty should do the following.

Be aware of students' prior academic literacy experiences. Understanding the prior educational background of generation 1.5 students is essential to understanding what they need from writing instruction. Many of these students were placed in low-ability classes in U.S. high schools and have had little experience with extensive or academic writing. Research has shown that high school students in low-track classes are socialized into literacy practices that differ from those used in higher tracks (Harklau, Losey, & Siegal, 1999). In low-track writing classes, instruction focuses almost exclusively on substitution drills, dictation, short answer, or writing from models. Students have little experience with revising their writing or writing from sources. This is in stark contrast to the experience of college-track students, who are taught argumentative and analytical writing and who have experience writing research papers. As a result, although generation 1.5 students may have the cognitive skills needed for college-level courses, their writing skills may not reflect this ability and may prevent them from keeping up with their English-speaking peers.

Promote academic literacy. Reid (1992) believes that to be prepared for college writing, generation 1.5 students must be exposed to authentic writing tasks in the content areas so they become aware of the schemata, purposes, and rhetorical conventions needed for academic writing. This exposure should begin before students enter college. Hartman and Tarone (1999) argue that generation 1.5 students should have exposure to a wider range of writing in high school in order to promote their academic literacy skills.

Help students develop critical literacy. Blanton (1999) argues that literacy acquisition is not the same thing as language acquisition. She believes that critical literacy makes a crucial difference in academic success because it involves more than learning to read and write. It demands that students be able to engage in questioning, discussing, evaluating, and writing about what they have read. Students who have no experience talking about reading or writing do not know how to do this.

Recognize diverse needs. Ferris (1999) notes that because of differences in generation 1.5 students' background and experiences, their writing instruction needs to be different from the instruction offered to international and ESL students. For example, in addition to providing clear and explicit feedback on students' writing, teachers may need to teach generation 1.5 students how to make use of feedback and how to revise and edit their work. In addition, many generation 1.5 students cannot identify parts of speech, although this is assumed to be prior knowledge

in most grammar and editing texts. So teachers may need to supplement the texts with focused instruction on formal grammatical features and editing strategies. Thonus (2003) recommends that writing instruction for generation 1.5 students affirm their cultural and linguistic heritage, emphasize learning *how* to write rather than *what* to write, and balance grammar correction with instruction in rhetorical styles.

Conclusion

It takes many years for literacy in a second language to develop fully. To be successful in college, generation 1.5 students may need to unlearn previous practices and learn new ways of approaching writing. To do this, they need access to instruction that recognizes that they are different from other English language learners. This instruction needs to make room for their diverse backgrounds and strengths and prepare them for life outside the classroom.

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