

# **A RESEARCHER AND A PRACTITIONER'S PERCEPTION OF GENERATION 1.5 VS. INTERNATIONAL ESOL STUDENTS IN COLLEGE WRITING COURSES -SAME VIEW, DIFFERENT LENS**

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## **Abstract**

Many might assume that English language learners who are originally from other countries, but are raised in the United States and graduate from American high schools (Generation 1.5) would fare better academically than English learners who graduate from high schools abroad and then migrate to the United States after graduation. However, as we demonstrate, this is not always the case. Through the perspectives of an ESOL teacher who interacts with students, and a quantitative researcher who measures students' performance, this paper discusses success in college-level ESOL writing courses, the influence of acculturation through living in the US, and the quality and significance of prior secondary academic preparation in the home language. The ESOL classroom teachers' years of practical experience complement and clarify the findings of researchers, and present a more accurate picture of English learners and their authentic production of written English.

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Through years of practical experience, ESOL teachers intuitively know what mistakes their students are going to make, such as troublesome areas of pronunciation, incorrect syntax, and faulty verb usage. After correcting hundreds of essays in English teaching, they often know instinctively what native language their students speak. For example, veteran ESOL teachers do not need a qualitative analytical study to tell them that students of English have difficulty using forms of do, such as, "Did you do your homework?" "I did do my homework." "I do do my homework every day." Simply, English is difficult to master and it takes much trial and error practice to dominate.

Because I have been teaching ESOL for many years, I have a wealth of practical knowledge from which I speculate and draw conclusions. I have not specifically measured English learners' mistakes, yet I have an understanding of English language learners that an individual who is only trained to conduct research might not possess. After honing my English teaching skills in a variety of classroom situations for many years, and undergoing the pain of learning a second language myself, I am in an excellent position to teach teachers how to teach language learners. To this end, I dedicate myself to being a practitioner. Being in the teacher education field, I have to stay familiar with current research as well. However, as with many ESOL teachers, we can often say to researchers, "Show me your numbers and I'll tell you why you got them."

Given my above-mentioned background, I was approached by my colleague who did a study in response to the evaluative needs of a large two-year community college ESOL program. Administrators of the program were concerned about the great number of ESOL students who failed and repeated writing courses. His initial assumption was that students who completed their

academic preparation in American secondary schools (Generation 1.5) would be more successful in ESOL writing courses due to the longer period of acculturation and exposure to English and the American culture. He theorized that those non-native English speaking students who graduated from secondary schools from other countries (bilingual international students) would prove to be the vast majority of repeaters due to their lesser exposure to the American culture and minimized acculturation. When his findings proved otherwise, he was baffled and sought to determine the reasons for this counterintuitive phenomenon. This confusion led him to me, and I began to explain to him why his findings made perfect sense to me, based on what I had noticed in the classroom over the years.

My colleague examined these factors to try to differentiate between students who pass college-level ESOL writing courses from those who fail: High school graduation (country of origin versus the United States), prior secondary schooling, age, age of migration, length of residence in the U.S., and number of hours worked per week. He assumed that demographic and acculturation-related variables would differ between students who passed and students who repeated ESOL writing courses, and supposed that acculturation and second language acquisition could be directly connected to ethnic identity and stress, especially resultant from the acculturation process itself. These factors could be critical influences on acculturation and second language acquisition (Author, 1998).

## **The Connection Between Acculturation and Language Acquisition**

I began my explanation by defining what I believed were important connections between acculturation and language acquisition. Research-

ers view acculturation through a rainbow of perspectives. Kim (1998) describes the process as "deculturation and acculturation." Learners acquire new cultural behaviors that fit the host culture and discard those behaviors that are unsuitable. Fantini (1997) relates the idea of acculturation as a transformative process of intersecting worldviews of similarities and differences, resulting in cultural universals. Brown (1994) and Schumann's (1978a) models of language acquisition linked proficiency in a second language to the level of acculturation. According to Schumann, second language learners who were slow to acculturate within the target language community failed to progress beyond the early stages of language acquisition because the need for language was for basic information exchange as opposed to social identification or the realization of personal attitudes (Ellis, 1994). Furthermore, Schumann's model assumed a linear relationship between language acquisition and acculturation, and the existence of mediators between the two factors.

Brown (1994) based his four-stage acculturation model on the idea that the learner's recovery from the culture shock experience determines assimilation or adaptation to the new culture. Language mastery plays a role in the acculturation process; if the learner feels social distance from the host culture, it affects language and culture learning. Brown also describes the tendency for learners to either stay in the third stage (anomie, or a feeling of homelessness) and not progress with the language, or they pass into the fourth stage and complete mastery of the language. At the third stage, learners "get by" with the incomplete language proficiency they possess, including the fossilized errors, because they make themselves understood. An intensely psychological experience, the higher-level language learner develops a new cultural identity to accompany the target language.

Keefe (1980), Giles and Byrne (1982), Author, (1998) and Lam (as cited in Carter & Nunan, 2001) used the term biculturality as the ability to alternate between two cultures. Author (1998) noted that acculturation was inextricably related to language acquisition. Moreover, Gibson (2001) noted that processes of acculturation depend largely upon where the immigrants settle in the United States, what ethnic and social class groups comprise the community in which they live and with whom they come into contact. The culture to which they are exposed is not necessarily a standard form of American culture, thus reducing contact with standard American English (Author, 1991; Gibson, 2001).

### **The Connection Between Ethnic Identity and Language Acquisition**

Lambert (1974), and later Banks (2001) addressed the connection between ethnic identity and language acquisition in terms of additive or subtractive bilingualism. Additive bilingualism involved the process of addition of the target language without the loss of the native language or the practices of the native culture. Additive bilingualism occurred when the language learner had a positive view of the native culture's ethnic identity and of the culture of the target language community. Contrarily, subtractive bilingualism occurred when the language learner's desire was to assimilate into the target language community and had a low estimation of the native culture's cultural identity (Cummins, 1984). Fishman (1981) stated that subtractive bilingualism tends to be a natural occurrence that takes place over a period of generations and immigrants who maintain the ethnic language are the exception rather than the rule. Some researchers (Hamers & Blanc, 2000) perceive additive and subtractive bilingualism as a parallel to cognitive advantages and disadvantages.

Young and Gardner (1990) assumed that a linear relationship existed between ethnic identity and second language acquisition. Specifically, Young and Gardner showed that those language learners who identified with the target language community were the ones who demonstrated higher levels of target language proficiency (Benz, 2002; Clement, 1980; Gardner, 1985). An obvious connection to the aforementioned position was that similarities between cultures facilitated cultural identification with a host culture and, consequently, second language acquisition (Banks, 2001). That is, marked similarities between host and the native cultures insured higher levels of second language acquisition (Svanes, 1988). Traditionally, when students are able to transition into the dominant culture to the extent that they are able to acquire the language, they are seen as "successful" in the acculturation process (Trueba, 1990).

Portes and Zhou (1993) and others (Portes, 1994; Portes and Rumbaut, 1996) described acculturation and mobility patterns in terms of segmented assimilation. Ethnic groups who improve their economic situations by completely integrating socially, politically and culturally in the traditional linear pattern easily assimilate into the middle class, become upwardly mobile, and are able to interact using the English language. Many Cuban exiles in Miami typify this type of immigrant (Portes & Stepick, 1993).

According to Portes and Stepick (1993), ethnic groups who practice selective acculturation or selective assimilation adjust their lives in the new country so they may deliberately maintain the native culture while rapidly climbing the socioeconomic ladder. Many Vietnamese, especially in New Orleans and California, exemplify this pattern, as they are able to function in both cultures and languages (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996; Zhou & Bandston, 1998).

Finally, downward assimilation results in poverty, unemployment and the inability to become prosperous or integrate into the middle class. Many Haitians who reside in Southern Florida suffer this misfortune. This marginalization may lead to a feeling of rejection of their native culture as the young immigrants try to blend into the mainstream of those born in the United States. Many young Haitians, who initially feel no kinship to African Americans, may later often assume the identity, lifestyle, language variations and mannerisms of African American youth to gain acceptance by their peers. This stance leads to a rejection of the native cultures and a denial of knowledge of the native language (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996; Portes & Zhou, 1993).

Additive acculturation (Lam, in Carter & Nunan, 2001; Gibson, 1988, 1998) is described as the ideal situation where the children of immigrants acquire the positive aspects and language of the new culture while enjoying the strong bonds of the native cultural and values. Larsen and Smalley (1972), and Banks (2001) agree that similarity between cultures can act as a catalyst to second language acquisition. Larsen and Smalley (1972) determined that cultural alienation results from the target language community's view of the new language learner as an alien within a community (e.g., domestics). To experience acceptance, the language learner had to undergo a process of dealienation or redomestication, which may have led to enhanced second language acquisition (Gardner, 1985).

## **Generation 1.5 Students**

Later studies have shown that other factors contribute to the idiosyncrasies and related issues of immigrant populations in the United States. A phenomenon called "Generation 1.5" is that of a population of students who arrive in the United

States during adolescence and remain trapped between two cultures. Their education and acculturation processes are incomplete in their native languages and cultures, as well as in their adopted language and culture (Benz, 2002). Harklau, Siegal, and Losey (1999) distinguish this generation as students who enter the United States by way of the public schools, become bilingual, and continue on to matriculate in higher institutions. Benz (2002) says, "Besides demographic traits, Generation 1.5ers can also be characterized by their common challenges....being immersed in English before they have a chance to develop their cognitive/linguistic skills" (p.19). This group of students is believed to acquire English by being what Reid (1997) calls "ear learners," or those individuals who learn the language by oral/aural methods, as opposed to "eye learners" who learn by traditional methods of reading, writing, and grammar instruction. Those students who are educated in other countries reflect "eye learning" and, presumably, are better prepared for the academic rigor of American tertiary institutions. Although the young American immigrants that have become acculturated through educational immersion in an English-language medium can be considered near-native English-speakers, their literacy skills are underdeveloped.

## **Limits of the Study**

In an attempt to provide constructive ESOL program assessment, this study focused on determining which students repeatedly failed ESOL writing courses. My colleague's principal objective was to ascertain if acculturation issues were the primary reasons for failure; therefore, factors such as familiarity with reading in English were not considered at the onset of his study. As a teacher and a learner, I assumed that better writers were better readers because they internalize the writing process as they read. My instinctive

assumptions are supported by studies that confirm through research that good writing is a direct result of reading (Krashen, 1993; Lee, 1995 {as cited in Krashen, 1996}) and individuals who live in print-rich settings possess greater facility with reading and writing. I am unsure to what degree participants of this study have contact with English print. A lack of reading practice could impede writing skills, which could account for failure in a writing course.

Additionally, cultural influences on writing styles were not addressed. That is, American academic prose, syntactic conventions, content, general form, and formats in presenting text differ significantly from the rhetoric and writing style of the students' native language (Connor & Kaplan, 1987; Kaplan, 1988; Vann, Meyer & Lorenz, 1984.) Without looking at these issues in contrastive rhetoric, it is difficult to determine to what degree they might have contributed to failure of the writing courses. As a rule, instructors more often overlook foreign language errors if they do not impede the content and general form of the writing (Carlson & Bridgeman, 1983; Carlson, Bridgeman, Camp & Waanders, 1985). It is also unclear to me how the instructors graded their students, if a uniform rubric was used, or if a standardized list of criteria was a basis for scoring achievement.

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

The participants were 210 ESOL students from a two-year community college who were enrolled in either the low-intermediate, high-intermediate, or advanced ESOL writing course. The participants were assigned to their appropriate level of instruction according to their scores from English proficiency evaluations designed and



implemented by the ESOL Department of the college. The least English proficient students were assigned to the low-intermediate courses; the high-intermediate students demonstrated a good level of English proficiency; and the advanced English students were evaluated as being almost proficient enough in English to attend regular college courses.

Students were identified as repeater or non-repeater based on their academic histories in ESOL courses. The repeater group comprised students who repeated a college-level ESOL course at least once. Those students who never failed a course comprised the second group.

### ***Demographic Characteristics***

Two hundred ten ESOL students participated in this study, 118 (56.2%) females and 92 (43.8%) males. The average age was 22.8 years old; the standard deviation was 4.5 years. The participants originated from Asia (59.5%); Africa (11.5%); Europe (9.5%); South-America, Central American, and Caribbean (8.1%); Arabia (7.2%); and India (3.3%). Only two participants (1%) omitted information about their country of origin.

English was the second language learned for 71.5% of the participants. Fifty-nine (28.1%) participants indicated that English was the third or fourth language learned. The average age of migration to the United States (U.S.) was 18.9 years old with a standard deviation of 4.9 years. The average length of residence in the U.S. was 4.0 years with a standard deviation of 3.4 years. The range of U.S. residence was from less than six months to 21 years.

Most of the participants were legal residents or citizens (61.4%). The next largest group (33.8%) comprised students with a student visa.

Ten (4.8%) participants neglected to indicate their legal status. The majority of participants (59.0%) graduated from high schools outside of the U.S. The remaining participants (41.0%) graduated from high schools in the U.S.

Business was the most frequent educational subject selected by the participants (29.4%). Other educational subjects were as follows: Engineering (18.6%); Nursing (10.0%); Computer Science (8.6%); Pharmacy (5.2%); Medical Technology (4.8%); Pre-medicine (3.8%); Art (2.9%); Pre-Dentistry, Sciences, and Architecture (1.4%); and Languages, Law, and Social Work (.5%). Thirty-three (15.7%) participants omitted a response to this question.

Most participants were employed (61.0%). The remainder were unemployed (38.6%). For the employed, "food service" (18.1%) was the most frequently indicated occupation. Other students worked in retail (13.8%), service (5.7%), medical technology fields (4.3%), laborer/factory (3.8%), clerical (2.9%), managerial (1.9%), private business (1.4%), and as illustrator (.5%). Many participants (74.3%) indicated that they lived with family members. A small number of students (9.0%) lived alone while a larger number lived with roommates (15.2%).

### ***Procedure***

The director of the ESOL Department of a two-year community college located in a large metropolitan area of the southeastern U.S. granted permission to conduct the study. Full-time and adjunct ESOL instructors volunteered to collect data in their classes following an initial meeting with the researchers. Data were collected during regularly scheduled classes from students who volunteered their participation.

It took approximately 20 minutes for the par-

ticipants to complete the research questionnaires. The participants were informed by the instructors about the nature of the study, the possible uses of the information, the manner in which data would be handled and by whom, and about their right to refuse to participate or withdraw from participation at any time during the data gathering period. The participants completed a written consent form, and anonymously completed a demographic questionnaire. The data collection period lasted approximately two weeks. Once the data were collected, they were compiled, prepared, and coded to conduct the statistical analyses using a commercially available computer program.

### ***Demographic Questionnaire***

Information about gender, age, country of origin, native language, languages other than English spoken, length of residence in the U.S., age of migration, educational major, employment, immigration status, courses enrolled in, number of times ESOL courses were repeated and living situations was collected to determine the backgrounds of the participants.

## **Results**

### ***Differences among Participants***

Analysis of the study indicated that the low-intermediate, high-intermediate and advanced level participants differed in relation to the country in which graduation from high school took place. Participants who graduated from high school in another country were more numerous in the advanced college-level ESOL course (54.1%). In other words, U.S. high school graduation was not a necessary or sufficient condition to place students in advanced college-level ESOL courses when conducting the department-based placement evaluations. Additionally, nearly 45% of the

participants repeated ESOL courses at least once. Within the group of those who repeated courses, 6.7% repeated a course twice and 17.6% repeated three or more times. These interesting findings are what puzzled my colleague.

### ***Discussion and Implications for Teaching***

The initial objective of this study was to determine if acculturation factors were the major determinants in predicting success or failure in college ESOL writing courses. My colleague assumed that U.S. high school graduation led to greater proficiency in the English language and subsequent readiness for advanced college-level ESOL writing courses. This assumption may rest on the logic that graduation from a U.S. high school allows increased exposure to English instruction and more opportunities for cultural accommodation and enhancement of language skills necessary for successful completion of college-level courses. Near-native acculturation does take place with immigrant high school students; they often become more comfortable with the American culture and English language and further removed from their native language and culture (Benz, 2002).

The results of this study dispute the initial assumption that graduation from an American high school would improve literacy skills in the ESOL writing courses. Specifically, students who graduated from high school in another country were more frequently placed in the advanced college-level ESOL writing course (54.1%). Existing and emerging second language acquisition research may further clarify the disparity in written English proficiency between graduates from American high schools and those from other countries. For example, Scarcella (1996) suggested that second language learners speak English following a brief exposure to the American culture, though the nature of the language used may be non-standard.

Cummins (1981a, 1981b) indicated that a type of conversational language, referred to as Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS), is a functional language derived from situational, context-embedded and paralinguistic cues such as body language, speech intonations and facial expressions. Though a functional fluency in the English language can be gained rather quickly, students' proficiency in oral language skills must not be confused with the ability to engage in college-level academic work. Reid (1997) adds that students who study in the U.S. high schools write what they hear based on their "ear learning" and their rhetorical styles of writing mirror their oral utterances (e.g. "fistobal," instead of "first of all," and "I'm going to go" becomes "I gonna go"). They produce incorrect, overgeneralized syntax according to the oral rules they have incorrectly internalized as a result of being immersed in English.

Learning that U.S. high school graduation does not necessarily lead to placement in advanced college-level ESOL writing courses raises questions about the influences on the development of English language proficiency in high school. Benz (2002) points out that ESOL instruction in high school may focus on oral language acquisition instead of academic content; challenging academic content utilizing critical thinking skills may be suspended until oral acquisition improves. Further explanation of this phenomenon may be derived from what Collier (1987), Collier and Thomas (1989), Cummins (1981a, 1981b, 1997, in press), Short and Spanos (1989), and Thomas and Collier (1997) suggested. These researchers showed that basic oral language proficiency is not a sufficient foundation to adequately and efficiently perform in the standard English-speaking classroom. Furthermore, these researchers attributed the academic insufficiency to a lack of exposure to and understanding of academic vocabulary, and content-specific language necessary to success-

fully engage in advanced academic tasks. It is also possible that interruption of learning opportunities in the native language impairs the development of proficiency in the target language. Blanton (2001) suggests that a critical period of literacy growth may exist and, if so, it might be lost if native language education is interrupted. Benz (2002) says this interruption at such a critical period in the learner's life can be substantiated by Piaget's (1969) theory of formal operational skills that develop during adolescence.

Cummins (1994) suggested that the Common Underlying Proficiency model of language learning explained how the skills and knowledge in one language transfer to another. Furthermore, Cummins posited that a second language learner with substantial instructional time in the native language enjoyed the benefits of being able to transfer previously acquired skills and knowledge to the second language. Cummins (1981a, 1981b) maintained that students needed to develop Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), the academic language germane to engaging in context-reduced instructional activities. Cummins' research supports the belief that native language academic skills can be transferred to the second language. Thomas and Collier (1997) suggested that an average of five to seven years is necessary for second language learners to develop academic language ability.

### **Success or Failure in College- level ESOL Courses**

Failing to pass college-level ESOL writing courses was a frequent occurrence for the students sampled. Nearly 45% of the sampled students failed a college-level ESOL course at least once. More importantly, a sizable group of students experienced frequent failures evidenced by the repetition of courses twice, three or more times.



Longitudinal studies that follow college-level ESOL students through their college experience might better ascertain the influence of single and frequent failures on educational commitment and stamina. The processes of overall academic achievement, as well as English language proficiency achievement could paint a clearer picture as well. Additionally, we must take into account culturally disparate writing styles, as well as the quality and amount of prior education in the home language when trying to determine reasons for failure or success. Literacy and knowledge transferred from the home language to English must be factored into the equation. Those individuals who are educated in their native language have a fountain of prior knowledge from which to draw and apply to the new language.

The high frequency of course failures may have implications for dynamics inherent in ESOL instruction and the overall functioning of college-level ESOL departments. The finding that nearly half of the students who participated in this study repeated a course at least once suggests that the ESOL department may be unnecessarily duplicating services.

### **Differences Between those Who Fail and Those Who Pass College-Level ESOL Courses**

The most salient differences between students who pass and students who fail college-level ESOL writing courses are related to the length of residence in the U.S., age of migration, number of hours worked per week, and the degree to which the student perceives to be the target of prejudice. The students who experienced the least failures migrated to the United States at a later age, which suggests that those students who received a richer educational experience in their native languages were more successful in college

English classes. Learners who studied outside the country but maintained longer periods of residence in the U.S. seemed to be buffered from failure in ESOL writing courses. Additionally, less involvement in work-related activities contributed to the students' academic success. Last, those who frequently failed courses perceived themselves as being the targets of prejudice. It is possible that those students who have attended American high schools might perceive themselves as targets of prejudice based on experiences suffered in the acculturation process during adolescence. However, a more significant conclusion might be drawn because second language learners from the United States are often perceived by teachers as inferior to English language students who are of a different class and are educated abroad (Harklau, 2000). Harklau describes the attitudes of college ESL teachers towards American-educated students as more disruptive, under prepared, non-compliant, and "typically high-schoolish," unlike the "foreign" English learners. Blanton (1999) adds that the students educated in the U.S. may feel their status in the community is challenged when they are relegated to the preparatory English classes and are mistaken for internationals.

Generally speaking, experience of success in college-level ESOL writing courses is multifaceted and sensitive to dynamics beyond academic achievement and proclivity. Success in passing college-level ESOL writing courses relates to many factors including migration, age, extent of involvement in work-related activities, prior educational experience, and the perception of others' prejudice toward them.

Though the shortcomings do not abrogate the importance of my colleague's study, I need to point out that the participants came from only one two-year, junior college. Future research may incorporate a wider sample of ESOL students, and

include, for example, students from four-year institutions. Furthermore, it is difficult to determine the accuracy and appropriateness of the students' original level of instructional placement. Placement was based on an in-house assessment instrument that was developed to determine English-language proficiency. Given that the instrument and process may not have been adequately validated, it is possible that neither the process nor the instrument addressed important determinants of readiness for college-level education. In other words, determining authentic assessment by testing has its limits; we can only approximate the measure of language proficiency. Most ESOL teachers can attest to the numbers of high scoring students who can read and write, but cannot speak or understand English. Conversely, they can also describe the difficulties they have attending to the fossilized errors of high fluency students who have been in the United States for years, yet these students have no idea about proper grammar, syntax, or English language structure.

In conclusion, research is fundamental when trying to analyze and measure the process of language acquisition; however, findings hold greater significance and more relevance when they are correlated with the interpersonal experiences of the field practitioner who has experienced valuable years of daily interaction with the language learners themselves.

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