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The Challenges Faced by Teachers of Generation 1.5 Students at the Community College

Theresa Pruett-Said
Macomb Community College

Abstract

Community colleges have a great diversity of students including many students defined as Generation 1.5 students. These students sometimes “fall through the cracks” because they have not been served adequately in K-12 schooling, nor do they fit neatly into a category when they are at community college. Further, these students are often not placed appropriately when they begin community college. If placed into developmental writing for native speakers, they may not receive the type or extent of instruction they need. Yet if placed into ESL classes, they may be resentful at being considered ESL students, and also may not receive the type of instruction that will benefit them the most. This paper explores the challenges faced by teachers of Generation 1.5 students at community colleges and their students, and how community college instructors can help students in this situation.

Introduction

Community college teachers in the U.S. serve a wide variety of students. More and more, these students are second language students (Batalova, Fix, & Murray, 2007; Berger, Short, & Menken, 2008; Gawienowksi & Holper, 2006). Some of these students are international students, some are first-generation adult immigrants, and some are Generation 1.5 students. At many community colleges, these different groups are frequently served by different course structures. For example, there may be non-credit continuing education classes for immigrant adults, for-credit developmental English for Academic Purposes (EAP) classes for second-language students enrolled in the college, and an intensive program for international students. However, there is no common paradigm shared by community colleges, so some community colleges will have only one or two of these programs, or even none of them. Also, which students participate in which program may vary from one community college to another. One of the groups that has presented an even further challenge to community colleges and community college teachers is what is frequently referred to as Generation 1.5 students (Blumenthal, Carmona, Machado, & Spaventa, 2008).

In the past, immigrants may not have attended college, but as the global economy has changed, students must pursue post-secondary education to meet the socio-economic demands of an economic system that requires knowledge-based workers instead of
manufacturing-based workers (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Roberge, 2009). Thus, many people, including immigrants and their children who may not have considered college in the past, now enroll in college. Many of these students enroll in community college because it is near to home, less expensive, and perhaps less intimidating. In addition, no doubt, many second language learners enroll in community college because they may not have been accepted by other colleges and universities in part because of their lack of academic language skills (Patthey, Thomas-Spiegal, & Dillon, 2009).

Today, as the number of immigrants grows, community colleges are often in the forefront of discussions regarding how to meet the needs of this population, including those students referred to as Generation 1.5. In the following article, the varied definitions of Generation 1.5 will be presented, followed by a discussion of a typical profile of Generation 1.5 students. Discussion will then turn to challenges regarding placement in classes. Information regarding accommodations one teacher has made in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) classes to meet the needs of Generation 1.5 students at a large suburban community college will conclude the discussion.

**Definition of Generation 1.5 Students**

Which students are defined as Generation 1.5 varies. In the late 1980’s, this term was coined by sociologists to refer to children who were either born in the U.S. of immigrant parents or who had come at a very early age (Rumbaut & Ima, 1988). Interest in this topic and the use of the term in ESL and second-language writing circles began to appear in the late 1990’s (Roberge, 2009). Some researchers define Generation 1.5 students as students who were born in the U.S., or came at a very young age, but still present with second-language errors in their English. Others have expanded the definition to include any student who has attended some K-12 schooling in the United States (Gawienowksi & Holper, 2006; Harklau, Losey, & Siegal, 1999; Roberge, 2002; Singhal, 2004). In other cases, native non-English speakers, such as Puerto Ricans and Native Americans, are included within the definition. Even students for whom English is a major second language, such as some students from the Caribbean, Africa, and India, can be considered Generation 1.5 students (Roberge, 2002). Finally, the use of the term altogether has also been questioned (Moore & Wald, 2008). While the definition of Generation 1.5 students may vary, there are enough common characteristics that educators find the term useful as a starting point for discussions regarding these students. For the purposes of this paper, the author’s definition of Generation 1.5 students is students who came to the United States as children or adolescents and have had some of their schooling in K-12 in the U.S. school systems.
A General Profile of Generation 1.5 Students

For many years, the typical students which most ESL teachers taught were international students. These students were new to the United States and had usually been well-educated in their own countries. Generation 1.5 students often have the opposite profile (Reid, 2006). Many of them have lived in the United States for many years, and in some cases for their whole lives. Therefore, they often act just like their native-speaking English peers. In addition, they often have the same conversational abilities as their peers. However, their reading and writing skills may lag far behind their native-speaking peers. In addition, it is not uncommon for many of these students to have had limited or interrupted schooling (Berger et al., 2008; Roberge, 2002). Some of these students may not have literacy in their first language (Berger et al.; Meltzer & Hamann, 2005). Even students who come into the educational system well educated are coming into a system that is new to them and their parents (Curry, 2004; Preto-Bay, 2004). The curriculum they studied in their home countries may not be the same as in the United States. Large numbers of schools in the United States do not have adequate ESL and bilingual programs to serve these students’ needs. Thus, these students find themselves dropped into a new academic environment, language, and curriculum with limited or even no support. Like most children, these students are able to pick up listening and speaking English with their peers fairly quickly, but may continue to struggle to read and write academic English (Roessingh, Cove, & Watt, 2005). At the K-12 level, teachers may support these students by not grading them based on their English skills. Therefore, Generation 1.5 students may not be truly aware that their English skills are still weak. However, once they begin college, they will be expected to function at the same level as their native-English speaking peers (Harklau, 2000; Roberge, 2002).

Although Generation 1.5 students are not monolithic, there are a number of characteristics that many of them have in common. First, their academic reading and writing skills are frequently much weaker than their speaking and listening skills. Nevertheless, some students who live in ethnic enclaves may still have difficulty with speaking and listening in English, especially within the college classroom where they are expected to be able to follow longer lectures and give formal speeches. In addition, their writing and reading skills are weaker than their native-English speaking peers. This seems to be especially true of vocabulary usage (Nuttall, 2003). A number of these students have learned to write what could be referred to as “safe” essays which they know will be acceptable, but they do not have enough understanding of the structure of English and enough vocabulary to manipulate the language in another way.

One of the major challenges that these students present is that they do not see themselves as English language learners. Thus, they are often reluctant to take course work in ESL/EAPP, or simply do not identify themselves as non-native speakers of
English. In cases where students have managed to gain adequate control of English, this may not present a difficulty. However, some Generation 1.5 students still have significant enough difficulties that college coursework becomes almost impossible for them without more English study (California Pathways, 2000; Connerty, 2008; Singhal, 2004). Initially, these students may be able to cope satisfactorily at the community college, and even pass their first composition class. However, as they proceed and are expected to do more with their language skills, they may find they do not have the academic language base they need to succeed academically. As Glowski (2008) stated, “They succeed in the short-run, but fail in the long-term.” Because these students do not fit neatly into a category, how to help these students succeed continues to be a challenge at the community college level.

**Placement Challenges with Generation 1.5 Students**

One of the major concerns regarding Generation 1.5 students at the community college is placement. Without appropriate placement, community college students are at risk of failure in meeting their educational goals. Furthermore, if such students are placed in classes with requirements they cannot meet, teachers are frustrated because they do not know how to meet their needs. In the opinion of this author, accurate placement of Generation 1.5 is even more crucial because if they can receive the second language help they need, they can realize what their actual weaknesses are, and these weaknesses can actually be improved more quickly than in native speaking students who still have developmental needs. If Generation 1.5 students are not placed appropriately, they will continue to struggle with limited knowledge of why they are not succeeding.

Nearly all community colleges require all entering students, regardless of their language background, to take placement tests to place them into writing, math, and sometimes reading classes. Most community colleges require students to take a standardized exam such as the COMPASS (ACT, 2003). COMPASS offers an ESL test, but a student must first be identified as a second language speaker before the student is given the ESL test. This initial identification is one of the biggest frustrations concerning Generation 1.5 students that community colleges face. Because community colleges are open-admission, many of them do not require resident students to indicate their previous educational attainment. Therefore, unlike four-year colleges and universities, community colleges have no verifiable way of knowing when a student actually started attending school in the United States, or what classes they took while in school, or how well they did in them. Therefore, the only way that most community colleges can identify second-language speakers is to ask students to self-identify as native or non-native speakers on their testing intake form. Some colleges may ask questions such as “Which language did you first speak?” and/or “Which language do you speak at
home?” in order to identify English language learners who may not view themselves as non-native speakers (M. Spelleri, personal communication, November 7, 2008).

Many Generation 1.5 students who have gone to school for several years in the U.S. may, indeed, be fluent speakers of English, and thus not view themselves as non-native speakers of English. This is especially true because many of these students have limited literacy in the language they speak at home. If students take the ESL test, they can pass into the test given to native speakers. But if they do not, they are then placed into ESL classes based on their scores. Even Generation 1.5 students who believe they are not native speakers of English will identify as native speakers because they want to avoid the perceived stigma of ESL. They may know they need more ESL support, but do not want to identify as being weak in English because they want to save face in front of friends and family. Another reason students may misidentify is because in most community colleges there are only one or two levels of developmental writing, but perhaps several levels of ESL courses. Students want to quickly get through their program of study and see ESL classes as slowing them down. This is true even though at many community colleges students can be enrolled in other classes while taking their ESL classes. But ultimately, many of these students are simply unaware of what they do not know, and their expectations of what they will have to do in college are uninformed (Goldschmidt & Ousey, 2006). This may be all the more true at the community college level because community colleges as open-admissions institutions accept all students regardless of their readiness for college study. Yet, if students are not placed accurately initially, their chances for success diminish (California Pathways, 2000; Roessingh et al., 2005).

Second-language students who do not take the ESL version of the placement tests will place into developmental (remedial) writing and reading classes regardless of their level of English. Since community colleges accept all students, it is possible for a student with very little English, and extremely limited literacy, to place into developmental English and reading. For many second-language students, one semester of developmental English will not be enough to bring their English writing and reading up to college level. But even for students whose English skills may be at a higher level, developmental classes focusing on native-speaker weaknesses may not meet the needs of Generation 1.5 students who may have different needs and require more time than just one developmental writing class to overcome those weaknesses. In addition, these classes are frequently taught by instructors who have little or no second language acquisition background (Matsuda, 2008).

Some students may feel they are being discriminated against because they are not native speakers and/or because of their ethnicity. Because of this tension, a number of community colleges only require international students to take ESL classes. Resident
students may be advised to take ESL classes, but this is not mandatory. A recent on-line discussion on three professional discussion lists (esllcc-l@hcc.hawaii.edu; slwis-l@lists.tesol.org; slw_eccc@lists.ncsu.edu) indicated that most community colleges are not satisfied with their initial placement procedure, especially as it concerns Generation 1.5 students. Those colleges that seem the most satisfied with their placement procedure base at least some of their placement decisions on a direct writing assessment. However, community colleges that do not use a direct writing assessment view it as too expensive and complicated to implement.

Furthermore, since counselors and advisers will often be the first persons students meet with at the college, it is important for counselors to understand the needs and background of Generation 1.5 students. Teachers can help initiate this process. For example, the author started the process of building bridges with counselors by creating a FAQ sheet regarding the EAP program and the students served in the program, including Generation 1.5 students. This was followed by more formal presentations where counselors could ask more questions. This has created a more comfortable interaction between counseling and EAP than was the case previously.

Yet the problem of initial placement remains unsolved. Meetings with the testing department, the English department, and the administration have produced few changes, and many Generation 1.5 students still “fall through the cracks.” In the author’s opinion, the inclusion of a writing sample, along with standardized placement testing, would significantly improve accurate placement of Generation 1.5 students since students’ writing samples could be evaluated for second-language errors. Thus, students who misidentify as native speakers and who still have many errors in their writing could be correctly placed and helped at the beginning of their college careers instead of when they find themselves in academic trouble.

Creating Support for Generation 1.5

One of the challenges of teaching Generation 1.5 is that even though their speaking and listening skills in English may be on par with their native English-speaking peers, in the realm of reading and writing they are frequently still English language learners. If put into a regular section of composition, these students will not receive the type of or the extent of instruction they need to improve. However, when they are in an ESL classroom with recently arrived immigrants and international students, they will be annoyed by and bored with activities that focus on improving listening and speaking skills as well as activities that focus on cross-cultural comparisons. Some Generation 1.5 students may have little knowledge of a culture other than the U.S. However, this does depend greatly on the amount of time the student has been in the U.S., how often they visit “back home”, how much their parents share of their culture, and whether they are
connected to their ethnic community (Gawienowski & Holper, 2006; Roberge, 2002; Singhal, 2004).

Some colleges have tried to offer special classes for Generation 1.5 including special sections of composition for multicultural students. While these classes have been described in the literature, they still present some problems (Gawienowski & Holper, 2006; Holten, 2002). Some colleges that have offered special Generation 1.5 sections have found that there is not high enough enrollment to fill the classes, and at the same time it takes enrollment away from ESL/EAP classes so that there is the potential for neither class to run.

Other colleges offer special multicultural composition sections, but who will actually register in them remains a challenge. Recent discussions show that enrollment in these special sections depend heavily on counselors advising students to take them. In addition, Generation 1.5 students may still be reluctant to take them, or the few sections that can be offered do not fit into the students’ schedules. Other colleges have added a tutorial run out of the writing center to help Generation 1.5 students (Destandau & Wald, 2002). In order to meet non-language needs, one college has added a special orientation for Generation 1.5 students to help them realize the demands in both time and language that college will present (Goldschmidt & Ousey, 2006). Others feel that Generation 1.5 students do benefit from ESL/EAP classes if those classes are modified to meet their needs. Matsuda, in Writing Myths (2008), makes the case that Generation 1.5 students can be taught in EAP classes, along with other international students and immigrants, as long as instructors recognize that the student profile of their class is not that of the typical international student.

Teaching Generation 1.5 at the Community College

This author, who works at a large suburban community college, has made changes within and outside the classroom to accommodate the Generation 1.5 students who now make up a substantial proportion of the students in EAP classes along with other long-term immigrants. However, readers will also note that these are not large changes in her curriculum, further emphasizing that Generation 1.5 students can be integrated into ESL classes. First of all, it has been necessary to add questions to the initial student introduction form in order to identify Generation 1.5 students. Questions now include not only how many years students have lived in the United States, but also if they graduated from an American high school. Interestingly, at the community college level, some students mark they attended an American high school, but did not graduate. Later on in the semester, students are given the opportunity to share language history stories, but this must be done carefully because Generation 1.5 students are often initially reluctant to do so. However, as the semester progresses, they tend to become more comfortable doing so and find they have much in common with other immigrant students in the classroom.
This also allows the teacher to gain more insight into the challenges and frustrations, as well as the successes, these students experience.

As mentioned previously, Generation 1.5 students are often over-confident because they are unaware of the different expectations between high school and college (Goldschmidt & Ousey, 2006). Because of this, it is recommended to give a first-week “placement” test that makes students aware of the level and type of language skills expected without discouraging them (M. Spelleri, personal communication, March 3, 2009.). The author of this article includes multiple choice grammar questions which also appear on the final exam, a reading comprehension passage that includes inference questions, vocabulary exercises that use the Academic Word List (Coxhead, 2000), and a spelling exercise that asks students to identify the correct spelling of a choice of words. Within the classroom setting, it is also helpful to point out to students what other professors will expect. This can even include sharing syllabi from other classes. This is not only helpful to Generation 1.5 students, but to other ESL students as well.

Another change that the author has made in classes with Generation 1.5 students is to have writing topics that do not solely depend on comparing cultural differences as some Generation 1.5 students have little knowledge of a culture other than that of the United States. Even if they do have some knowledge, they may not be able to distinguish between cultural differences and generational differences. This may be one of the more difficult changes for ESL teachers to make as they often enjoy learning about the cultures of their students. Initially, this requires evaluating textbooks to determine if the textbooks focus too heavily on cultural topics as well as topics that assume the student is unfamiliar with U.S. culture. Such textbooks should not be used for classes with Generation 1.5 students. It is also necessary to offer a choice of topics in assignments. For example, a typical writing prompt is to compare two cultures. An alternative to this topic is to ask students to write or speak about how their lives are different from their grandparents’ lives. In this case, students can write about cultural or generational differences. Instead of just asking students to compare educational systems between two cultures, the option can be given to compare high school with college. This can have the added benefit of making Generation 1.5 students think about these differences as they are often not completely aware of what the differences are. Nevertheless, because Generation 1.5 students’ experiences are varied, there will be Generation 1.5 students who can and will want to discuss cultural differences. Therefore, giving students options in their assignments is important in classes with Generation 1.5 students.

Helping students to understand the register of college discourse is also important as Generation 1.5 students frequently have no idea that the English they speak and write is informal or even includes slang. In fact, they may not even realize there are different registers of language, whereas international students are often aware of register (even if
they do not know the term) and will ask overly-concerned questions about whether their language use is appropriate. Native speakers of English, while perhaps not being aware of the term register or how to exactly function in some registers, are at least aware that different people use language differently in various situations. In writing assignments, the author frequently spotlights words and expressions that may be too informal for college writing. In order to expose students to academic register in speaking, the author requires students in the more advanced ESL classes to attend academic presentations of guest speakers on campus and then write a summary and response to what they heard. This also encourages them to become more involved in campus activities, which is a continuing challenge with community college students.

Finally, there are language issues. While Generation 1.5 students may have similar difficulties, the range of those difficulties can vary significantly even within the same level. Some students’ writing may be barely comprehensible, or even legible, whereas other students appear to have fluency and reasonable accuracy in their writing. Generation 1.5 students will often continue to repeat the same mistakes so that it seems their English has become “fossilized” with errors. One reason for this is they do not notice their mistakes. Therefore, it is necessary to create activities that will make students notice. One way to do this is to ask students to find particular grammatical, lexical, and sentence structures within reading passages. These readings can come from their EAP textbooks, or from other books, newspapers, or periodicals. For example, students are given homework in which they are required to find examples of transitions with their meanings, or students may be asked to find examples of indirect speech in a reading. This is frequently done when students are studying these structures so that they notice how these structures are used in context. But just as important as helping them learn the structures, it also teaches them how to slow down and notice what they are doing. The author also gives spelling tests based on students’ spelling errors in their own writing since some of the Generation 1.5 students tend to have significant enough spelling difficulties to make their writing difficult to understand. But, in many cases, this is again a matter of students not noticing, as well as not knowing, what is important. Students sometimes feel their mistakes are not important because many of their mistakes may have never been brought to their attention (Fan, 2009).

Even Generation 1.5 students, however, whose writing appears reasonably fluent and accurate on first look may have more difficulties in writing than what may be initially apparent. This is because students have learned to write a “safe” essay, but if required to write outside of their comfort level, they will often have considerable problems. Forming and using verb tenses correctly, making a variety of complex sentences, and choosing precise, academic words may continue to be challenges. In order to encourage students to write beyond their comfort level and to use structures that
may be new to them, this author requires students to use particular sentence types and other structures as well as new vocabulary in their formal writing assignments. Requiring students to make revisions not only of content and organization, but also of more micro errors such as spelling and grammar, is essential for Generation 1.5 students because they often believe that as long as they have good ideas it does not matter how they communicate these ideas. Unfortunately, well-intentioned teachers can also reinforce this belief by telling students “you have good ideas” without pointing out aspects of their writing that they need to improve. In sum, activities that require Generation 1.5 students to notice, understand, and correct their language mistakes will help them accomplish their goals of obtaining a college education.

Conclusion

Community colleges and community college teachers are familiar with diversity issues and with working with under-prepared students. As such, they will continue to be on the front lines of working with Generation 1.5 students and other immigrant students to help them make the transition to academia. While a few colleges and teachers have created special classes and services for Generation 1.5, most teachers will find that they have to meet the needs of Generation 1.5 students within the configurations already present in their own colleges and in their own classes. This can be done by making modifications within their classes that include identifying students who may be Generation 1.5 and creating a safe, yet realistic, writing community within the classroom. In that context, curriculum modifications can be made to accommodate Generation 1.5 students. These modifications may include giving students topic options that do not require them to compare cultural differences with which they may be unfamiliar, teaching them the discourse and register of academia, creating activities that help them notice their mistakes, and increasing their academic vocabulary acquisition.

Furthermore, community college EAP teachers need to take the initiative in making connections with other support systems in the community college to inform them of the presence and needs of Generation 1.5 students. It is important that counselors and advisors be aware that the oral fluency of Generation 1.5 students can often mask significant weaknesses in reading and writing that can put these students at risk unless appropriate interventions are taken. Support personnel, such as tutors in the learning and writing centers, can be given training that helps them understand the problems that Generation 1.5 students may come to them with as well as how to help them overcome these problems. Faculty and administrators also need to be made aware of this demographic and their characteristics and challenges. Finally, EAP teachers will need to continue the push to create initial placement procedures that are both fair and accurate for Generation 1.5 students.
Community college teachers and administrators will continue to struggle with how to help Generation 1.5 students gain the language and academic skills they need to be successful, while the students themselves are reluctant, and even surprised, to discover that they, indeed, are having academic difficulty because of language weaknesses that are neither, yet both, ESL and developmental English concerns. In addition, these students may also be unfamiliar with the requirements and expectations of college and need extra support to help them acclimate to the college environment. The community college as a whole needs to recognize that this demographic must be served as it is a growing, yet at-risk, group. EAP programs and teachers, whether they want to or not, are often the ones that must take the initiative to help their college support Generation 1.5 students. With timely and appropriate support, these students can be successful in their educational goals.

Author Note

Theresa Pruett-Said, English for Academic Purposes, Macomb Community College. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Terry Pruett-Said (pruett-saidt@macomb.edu).
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