

# Assessment of Generation 1.5 Learners for Placement into College Writing Courses

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*ABSTRACT: Higher education settings in the United States typically include several types of writing assessments. Since tests determining students' placement into writing courses are often high-stakes, it is imperative for those who make placement decisions to be knowledgeable of the different types of learners entering higher education in order to make appropriate placement recommendations. This article investigates the existence of different types of second language learners in the U.S., with particular emphasis on the population currently identified as Generation 1.5. After describing several defining characteristics, I draw on results of studies identifying how these learners are different from other L2 learners. I use this exploration to highlight findings that can inform writing program administrators interested in adopting assessment procedures leading to fairer and more accurate placement of L2 students. Such findings could serve as a foundation for a writing placement framework that takes into consideration different types of learners based on their writing performance as well as cultural and educational backgrounds.*

*KEYWORDS: Generation 1.5; placement testing; second language learners; writing assessment*

## Introduction

Students pursuing higher education in the United States are typically subjected to several types of writing assessments. For example, before they enter a college or university, many future students are required to complete the SAT exam, which now includes a writing component with both multiple-choice and essay sections. Upon entry, students then take placement exams to determine which first-year writing courses are most appropriate for them. In some cases, students are also compelled to take exit exams verifying their writing proficiency before they continue in their coursework. While the practical purposes for each of these testing situations may differ (college applications, course placement, proficiency measures), one feature they have in common is that each of these testing situations serves the purpose of door-opener or gate-keeper (Bachman and Purpura), depending on the

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outcome. Additionally, in each case test users may consider results from these tests sufficient for making inferences about test takers' writing ability. Such inferences, however, are complicated by the fact that an increasing number of students in U.S. higher education are non-native speakers of English.

Assessment of students' writing to determine their initial placement into writing courses is an area of particular concern, since students' success in college depends in great part on their first-year experiences. Though often labeled placement tests, most of these assessments are actually diagnostic tools, used to identify students' strengths and weaknesses (Bachman and Palmer). Many colleges and universities offer various placement alternatives for new and transferring students, such as first-year composition, advanced composition, developmental or basic writing courses, ESL writing sections, and in some cases, intensive English courses through a non-credit intensive English program. When colleges offer several options for writing placement, they demonstrate sensitivity to the various needs new students have; however, fair and appropriate placement is potentially more complex than even these many options reveal. For example, while it may be relatively easy for placement test readers to identify writers whose first or only language is English (L1 writers) from those for whom English is a second language (L2 writers), it is much less simple to distinguish among different types of L2 learners based on their writing alone. Such a distinction among learners is critical, however, to ensure that the courses students are placed into will address their specific needs—both academic and psychological—rather than those of a similar population with a different set of strengths, weaknesses, and educational experiences.

In this article, I first investigate the existence of more than one type of L2 writer in the U.S., placing particular emphasis on the population currently identified as Generation 1.5. After describing several defining characteristics, I draw on results of studies examining Generation 1.5 students, especially those maintaining that these learners are different from other L2 learners. I use this exploration to highlight findings that can inform writing program administrators interested in adopting assessment procedures leading to fairer and more accurate placement of L2 students. Such findings could serve as a foundation for a writing placement framework that takes into consideration different types of L2 learners. I conclude by noting that the type of research that is currently needed to further our understanding of the differences between Generation 1.5 and other L2 learners is that which investigates students' writing performance and preferences in more detail in addition to their educational and cultural backgrounds.

## **Different Types of L2 Learners**

Learning to write in any language can be a challenge, since literacy is a type of “technology” (Purves 36) not acquired naturally or effortlessly, but which requires a great deal of attention and time. In this sense, writing and learning to write may be considered similar regardless of whether one is writing in one’s first language or a second language. Clearly motivated by the need to contest assumptions that L1 and L2 writing are similar beyond a superficial level, in his article “Toward an Understanding of the Distinct Nature of L2 Writing: The ESL Research and Its Implications,” Tony Silva summarizes 72 empirical studies comparing L1 and L2 writing, finding that “though general composing process patterns are similar in L1 and L2 . . . L2 writers’ texts were less fluent (fewer words), less accurate (more errors), and less effective (lower holistic scores)” (668). In addition to describing more specific differences at both the sentence and discourse levels, Silva notes differences in composing processes, stating that L2 writers planned and re-read their drafts less than L1 writers, and were less able to rely on intuition for revising and editing. Given these findings, Silva concludes that “L2 writing is strategically, rhetorically, and linguistically different in important ways from L1 writing” (669), findings which thus “have important implications for assessment, placement, and instructional procedures and strategies” (670).

To address the different writing behaviors and products that L2 learners appear to exhibit, many colleges offer L2 students the option to take writing courses taught by instructors trained in ESL teaching methods. The position promoted by the Conference on College Composition and Communication in their “Statement on Second Language Writing and Writers” (CCCC Committee) is that colleges should offer students a variety of placement options, and inform them of the consequences of these various choices. More specifically, providing students with alternative ESL courses allows students to choose classes where they may feel more at ease, and possibly offers them greater chances of success (Braine). For this reason, at the university where I teach, in addition to ESL developmental writing courses, we offer credit-bearing ESL versions for each of the three English courses required for graduation. While these courses are intended to help L2 students overcome some of the disadvantages they may face in writing in English, such courses cannot serve this purpose if (1) students are not made aware of these course options because they do not self-identify with the ESL label attached to such courses; (2) students are not identified as need-

ing ESL support through other means, such as placement testing; or (3) the courses fail to address students' actual needs by focusing instead on those of other types of L2 learners. For example, many L2 learners are long-term U.S. residents who enter college with a U.S. high school diploma, and thus they are not required to submit scores from proficiency exams such as the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) or IELTS (International English Language Testing System). College administrators are likely to evaluate these students along with L1 speakers of English, which may deny L2 learners access to courses and services created specifically for them, as they may not be identified as L2 learners until they have already been placed into courses designed to address L1 writers' needs (Fox). In contrast, some L2 graduates from U.S. high schools are too readily identified as L2 learners and then placed into intensive English programs, where they are treated as newcomers to the U.S.—an equally inappropriate result. Either of these placement decisions, which neglect to consider L2 learners' backgrounds and specific needs, may result in students' dissatisfaction with their writing performance and themselves, making them more likely to fail or withdraw from courses and even from higher education in general.

The usual focus on the L1-L2 dichotomy in much of the literature in second language acquisition often disguises the diversity within the population of L2 writers in U.S. higher education. Specifically, many findings from research on L2 writers in higher education are based on the assumption that these learners share the experience of international students who come to U.S. colleges and universities after having completed formal education in their home countries and, by implication, in their L1s. Practitioners who interact closely with L2 learners, however, have come to recognize the large numbers of students in U.S. higher education who have completed some of their secondary, or even primary, education in the U.S.; that is, there are many L2 students who already have extensive experience with English and who may have limited formal experience with their L1s (Bosher and Rowecamp; Harlau, Losey, and Siegal; Matsuda). In fact, students in ESL courses may range from international students who have achieved advanced degrees in their L1s and intend to return to their home countries, to refugee and immigrant students who have settled permanently in the U.S. with their families and may have received very little, if any, formal education in their L1s, as well as long-term resident bilingual students whose linguistic experience is unevenly divided between their L1 and L2 in a diglossic-like manner. Suresh Canagarajah adds that, in addition to its reference to linguistic minorities in the U.S., Canada, and Britain, the ESL label can be

extended to include students learning English for academic purposes in former British colonies, such as India, Nigeria, and Jamaica. This increasing recognition of different types of ESL learners and the contexts in which they study English calls into question the practice of treating them as one group during placement decisions into college writing courses, defined primarily by their non-native speaker status.

### **Generation 1.5 Students: Defining Characteristics**

More than fifty years ago, William Slager wrote about differences between the “foreign student and the immigrant,” and the corresponding differences they exhibit in college English courses. Emphasizing that course books and assessments designed for one population of L2 learners are often inappropriate for the other, Slager concludes “that there is a need for such specialized materials, there can be no doubt” (p. 29). More recently, Rubèn G. Rumbaut and Kenji Ima coined the term “1.5 generation” students in a 1988 paper about Southeast Asian refugee students, having recognized that L2 students who arrive as immigrants to the U.S. while still in school share certain traits with newly arrived L2 students as well as second generation immigrants (who were born in the U.S.), placing them somewhere in between these two populations. Though Linda Harklau, Kay Losey, and Meryl Siegal note that such a generational definition is inadequate for defining these L2 writers, they adopted the term “Generation 1.5” in the title of their 1999 landmark book, thus codifying the label for this previously unacknowledged segment of L2 learners whose presence in U.S. institutions of higher education is growing.

Perhaps the one common denominator in most definitions of Generation 1.5 students is that they have completed their secondary education in U.S. schools before entering college, unlike international F-1 visa students who arrive in the U.S. having already finished high school in their home countries. While useful, such a definition is problematic, however, since some L2 students may attend boarding schools in the United States prior to college. Indeed, the range of experience in U.S. schools may vary, with some students educated almost entirely in the U.S. K-12 system and others just finishing their final high school years in the U.S., blurring the boundaries between traditional L2 and Generation 1.5 learners in some cases. As a result of their experience in U.S. schools, many Generation 1.5 learners are familiar with U.S. education, teenage popular culture, and current slang, in contrast with most international students, who may require a period of orientation

and adjustment to these aspects of U.S. higher education (Harklau, Losey, and Siegal; Reid).

Another defining feature of Generation 1.5 students—one that is often overlooked—is their experience with their L1s. In fact, as a result of their experience in U.S. schools, Generation 1.5 learners have received part, if not all of their formal education in English, while international L2 students have received all of their primary and secondary education in their L1s. Thus, international L2 students have academic literacy competence in their L1s, but Generation 1.5 students often do not have such advanced L1 academic experience.

Other researchers have viewed the distinction between different types of L2 writers from the perspective of societal bilingualism. Guadalupe Valdés notes that some L2 students are elective bilinguals who, after having spent most of their lives in a society where their L1 has majority status, have opted to learn an L2. That is, immersion into an L2 society is a choice for elective bilinguals. Students who come to the U.S. as foreign exchange students, or to study abroad and then return to their home countries, would be examples of elective bilinguals. Other L2 learners, however, are circumstantial bilinguals, forced into the L2 environment as immigrants, refugees, or citizens of post-colonial states, all cases where the L1 lacks prestige. Examples of such students would be the children in families who have moved permanently to the United States, often for political or economic reasons, and do not have a choice but to remain in the U.S. for education. Given these examples, it should be clear that elective bilinguals correspond in great part with international L2 students and circumstantial bilinguals with Generation 1.5 students. Furthermore, one can speculate that most international students who have chosen to come to the U.S. to study are from families with higher socioeconomic status than Generation 1.5 learners, whose families have often immigrated to the U.S. to improve their financial situation.

Valdés further subdivides circumstantial bilinguals into incipient or functional bilinguals. Incipient bilinguals, who are still in the early stages of L2 acquisition, differ from functional bilinguals, who, despite a great deal of experience with the L2, remain clearly non-native. While incipient bilinguals will probably benefit from continued L2 instruction and exposure, functional bilinguals may reach a plateau in the L2, rendering some types of language instruction less effective for them. Using this framework, recently arrived L2 learners are most likely still incipient bilinguals, while long-term U.S.-resident L2 learners may have achieved functional bilingual status. By this categorization, L2 learners young enough when they arrived to attend

high school in the United States, yet still considered recent arrivals by the time they reach college, may share some characteristics with international L2 students and others with their Generation 1.5 peers. Such overlap confirms that classifying Generation 1.5 students solely on the basis of a U.S. high school diploma is inadequate, as some of these high school graduates may still benefit from ESL courses, while others may not.

Finally, many have observed that Generation 1.5 learners have acquired the L2 primarily through immersion, often in casual, non-academic situations, which allows them to rely more on oral/aural skills than literacy skills, unlike international L2 students who often acquire the L2 in classrooms and through vast amounts of reading and written grammatical practice (Reid). As a result of these differences in their L2 learning environments, Generation 1.5 learners tend to have strong oral fluency and listening comprehension, yet weak writing skills and little knowledge of L2 grammatical terms, in contrast with international L2 students who tend to have strong L2 reading skills and metalinguistic knowledge of the L2 (Bosher; Harklau).

The cultural and linguistic differences outlined here can be used by program coordinators to better identify different types of L2 learners and their corresponding needs in first-year college courses. Fifty years after Slager's article was written, his terms ("foreign student" and "immigrant") appear outdated, but the distinguishable differences between the L2 learners he described are still meaningful. And nearly a decade since Harklau, Losey, and Siegal's seminal volume introduced composition scholars to "Generation 1.5," this term has also become somewhat problematic, as it is all too easy for program coordinators and writing instructors to brand students with this label, perhaps assuming that by assigning these formerly unrecognized L2 learners to their own category, their needs are being addressed better. Despite the real possibility of overgeneralization and misuse attached to the term "Generation 1.5," the fact that noticeable differences exist among L2 learners in U.S. colleges and universities makes it necessary to discuss the characteristics typical of different groups of L2 learners. We should exercise caution, however, in using this and other labels since such cover terms often lead to stereotyping.

### **Generation 1.5 and the Development of Writing Ability: The Claims**

Concerning writing ability in particular, many claim that Generation 1.5 and traditional international L2 students make different types of sentence-level and discourse errors. For example, noting that Generation

1.5 students tend to be “ear” learners, Joy Reid states that they form grammatical and vocabulary rules based on how they have heard the L2 spoken and, as a result, their use of the L2 often includes errors in inflectional morphemes, such as verb endings and plural markers, as these are not audibly salient nor do they interfere with comprehension during oral interaction. Other common errors are a result of inappropriate use of idiomatic expressions, both in terms of form and differences in register. “Eye” learners, on the other hand, a characteristic more typical of international L2 students, tend to have more experience with grammatical rule-learning and reading skills, but lack practice with listening and speaking skills due to their lack of experience using the L2 for communication with native L2 speakers. Typical writing errors by these L2 learners are the use of false cognates, incorrect word order, applying plural inflections to adjectives, and other errors as a result of interference from the L1 (Reid). Given their advanced L1 writing ability, international L2 students may be able to transfer composing skills and strategies from their L1 writing, but show signs of lacking linguistic control when writing in an L2. Generation 1.5 students, on the other hand, may not have advanced composing skills and control of the linguistic code used in academic writing, yet their fluency in the L2 can compensate for some of these shortcomings.

As Reid points out, many students’ writing performance may not reflect typical errors or behavior from only one of these two sets, but a combination. It would be more accurate, perhaps, to describe different ESL students and their writing abilities as falling along a continuum, or series of overlapping continua, one for the progression of writing development in typical international L2 students, another for mainstream L1 students, and Generation 1.5 students’ development overlapping each of these for various characteristics. Placement testing that aims to assess L2 students’ writing and identify students’ strengths and weaknesses for accurate placement decisions must account for these major differences in L2 learners’ development.

## **Empirical Research Findings**

The above observations about Generation 1.5 students’ strengths, weaknesses, and overall characteristics are helpful as a point of departure, but if writing program administrators wish to argue that their placement decisions are both accurate and fair, they need empirical evidence supporting their recommendations. Indeed, many of the assertions above concerning students’ writing ability appear to be based mainly on anecdotal evidence



or impressionistic claims, yet these putative differences are often accepted without question. In recent years, researchers have begun to collect empirical evidence as to the differences between Generation 1.5 and international L2 writers.

Most of the empirical research to date concerning these differences is qualitative in nature, often based on case studies. For example, Linda Harklau conducted a year-long ethnographic case study of three ESL students as they transitioned from a U.S. high school to a community college ESL program. Based on interviews, observations, and students' written work, Harklau noted that the same ESL students who had achieved success in high school, when placed in ESL courses at the college level, found themselves both insulted and at a disadvantage, making it difficult for them to succeed. The curriculum in many college-level intensive ESL programs is primarily oriented toward international L2 students' needs, with assignments and texts reflecting the assumption that students are newcomers to the United States who need orientation to U.S. education and culture. As Harklau notes, U.S.-educated students may find the content in such courses irrelevant to their needs as well as offensive in that it suggests they are cultural novices. Furthermore, many of these courses tend to involve grammar exercises and the discussion of English-language structure in metalinguistic terms, favoring international L2 students who have studied English from this perspective while putting U.S.-educated "ear" learners at a disadvantage, and potentially making them feel less secure of their knowledge of English. While it is difficult to generalize from three case studies to a larger student population, U.S.-educated ESL students have a vast knowledge of the English language, but it is different from the type of linguistic knowledge that international L2 students have acquired. To avoid marginalizing one of the other type of ESL learner, writing placement should take into account the different backgrounds of ESL learners.

Another qualitative study, more directed at students' linguistic needs, is Jan Frodesen and Norinne Starna's case study including detailed profiles of two students who had completed at least part of their high school education in the U.S. Focusing on students' errors, they noted that one student's writing exhibited few, yet systematic errors, and greater fluency than typical international L2 students, while the other student made many more errors, mainly in word choice and sentence structure. Such comparisons indicate the need to examine students' linguistic profiles in more detail in an attempt to discover the kinds of errors that might distinguish L2 students still in incipient stages of L2 development from those who are functional

bilingual writers (Frodesen and Starna). As with most case studies, the results are not easily generalizable to larger populations, but this study illustrates the potential for discovering developmental patterns found in students' writing and the potential for using observations of such patterns to make appropriate placement decisions.

A few quantitative studies in this area of research also exist. Susan Bosher and Jenise Rowekamp conducted a study examining a series of factors to see which were most relevant for immigrant students' success in U.S. higher education. Noting that some immigrant students may be more like international students in some respects, they divided their 56 study participants into two groups based on whether they had completed high school in their home countries or the U.S. Data were collected on participants' length of residence in the U.S., years of schooling in the U.S. and in their home countries, and their scores for three different sections of the Michigan English Language Assessment Battery (MELAB): objective, listening, and composition sections. Not surprisingly, participants who had completed high school in their home countries scored significantly higher on the objective section of the MELAB, while those who had completed high school in the United States scored significantly higher on the listening section. Surprisingly, however, there were no significant differences in the composition scores. The background factors and standardized test scores were then compared with participants' GPAs for their first, second, and third years of college (the dependent variable), and a regression analysis was run with the significant factors: years of schooling in the home country, years of schooling in the U.S., length of residence in the U.S., and objective score on the MELAB. The results showed years of schooling in the home country to have the highest positive correlation with first-year GPA, with objective score on the MELAB the next significant factor. These same factors correlated positively with second- and third-year GPAs, with objective MELAB scores a better predictor than years of schooling for these future GPAs. Conversely, years of schooling and length of residence in the U.S. had significant negative correlations with first-, second-, and third-year college GPAs. Bosher and Rowekamp conclude that years of schooling in the home country and objective score on the MELAB are good predictors of academic success in U.S. higher education. Several important implications of these results are relevant for those who make placement decisions for L2 students in higher education: oral L2 proficiency is insufficient for determining if students need further ESL support; years of schooling in students' home countries could serve as a useful indicator of potential success for L2 students; years of schooling in the

U.S. may actually put Generation 1.5 students at a disadvantage; and despite obvious differences in other skills, composition scores may not be detailed enough to reveal students' specific strengths and weaknesses.

In a similar study, motivated by their observations of changing score patterns among L2 students entering a college intensive English program, Dennis Muchinsky and Nancy Tangren collected data including students' scores on the Michigan Test of English Language Proficiency (MTELP), the Michigan Test of Aural Comprehension (MTAC), and a 30-minute holistically scored composition, as well as passing rates upon completion of the program. Results showed that the thirteen students who had completed high school in the U.S. scored significantly higher on the MTAC, or aural component, than the other sections of the exam, while the nine students who had completed high school in their home countries scored similarly on both the MTAC and the MTELP, and scored significantly better on the MTELP section than the U.S.-educated cohort. The U.S.-educated students appeared to score higher on the MTAC than the international students, but the difference was not significant. Upon completion of the ESL program, the students who had completed high school in their home countries still scored significantly better on the MTELP than the U.S. high school graduates, and also better on the MTAC section, though not significantly so. In other words, the home country graduates maintained a lead over the U.S. graduates in the MTELP portion of the test, and may even have surpassed them for the MTAC section. Though the number of participants was small, which probably contributed to the lack of significance in score differences, Muchinsky and Tangren believe these results provide evidence that the MTELP is a better predictor of academic success than the MTAC, and that U.S.-educated students who perform well on the MTAC have inflated overall placement scores not representative of their actual academic proficiency. Specifically, students who have completed their education in their L1s are at an advantage in college classes, even with noticeably weaker L2 skills in certain areas, because their familiarity with context-reduced academic language is greater than that of Generation 1.5 students, whose skills are stronger with context-embedded language.

In their analysis of the composition component, Muchinsky and Tangren found that the essays by U.S.-educated students were the longest, but the international students had the highest scores. These results support the claim that Generation 1.5 students are more fluent language users, yet not necessarily well prepared in the language of academic writing. Such observations bring into question the role of fluency, or length, in measures

of writing ability, as this feature may not correspond with strong academic language proficiency.

## **Implications for Placement Testing**

The studies described above provide evidence that Generation 1.5 students may be at a disadvantage if placed into programs designed to address international L2 students' needs, and vice versa. The qualitative studies reveal that ESL courses designed to assist L2 learners may actually marginalize certain learners already familiar with U.S. culture. One study also provides limited, but empirical evidence as to noticeable patterns found in students' writing performance. The quantitative studies emphasize that, despite their fluency, advanced oral/aural skills, and overall familiarity with English in many situations, Generation 1.5 students tend to lack the academic language skills that their international peers have acquired in their L1s.

Several implications for the assessment of students' writing ability for placement purposes can be drawn from these studies:

- Academic writing proficiency is a specific type of language ability not necessarily acquired through immersion in an L2 culture.
- A U.S. high school diploma does not automatically exclude Generation 1.5 learners from potentially needing English language support in college writing courses.
- The needs of Generation 1.5 students differ from those of international L2 students.
- The writing of Generation 1.5 and international L2 students may exhibit different types of errors.
- Fluency, as measured by length in timed writing tests, is not necessarily a useful indicator of academic writing ability.
- Exams that include an oral/aural component may mislead test users concerning students' academic writing ability.
- Information about length of residence in the U.S. and years of schooling in the L1 may be helpful for placement readers and instructors to identify the types of strengths and weaknesses L2 students are likely to exhibit.

Those who make decisions concerning L2 students' placement should know that certain types of assessments or scoring criteria may favor either

international or Generation 1.5 students and may not be useful indicators of students' strengths and weaknesses in college writing courses. Since Generation 1.5 students often do not self-identify with the ESL label—indeed, they may even resent such labeling, as Christina Ortmeier-Hooper discovered during her case studies of three Generation 1.5 students—it is necessary to examine students' writing in order to make accurate placement decisions. At the same time, results from writing samples alone may not provide test users with certain critical information about L2 learners, such as length of residence in the U.S. and years of schooling in the L1, in order to offer them the most appropriate placement options. Until future empirical studies can identify more precisely the types of differences typical of each population's writing performance (if such reliable indicators indeed exist), test users may need to rely on questionnaire data, in addition to writing samples, to assist them in making appropriate course placement decisions. To clarify, I am not suggesting that programs offer separate tests to different groups of students, as this is neither practical nor necessary. I am, however, suggesting that it is reasonable for program coordinators to ensure that students' writing is evaluated by readers who are aware of and sensitive to the types of strengths and weaknesses that likely correspond with students' diverse backgrounds. An additional suggestion is that programs consider adopting a term other than "ESL" for L2 learners in college writing courses, as this term tends to exclude U.S.-educated L2 students. Perhaps a course label emphasizing *writing* in a second language would be more appealing to all L2 students (Costino and Hyon).

I believe the findings cited here offer an initial framework for placement test designers to consider and build on when selecting and creating instruments for placing different types of L2 learners in college writing courses. I recognize, however, that not all programs offer students a wide range of placement options, including sections taught by ESL-trained professionals. In cases where placement options are limited, first-day in-class diagnostic writing assignments can be especially useful. Instructors can use this occasion not only to examine students' writing abilities, but also to determine if students are more similar to international L2 or Generation 1.5 students in order to develop realistic expectations and select appropriate teaching materials. Such information can even be part of the writing prompt. For example, after reading "Second Language Writing Up Close and Personal: Some Success Stories" (Silva et al.), which includes contributions by five L2 writers on their experiences writing in a second language, I developed a writing topic I often use on the first day of class, which asks

students to write about their own writing experiences in a type of writing autobiography (see Appendix). Not only do students' responses reveal useful information about their backgrounds, the topic also lends itself well to both L1 and L2 writers, and thus can work in classes including all types of learners. Furthermore, since students' experiences with writing will continue to develop during the course, this topic can also be adapted for repeated use throughout the term, resulting in a self-revised multi-drafted essay useful for different assessment purposes later in the course, as described by Janine Graziano-King in "Assessing Student Writing: The Self-Revised Essay."

### **Directions for Future Research: A Closer Look at Performance Data and Student Preferences**

While several studies support claims of the existence of two distinct types of L2 writers in U.S. higher education, what is currently lacking is a more precise description of each group's writing performance. For example, Generation 1.5 students' writing appears to be more fluent and exhibit grammatical and lexical errors based on their having acquired English primarily through spoken input, yet the research confirming these linguistic analyses is scant. If writing program administrators are to identify learners based on developmental patterns in their writing, they need more specific information concerning students' linguistic performance.

The research described here also suggests it is important to collect background data in order to distinguish types of L2 learners. In an ideal situation, placement assessments would include several types of information in addition to writing performance data. In reality, however, such additional information may be unavailable, misleading, or merely insufficient. For example, in programs where large numbers of students are tested at the same time, and where test administrators require immediate results, it is not possible to include interviews or other types of oral components in order to determine course placement. And while short questionnaires may provide useful information, self-reported answers are not always reliable. Moreover, if learners react as one of the students in Ortmeier-Hooper's study, they may even conceal their L2 status as a way of rejecting the ESL label and its connotations. Finally, in many cases, those who evaluate writing exams and make placement decisions may not have access to questionnaire data.

For these reasons, future investigations of L2 learners' writing need to provide more complete descriptions of each group's writing performance in addition to their personal and academic profiles. Specifically, research com-

paring writing performance with other sociolinguistic and background data, to see if specific patterns in writing performance exist for each group, would be particularly useful. If such patterns are discernable, the results could greatly affect writing placement procedures, potentially making it possible for those who only have access to students' writing performance without background data to make more accurate recommendations. On the other hand, if future research concludes that differences observable only in writing performance data are not as consistent or accurate as many believe, this would confirm the need for writing placement exams to include additional instruments inquiring about learners' background information, such as their academic and life experiences in addition to their writing performance, in order to distinguish between these two types of learners (Harklau).

Finally, given the negative connotations that college courses labeled "ESL" have unfortunately acquired, it would also be useful to conduct more research concerning students' preferences, if not for placement decisions, then for the types of practice they see themselves as needing, along with their opinions about what to call courses created for college L2 writers. For the many programs able to offer separate credit-bearing "ESL" sections to L2 writers, finding a label inclusive of all types of L2 learners, especially U.S.-educated students, is a real problem. For those programs whose enrollments or student populations do not warrant creating separate ESL sections, the most pressing need may be to increase awareness among instructors about the distinctive nature of L2 writing (see Silva) and the characteristics of Generation 1.5 learners (see Harklau, Losey, and Siegal) to assist instructors in establishing realistic expectations for these learners' writing ability, especially in testing situations.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, I have highlighted what I consider to be principal implications to be drawn from the existing research on Generation 1.5 learners with regard to writing assessment and placement in college writing courses. It is not enough for writing program administrators to recognize the existence of different types of L2 learners. We must also adopt or design assessment procedures to help us identify these different groups of learners if we are to provide them with the most appropriate placement options, ensuring that our tests serve as door-openers rather than gate-keepers. Additionally, I emphasized the need for more empirical research based on analyses of students' writing performance, such as that by Frodesen and

Starna, which could confirm or refute claims regarding the strengths and weaknesses typical of Generation 1.5 learners based on their writing alone. Such research could also contribute to our understanding of how writing ability develops in different types of L2 learners. Greater knowledge of the developmental nature of writing ability across different learners could assist writing program administrators in identifying students' needs based on where they may fall along a learning continuum, and also assist writing instructors in selecting assessment and instructional activities for the range of students in their classes.

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## **APPENDIX**

### **First-Day Diagnostic Writing Assignment**

Write an essay about your writing experience. Below are some questions I'd like you to think about in composing your response. Try to organize your answers into an essay—do not write just a list of answers to the questions.

- What types of writing do you have to do? What types of writing do you do for pleasure?
- What type of writing do you expect to do in the future?
- Is most of your writing experience in English or in another language?
- Has your experience with writing been mostly positive, negative, or neutral? Explain.
- What is your opinion of your current writing ability?
- How important (or not) do you think it is for you to be able to write well?
- Feel free to discuss other information about your writing experience in addition to these questions.