

Binary Structures in a Translingual Age: Investigating Community College Writing Placement to Support Linguistic Diversity

Jennifer Maloy

ABSTRACT: This article argues the importance of designing writing placement procedures that support linguistic diversity at community colleges. Using data on community college writing programs and student demographics at an urban community college, it examines prevailing structures of ESL and developmental writing programs at two-year schools and identifies potential problems with existing models. In addition, the article recommends a translingual approach to writing placement, particularly in community colleges with diverse student populations. A translingual approach acknowledges the complexities of language use and values student agency throughout the placement process.

KEYWORDS: community college; ESL placement; translingual; writing program administration

Composition has taken a translingual turn, as our scholarship and pedagogies increasingly acknowledge the growing diversity not only of student populations in higher education but also of the languages and language varieties students bring to writing classrooms. Within this translingual turn, many in the field have argued the importance of valuing linguistic difference in composition pedagogy and research and examined ways to study and support the complexities of individual and communal language practices in and beyond English. The momentum that “translingual approaches to composition” (Horner et al.) has gained in recent years reflects scholars’ and teachers’ identification and appreciation of the language varieties that students bring to their writing classroom as well as our willingness to draw upon students’ linguistic experiences as a resource. Many composition

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instructors may enact translingual pedagogies in their classrooms through discussions of linguistically diverse assigned texts, approaches to error that contextualize variants in language systems, and writing assignments that ask students to explore their own language experiences as well as those of a variety of authors. Writing Program Administrators (WPAs) may even promote such work across first-year or basic writing classrooms. However, as our work on language diversity grows, so too should our interrogation of the ways in which our writing placement and program designs are based on a prevailing “myth of linguistic homogeneity” (Matsuda).

To a large extent, our field has not considered how we may implement translingual approaches on a programmatic level. Writing programs still may be structured in ways that assign all students—those who are monolingual, those who speak dialects, and/or those who are multilingual—static linguistic identities through placement into *English-as-a-Second-Language* (ESL) or *Native English Speaker* (NES) writing courses. While ignoring the nuances of linguistically diverse student populations, placement processes such as these often position students differently across campus based on binary categories. What is more, the writing courses that students are assigned to take—be they developmental or basic writing, ESL writing, or first-year writing—may be housed in different departments that draw upon divergent scholarship and pedagogy. For example, colleges may have ESL departments or programs for international students that offer writing classes that are separate from those offered in English departments or composition programs, or basic writing courses may be housed in a Developmental or Remedial Education department separate from an English department that houses first-year writing courses. These divisions may occur for many pedagogical, disciplinary, political, and/or financial reasons; however, such divisions also may challenge inter-department collaboration and understanding while shuffling students into various programs with different expectations and philosophies related to writing and language use. Because the design of a writing program—from placement to course sequence to learning objectives—lays the foundation for the work that takes place in individual classrooms and among faculty, it is important for us to consider the extent to which the structures we create for our writing programs support the exploration of students’ linguistic heterogeneity and challenge a binary categorization of students as ESL or NES.¹

This is particularly the case for community college writing programs, which often face more diverse student populations and simultaneously more institutional obstacles such as high attrition rates, large numbers of new students each semester, and inadequate funding. Students coming to community colleges may experience a lack of comprehensive advising, decentralized and poorly located student service offices, and ineffective developmental education structures (Dougherty et al. 8-11). Such serious challenges may inhibit possibilities for innovating writing programs in ways that support and foster the linguistic diversity of students. As students are categorized as either ESL or NES within placement practices and program structures, the obstacles outlined above demonstrate the likelihood that they will struggle to learn about the variations across ESL and NES writing courses as well as to understand how much agency they may have in choosing writing courses. All of these factors can limit possibilities for acknowledging multilingual students' complex relationships to languages in the writing classrooms on community college campuses where this work is most needed. While an awareness of these issues is important for those of us teaching writing in community colleges with diverse populations, it also is essential to use this awareness to interrogate the extent to which our programmatic structures and divisions support linguistically diverse students.

In this article, I examine issues surrounding categorization and placement of linguistically diverse community college students, draw attention to the ways in which ESL and NES divisions often do not represent students' linguistic complexities, and call for us to rethink our approaches to placement in ways that further support translingual approaches to composition. Specifically, I argue that we should consider carefully possibilities for offering students information and agency in ESL/NES placement processes and that we foster open dialogue about students' language backgrounds and practices across all writing programs, basic/developmental, ESL, and first-year writing alike.

The Translingual Turn in Community College Contexts

In 2011, two articles affirmed the concept of “translingual approaches” in the field of Composition. In January, Bruce Horner, Min-Zhan Lu, Jacqueline Jones Royster, and John Trimbur published “Language Difference in Writing: Towards a Translingual Approach” in *College English*, arguing that traditional approaches to teaching composition in the United States assume a “linguistically homogeneous Standard English” and “are at odds with facts”

(303). The facts to which they refer are that a majority of English speakers do not speak Standard English, and for this reason, teachers of English should acknowledge this reality as part of the work of the writing classroom. The authors argue for taking what they term a “translingual approach” to composition, treating language as a resource for producing meaning, and seeing the diverse language uses of not only multilingual students but also students who would claim to be monolingual English speakers. Such an approach, they assert, “adds recognition that the formation and definition of languages and language varieties are fluid. Further, this approach insists on viewing language differences and fluidities as resources to be preserved, developed, and utilized” (Horner et al. 304). In the fall of the same year, Horner published “Relocating Basic Writing” in the *Journal of Basic Writing* in order to position Basic Writing within a tradition of translingual approaches, approaches that see language use as always evolving, being challenged, and challenging users. Here he says that Basic Writing has and should continue to be a space where active investigation and negotiation of language takes place.

Translingual approaches to composition, be they rooted in practice like “Language Difference in Writing” or theory in the cases of “Relocating Basic Writing,” are extensions of scholarship on multilingualism such as Braj Kachru’s decades of research on world Englishes; Ofelia Garcia’s research on translanguaging; A. Suresh Canagarajah’s work on “shuttling between languages” and codemeshing; and Lu, Horner, and Trimbur’s collaborative work on multilingual composition. All of these scholars explore the ways in which multilingual speakers and writers actively negotiate multiple language systems as well as the ways in which language systems evolve through use of diverse speakers. Translingual approaches to composition build upon these seminal ideas, calling compositionists to elucidate—and encourage—such language work in composition classrooms and acknowledge that all individual language users adopt and contribute to multiple language systems. This has resonated more and more with composition instructors and scholars, mainly because, as Horner et al.’s “Language Difference in Writing” begins, a majority of English speakers use a variety of Englishes as well as speak English as one of multiple languages. Some recent expansions of translingual approaches within composition include scholarship on student writing (Gonzales), classroom practices (Mlynarczyk), community writing projects (Kimball), and teacher training (Canagarajah, “Translanguaging”). Scholars also connect *translingualism* to the fields of Applied Linguistics and Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) as well as studies of code switching and code meshing (Canagarajah, “Codemeshing;” Sebba et al.).

However, there also have been calls to use caution when appropriating and expanding the term *translingual*. In “Clarifying the Relationship between L2 Writing and Translingual Writing: An Open Letter to Writing Studies Editors and Organizational Leaders,” a group of prominent second-language (L2) writing scholars argue that it is necessary to acknowledge the unique differences between students who speak varieties of languages and students who are L2 writers. They state, “translingual writing is a particular orientation to how language is conceptualized and implicated in the study and teaching of writing” and should by no means replace the expertise of L2 scholarship and pedagogies (Atkinson et al. 384). English Language Learners (ELLs) have unique needs to be supported by L2 specialists; therefore, the authors argue, translingual approaches should not be seen as synonymous with second language writing instruction. While translingual approaches represent an ethos in which instructors and scholars demonstrate the value of language diversity in the structure and practices of their classrooms, those adopting the approach also need to consider best practices for learning the uses and nuances of multiple language systems. The authors demonstrate the need for careful consideration of the unique experiences and needs of multilingual students rather than relying upon the assumption that an appreciation of diversity is enough to support students. For example, while exploring the fluidity of language use in a composition classroom may be considered a translingual approach, it may not ensure that ELLs in that classroom are being provided the support they need in their development as English users. The authors affirm that substantial support to linguistically diverse students requires careful design of all aspects of a writing program, from placement to curriculum design to programmatic assessment, and yet we need not abandon a translingual ethos as we consider how to best serve ELLs. Instead, it seems particularly important to ensure that L2 scholarship inform translingual approaches in order to bolster support for ELLs across college campuses, within and beyond ESL writing courses.

At two-year colleges, supporting linguistically diverse students poses unique challenges as student populations are generally more diverse—in terms of educational, socio-economic, racial, ethnic, national, and linguistic backgrounds—and a wide variety of points of entry into the college exists for students, particularly those identified as ESL. Adopting translingual approaches across programs may be particularly daunting and yet is particularly necessary at community colleges due to the uniqueness of their student populations. A snapshot of community college student demographics puts this into perspective: of the 12.3 million students enrolled in community

colleges in 2014, 36% were first-generation college students, 57% were female, 58% received financial aid, and 38% received Pell Grants (Fast Facts). In addition, 57% of all Black students begin higher education at community colleges (Fast Facts), 2/3 of all Latino students begin higher education at community colleges, and almost half of Asian or Pacific Islander students attend community colleges (Bunch and Endris). While hard numbers can be difficult to determine, evidence also has shown that immigrant and language minority students are more likely to attend community colleges than US-born and monolingual students (Bunch and Endris). This profile of students demonstrates why translingual approaches to writing program design are so essential at two-year colleges: greater socio-economic, racial, ethnic, and national diversity ensures greater linguistic diversity on community college campuses. Community college students bring a variety of linguistic resources with them to their English classes, be they basic writing, ESL, first-year writing, or advanced composition classes. The profile of community college students also demonstrates the stakes of supporting such students in writing classrooms, as research from sources such as the Community College Research Center at Columbia Teacher's College also has shown that "immigrants, students of color, and low-income students have lower odds of completing their postsecondary education" ("Underrepresented Students"). The stakes for engaging increasingly diverse student populations are high at community colleges, and the need for innovation is essential.

Such innovation that focuses on multilingual students at community colleges, however, often is enacted by individual instructors rather than programmatically. For example, Andrea Parmegiani describes translingual pedagogies in a learning community in which Spanish-speaking ESL students enrolled in an ESL writing course and a Spanish composition course. He argues this project positioned students as both experts and learners within the classroom, challenging the deficit narrative his institution used to describe this population of students by valuing their linguistic knowledge and offering multilingual students the opportunity to write across languages and develop both Spanish and English literacies. Likewise, Rashi Jain argues that exploring and envisioning translingual pedagogies in ESL classrooms requires both students and instructors to examine their linguistic backgrounds and identities. She describes class practices that encourage students to compare and contrast usages of language while she also instructs them on the norm in their target language (Standard American English), acknowledging that language instruction in formal settings is often a "compromise" across discourses (511). Both of these examples demonstrate promising possibilities

for translanguaging approaches in writing classrooms with ELLs, showing how instructors can integrate an exploration of the nuances of language use. However, innovative classroom approaches like these should be reinforced programmatically as well.

To fully realize the possibilities for translanguaging writing we need to ensure that our program structures, beginning with our placement processes, support the translanguaging pedagogies we seek to implement in individual classrooms. Students in classrooms that practice translanguaging approaches as the work of composition benefit from understanding that their linguistic experiences are resources for further language study; however, unless our writing programs also support this idea—through placement policies, course design, and assessment procedures—the long-term reinforcement of this point may be lost on students who are continually positioned on community college campuses in ways that promote the deficit model that Parmegiani mentions. While rejecting English-Only or monolingual ideologies embedded in institutional structures is possible, it has proven to be slow-moving and fraught with challenges. One of the main reasons this is so challenging, as Christine Tardy demonstrates in an examination of her own writing program, is that the prevailing investment in the predominance and importance of Standard American English by instructors, students, and administrators can complicate change on a programmatic scale. Change at this level requires the investment of many individuals, additional funding, and sometimes political resistance on campus. Most importantly, it requires critical reflection of individuals' investment in Standard American English as well as a critical examination of the extent to which writing programs affirm monolingual ideologies.

Interrogating Common Community College Writing Placement and Structures

Initial steps towards programmatic change necessitate reflection: specifically, reflection of the methods of identifying and placing multilingual students into NES or ESL courses in addition to reflection of the programmatic structures that facilitate such placement. The *National Census of Writing* for two-year institutions provides a glimpse into some of the potential hindrances to a translanguaging approach to writing programs, including the disparate course offerings for students identified as ESL as well as the physical separation of departments across campuses. Out of 144 two-year institutions surveyed, 88% offered supports for ELLs, 70% of responding schools

indicated that they offered ESL courses, and 80% of responding schools stated that these ESL courses were separate from basic writing courses. The percentages of four-year schools that offer support for ELLs was similar, and in the case of offering ESL courses, lower by 10%. This data demonstrates that community colleges offer more courses for ELLs, a reality confirmed when we examine the types of supports for ELLs in two-year versus four-year schools: at community colleges, 46% of ELLs are required to take a basic writing class, while only 30% of ELLs at four-year schools are required to take such a class. Although this information does not reveal where these basic writing classes are located and whether they integrate students identified as ESL and NES, it does reveal that more ELLs end up in basic writing at two-year schools than at four-year schools. What is more, the census reveals that students are placed into ESL courses differently at two-year versus four-year schools. At two-year schools 67 out of 76 respondents (or 88%) indicated that ESL students were identified or placed, at least in part, through a writing placement test of some kind, while 50% or fewer respondents used TOEFL/ACT/SAT scores, faculty or advisor referral, and/or self-placement. At four-year schools, only 54% of respondents indicated that their programs relied on writing placement tests, while 71% used TOEFL/ACT/SAT scores, and 50% or fewer used faculty or advisor referral and self-placement (Gladstein).

While a greater reliance on national standardized tests makes sense at four-year schools with higher numbers of students coming directly from high schools in the United States and at schools with higher numbers of international students, a greater reliance on a placement writing exam in two-year schools may mean that students are more likely to be placed based on only one example of their writing, often in a timed-writing environment. This could potentially become problematic when students are being placed, with little agency, into writing classes based on one sample of high-stakes timed writing rather than on a more accurate representation of their linguistic and writing abilities. As George Bunch and Ann Endris have documented, students may take placement tests, which often dictate their placement in non-credit bearing ESL courses, without preparing for them or understanding the consequences of their performance on such tests (166). We must be aware of the ramifications of relying upon single measures such as placement exams, particularly when we do not inform or consult with students before placing them in various programs that are sometimes located in different departments across the college and offer them different resources and support.

The *National Census of Writing* also reveals another important difference between two-year and four-year schools in terms of serving ELL populations: at two-year schools, only 29% of schools indicated that ESL courses are offered in English departments, while 57% of ESL courses were offered in an “other” space on campus, most likely another academic department. In four-year schools, 30% of ESL courses are offered through English departments (similar to the two-year school number), 32% of ESL programs are housed in an “other” location on campus, and 17% of ESL programs are located within writing programs (Gladstein). Thus, in a majority of scenarios at community colleges, students identified as ESL are positioned outside of the English department and/or a writing program. It seems unlikely that two individual departments—or even programs—would possess the same learning outcomes and approaches to pedagogy, increasing the possibility for inequitable experiences across different programs. While different departments surely will have their strengths and offer students opportunities for developing their writing, this should give us pause to consider what the implications of this division might be on promoting translingual approaches to writing on a programmatic level. Institutional separation may make it less likely for faculty to talk across departments about working with linguistically diverse students and supporting them through careful writing pedagogies. In addition, separation may accompany inequitable resources and support across departments, which affects students and faculty alike.

Dictating multilingual students’ linguistic identities by defining their relationship to English—either as “native” or “second”—is problematic both because it positions students differently in academic terms and because, by its inherent binary nature, it resists the complexities of language use, complexities that enable students and faculty to learn from one another’s language experiences. While we may say that it is possible to offer both NES and ESL courses that value students’ linguistic experiences equally, though perhaps differently, a closer examination of how programs are structured, particularly at the community college level, problematizes the concept of “separate but equal” if we genuinely wish to design placement processes that support translingual approaches to composition. However, when we design writing programs that acknowledge students’ linguistic complexities and place students within these programs in ways that show we value these complexities, we promote classroom spaces where the learning we can experience—from language, about language, and within and across languages—is ingrained.

ESL and NES Student Placement at an Urban Community College

Community college writing programs that rely on static representations of students' linguistic experiences in the form of a binary division of ESL and NES tracks seem to run counter to translingual approaches to composition. Yet, how can we accurately categorize linguistically diverse students using a placement process that acknowledges the range of students' language backgrounds? Is it even possible or desirable to embed such acknowledgement in our placement processes? Often the answers to these questions can be challenging because the information that writing programs have about students—in terms of linguistic backgrounds—is limited and/or incomplete. The complexities of students' linguistic experiences commonly are not represented in the demographic information collected in the admissions process and in the writing exams used to place students. This is particularly complicated at community colleges with large populations of students who move to, or back and forth from, the United States at a variety of ages and who may speak a language other than English at home. When writing program structures rely on ESL or NES categorizations of students, there is not room to account for complexities of linguistic diversity, even when information about students' linguistic experiences is available during the placement process.

To exemplify this loss of complexity within the placement process, I examine the placement of community college students at a diverse campus over the course of two semesters, comparing and contrasting students' placement within a binary ESL and NES course structure to the more nuanced representation of their language backgrounds collected through an additional survey. I surveyed students over the course of two semesters, Fall 2012 and Spring 2013, in order to explore some of the similarities and differences between these groups at a diverse urban community college located within a large university system. At my research site at the time of my study, almost 41% percent of the freshman class spoke a language other than English at home, and 28% of all students were born outside of the United States. Despite this linguistic and national diversity of these students, 69% of this freshman class attended local public high schools (Community College Office of Institutional Research and Assessment), demonstrating that this community college has a relatively low international student population, and that a majority of its multilingual students attended at least some school in the United States.

While the potential for translingual pedagogical approaches is clear in such an environment regardless of whether a writing course is designated ESL or NES, it still matters a great deal which specific courses students enter. Like the majority of community colleges responding to the *National Census of Writing*, my research site relies upon a high-stakes timed placement exam as one of the main determinants for placing students in non-credit ESL, NES developmental, or first-year writing courses. In general, students are placed into ESL or NES developmental writing courses through a university-wide placement process. The university policy states that if students do not receive a set score on SAT, ACT, or state exams—or if they attended high school outside of the United States, have been out of school for some time, or have earned their GED—they are asked to take a university-wide timed writing exam. Students who fall into the categories above take this timed-writing exam once before their semester begins in order for their placement into a writing course to be determined. When students take the exam, they are asked to read a short passage and then write an essay responding to the ideas in the passage in 90 minutes. Each student's essay then is scored by university faculty members in multiple categories connected to understanding of the assignment and the reading, development of ideas, organization, sentence clarity, and mechanics. When the scorers read each essay, they are able to provide an ESL designation, based on the scorers' review of the student's writing and any information a student may provide in optional questions about the student's language background included in the testing booklet. This may be used along with a student's score on the exam, as well as any additional admissions data, to place students into ESL or NES developmental writing courses.

At my research site, both ESL and NES developmental writing courses are offered within the same department, much like many of the two-year schools responding to the *National Census of Writing*. To gain a better sense of the department's population of writing students in both ESL and NES sections, I distributed a linguistic and educational background survey to students enrolled in 35 sections of ESL or NES developmental writing courses across fall and spring semesters in 2012-2013. The survey I distributed consisted of questions about students' language practices, their educational backgrounds, their cultural identifications, their nationality, and their placement process at the community college.² A total of 521 students completed the survey, with 270 students completing the survey in the fall and 250 in the spring. In the fall, 136 students surveyed were enrolled in the upper or lower level of NES developmental writing, 130 students were enrolled in

one of three levels of ESL developmental writing, and 4 students did not indicate the class in which they were enrolled. In the spring, 112 students were enrolled in upper or lower level NES writing courses, 133 students were enrolled in ESL writing courses, and 2 students did not indicate the class in which they were enrolled.

The results from the survey reveal that, out of the 270 students surveyed in the fall semester, only 38 students, or 14%, indicated they were born in the United States and grew up in a monolingual English-speaking household. Likewise, out of the 249 students surveyed in the spring semester only 39, or 16%, of students indicated they were U.S.-born monolingual English speakers.³ These numbers show a vast majority of the students in both ESL and NES sections of the department's writing classes could be identified as multilingual students. This revelation demonstrated the need to examine the large group of students who revealed their multilingualism through the survey and to determine exactly how the multilingual students in the ESL courses differed from those in the NES courses. The answer could have been as simple as those multilingual students in the NES classes were US-born bilingual students or students who moved to the United States as young children and grew up speaking English in school and possibly at home. However, when asked on the survey, "How long have you lived in the United States?" and "How old were you when you moved to the United States?" multilingual students in NES classes indicated that they had moved to the United States at all ages, that they had lived in the United States in some cases for many years and in some cases only a few months. Likewise, the data from the ESL students demonstrated a similar level of diversity: some students moved to the United States quite recently while others had lived in the United States for many years. When asked "What language did you grow up speaking?" and "If English is not the first language you learned, how old were you when you began speaking English?" some students revealed that they grew up speaking English while others only learned English in the last years of high school.

A close examination of this type of demographic data demonstrates the ways in which students' linguistic backgrounds often complicate—and generally transcend—the straightforward division between NES and ESL upon which writing placement relies. If community college writing programs do not have a clear conception of what distinguishes an ESL or NES student writer—and do not enact that conception through writing placement—those invested in a translingual approach to writing might ask why the division exists in specific local conditions or at all. If a closer look at the populations of ESL and NES writing courses reveal the ways in which

language use is fluid, the ways in which the lived experiences of individuals influence the ways in which they use English(es), and the ways in which all students are learning—and creating—the relationship they have to academic discourse in English, then again a translingual approach to writing would call into question the purpose of such divisions. These divisions need to be investigated not only because they reveal complexities of students' linguistic backgrounds but also because they reveal these complexities in the face of important realities: one, that ELLs do need support to succeed in community colleges, and two, that the longer ELLs are in stand-alone, non-credit bearing ESL courses, the more difficult that success becomes. Taking a translingual approach to placement requires an interrogation of our placement policies and writing program structures to ensure that we support the linguistic diversity of all students across campus and that we view students as agents in their development of multiple literacies.

In further analyzing the demographics of multilingual survey participants who appeared in both ESL and NES courses, I wish to demonstrate the ways in which binary categories such as “native” and “second language” are challenged when we look at students who could be classified as Generation 1.5. As Paul Kei and Aya Matsuda argue in their essay, “The Erasure of Resident ESL Writers,” the term Generation 1.5 may be useful for teachers in identifying students who are not “traditional” monolingual English speakers (59), as it refers to immigrants who come to the United States at some point after their formal schooling has begun and, as ELLs, speak English as a second (or third or fourth) language. However, as Matsuda and Matsuda demonstrate, the term runs the risk of becoming just another categorization through which we can assign students a static linguistic identity that can fit into institutional structures. Despite its problematic nature, the classification of multilingual, multicultural, and/or transnational immigrant students under this umbrella term has helped scholars and educators to more closely examine the linguistic and cultural experiences of college writing students and to distinguish the experiences and needs of Generation 1.5 students from international students with limited experience or knowledge of English and/or U.S. culture.

For the purposes of my survey analysis of Generation 1.5 students, I classify any student who indicated that their first spoken or heard language was not English and who moved to the United States between the ages of 6-16. I sought to identify Generation 1.5 students in order to see how linguistically diverse students were being placed within the program.⁴ Tables 1 and 2 below demonstrate that students who could be classified as Generation 1.5

were placed in both ESL and NES sections in the semesters during which I conducted my survey.

Table 1: Students Classified as Generation 1.5, Fall Semester

<i>Course</i>	<i>Generation 1.5</i>	<i>Total Students</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
ESL Lower Level	12	46	26%
ESL Upper Level	19	77	25%
NES Lower Level	13	57	23%
NES Upper Level	8	78	10%
All Courses	52	258	20%

Table 2: Students Classified as Generation 1.5, Spring Semester

<i>Course</i>	<i>Generation 1.5</i>	<i>Total Students</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
ESL Lower Level	14	35	40%
ESL Upper Level	24	81	30%
NES Lower Level	1	14	7%
NES Upper Level	23	101	23%
All Courses	62	231	27%

Tables 1 and 2 reveal that Generation 1.5 students were present in both ESL and NES sections surveyed, as well as in both lower and upper levels of writing courses. In the fall semester, a total of 52 out of 258 students, or 20%, could be classified as Generation 1.5. The highest percentages of Generation 1.5 students were placed in the lower-level ESL course, at 26%, and the upper-level ESL course, with 25%. In the lower-level NES course, 23% could be classified as Generation 1.5, and in the upper-level NES 10% of students could be categorized as such. In the spring semester, the percentage of this group of students rose to 27%, or 62 out of 231 students. Again, higher percentages appeared in ESL courses, with 40% of the lower-level ESL sections consisting of students who could be classified as Generation 1.5 and 30% in the upper-level ESL course. In the lower-level NES courses, 7% of the student population (just one student) fell into this category, while 23% did in the upper-level NES courses in the spring. While a larger overall number of these students appeared in ESL courses versus NES courses each semester,

Generation 1.5 students nonetheless were present in NES courses as well, and in healthy numbers. The number of such students within given levels and overall vary each semester, demonstrating the fluctuations of student population inherent in the placement process.

With the consistent appearance of multilingual students in all writing courses, the question then becomes, how are these multilingual students placed into ESL sections of writing different than those who are placed into NES sections? When asked at what age students moved to the United States, the average age for these students was 14 in both the lower level and upper level ESL courses surveyed, while the average age in the NES writing courses was 11 in the lower level and 12 in the upper level. Thus, in general, Generation 1.5 students who came to the United States during high school were more often placed in ESL courses, while the population in the NES courses consisted of students who immigrated to the United States at a younger age. This difference makes sense when we consider that each year an English Language Learner spends in the United States could mean more exposure to and use of English. However, an examination of the age of immigration for all linguistic minority students responding to my survey who were born outside of the United States revealed the largest number of students in both ESL and NES students immigrated between the ages of 15 and 19. Therefore, even though there were more students who immigrated before high school in NES sections, there still were many linguistic minority students in *both* ESL and NES sections who immigrated in the last one or two years of high school or after they completed high school outside of the United States.

One notable difference between Generation 1.5 students in ESL versus NES courses was birth country, as the populations of ESL and NES writing courses varied significantly in terms of national origin. The student population of both the lower and upper levels of NES courses are nationally and culturally diverse, with students claiming to have been born in over fifteen different countries. However, in both levels of ESL, there were large numbers of students from China—46% in the lower level, and 47% in the upper level. The charts that follow provide a visual representation of the levels of diversity in each course across the fall and spring semesters.

Binary Structures in a Translingual Age

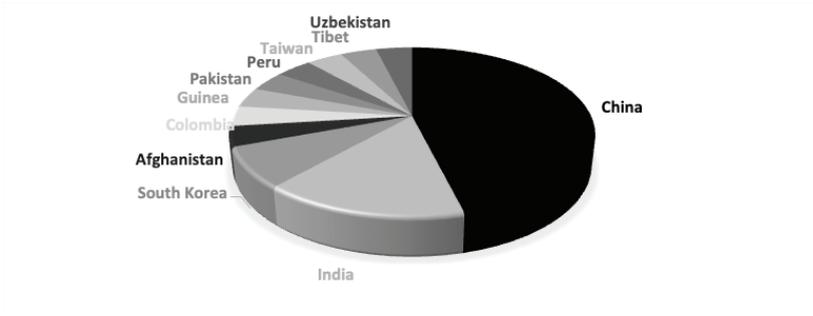


Figure 1. Birth Country, ESL Lower Level

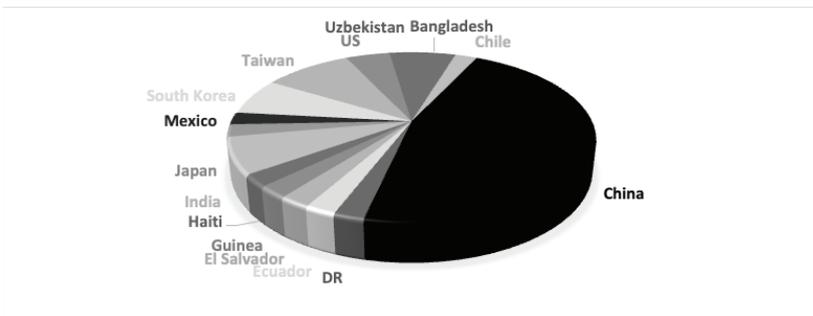


Figure 2. Birth Country, ESL Upper Level

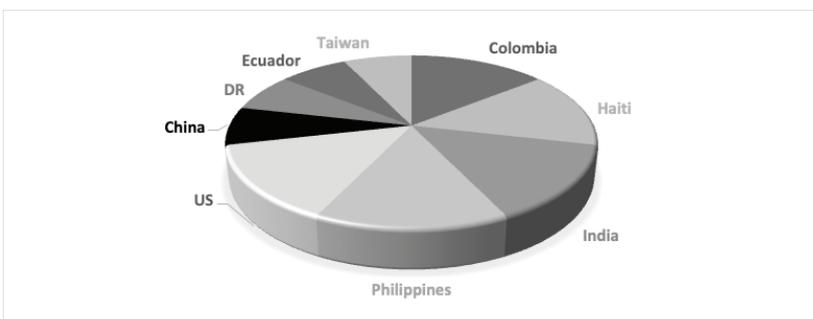


Figure 3. Birth Country, NES Lower Level

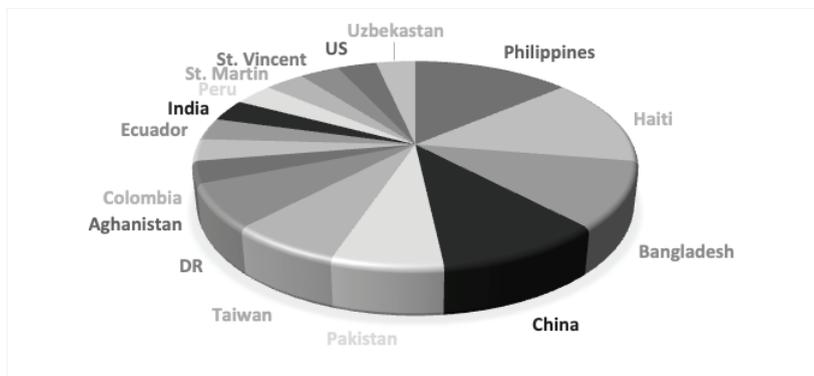


Figure 4. Birth Country, NES Upper Level

Figures 1-4 reveal the developmental NES courses in the survey are *more* linguistically and culturally diverse than ESL courses. The overall percentages of birthplaces for all students in ESL and NES courses reveal that only 7 out of 248, or 3%, of all students in NES courses indicated being born in China, even though 111, or 45%, indicated being born outside of the United States. In ESL courses, however, 94 out of 263, or 38% of all students indicated being born in China when a total of 95% of all students stated that they were born outside of the United States. These high numbers stand in contrast to the overall percentage of all students at the college who stated they were born in China as of Fall 2012: 4.2%, or 669 out of a total of 15, 711 students (Community College Office of Institutional Research and Assessment).

Overall, the student populations of both ESL and NES developmental courses at my research site prove to be linguistically diverse; however, they also reveal the existence of a form of linguistic homogeneity, even though the type of homogeneity—the predominance of students from China in ESL classes—is different from the homogeneity of English in NES courses that might be more readily imaginable in writing programs of this kind. The parameters of my study do not explain why this sort of linguistic isolation occurred during these semesters within the writing program at this particular community college. Students' daily English use is dependent upon a series of individual factors— including family and living situation, employment, residence within communities that may or may not be linguistically isolated, and education background—that reach far beyond their experiences at community college. For example, when asked, “How often do you speak English in your daily life?” the median response (out of 100%, 75%, 50%, and 25% or less of the day) was 50% for Generation 1.5 students in both levels of ESL

and the upper-level NES course, while the median was slightly higher for those in the lower-level NES course (62.5%). Generation 1.5 students in NES courses indicated that they spoke English on average 62.5% of the day, while students in ESL courses averaged 50%. It does generally seem to be the case that the students who were placed into ESL courses spoke and heard English less often than students in NES courses. Thus, the placement of students in the two semesters I examined may reflect patterns of usage and need within respective populations.

Overall, my study demonstrates that placement procedures may affect the demographic make-up of ESL and NES courses in unexpected ways, ways that might not be apparent through the demographic data collected by a college or even a writing program through an official placement process, particularly an official placement that relies upon one high-stakes writing exam for placement. Although it is not in itself problematic that students from a particular national, cultural, or linguistic background are placed into ESL courses, WPAs need to be aware of this possibility and understand how their placement processes could promote—or resist—such divisions. They also, as Tardy discusses in “Enacting and Transforming Local Language Policies,” may need to examine how such data may reveal underlying ideologies about Standard American English as well as how different variations of English are acknowledged within the placement process. From a translingual perspective, any isolation of a particular group of students based on language practices would need to be investigated in order to understand whether such positioning of students is based on assumptions about language and use of English(es) more than on established needs of students. While my analysis certainly supports the need for WPAs to collect detailed information about students’ language backgrounds on a regular basis, it also supports the need for WPAs to design placement procedures that anticipate fluctuations in student demographics and variation in student experiences.

Imagining a Translingual Approach to Writing Placement in Community Colleges

Two-year schools face unique challenges as they envision writing programs that support diversity and foster students as college writers. While community colleges may attract a wider array of students with varied educational, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds than that of students in four-year schools, the writing programs at community colleges also may be more fragmented and reliant upon limited assessment measures to make decisions

about placement, particularly in the case of multilingual students. While individual writing instructors may implement translanguaging approaches in their classrooms in order to encourage students to explore language difference and their identities as writers, considering how such approaches may be implemented programmatically—in terms of curriculum as well as structure—is challenging for many reasons.

One of the reasons may be that translanguaging approaches to composition may pertain more to an overall ethos of language as opposed to a mandate of standards or procedures. In translanguaging scholarship, there is more discussion of pedagogical or disciplinary values than policy. However, resisting the myth of linguistic homogeneity, teaching students to pay attention to language difference and investigate their own language use, and drawing upon students' linguistic knowledge as a resource can be implemented programmatically as well as pedagogically. As spaces that engender and support diversity, community colleges are fertile grounds for translanguaging approaches to writing classrooms and programs, so long as they are able to structure programs in a way that promotes linguistic diversity in writing classroom placement and practice. As this article shows, a first step in doing this relies upon an examination of the realities of placement in order to ensure that established practices do not rely upon a somewhat imaginary binary. What follows are some recommendations for how we may begin such work.

It is essential that instructors with Composition and TESOL backgrounds work together to serve linguistically diverse student populations. Because multilingual students were the majority in both ESL and NES developmental writing courses I surveyed, instructors of all courses could benefit from both a knowledge of L2 writers' needs as well as a knowledge of translanguaging approaches to composition. While the structure of the writing program at my research site united ESL and NES developmental writing faculty within the same department, the divisions drawn between ESL and NES students proved to be much less clear than these categories would suggest, and thus the need for faculty support across ESL and NES courses proves to be essential—and has been something the department has worked towards. Because ESL and NES developmental courses are offered in the same department at my research site, faculty members shared learning goals across these courses and also collaborated with one another to ensure that all faculty were prepared to work with linguistically diverse students. Programmatic and departmental divisions may inhibit the communication and collaboration essential to serving linguistically diverse students, particularly when linguistically diverse students exist across all writing courses—in ESL, developmental, and

first-year writing. As the *National Census of Writing* shows, ESL writing courses are more likely to be offered outside of writing programs at community colleges, even as mounting research shows the growing linguistic diversity of community college students. Regardless of the location of writing programs, the reality of linguistic diversity at community college necessitates, as Susan Miller-Cochran argues, an increase in second language specialists and training across writing programs.

We must create placement processes within which linguistically diverse students are positioned as agents in their writing placement. As Tanita Saenkhum argues in her examination of multilingual writers in first-year writing courses, a writing program's goal should be to "maximize student agency" in the placement process (111). This process would require that writing programs provide adequate information to students about their options and explanation of the various structures and course sequences designed for students. It also could include giving students agency to choose which courses seem most fitting to their experiences and needs. As Neil Meyer argues, community college writing programs should consider directed self-placement (DSP) as an option for multilingual students, particularly those who challenge binary conceptions of ESL and NES students. While there are challenges to implementing DSP in community college settings, those wishing to enact translingual approaches to writing placement need to consider seriously this option if they want to promote agency among linguistically diverse students.

Patrick Tompkins elucidates common problems community colleges may experience when trying to adopt DSP in his description of a DSP pilot program that focused on placement in developmental writing or first-year composition (rather than placement into ESL or NES developmental courses). While piloting DSP encouraged students, instructors, and counselors/advisers to rethink standard placement procedures that relied primarily on writing placement exam scores, consistently training counselors/advisers and instructors on DSP and ensuring that all students registering for courses have access to the same information and time for self-assessment may be challenging at community colleges that have limited resources and funding and enroll large numbers of students each semester (204). However, despite the potential challenges to increasing student agency in the placement process, WPAs invested in translingual approaches to composition should consider how they may engage students in the process of identifying and placing ESL and NES students, whether that involves asking more questions about language background during advisement or allowing students more agency in choosing courses. Fundamentally, the process should involve offering

students a variety of options for writing courses and clearly articulating the differences and similarities between these courses.

Translingual approaches to writing placement for linguistically diverse students also must be built on the belief that, as experienced language users, students will have valuable views on the types of courses that would best serve them. As Saenkhum and Todd Ruecker show in literature reviews of ESL placement, there are conflicting studies on ELLs' preferences towards ESL or NES courses. This is particularly the case when it comes to multilingual students who have attended some secondary schooling in the United States. Citing placement studies by Braine, Chiang and Schmida, Costino and Hyon, and Ortmeier-Hooper, Saenkhum concludes, "conflicting placement preferences and perceptions make it ... difficult to understand the placement of multilingual writers into first-year composition courses" (8). The same is the case for students being placed into non-credit ESL and developmental writing courses. Because a student's preference is based on a variety of individual factors that often cannot be accounted for in timed-writing exams or the demographic data that may be available during the placement process, it is important for us to allow students to weigh in on their placement, particularly when they are choosing among ESL and NES courses that have many of the same learning goals.

As Christine Toth discusses in her recent "Directed Self-Placement at 'Democracy's Open Door': Writing Placement and Social Justice in Community Colleges," viewing writing placement at community colleges through a social justice lens may help us to understand the goals of DSP differently, particularly at a moment in which many community colleges are moving away from the reliance upon high-stakes exams as the sole measure in placement. In her literature review of DSP, she points to some important factors for multilingual students' decisions in DSP: cultural differences regarding self-assessment; financial concerns; and complex intersections of cultural, linguistic, and national identities among students (149). However, she also identifies, in the scholarship on DSP in ESL contexts by Deborah Crusan, Gita Das Bender, and Mathew Gomes, some possibilities for designing DSP for multilingual students when local contexts and student demographics are carefully considered. Furthermore, she argues that if social justice considerations are integral parts of the design and assessment of DSP, this type of placement can be deemed successful at community colleges with diverse student populations. If we value and draw from students' linguistic diversity as an act of social justice, then exploring possibilities for DSP may help us to enact a translingual ethos across our writing programs.

Finally, we also should consider possibilities for thoughtfully integrating linguistically diverse students into basic writing and composition courses. Given programmatic restrictions or obstacles in implementing DSP at large community colleges, an alternative to DSP may be offering students more opportunities for cross-cultural writing courses. Ruecker demonstrates that the realities of current placement procedures, as well as the insufficiencies of ESL/NES dichotomies inherent in placement, support the need for an increase in cross-cultural composition courses that combine “native” English speakers and ELLs (101). He finds in his study of student satisfaction of ESL/NES placement that 79% of ESL students surveyed indicated that they wanted to be in a “class that includes both native and non-native speakers of English” (102). When multilingual students are given the option, many of them may choose courses that consist of linguistically diverse students—both ELLs and “native” English speakers—as their preferred composition experience. Therefore, writing programs that enhance student agency may also need to expand options for students, as many multilingual students may decide that courses with a mixture of ELLs and NES students will best support them. When such courses are designed through the collaboration of compositionists and L2 specialists across disciplinary divides, they will ensure that all students are able to explore their use of various language systems and learn about Standard American English in a translingual context.

The translingual turn in composition should encourage WPAs to envision writing programs as places where students are able to explore language difference and embrace a sense of agency in the linguistic decisions they make in their writing (Lu and Horner). While the placement processes we create within such writing programs may be informed by WPAs’ assessments of students’ experiences with English (and other languages), trying to better understand students’ linguistic experiences, from both the student and WPA perspective, needs to be a foundation upon which a writing program—and its placement procedure—is built. Unearthing and challenging assumptions made as part of the placement process, encouraging campus-wide discussions about students’ language backgrounds, and revising program structures that consider students’ experiences rather than a snapshot of their writing are all translingual approaches on a programmatic level.

Acknowledgments

I’d like to thank Cheryl Smith and Hope Parisi as well as my *JBW* peer reviewers for all of their invaluable feedback on this article. I’d also like to

thank my colleagues in the CUNY Faculty Fellowship Publication Program and the Dartmouth Summer Seminar for Writing, as well as attendees at my past Conference on College Composition and Communication presentations, for helping me to clarify ideas.

Notes

1. Throughout this article, I use English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) to refer to the courses with this label and to students who have received this identification through the placement process. I use the term English Language Learners (ELLs) to refer more broadly to any student who is multilingual and is in the process of learning English (whether identified in an ESL context or not).
2. The creation and distribution of the survey followed IRB guidelines and was reviewed through the IRB process.
3. In the fall survey, 17 out of 270 students did not provide a response to questions about birth place and/or first languages spoken or heard in their home. In the spring survey, 7 students did not provide this information.
4. In this discussion, I did not include analysis of data from the lowest level of ESL writing, as there was no NES equivalent.

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