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## **Graduate ESL Students, Generation 1.5, and the Basic Writing Class**

**AT MANY OPEN-ACCESS COLLEGES, WHEN ESL GRADUATE STUDENTS** and members of Generation 1.5 do not test into college-level composition courses, the only option that they have for continuing their education is to join native English speakers in the basic writing classes. There are advantages for members of Generation 1.5 in these classes because they share a high school background with recent native-speaking high school graduates, and many find a more comfortable learning environment in the basic writing class than in classes of international ESL students (Harklau, “Representing Culture”). However, scholars stress that international ESL students have a different academic orientation, which may have little in common with their basic writing peers because their “relation to English is culturally and linguistically different” (Blanton 110).

For readers not familiar with ESL pedagogy, the term Generation 1.5 refers to students who were born outside the United States and moved with their parents to complete their education in American schools. Graduate ESL students have already completed a degree in their native countries and have moved to the United States alone or with their families. They apply to open-access colleges for different reasons, and for many this results in a career change and the opportunity to work in the United States. Scholars refer to both groups of students as users of English as their second language (ESL), who belong to the second language (L2) community. Their native-speaking peers, in contrast, are referred to as students who belong to the American English-speaking, or L1, community.

Scholars have different opinions about the learning environments that will help both graduate and undergraduate ESL students to realize their full potential. Paul Matsuda comments that these different perspectives reflect “systemic” scholarly and administrative differences between professionals in composition studies and second language studies (“Basic Writing” 83). The complexity of this debate is beyond the scope of this article. However, the following description of the experiences of four ESL students, two of whom are Generation 1.5 students and two are international ESL students, illustrates some of the issues that are important for administrators and instructors of basic writing courses. These students are current examples of those who “for the last four decades” (82) have taken basic writing courses as a way to begin their college education. These students, however, “have remained periph-

eral in the disciplinary practices...of the basic writing class" (82).

The four students in this study, like most ESL students at this open-access college, are all women. Tham and Hien were born in Vietnam. Hien, is a graduate ESL student and had a degree in science when she emigrated with her family; she started taking courses at the college two years later. She had not spoken or written in English before she came to the U.S., besides completing grammar exercises in high school. Tham is a member of Generation 1.5, who moved to the U.S. when she was a second grader. She had always been a strong student in math and science classes, so she avoided courses that required much writing, and she took ESL classes throughout high school.

Raisa and Elena were born in Russia. Raisa, a member of Generation 1.5, moved with her family to the U.S. when she was fifteen. She attended ESL courses in high school, but she skipped these frequently because she could not relate to the instructor. However, she was successful in her other courses, and by the time she was taking classes at this open-access college, she found it easier to write about the U.S. than Russia. Topics that related to her life in Russia did not interest her, and she commented that she was "sick of Russia." Elena is a graduate ESL student. She moved to the U.S. from Russia when she was 21 years old and has a Russian degree in accountancy. She started taking courses at the college two years later. Her experiences of learning English as a foreign language in her native country were similar to Hien's experiences as a graduate student in Vietnam; like Hien, Elena had not spoken or written in English before moving to the U.S. Raisa, Elena, Tham, and Hien took the same placement test as their native-speaking peers, and their scores indicated that they were writing at the same levels of preparation for college writing as the native-speaking peers who also placed into the college's Basic Writing sequence.

Like the ESL students in these classes, these native-speaking peers represent a range of social and academic backgrounds. A native-speaking (L1) nurse in Raisa's course, who was taking classes to meet administrative requirements, had different perspectives from the L1 eighteen year old, who dropped out of high school in tenth grade, took the GED, and aimed to take an associate's degree in computer programming. At the beginning of the quarter, the native-speakers in the class regarded second language students only as immigrants to the U.S.; however, as the course progressed, they adjusted their perceptions when the L2 students contributed to class discussion. Raisa, for example, talked about the pressures she experienced in her American high school, and the group's perception of her, exclusively, as a foreigner changed to include ideas of her as a high school graduate. Raisa shared high school experiences with L1 high school graduates, and L1 mothers in the group identified Raisa as a member of their children's peer group.

As members of Generation 1.5, both Raisa and Tham were educated in American

high schools; however, they interacted with the class in different ways. Raisa has an outgoing personality and communicated orally in ways that held the interest of her peers; her errors in grammar did not interfere with this. In contrast, Tham, although she had lived in the States since second grade, only spoke when asked direct questions, but she understood everything that was said. She did not appear to have any contact with any of her peers including Hien, who is also Vietnamese. Hien had moved to the United States with her family and Elena had moved alone; however, both students had lived in the U.S. for two years before attending the college. Their interactions with the local community had taught them to communicate in individual conversations, but they never contributed directly to class discussion. Nevertheless, during peer review activities, they did make comments that were used by both native and non-native speaking students to develop their essays. Their participation in the class community was to read and comment on their peers' essays and to write their own, which were used in class discussion.

Tham, Raisa, Elena, and Hien were all born outside the U.S. and are defined as "ESL" students. However, having lived in the local community around the college for two years, students like Hien and Elena share roots with both their native-speaking peers and Generation 1.5 students, like Raisa and Tham. Although they may not speak and write standard American English, for students like Tham, who had attended English-speaking schools since second grade, English is their first language. On a daily basis, all these students interacted with different communities both on and off campus, and the American culture was their first priority. In the basic writing courses, they work with members of their equally diverse native-speaking peer-group. In light of the diversity in a basic writing class, it is difficult to separate the students into academic or social categories. Both native and non-native speakers belong to a distinct set of cultural and linguistic communities, but these communities intersect, and members interact with each other. As Matsuda writes, "the distinction between basic writers and second language writers is becoming increasingly untenable because of the

"common interests that native and non-native speaking students share and discuss both in writing and in class interaction may be potentially more significant than their linguistic differences"

increasing diversity among second language writers and basic writers" ("Basic Writing" 83).

ESL and native speaking students share family roles in their social communities. Members of both groups of students could be parents of children who attend the same local school, for example. Elena writes in her essay about taking her daughter to the college day-care center, where she talked to native-speaking mothers about the way this is organized and became part of that community on the college campus. Students write about social and professional commitments to develop topics for their essays. As the quarter develops, the common interests that native and non-native speaking students share and discuss both in writing and in class interaction may be potentially more significant than their linguistic differences. Each student can be defined in multiple ways. Using the term "basic writing" as a label to categorize these students involves not only a "practical difficulty" but also the "ethical complexity of defining basic writers" (Matsuda, "Basic Writing" 83).

Educational background experiences are important for understanding all the students in these basic writing classes. Generation 1.5 students, like Raisa and Tham, are defined as "products of our own secondary education system"; therefore, high school must have had an important educational and academic influence on them (Matsuda et al. 153). These influences are different in various high school contexts, however. Some Generation 1.5 students, for example, have reported feeling marginalized in college because they cannot participate orally either in class or socially (Lay, Carro, Tien, Niemann, and Long). This isolation is an extension of their high school identity as outsiders who, through lack of communication skills, are not part of the peer group. Still, in other high school situations, Generation 1.5 students feel they have a choice: if they want to be identified with the native-speaking peer group, they need to stop working hard, "lighten up a little," and adopt the high school culture represented by the music students enjoy and the way they dress (Olsen 118). Motivating such Generation 1.5 students can be a problem for their instructors. In other contexts, though, high school instructors view the Generation 1.5 students' class participation differently; instructors might perceive 1.5 students as the "Good Kids" in contrast to their L1 peers (Harklau, "From" 35).

When these Generation 1.5 students move to a college setting, research studies report that they experience tensions with their international peers and professors. In Linda Harklau's study, high school instructors describe these students as the "Good kids" while college instructors perceive them as the "Worst" in the class ("From" 35). Jan, a Polish Generation 1.5 student in Llona Leki's study, moved to a class of international students, and he found that his international peers identified him as American, and his teacher found that his written work was full of slang and "street language" (29). From the perception of instructors of international students, Generation 1.5 students bring high school habits to college in their

affiliation with the image portrayed by their high school peers (see Reid). In the context of an academic intensive English program, Generation 1.5 students appear to lack motivation, and in contrast to international students, they make little effort to complete their assignments (see Muchinsky and Tangren). The educational background that international students, like Elena and Hien, share with students in intensive English programs may be an indication that their work habits are similar. The question that is important for the students in this study, though, is how far the interactions that students like Elena and Hien have had with their communities of their native English-speaking peers shape the way they perceive issues that students discuss in their writing.

The academic preparation that American high school graduates, like Raisa and Tham, bring to college classes is very different from students like Elena and Hien, who have completed a degree in their native language. There is very little published research on graduate students in basic writing classes, and perhaps one of the reasons for this is that it is not possible to identify their graduate status through the admissions process. All the students that are the focus of this report took the same placement test as all incoming students to assess their level of writing competency. Administrators place students who do not write at the college level in basic writing classes. As far as the institution is concerned, a high school graduation certificate is the entrance requirement. There is no form in the admissions process where students like Elena and Hien can record the fact that they are college graduates in their native countries; it is only when they start to talk and write in the basic writing class that such background information comes to light. Kristen di Gennaro in her study, "Investigating Differences in the Writing Performance of International and Generation 1.5 Students," writes that at her private urban university, "it is impossible to identify L2 learners," whether high school or college graduates, "exclusively from admissions information" (538). At her university, students complete a form where they answer questions about how long they have lived in the U.S. and "where they have attended high school." Placement test administrators use the students' answers on the form and their placement test scores to place them in the course from which they will benefit the most. It is possible that some of these students may have been graduate students.

Di Gennaro compares the placement test writing performance of students who graduated from American high schools with those who graduated from high school in their native countries. The results indicate differences in the characteristics recorded in previous research studies. Generation 1.5 students wrote at more length and with greater rhetorical awareness of American essay requirements, which is not surprising as they have recent experience in writing American high school essays. Nevertheless, in contrast to the observations by Reid or by Muchinsky and Tangren, no significant differences between the two groups reg-

istered on their placement tests “with regard to grammatical control, cohesive control, or sociolinguistic control” (Di Gennaro 552). This analysis of the placement test writing samples indicates that these international high school graduates and American high school graduates wrote at the same levels of academic competency.

The picture that emerges from these studies of Generation 1.5 and international students is a complex one, which suggests that categorization of these students is context specific. It is impossible to know whether the international students in Di Gennaro's study had degrees from their native countries; they had registered to take an American degree at a private urban university and the English placement test placement was part of this process. In the same way, Hien and Elena were placed in the basic writing class of an urban open-access college as the first step to realizing their academic goals.

The challenge for instructors of classes that include international students, Generation 1.5, and native-speakers is to find common ground between these the different groups of students. In this respect, the strong links between the underlying goals that professionals in both ESL and composition studies share are useful. Linda Lonon Blanton writes that L2 students must be “intellectually engaged in projects that require literate behaviors for their completion” (118). Marilyn S. Sternglass stresses that all levels of the basic writing sequence “should provide students with opportunities to practice analysis and synthesis” (259). As educators, both Blanton and Sternglass base their curricula objectives upon the goal of developing students' critical thinking, and this fundamental objective is one of the important goals of basic writing curriculum designers.

An analysis of the ways students work to complete these requirements must include “all students who are subject to the disciplinary and pedagogical practices of basic writing” (Matsuda 84). The international students, Elena and Hien, and the Generation 1.5 students, Tham and Raisa, are representative of the students who test into the basic writing classes at the open-access college where I teach. Tham and Hien were in the same class, but Raisa and Elena were in different sections; I taught all three sections. In this article, I describe the administrative process at the college and the basic writing courses taken by these ESL students, and I analyze examples of their writing. My goal is to begin to assess how Generation 1.5 and international students use the “disciplinary and pedagogical practices” of the basic writing class to develop as writers. This analysis may contribute to an understanding of the diversity of students in the basic writing classes.

## **Administrative Background at the College**

At this open-access college of a large, state university in the industrial Midwest, if L2 students do not test into college-level courses, they have the opportunity of taking classes in one of the

three preparatory composition courses. The English Program recently piloted ESL sections of these courses at the college but discontinued them because, from an administrative perspective, there were not enough students at the different levels to justify the cost. Like the students in Di Gennaro's study, the students at this college completed a questionnaire where they recorded details of their high school backgrounds. Placement test administrators used these background details and the students' test scores to decide whether they would benefit from taking an ESL composition course before moving into the preparatory composition sequence. These ESL sections had a theoretical advantage for students who had learned English as a foreign language, as instructors could, potentially, draw on a common linguistic background in the class and use this as a way to introduce students to essay writing in the U.S.

However, the students came from a wide diversity of the linguistic backgrounds, which meant that they did not share a common linguistic or cultural background. Students from Vietnam and Eastern Europe, for example, had different experiences of learning grammar, and they did not share a common cultural background. As recent high school graduates, many of the Generation 1.5 students were orally fluent, and students who had recently arrived in the U.S. regarded them as members of the L1 community and were intimidated by their oral skills. As each student represented a different set of background circumstances and educational needs, the administrative identification of them all as "ESL" students who need "ESL sections" of the basic writing sequence was inaccurate.

The students submitted a portfolio of their writing at the end of the quarter, and the team of evaluators made the decision about whether they were able to move into the higher levels of the native-speaking preparatory sequence. Therefore, the students felt that an initial ESL placement identified them as being further away from their goal of a college education than an initial placement with native-speakers in the basic writing courses would do. Non-native speakers of English are nervous to be placed with native speakers in the basic writing class, but in high school they were accustomed to setting their educational goals upon being able to work in classes of native speakers. In general, both students who had relatively recently arrived in the United States, like the ESL graduate students Hien and Elena, and Generation 1.5 students, like Raisa and Tham, were encouraged by their placement in the basic writing class.

## **Basic Writing Course Design**

These basic writing courses immersed these ESL students in the process approach to composition used in all the composition courses at the university. The ratio of students who are using English as a first or second language is different in every section. In general, the first

section has predominately L2 students and the third section predominately L1 students. Instructors introduce essay topics through extensive class discussion of the ideas in selected texts from many different perspectives, and this is a process that draws on the reactions of all the students in the group. The contributions that students make to class relate to the essay topics, and the extent to which students draw on personal experiences depends on many factors. In general, ESL students prefer to talk about their experiences in the U.S., and graduate ESL students do not refer to studies for a college degree in their native countries, unless these relate directly to the essay topics. They are completely immersed in understanding the American process approach to writing and relating their experiences to this. They only talk about background educational experiences in conversation with their instructors.

After detailed class discussion, students then work through a process of writing first a brief concept statement, then a draft for peer review, then a first presentation draft that receives extensive feedback from the instructor, and then finally, a completed, revised draft. Student texts are used throughout this process for class discussion of the ideas and how these could be developed. The goals of the courses are for students to think critically about the topic, relate this to their experience, and use this analysis to focus their essays in a way that is relevant for the basic writers in their class and for communities outside college.

## **The Writing Assignments**

The issue of oral interaction affects all aspects of the writing process used in the class. With the permission of the students, their essays and less formal assignments are shared at all stages in the drafting process; therefore, an awareness of the audience of native-speaking peers (as well as the instructor) affects their writing. The following analysis focuses on the ways the students established themselves in their writing in the first presentation drafts of the second essay that they wrote for the second course in the preparatory sequence.

The assignment for the second essay in Tham and Hien's class was to describe a group of people who belong to a specific culture and discuss the problems they have integrating with other cultural groups. In class discussion, the students defined "culture" of a group as the shared experiences and values that link members of the group in significant ways. The texts reflected the problems that both native and non-native speaking groups have in this respect, and the students were free to develop any aspect of the topic in their essays. For example, both L1 and L2 students wrote about entering the American college culture from different perspectives.

Both Tham and Hien focused on experiences of integrating into American communities. Tham draws extensively on her experiences as a member of Generation 1.5 and writes about her life when she attended the local school. She uses these experiences to establish



herself in her essay as a commentator on the values she held as a young immigrant to the U.S. in contrast to the values she now holds as a college student, which are those generally accepted by all our communities. Her title establishes her thesis: "Responsibility Is at Every Stage of Life." The introductory paragraph develops this general reference.

Life is a cycle of responsibility. It is a process everyone has to face as a human being. As people grow, they learn rights from wrongs and how to act responsibly and accept the consequences in the actions they make.

Tham uses her own experience as an example of irresponsible behavior, and looking back, she dissociates herself from the way she acted. She writes: "I regret what I had done as a kid." The reason for this is that she had chosen "a wrong direction that led [her] to a complicated future." When she was young, "English was considered worthless to [her] because [she] did not understand the rules." Instead of going to class, she "hung out" with her brothers and did "what they thought was 'cool'—smoking and drinking." She describes her interaction with her brothers in the past, but she focuses on a code of values that applies to all our communities.

She uses this framework of generally accepted societal values as a reference point when she continues to write about the community outside school. She disassociates herself from her actions when she was younger, and she writes: "Instead of wasting my life to learn to be 'cool,' I could use these times to learn being responsible for my community." She writes that family obligations are especially important, and remembers: "Sometimes, when I went out I bring shames to my parents." Her friends were able to help by "cooking, cleaning and receiving good grades." However, she writes, "As for me, I was behind." Tham establishes a code of values that relate to her American audience and uses this to contrast the values of her peer group in school. When I returned the presentation drafts with my comments for further revision, Tham gave me permission for photocopies of this essay to be used to discuss how to use examples from experience to develop ideas in an essay.

Hien also focuses on two contrasting cultures, the culture of Vietnamese immigrants and the Midwestern American culture. She immigrated as a mature graduate student to the U.S. but does not draw on her Vietnamese experiences; in contrast, she focuses on the cultures with which she was currently involved. Her role in the essay was not to evaluate these cultures but to explain problems that Vietnamese people have in the U.S. and to interpret them for her American audience. Exemplifying the dual role she adopts in the essay, she explains that the problem with her parents' generation is that they belong to the "the first generation that has left [their] country for political reasons." They used to hold "high positions in the army" while now they are "only ordinary people of a minority group in this country." Hien then goes on to adopt the role of interpreter and explains that it is this feeling of

“inferiority” that “leads to losing self-confidence.”

The problems that Vietnamese people have with the American lifestyle are particularly difficult “between parents who are ‘very’ Vietnamese and [their] children who grow up in America.” It is in the different expectations of male and female roles where “the gap between ‘very’ Vietnamese parents and their daughter-in-law or son-in-law” is most significant. She explains that it is for this reason that traditional Vietnamese parents cannot “accept the situation that their son has to stay at home to take care of the children and do housework while their daughter-in-law goes to school or works outside the house.” Hien arrived in the U.S. as a young adult and understood the tensions that Vietnamese people experience. She adopts the role of interpreter for her native-speaking peers and instructor, and in this way her audience defines the focus she adopts for her essay.

In similar ways, the audience of the basic writing class influenced the ways Raisa and Elena organized their essays. The goal of the second essay that Raisa and Elena wrote in the course was to describe a current problem in our communities and discuss the implications of this. In class discussion, the students brainstormed lists of problems and attitudes that people in different communities have towards these problems. Raisa is an American high school graduate, and Elena had completed a tertiary degree in Russia. However, adopting ideas that were discussed in class, both students chose topics that have particular relevance for students at this open-access college: Elena wrote about teenage pregnancy, and Elena focused on financial pressures.

Raisa’s first draft contains five short paragraphs. Her title poses a general question for all her readers: “How We Treat Teen with Children?” She begins to answer this question in her first paragraph. She writes that on the one hand, “People fail to realize that that having a baby is supposed to be a sort of privilege.” However, as a teenager herself, she acknowledges the pressures at this time of life and goes on to write: “We, as teens, do many mistakes by learning life.” She assumes that her readers feel as she does in her statement: “Most of us aren’t sorry for them and why should we be?” Many people when they see a young pregnant girl “walk by us we usually look at her like she done something bad in her life.” However, she writes that these mothers have a “huge responsibility to raise a good healthy child.” She “smiles” and “talks to” pregnant students “nicely” like most students in college.

She goes on to question how these teenagers are perceived outside the college environment and uses an example of taking her niece to a park to answer her question. While the niece played, she talked to an “old” woman about her “her grandchildren and her life right now.” She recalled, “Everything was going really nice until her niece came and sat on her lap.” The woman’s attitude changed and “she started talking some rude things to us,” and accused Raisa of being “dumb to have a child at a young age.” The woman left without giv-

ing Raisa a chance to explain. She concludes her paragraph by writing that this experience taught her “that being a young mother is very hard.”

One of the goals of the preparatory sequence is to introduce students to using sources to support their ideas. After a discussion of how sources could be introduced, using an example from a peer’s essay, Raisa’s later drafts were supported with sources of information from the internet. For example, she adds to her introduction: “Recent statistic have shown a continuing increase in teen pregnancy. About one million teenagers become pregnant each year and more than 530,000 give birth.” However, although the later drafts develop the ideas in her original five-paragraph essay, she continues to focus on different perceptions of teenage pregnancy in order to establish her own sympathetic understanding of teenage mothers. On the one hand, she writes that teenagers “have a tendency to rush into commitments before fully understanding what they are getting into.” However, she goes on to write: “life is often difficult for a teenage mother” and “society has to have some respect to teenage mothers.”

The students submit a portfolio of their writing for review by a committee that assesses whether they are ready to move into the composition sequence. One of the criteria for a “ready” evaluation is an assessment of the students’ revision processes. For the most part, Raisa resisted the idea of revisiting her work. She did, though, respond to my request for more clarity in regard to the sentence: “We, as teens, do many mistakes by learning life.” She revised the sentence in this way: “Young girls today have a tendency to rush into commitments before fully understanding what they are getting into.” She used a generalized example to explain her point; an example that relates more closely to the thesis of her essay replaces the immediacy of her early draft.

Elena writes about financial pressures, and like Raisa, introduces several perspectives on this topic. She refers to a Russian proverb to support her thesis: “You better have one hundred friends than one hundred rubles.” She explains in parenthesis for her L1 audience that rubles are “(Russian money).” Throughout her essay, she states different ways of considering this topic and introduces counter arguments for the points she raises. For example, she stated, “Thousands of people have the opposite point of view.” She agrees in part with these opinions and writes, “I have to say that money is an important factor of our emotional state,” because “if we cannot pay our bills and support our family, we feel stress and cannot feel happy.” Nonetheless, there are many people who think that, “power is in money.” In her perception of some people in the U.S., “Americans say, ‘money talks.’” She agrees with these Americans that money is certainly important, but then goes on to argue her thesis and concludes her essay like this: “Our money will take care about everything but our happiness. We cannot buy feelings because they are priceless.”

In this first presentation draft, Elena draws on different sources to support her point

of view. For example, she referred to a comment by Oprah Winfrey suggesting that people have to make their own decisions about how they organize their lives. She develops this idea by writing, “The way to choose happiness is to follow what is right and real and the truth for you. You can never be happy living someone else’s dream.” She also refers to an article used in class discussion that focuses on the importance of optimism as a way of coping with difficulties (Goleman). She responds to the ideas in this article and uses them to develop her own thesis. She writes, “People who are optimistic see their money problem like something that can be changed.”

Both Raisa and Elena selected topics closely connected to the issues with which students wrestle in the basic writing class. They introduced different perspectives on the topics that reflect the discussion in the basic writing class. Both students supported their main ideas in the essays by assuming the role of commentators on these topics.

## Implications and Conclusions

This study is limited to the experiences of two graduate ESL students and two members of Generation 1.5, from two first-language backgrounds. However, in any section of the basic writing courses at this open-access college, the ESL population of students includes both groups of students; therefore, these students’ experiences are representative of the second language students who attend the college. These experiences indicate ways that both groups

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establish themselves as members of their classes and use their educational and social backgrounds to fulfill the requirements.

Both Tham and Raisa were shaped academically by the American education system and, in this respect, are members of Generation 1.5 (see Matsuda et al.). However, they were not marginalized in the class like Generation 1.5 students in different locations in the U.S. (see Lay et al.). Raisa contributed to class discussion about her experiences in American high schools, and Tham’s essay contrasting educational values she held as a child and a college student is an example of student writing that was used in a class discussion of ways to develop drafts. The students’ comments in

class and in their writing shaped the way they established themselves in the class and entered into an academic relationship with their peers and instructor. In contrast to the ESL graduate students, Raisa contributed to the class like her orally confident native-speaking peers. However, Tham was as silent in class discussion as both Elena and Hien.

Tham writes about ways she rebelled in school, but in contrast to students in earlier studies, she was not conforming to habits of native speaking peers but to those of her brother. She suggests in her essay that her reasons for doing this were a reaction to the frustration of not being able to understand the rules of English grammar. From her own perspective, she was not conforming to the habits of high school peers, as researchers have suggested other examples of Generation 1.5 students do (see Reid), and by the time Tham had registered for college, she was completely focused on her studies. She worked very hard with the tutors in the writing center both to complete this presentation draft and to revise her essay further.

Raisa had difficulty focusing on the demands of the course, and this is one characteristic that identifies Generation 1.5 students in contrast to immigrant students in an intensive English program (see Muchinsky and Tangren). Her first drafts did not meet the program's requirement for moving into the next course. Students are required to revise their essays to pass the class, and although Raisa resisted this requirement, her final revisions indicate that she is beginning to find her identity as a college writer through this activity. In the context of these basic writing classes, generalized characterizations of what it means to be a Generation 1.5 student, both in high school and in college, are difficult to apply.

Hien's and Elena's motivation and work habits corresponded closely to the description of those international students in intensive English programs. They worked very hard to complete the assignments and spent many hours with the tutors in the writing center to revise their essays. Despite being graduate students, they were reading the same texts and writing the same assignments as their L1 and Generation 1.5 peers. Yet, during our frequent conversations over the quarter, they never gave any indication that they felt the placement in a basic writing class and the required assignments were inappropriate for them.

Hien's and Elena's general comfort level may be attributed to the professional preparation of their instructors, who are trained to meet the needs of a diverse population of ESL students (Matsuda 83). Further, Hien and Elena came from mathematic and scientific backgrounds in their mother tongue and had little experience of reading and writing in English. Intellectually, they may have had deeper resources upon which to draw than their Generation 1.5 peers, but they needed the time in the preparatory courses to develop competency in writing English essays, and the supportive environment of the basic writing class gave them this space.

Even if this time was necessary, if the assignments had been too easy for them they

could have felt frustrated by the fact that they were placed in the preparatory classes only to develop their language skills. However, this was not the case; they indeed felt challenged by these assignments. They were required to use critical thinking strategies to relate the topics of the assignment to their experience and to find their own focus for their essays, and they were free to develop their topics in any way they wanted (see Blanton; Sternglass). Both Hien and Elena were encouraged to use their graduate-level critical thinking skills to develop complex arguments in their essays. Elena draws on materials from sources to develop the first presentation draft of her essay, which may reflect her experiences of academic writing in Russia. Hien's argument is arguably more complex and sophisticated than Tham's, who describes personal experiences to support her thesis in ways that are more typical of native-speaking basic writers. However, within the flexibility of the basic writing curriculum, which is designed to accommodate the diverse population of native speakers, the graduate ESL students were able to draw on academic experiences to develop as writers of English.

Tham had lived in the U.S. since second grade, and Vietnam was a distant memory for her, so it is not surprising that she was comfortable establishing her essay topic by describing and supporting American community values. Raisa, who had lived for less time in the States, also established her identity as a commentator on her topic that focused on different perceptions about teenage mothers in the U.S. However, after just two years in the U.S., Elena and Hien were also not static "cultural novices" (Harklau, "From" 52). In contrast, they were learning from American talk shows and interacting in the native-speaking communities with which they had contact on a daily basis. In addition, Hien used her Vietnamese background to establish her identity both as a source of information and a commentator on the problems of Vietnamese immigrants in the local community. She wrote about both L1 and L2 communities, but members of both are local residents. Elena writes about attitudes to money, primarily, from her understanding of the perspectives of people in the U.S. Both students established themselves in their essays as writers who live in the U.S. and as commentators on American communities. Assignments that would have required them to focus exclusively on Vietnam or Russia would have asked them to ignore all the work they had done over the previous two years to understand these communities.

Orientation to the native-speaking audience of the basic writing class shaped the way these students developed their essays in different ways. They used quoted colloquial expressions such as: " 'money talks' " and " 'very' Vietnamese" and brought the voices of L1 speakers into their essays. However, at a deeper level, the ideas in their essays reflect the basic writing class discussions and the contributions that native and non-native speakers made. Peers in the class read Raisa's essay on teenage pregnancy and the range of opinions she suggests on this sensitive topic of teenage pregnancy indicates her level of confidence in the

class. The difficulty of coping with babies as teenagers is a problem some of her peers have experienced. The problems of drinking and smoking in school is one that the mothers and fathers in the basic writing class raised in brainstorming sessions. Tham establishes her focus in the essay by commentating on this problem and uses her own experiences to do this.

## **Pedagogical Implications**

All these “L2 students” were placed in the preparatory sequence. From an administrative perspective, they are defined as “basic writers,” and their “ESL” identity is lost in this label. However, Tham’s first language is English, and Raisa found it easier to write about the States than about Russia. Like Raisa and Tham, Elena and Hien also shared communities with the native speakers in the class. Their identity as “ESL” students is complicated, and the accuracy of the labels “ESL” and “L2” needs to be questioned.

The students in this study blended into the communities of their basic writing classes. They used their experiences of their first language culture to enrich and deepen their writing and as a source of comparative analysis of their American experiences. Elena and Hien had more recent experiences of their first language culture, and they had lived in their native countries at a time of their lives when they were able to use their tertiary education to develop as critical thinkers. They were more mature students in this respect and contributed to the class through writings that drew from their wider experience. The common ground that they shared with their Generation 1.5 peers was their determination to write in ways that would give them access to a college education, which is the dominating goal of all the students in these classes. These common goals are links they shared with all their peers.

Students like Raisa, Tham, Elena, and Hien influence the way the class community develops over the quarter through basic writing pedagogical practices such as class discussions and reviews of each other’s writing. These students represent a diversity of cultural perspectives, and their contributions bring a richer dimension to class discussion. Their ideas are valuable tools for introducing cultural differences and can lead to ways to discuss diversity in our communities. At the same time, they are part of the local community where their native speaking peers went to high school, raise their children, and work.

Non-native speaking basic writers can play a central role in a class where the goals of the course include open discussion of cultures that are shaping our communities. As our communities are becoming steadily more diverse, such topics are an essential component of the curriculum design in the basic writing course.

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