Improving a Generation 1.5 Student's Writing

Jacqueline Peña, Miami Dade College, FL

Jacqueline Peña, Ph.D., is the Dean of Academic Affairs at Miami Dade College's North Campus.

Abstract
This case study focuses on a Hispanic Generation 1.5 student who completed all requirements for graduation except the completion of high stakes writing exams. Mixed methods are used to identify the student's writing knowledge and abilities, and the data are used to create lessons for tutorial sessions. The pre and post writing assessments demonstrate a decrease in writing time and grammar errors as well as an increase in the use of complex and compound-complex sentences. Several lessons are identified for college tutors and teachers.

Introduction
United States colleges and universities serve foreign-born, non-native speakers of English who complete part of their schooling in their home countries and graduate from U.S. high schools. In college, these students might demonstrate characteristics and language abilities similar to first-generation as well as second-generation immigrants (Harklau, Siegal, & Losey, 1999; Matsuda & Matsuda, 2009; Ritter & Sandvik, 2009). This particular college population has been labeled Generation 1.5 because these students share some characteristics with both groups and seem to exist between two cultures or identities (May, 2007; Rambaut & Ima, 1988; Reznick, 2013). The number of incoming Generation 1.5 college students who have been in the U.S. for more than 7 years has tripled in the last half decade (Holten, 2009). In order to meet the language needs of these students in our college classrooms, educators need to understand these students' writing knowledge and abilities in relation to their U.S. schooling experiences.

Generation 1.5 students' English language abilities and needs set them apart from other English language learners in college (Harklau et al., 1999). In speech, Generation 1.5 students sound like native speakers with minimal accents and comfortable use of popular idiomatic expressions; however, in writing, these students produce second-language grammatical errors (Harklau et al., 1999; Gawienowski & Holper, 2006; May, 2007). Therefore, many of these students assess into developmental or English as a Second Language (ESL) courses depending on institutional placement policies, and these students might struggle with writing throughout college. The purpose of this case study is to analyze a Hispanic Generation 1.5 student's writing knowledge and abilities in relation to his English language learning experiences while implementing an instructional model for this particular case.

Methods
In this single case study, the study participant, Jonathan, was unable to graduate from college because he had not passed several required exams including the Florida College-Level Academic Skills Test (CLAST) and three subtests (essay writing, English language skills, and reading) of the Florida General Knowledge (GK) test for

education majors. Jonathan emigrated from Honduras to South Florida in the third grade. He completed his U.S. schooling in English-only classrooms. He lived in Spanish-speaking communities, spoke Spanish both at home and at work, and spoke English mostly in school. He could barely write in Spanish, and he rarely read Spanish texts. At the time of the study, Jonathan was a senior at a public higher education institution in South Florida. He had completed all the requirements for a bachelor's degree in special education except for the language components of the CLAST and the GK.

Data Collection
Case studies rely on multiple sources of data (Yin, 2003a, 2003b). For this study, data came from field notes, interviews, and writing samples. Jonathan completed approximately two writing samples per week for five months. Every two weeks, Jonathan completed one timed writing sample, which was used to assess Jonathan's writing knowledge and skills during independent writing projects similar to the CLAST and the GK. Field notes were maintained throughout the study. In addition, two 60-minute semi-structured interviews on his language learning experiences were conducted 4 months apart,, focusing on Jonathan's language learning experiences throughout his K-16 education.

Data Analysis
The writing samples were coded and analyzed first for sentence variety and then for English language errors, including verb, pronoun, and sentence structure errors. (Refer to Table 1 on the next page for a complete list.) After coding all the writing errors, an error rate was calculated for each essay by dividing the number of words in the essay by the number of errors and multiplying that number by 100 (Error Rate = number of errors/number of words*100). This error rate provided a reliable number by which to measure and compare correct use of grammar in each written text. The interviews were transcribed and coded using an open coding approach through which the data was broken down into manageable units and organized by category and code (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Open coding was applied to the interview notes, and then the codes were organized into categories or themes. This coding process yielded a coding map that was applied to the interviews and field notes for final coding.

Intervention
A tutorial program was created for Jonathan to help him develop metalinguistic knowledge of academic English and learn writing success strategies including prewriting and editing techniques. We began every untimed writing sample with an oral prewriting activity in which Jonathan would talk about the topic, forcing him to recall and organize information through speech. Then he would complete a written prewriting activity before writing the first draft of the essay. We would review the draft of the essay, focusing on key learning goals each week. Jonathan would rewrite the essay for homework, and we would review the new draft together during our next meeting addressing any unresolved issues. We had 60-minute sessions 1-2 times a week for five months. Because of his need to pass several timed writing exams and his prior knowledge of essay structure, our measurable goals were to reduce his error rate and writing time on handwritten essay exams.

Table 1

Grammar Comparison of Two Essays Written Four Months Apart

Type of Error	Number of Errors	
	Handwritten Essay Month #1	Handwritten Essay Month #4
Length	90 minutes	55 minutes
Spelling	8	9
Word Form	12	2
Word Choice	17	9
Word Order	0	1
Verb Tense	10	6
Verb Form	0	1
Article	2	2
Preposition	3	1
Number (singular/plural)	0	4
Subject-verb Agreement	2	0
Noun-pronoun Agreement	0	0
Capitalization	2	0
Punctuation	7	1
Not Needed	4	4
Missing Word	17	8
Commas Splices and Run-ons	3	1
Fragments	0	0
Possessive	0	0
Total Errors	87	49
Total Words	662	570
Error Rate	13.14	8.60

Quantitative Findings

Jonathan completed a timed writing assessment every two weeks in which he had to handwrite a five-paragraph essay, focusing on structure and grammar: the two key elements needed to pass his exams. Through the tutorials, Jonathan reduced his time on writing tasks while improving his grammar skills. As a result, Jonathan's essay word count reduced slightly to accommodate the reduced timeframe, but his error rate went down by nearly 5 points, meaning that he had five fewer errors in every 100 words. Table 1 compares the first essay exam and an essay exam written approximately four months later.

When looking at sentence complexity, there were no significant changes in the number of words and sentences. Jonathan used the same percentage of simple sentences, but his use of compound-complex sentences increased. His mean sentence length decreased by three words per sentence because he wrote in a more concise manner and avoided possible errors from unnecessarily lengthy compound or complex sentences. Table 2 compares the same two handwritten essay exams in relation to the number and percentage of the four types of sentences.

Table 2

Sentence Complexity Comparison of Two Essays Written Four Months Apart

Type of Sentence	Number of Sentence types			
	Handwritten Essay Month #1		Handwritten Essay Month #4	
	Number of Sentences	Percentage of Sentences	Number of Sentences	Percentage of Sentences
	90 minutes		55 minutes	
Simple	20	51%	21	51%
Compound	5	13%	2	5%
Complex	13	33%	12	29%
Compound-complex	1	3%	6	15%
Total Sentences	39		41	
Total Words	662		570	
Mean Sentence Length	16.97		13.90	

Qualitative Findings

The qualitative findings provide additional information on Jonathan's writing knowledge and skills as well as some of the schooling experiences that might have influenced his writing. In this section, I present the qualitative findings of this study organized by themes. These themes provided insight into specific strategies that were implemented in the tutorial sessions.

Theme 1: Auditory-based English Language Acquisition

Jonathan wrote according to how he heard and spoke the language, which resulted in many missing word endings, especially the –ed, -s, and –t endings. The missing word endings would produce many subject-verb agreement, number agreement, and verb tense errors. Because of his auditory-based writing skills, Jonathan also produced many

spelling errors and left out critical words or phrases from his sentences, similar to speech where people rely more on gestures and tone of voice. Jonathan also produced sentence structure errors that were similar to his speaking patterns such as placing the independent clause in the middle of an adverb (dependent) clause or vice versa. However, as an auditory learner, he wrote more effective essays when he had opportunities to discuss the topic (i.e., oral prewriting).

Theme 2: Poor Knowledge of the Writing Process

In the tutorials, Jonathan demonstrated poor knowledge of the writing process. First, he rarely brainstormed or completed any planning process prior to writing an essay. He simply read the writing prompt, chose the topic, and started writing. Because he lacked planning, Jonathan not only struggled with content decisions (i.e., what to write), but also with language decisions (i.e., vocabulary and grammar) throughout the entire drafting process. Therefore, when completing exams, he ran out of time before completing the essay. In addition, Jonathan did not understand the difference between revising and editing, and he approached revision by focusing on minor sentence level corrections.

Theme 4: Missed Opportunities in English and Writing Courses

One of the most detrimental curricular issues for Jonathan was the poor integration of grammar and writing instruction in English courses throughout his K-16 schooling. In elementary and middle school, teachers focused on fluency development and essay structure and rarely taught grammar or the metalinguistic properties of the English language. In high school, Jonathan barely received grammar instruction and had very few essay writing opportunities. His graded assignments were mostly oral activities (e.g., presentations, debates) and projects, which Jonathan felt comfortable completing. In college, he placed into developmental writing courses, which focused on grammar and offered limited writing practice. When he transitioned to the college-level composition courses, he had the opposite experience. He had multiple essay writing opportunities but very little grammar instruction. Grammar and essay writing had not been integrated for him until he began working on this tutorial intervention.

Theme 5: Poor Writing Support in College Content Courses

Jonathan discussed having poor writing support in his content courses where he received two types of writing comments from his instructors: the "get help" response when the grade relied on the content but language got in the way and the "great work" response when the instructor focused solely on content demands. For the "get help" response, Jonathan's professors would not grade for grammar, but would suggest that he get help in the Writing Center. However, Jonathan was too embarrassed to see a tutor. For the "great work" response, Jonathan's professors would provide positive comments on the content and ignore his writing skills, never suggesting help or requiring revisions.

Lessons Learned

As a writing instructor and a college administrator, I learned many valuable lessons from this case study that I immediately applied to my intervention with Jonathan and later to a variety of work settings, including my work with writing courses and academic support centers. Some of these lessons might be valuable to readers who work with Generation 1.5 students in higher education settings. This section will highlight these lessons and provide a few strategies for educators.

Lesson #1: Do Not Ignore Students' Oral Language Skills

Writing instructors and tutors should help these students understand the differences and similarities between informal and formal or academic English in both speech and writing. Generation 1.5 students are ear learners with two types of errors: developmental and ear-learning errors (Ritter and Sandvik, 2009). With this

distinction, students should read their papers aloud for ear-learning errors so that they can self-correct and improve their editing skills. This self-awareness and editing process takes time to develop since Generation 1.5 students have been hearing and using language in particular ways for many years.

Lesson #2: Teach Grammar with Grammar Terminology

Generation 1.5 students may lack metalinguistic knowledge of their first language and the English language, which complicates grammar instruction for developmental errors. Therefore, avoid using technical terms at the beginning of the writing relationship and integrate the terminology each week into the lessons pushing the students to use these terms when they speak about their writing. In addition, instructors and tutors must help students understand the English sentence structure as early as possible. With this knowledge, students will compose more correctly formed sentences and will expand the types of sentences used in their essays. In addition, knowledge of sentence structure helps students edit for structural errors as well as missing words or phrases and incorrect word forms.

Lesson #3: Integrate Reading in Writing Instruction

Writing instructors and tutors should motivate students to read academic English texts more often so that they develop a more accurate and intuitive sense of English. Because they are auditory writers, Generation 1.5 students should read model essays aloud on similar topics. Allison (2009) argues Generation 1.5 students need both reading and writing strategies throughout college. Therefore, writing courses should incorporate more reading activities related to writing tasks, and reading courses should require writing activities. Content course instructors should adopt writing across the curriculum and require students to write about texts and concepts or topics discussed in their classes.

Lesson #4: Be Strategic When Grouping Students in Courses

Instructors should create heterogeneous groups by including first generation immigrants, Generation 1.5 students, and native speakers of English in each group. First generation immigrants tend to have high metalinguistic knowledge of at least one language and native speakers of English have stronger intuitive skills. With this heterogeneous grouping, instructors could require peer review of essays or even the creation of collaborative essays in which the group members negotiate content, essay structure, language, and grammar as they write one essay together.

Lesson #5: Require Prewriting Activities

Generation 1.5 students might demonstrate poor background or content knowledge in their essays if their effort to learn the English language in K-12 detracted them from content learning (Gawienowski & Holper, 2006). Prewriting activities help students organize their thoughts and make content decisions prior to writing the first draft of the essay, especially during essay exams. Therefore, writing and content instructors should require prewriting activities for all written assignments and essay exams, which will help students develop positive prewriting habits while recalling and organizing content.

Lesson #6: Require Submission of Multiple Drafts

Writing multiple drafts helps students enhance the quality of the written assignment prior to submission for a grade and learn more effective writing strategies. Instructors could review a draft of the paper or require that students take their papers to a writing tutor prior to final submission. Instructors could use online tutoring programs when working on campuses with limited academic support resources or with a non-traditional population of students with limited on-campus time. While this teaching lesson might not be new in writing courses, it is a critical lesson for content courses where instructors

are not teaching writing skills along with the content. Content instructors who are not comfortable reviewing drafts can require students to work with an online or face-to-face tutor on one draft for every essay assignment.

Lesson #7: Require Handwritten and Typed Assignments

Most times, instructors gauge students' writing knowledge and skills based on written assignments completed at home. However, students might rely on friends, family members, and word processing programs as well as content and writing websites to help them write acceptable papers. Writing instructors and tutors should ask for both timed and untimed writing assignments as well as handwritten and typed assignments. The variety of writing formats will help instructors and tutors properly gauge their students' writing knowledge and abilities and choose the most appropriate instructional strategies.

Next Steps

Working with Jonathan taught me that we need to find ways of helping Generation 1.5 students succeed in college writing activities; however, research in this area has not been abundant in the last decade. Therefore, the next steps in this area of research include more studies to identify pre-college language learning experiences that contribute to college writing abilities. In addition, research needs to look at whether there are differences in writing abilities and needs among different groups of Generation 1.5 students based on current region, native language, or country of origin. Finally, this research was just a small piece of the larger picture of Hispanic Generation 1.5 students' academic writing experiences in college. An ultimate goal should be to develop and test various assessment and instructional models and see which ones are the most effective in helping Generation 1.5 students become stronger college writers.

References

Allison, Harriett. (2009). High School Academic Literacy Instruction and the Transition to College Writing. In M. Roberge, M. Siegel, and L. Harklau (Eds.), Generation 1.5 meets college composition (pp. 75-90). New York: Routledge, Taylor and Francis.

Bogdan, Robert C., & Biklen, Sari K. (2003). Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theories and methods (4th ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Gawienowski, Mary F., & Holper, Kathi. (2006). A portrait of generation 1.5 students. In C. Machado (Series Ed.) & A. Blumenthal (Vol. Ed.), Perspectives on community college ESL series: Vol. 2. Students, mission, and advocacy (pp. 117-130). Alexandria, VA: Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, Inc.

Harklau, Linda, Siegal, Meryl, Losey, Kay. M. (1999). Linguistically diverse students and college writing: What is equitable and appropriate? In L. Harklau, M. Siegal, & K. M. Losey (Eds.), Generation 1.5 meets college composition (pp.1-16). Mahweh, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Holten, Christine. (2009). Creating an Inter-Departmental Course for Generation 1.5 ESL Writers: Challenges Faced and Lessons Learned. In M. Roberge, M. Siegel, and L. Harklau (Eds.), Generation 1.5 meets college composition (pp. 170-184). New York: Routledge, Taylor and Francis.

Matsuda, Paul Kei, & Matsuda, Aya. (2009). The Erasure of Resident ESL Writers. In M. Roberge, M. Siegel, and L. Harklau (Eds.), Generation 1.5 meets college composition (pp. 50-64). New York: Routledge, Taylor and Francis.

May, James S. (2007). Analyzing the placement of community college students in English as a second language for academic purposes (EAP) courses. Retrieved from the University of Florida Digital Collections. (UFE0015741:00001)

Rambaut, Ruben. G., & Ima, Kenji. (1988). The adaptation of Southeast Asian refugee youth. A comparative study. Final report to the Office of Resettlement. San Diego: San Diego State University. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED299372)

Reznick, Alisa. (2013, November 18). Between two worlds: America's 1.5 generation [Web log]. Retrieved from http://blogs.seattletimes.com/race-awsd/2013/11/18/race-project-between-two-worlds-americas-1-5-generation/

Ritter, Jennifer J., & Sandvik, Trygve. (2009). Meeting in the Middle: Bridging the Construction of Meaning with Generation 1.5 Learners. In S. Bruce & B. Rafoth (Eds.), ESL writers: A guide for writing center tutors (pp.91-104). Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers, Inc.

Yin, Robert K. (2003a). Case study research: Design and methods (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.

Yin, Robert K. (2003b). Application of case study research (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.