

Uses of Background Experience in a Preparatory Reading and Writing Class: An Analysis of Native and Non-native Speakers of English

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ABSTRACT: The goal of the study reported in this article is to analyze ways students in the first course of a three-quarter college preparatory sequence in reading and writing write about their experiences in their essays. The student participants were three native speakers of English and three native speakers of Punjabi, who had lived and studied in the United States for between three and five years at the time of the study. In order to assess how these students' writing related to the context of the class and the students' backgrounds, both faculty and students were interviewed. The students were asked about their reactions to their placement, their pre-college educational experiences, and their perceptions of the preparatory class. The reading and writing sections are taught separately and in sequence. The instructors share equal responsibility for assessing the students, so both instructors were asked to evaluate the students' achievement in relation to their expectations for the course. Analysis indicates that, for the students in this study, both native and non-native speakers of English are trying to find ways to make the transition from high school to college. However, in order to succeed, each of these students needs individual orientation to the demands of the preparatory class. Some students need more help with development of ideas whereas others need more help with editing for correctness.

In many open-access colleges, high school graduates, whether they are native or non-native speakers of English, take the same test to place them in composition programs. At some of these colleges, all students who are identified as not yet ready for college-level courses are placed in the same preparatory classes. To a certain extent, the attitudes of the students towards this placement as well as their peers and teachers in the preparatory courses influence their progress in writing. These placement practices assume that both native and non-native speakers share experiences that will provide common ground for them to complete the assignments. A comparison of the experiences that both groups of students select to use as content for their essays and the writing qualities they use to do this may indicate aspects of the common ground they share both in high school and in communities in the United States.

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For some time, there have been calls for research that will enable faculty who work in preparatory programs to understand, in greater depth, the students who come from different backgrounds (Harrington 92). The need for such research is growing, as the extent of the diversity in such classes is steadily increasing (Harklau, Losey, and Siegal). Teachers frequently require students to draw on their personal experiences to complete their written assignments, and it is important that teachers understand the ways that all students in these diverse classes represent themselves in their writing. It is from this understanding that teachers are able to respond to the students' texts and help these inexperienced writers to stand back from the subject matter of their papers, assess the implications and significance of their experiences, and use them as "as a productive means of developing . . . writing proficiency" (Harklau "Representing Culture" 126).

Native and non-native speaking high school graduates have many educational experiences in common. So-called Generation 1.5 students moved with their parents to the U.S. when they were young children or adolescents, graduated from American high schools, and are still studying in U.S. educational institutions (Harklau, Losey, and Siegal). For these reasons, they can be defined as "products of our own secondary education system" (Matsuda, Canagarajah, Harklau, Hyland, and Warschauer 153). At the same time, they share values and background influences with their parents' generation. Although they constitute a significant proportion of those in college preparatory programs, there has been little research that investigates how they relate to their native-speaking teachers and peers in preparatory reading and writing classes.

There are some studies, however, that assess why Generation 1.5 students are struggling in their college classes. Lay et al. describe three Chinese students who felt that their high school preparation was an inadequate "program of discrete skills development" without enough opportunities to write (Lay, Carro, Tien, Niemann, and Long 180). It is not only their problems with writing, however, that are holding them back. All the students in this study comment on the isolation they felt in class because they could not participate orally. Blanton discusses the difficulties that both basic writers and Generation 1.5 students have in finding a confident voice in their writing to explain "their own ideas clearly as they connect to the ideas of others" (122). At the same time, the non-native speakers are struggling because they "have gotten stuck in a sort of inter-language" that makes their spoken and written English difficult to understand (124).

In the majority of universities, Generation 1.5 students are separated from their high school peers and placed with recently arrived international students in ESL classes (Harklau, Losey, and Siegal). Studies have compared the ways both groups of ESL students study, interact, and participate in class. One faculty member found that, in comparison with international students, she needed to work hard to give Generation 1.5 students a “sense of academic motivation,” as these students did not complete and turn in assignments (Muchinsky and Tangren 223). Reid describes how Generation 1.5 students “understand the slang, pop music, the behaviors and ‘cool clothing’” of their high schools. However, in contrast to international students, their lack of understanding of written discourse limits their reading, while their writing reflects the “conversational phonetic quality of their ‘ear-based language’” (18). One Polish student, Jan, looked back on high school as relatively easy and commented that in his pre-ESL class, the “‘foreign people’ . . . found him too Americanized,” while his teacher “told him his English was only slang and street language” (Leki “ ‘Pretty Much’ ” 29). Questions need to be asked about how Generation 1.5 students look back at their high school experiences and how they relate these to teachers and peers in college preparatory programs.

As it is the experiences that they build upon to develop the ideas in their papers, one of the significant problems for permanent residents in ESL preparatory classes is in completing assignments that are framed for international students who need cultural orientation to life in the United States. After several years “in the multiethnic, urban U.S. social milieu” (Harklau “ ‘Good Kids’ ” 55), students’ memories of the countries of their birth lack relevance for their lives in the United States. In preparatory classes, both native and non-native speakers share a common background in the local community and in their high schools. All are initiated into “the culture of school and are largely literate about classroom work” (Nelson 411). Although they do not have the support in mainstream classes from ESL teachers, Harklau suggests that the needs of Generation 1.5 students may be met more effectively in “developmental writing courses, where they will be among students with the same academic training and experience” (Harklau “Representing Culture” 124).

The papers that they write for class indicate ways this common academic background has influenced their writing. If the texts are documents of the students’ experiences and a record of the ways that they are using this experience in their writing, they represent what Matsuda has called a “virtual world . . . in which the writer and reader meet each other and construct a

shared social reality” (“Contrastive Rhetoric” 251). The final drafts cannot be evaluated in isolation, however, as these are influenced by instructors’ comments. Fife and O’Neil stress the importance of responding to students’ texts in relation to the process approach used in composition classes. This process begins with the class discussion and students’ interaction with their peers. Both native and non-native speakers are “strangers” in the context of the “strange lands” of college courses (McCarthy 233). This “context” comprises both the ways that the texts relate to the background of all the students and the context of the preparatory writing class where the papers are being written.

The goal of the study reported in this article is to analyze how students write about their experiences in their essays for the preparatory writing class. In order to assess how these assignments relate to the demands and expectations of the class, the students and instructors were interviewed. As in many colleges, faculty had “no choice but to place” both native speakers and Generation 1.5 students in the same class (Matsuda “Basic Writing” 68). By comparing the ways native and non-native speakers completed the assignments, I wanted to understand how the diversity of the class was represented in the students’ writing.

THE STUDY

The students described in this paper were placed in Preparatory Reading and Writing I, the first course of a three-course preparatory sequence at one of the open-access colleges of a large university in the industrial Midwest. This is a six-credit course taught by a reading and writing instructor. The reading and writing sections are taught separately and in sequence. The class meets for two hours three times a week. The reading instructor teaches the first hour and focuses on the texts selected to support that section of the course. The writing instructor teaches the second hour, where the focus is on helping the students to use and develop the ideas in the texts in writing the assigned essays. The instructors meet frequently to discuss what they have covered in their classes, but they do not team teach in the sense that both instructors teach the sections at the same time. The two instructors share equal responsibility for assessing the students, so both instructors were asked to evaluate the students’ achievement in relation to their expectations for the course. I am an instructor in the program, but I was not teaching the class that is the focus of this article. Twelve students volunteered to participate

in my study, and during our open-ended conversations, toward the end of the quarter, I talked to all of them about their lives before they came to the college, their reactions to their placement, and their perceptions of the class and their peers. The students gave their permission for me to tape these conversations and analyze them and their assignments after the course was finished. All student names in this article are pseudonyms.

After the final portfolios (containing all the completed assignments and drafts) had been submitted at the end of the quarter, the students' written assignments, which included the comments of the instructor, were analyzed. I read and reread their descriptions of their experiences to assess how these were used to develop the writing prompts for the essays. I discussed the students' written work with the reading and writing instructors and asked them how the completed assignments represented the students' progress throughout the quarter. With the instructors' permission, these conversations were also taped. The conversations with both students and faculty were analyzed and used to understand, in greater depth, the ways students had written about their experiences. The reading and writing instructors of the class read and gave feedback on the final drafts of this article.

Students' Backgrounds and Perceptions of the Class

For this article, I selected the six students in the group who were recent high school graduates; Rahul, Vijay, and Meera are Generation 1.5 students, and Marian, John, and Ian are native speakers who have never lived outside the state. Although Meera arrived in the U.S. after adolescence, she attended a mainstream American high school for three years, and the ways she worked for the class indicate that she was shaped by the American education system and, in these respects, can be considered as a member of Generation 1.5 (Matsuda et al.). For Rahul, Vijay, and John, this open-access college was their second experience in postsecondary education, as these students had attended different colleges the previous year. Rahul and Vijay had not found the courses they wanted or the help they needed in their first colleges, and John had found the courses too difficult. For Meera, Ian, and Marian, this was the first college experience.

The non-native speakers all come from India and are native speakers of Punjabi. Rahul and Vijay had attended public schools in India, where classes were taught in Punjabi, and Meera, a private boarding school, where English was the language of instruction. Rahul and Vijay took ESL English classes in high school, while Meera was mainstreamed in general English

classes. At the time of the research, Vijay had lived in the U.S. for five years, Rahul for four years, and Meera for three. Vijay's family had recently received American citizenship, and Rahul's was in the process of applying. Although the students do not write about India, the memories they had of Indian schools and their parents' motivation to give their families a better life in the U.S. are important for the ways they perceive themselves in the United States. All remember India as a place where the education system is more demanding than in the U.S. Whether they attended public high schools or a private boarding school, the students had no choices in the classes they took, and the emphasis on rote learning, reinforced by corporal punishment and extensive testing, meant that life at school was stressful. Meera commented that, in contrast, "the American school system is easy. If you know what you are doing, it is easy."

Vijay's family came to the U.S. for job opportunities, which were limited in India, where "to get a job, you have to pay money." Rahul's family wanted to move to the United States where "everything is better" especially "education and lifestyle." His mother now works in a clothing factory, and his father drives a forklift truck. Meera's family moved to the U.S. for the education of the children as "it is very difficult to get into college in India and costs a lot of money." Both her parents now work in a nursing home for the elderly "helping people in the dining room, and they have no choice" of other employment. Vijay was intimidated by the thought of high school because he "didn't know any English," and his uncle had to "force" him to go. However, like Rahul, he remembers the high school ESL classes as supportive. Rahul also recalls a history teacher who "really helped" him because "he gave [him] different tests." Both Rahul and Vijay had little contact, however, with the other high school students. Rahul commented that although he liked the students in high school, they did not talk to him because he could not carry on a conversation in English. Vijay had similar feelings of isolation within the native-speaking community because he could not express his thoughts in English.

All the non-native speakers were uneasy about their placement and achievement in the preparatory college class. Meera thought she did well in high school because her grades were As and Bs. She felt that her English was especially strong until she took the test at the college and was placed in the first preparatory class. She was disappointed with her B for the course and felt she should have done better. She worried that another non-native-speaking student in the class had higher grades. Rahul felt he "learned more in school than in college." He said, "I don't feel I need to be there"

as the instructors cover “the same stuff in reading and writing.” Vijay was disappointed with his grade of B- and thought he could have done better if he had worked harder. Both Vijay and Rahul felt that their spoken English was holding them back in the class. Rahul found speaking English was still very difficult, and he was only able to express himself orally if he understood the topic “really well.” Vijay said, “In the class I won’t speak up. I am scared that I don’t speak English very well.” He was surprised that the native speakers, who could speak so well, were taking this class. He felt that if he knew as much English as they did, he would have done better. He commented, “They don’t try hard.”

The non-native speakers looked back to high school as a place where they felt they had fulfilled their potential better than in college. In contrast, college was stressful. They were concerned about their level of achievement and their ability to participate in the class, and they felt that they compared negatively with some of the other non-native speakers in the class.

Marian, John, and Ian were also recent graduates from high school, where Marian and John had taken general English and Ian, vocational English courses. In contrast to the non-native speakers, these three students felt that college represented a relief after the stresses of their high school experiences. Both Marian and John struggled to graduate. Marian said that in high school she “really didn’t get along with most of the people and wasn’t normally there all the time.” However, it was the relationships with the faculty that made her want to drop out. She commented, “When I did not like the teacher, I didn’t do anything.” The twelfth grade general English teacher would not explain the assignments she had missed and told her to ask another student. She remembered, “I told her it’s your job, and I never ever went to her class again.” Instead, she said that she “would just go and do [her] work at the principal’s office.”

John looked back on high school as “a huge nightmare every time [he] woke up.” Like Marian, it was the memories of the teachers, who “should treat [students] with more respect,” that had left the most lasting impression. He remembered little structure in the class: “students would goof off and the teachers wouldn’t say anything.” He felt he had achieved nothing from these academic classes. Although Ian “hated elementary and junior high school,” high school was very different. He tested as learning disabled and commented, “It’s helped me a lot.” Ian explained that he had always been a “poor test taker” who “couldn’t pass proficiencies.” In his senior year, he was exempted from these tests because of his “disability in test taking.” He did well in vocational English computer graphic classes, which he passed

with “all As and Bs.” He had resisted coming to college, but his job in a local distribution company required college qualifications for promotion, so he felt forced to come.

In general, the native speakers came to the class with negative perceptions of themselves as students and writers. In contrast to their high school experience, the class offered them space to express themselves, and they felt respected by the faculty. Ian found the teachers “almost at friend level.” He liked the class discussion in both the reading and writing sections. He found the students’ contributions to be very important in class especially those of the “foreign students,” who “contribute so much about languages and beliefs.” Marian felt confident in the class, accepted by both faculty and students, and she had little difficulty with the work. In the beginning, John found the class difficult; however, he soon found that “students help each other and the professors treat you with respect.” He explained that he struggled so much with writing that his mother and brother’s girlfriend always helped him to write his papers. He commented, “I always miss the grammar.”

Although the native and non-native speakers share the same high school background, their attitudes, which have been affected by these experiences, are different. Memories from Indian schools influence the non-native speakers’ attitude to American high schools, and they feel a pressure to succeed because of the efforts of their parents to give them a better life in the United States. The native speakers feel no such pressures, but they struggle with negative memories of high school. Both groups of students are, however, working in their own ways to adjust to the demands of college life.

Faculty Perceptions of the Class at the End of the Quarter

Both reading and writing sections are taught as interactive discussion classes. The goal is for the students’ reactions to the topics that arise from the readings to dictate the direction of the class. The reading and writing instructors had worked as a team to teach the combined sections of the class for several years, and they met frequently to discuss what they had covered in their classes. Both instructors viewed the class as an interactive one, and they frequently found students already discussing the topic of the papers when they arrived.

The instructors perceived Meera as the most interactive of the students involved in this study. She often initiated the topic for discussion and helped other students to become involved. Marian and Ian were also involved par-

ticipants both in small group discussions and in the class as a whole. John was less involved, and Rahul and Vijay “kept themselves on the edge.” Rahul “was very quiet and modest.” The writing instructor remembered only one occasion on which he contributed to class discussion when he became very heated as “he described an American in the gas station where he worked whom he perceived as a whiner.” She felt that Vijay’s aloofness was not the result of shyness but an attempt to adopt a “cool, punk allusiveness.” He gave her the sense that “he did not want to write these essays and didn’t want to deal with these Americans.” She thought he felt that “Americans were not quite as good as the Indians. They were lazy, not sufficiently grateful, and spoiled.” The impression that Vijay left with her was that he did not “care” about “doing anything.”

The fact that both Rahul and Vijay were not involved with the class “affected their assignments because it meant that they could not benefit from the community brainstorming of ideas.” Both instructors commented that Vijay regularly turned in his assignments late. The reading instructor attributed this, in part, to the fact that he was working forty hours in a local gas station, as well as being a full-time student. This was a problem because when these late assignments were returned to him, he did not have time to revise his work. He only passed the class because the writing instructor “gave him coaching to get assignments out of him.” In her perception, “his competency was reasonable, but the amount of effort he put in was not sufficient.” In contrast, Meera was an “‘A’ type perfectionist.” She wrote and rewrote her papers and was never satisfied with the results. All the students passed the class, however, as they fulfilled the course criteria, which were based on the quality of the revised assignments in the final portfolio of work. In these revised drafts, the students needed to show that they were developing their ideas in their essays and editing their work at the sentence level. (In assessing student work, the reading and writing instructors evaluate the work done in their sections on a scale of A to C-. Each section represents 50 percent of the final grade. At the end of the quarter, the instructors meet to discuss the students’ results, and they come to a consensus over the final grade by re-reading the work in the portfolio. If the instructors cannot agree on the grade, the portfolio is sent to the composition coordinator, who makes the final decision.)

Of the six students, John found the class most difficult. The writing instructor was surprised at “the absolute incomprehensibility of his writing.” She found the work he did in class presented profound sentence-level difficulties and was convinced that he had “someone at home to edit his

papers.” She perceived his disability to be “more profound than Ian’s.” Although Ian was the student identified with disabilities, she found him “a smart assertive user of the system.”

Both instructors felt that the group was average for a Preparatory Reading and Writing I section. The non-native speakers “came in at the same level as the native speakers in the group,” and “both had an equally poor command of spoken and written English.” The writing instructor commented, “All shared the same disjunctive experience when they started, because they were all in a foreign academic land.” The “common denominator” that they shared was that they were all “foreigners in college and not necessarily foreigners in the U.S.” The fact that John, Vijay, and Rahul were not active participants while Ian, Meera, and Marian were led the writing instructor to assume that “participation is not culturally dependent.” Both instructors drew on the students’ pre-college experiences to guide their responses to the texts and facilitate the writing of their papers.

THE WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS

Explaining the Significance of Personal Experience

In both the reading and writing class the students’ personal experience was an important component of the work. The reading instructor approached each text by asking questions that required the students to think about how the topic related to their own personal experiences. As these students were all in their first quarter at the college, they related their ideas to events that had happened to them before they enrolled in college. All of the class time in reading was used for these discussions. The themes of the readings were also referred to in the writing class. Here, the focus was on brainstorming ideas that could be used as material for essays. In order to develop these ideas, the students were asked to think about their experiences. After the initial brainstorming, the class worked to organize the ideas in an outline, which was used to complete the first draft of the essay. Throughout the reading and writing processes, the instructors asked the students to think about events in their own lives that were similar to those related in the texts. These personal experiences became the subject matter for the essays.

In the first assignment, the students were asked to analyze an example of positive or negative pressure they had experienced from peers and to use this to draw conclusions about the situation, the peer pressure that had been

exerted on them, and the significance that this may have for society. After the initial presentation draft, the students were required to redraft their papers at least twice before submitting them in the final portfolio. The goal for the class was for the students to develop the ideas in their papers beyond two double spaced pages. The topics for all the papers were developed from readings that had been collected by faculty and custom published (*Critical Bridge*). An example from the readings on this topic was "Salvation" by Langston Hughes.

Vijay and Rahul chose to write about pressure from peers in the first colleges they attended. In both papers, there is the same focus on the confusion of their situation as they try to find a place in the "system." Rahul wanted to specialize in computers, but, as he was "new in the computer field," he talked to a friend, who "forced [him] to come to the same college that he was in." The advantages of this first experience of college after high school, as described by his friend, included the fact that "he did not get homework at school and also sometimes they let him go home early." In addition, his friend had told him, incorrectly, "that this college is the cheapest college," where it was possible to be successful while "working 40 to 50 hours a week." The school did not work out for Rahul, and he felt that the "money and the valuable time" which he spent were "never going to come back." Vijay describes a similar situation where he was persuaded to attend a college where it was possible to graduate "within one year," which he thought "could be money saving." However, the diploma he received did not give him access to opportunities he wanted, and he felt that the courses were a waste of his time and money.

Both Rahul's and Vijay's papers reflect their confusion about the education system, a confusion that they share, in many respects, with the native speakers in the group. Similar shared concerns are the realities of trying to find financial resources for college and the problems of balancing the needs of studying with those of holding down a full-time job. The comments from the instructor on early drafts encourage the students to develop their writing by showing the significance of the events they are describing. In the final drafts, the body of their papers remains unchanged, although Rahul adds in his conclusion, "We should always listen to friends' advice, because we gain our knowledge from listening to them. But make the decision only yourself because it's your gain or loss." Vijay adds no comment to explain the significance of the pressure he experienced, and the instructor suggests he needs to "develop some of these ideas and explanations in more depth."

The other students in the sample all write about different kinds of pressure outside school. Like Vijay and Rahul, Marian and Ian do not develop

their papers in sufficient depth, and their first drafts of little over one page remain largely unchanged through the drafting process. Marian focuses on a description of the pressure she experienced from a peer to drop one boyfriend and go out with another. Like Rahul, she adds ideas to her conclusion: "Being pressured to do something can change everything and sometimes bad or good." She advises against allowing friends to exert pressure in her situation because "you end up being depressed and you think it is your entire fault." Ian pulls back from his description of positive peer pressure to change jobs and comments: "My peers have helped me come a long way, and I am thankful to them for the extra push they gave me." Both native and non-native speakers select topics with which all students are concerned: choosing colleges, changing jobs, and deciding about relationships.

Meera wrote about the significance of her topic, throughout the assignment, most effectively. She focuses on the pressure that a peer put on her to send for acne medication. Her skin was distressing her to such an extent that, she writes, "It discouraged me by looking at my own face in the mirror." The medication did not help, however, and "the worst part was they just mail the solution every two months without asking." She concludes: "From this point I learned a real good lesson. Never take advice from an inexperienced person. Always trust yourself. Have self-confidence and that is the most important thing in your life." She concludes: "It takes time to achieve your goal." After an analysis of the situation, Meera uses her experience to generalize about peer pressure and advises her reader on this topic. She relates herself to others as she addresses the reader and makes generalized assumptions about the topic.

For the second assignment, the students were required to write about a change that represented a "rite of passage." They were given free rein to choose any experience that they felt related to this topic, but they needed to go beyond a description of what happened and indicate the significance of the experience in relation to the context in which it occurred and its significance for the rest of their lives. Malcolm X's experience of teaching himself to write, excerpted from his autobiography, was one of the readings that the students discussed as an example of such fundamentally liberating experiences.

All the non-native speakers chose to write about aspects of their experiences of moving to the United States. Unfortunately, it is not possible to assess the influence of class and group discussion that led the non-native speakers to focus on their immigration experiences. The texts that they read and the requirements of the assignment led the students to think about experiences that have transformed their lives. For young people who are still

accommodating to the cultural life of the United States and still remember the country of their birth, their immigration experiences remain a powerful force.

The students describe the stress they felt as they tried to move into the American way of life while at the same time retaining the cultural roots they share with their parents. Vijay explains the tension of living under a green card status before he was granted citizenship. His father “told” him he “had to show good moral character to become a U.S. citizen,” because “if anyone does something wrong, INS could send them back to their country.” He was so determined to become an American citizen and not to let his family down that he could “remember all fifty questions [on the citizenship exam] by heart.” He writes, “Citizenship makes me feel like an American.” And, as his new status will enable him to marry an Indian girl easily, the experience of citizenship is fulfilling both personally and socially.

Both Rahul and Meera focus on the difficulty of adjusting to the pace of life in the United States, which they perceive as an important aspect of the difference between the Indian and American cultures and the source of many of their problems. Rahul concludes his brief paper by writing, “My lifestyle has been changed into a fast lane with all American.” He sees an adjustment to the fast pace of life as his way of reaching his goal of citizenship. Meera also writes about the pace of life as a significant factor when she moved to the U.S. From the first confusing experience at the airport, where no one has time to stop and help her family, she describes her experiences of trying to find a way through the “rush” of high school, where people have no time to make friends. Eventually, she was encouraged by the achievements of another non-native speaker; she “started talking little bit in class and from there [she] made a few friends.” For Meera, it was through her ability to interact with her peers that she resolved the difficulties of her initiation into the new culture.

The non-native speakers in the class write about the passage into American society and culture, which, on the one hand, was a “public” change in status that affected and was still influencing every aspect of their lives; however, they describe this change in terms of the contacts they have with their peers and members of the communities where they are living. The native speakers focus on significant “private” stressful experiences that they describe as being resolved, in different degrees, by the rite of passage of their initiation into college.

Marian describes her disruptive life in high school and focuses on coming to college. She writes, “I went through a rite of passage by having

changes in friends, my attitudes, and by caring more about others and me.” John writes about his junior year, which was “probably the worst year [he] had in [his] whole life.” He concludes his description by writing, “I am in college now studying to be youth pastor.” In a similar way, Ian describes the stress that affected his extended family when his mother discovered that her stepfather was, in fact, her biological father. He writes of the way this has been resolved for him: “My life is running smoothly. I am doing wonderful at school and loving every minute of it.” The native speakers write of the benefits of the changes they perceive as a result of attending college, while the non-native speakers are more aware of the ongoing pressures to become part of the American way of life. In this respect, the non-native speakers may be more aware of the realistic repercussion of such changes than the native speakers since college is still a very recent experience. All the students found ways, however, to use their current experiences to fulfill the demands of the assignment.

Using Personal Experience to Develop Argument

For the final assignment, the students were required to evaluate television from different perspectives. They were asked to establish a position, give reasons to support their position, introduce other ideas, or “counterarguments,” and show how these new perspectives related to their original position. The resulting essays show how their writing has developed over the quarter.

John makes a clear statement about the potential that television has for drawing the country together after September 11, 2001, but he does not develop this by including other perspectives on television. The other students in the sample use the pattern of argument/counterargument in their papers. Vijay writes that “television gives us weather updated every moment so it would be a good thing for people to schedule their work,” and is a useful source of information on current affairs. He goes on to comment that such information can also be found in newspapers and the library and not on TV alone. He develops the complexity of his paper when he responds to the “counterargument” by writing that “newspapers does has all the information, but it takes much effort to read, and I think reading newspaper would be time consuming, and it does not have the right at the moment updated information.” As is the case for Vijay’s essays throughout the quarter, this final draft needs proofreading and developing to meet the length requirements of the assignment.

The patterns of revision that the students adopt throughout the quarter indicate the level of success they achieve in the class. Vijay, Rahul, and Marian write relatively accurate first drafts, but do not make substantial revisions beyond correcting surface grammar errors. In contrast, the ideas in Meera's first drafts are developed but unstructured grammatically. She edits the grammar in her revisions while also structuring the ideas.

Examples from the final essay assignment make this clear. Meera's first draft is three pages long and is filled with ideas and comments that criticize the content of television while supporting its educational value. She writes, in her first draft, "Now days movies has influenced a lot to teenagers, which ruins there whole life by getting into trouble." Many of the surface inaccuracies are adjusted in the final draft: "Nowadays movies have influenced a lot of teenagers, which ruins their whole lives by getting into trouble." In contrast, Rahul's one-page first draft is comparatively accurate; for example, he writes: "TV is the fastest source of fresh information including news, weather, political matters and sports." However, this paper remains undeveloped in content and ideas throughout the drafting process. Like Marian's and Vijay's, his drafts were shorter than the required length, and although they are relatively accurate, he spends little time or thought on revision.

Ian redrafted his final assignment the most effectively to indicate the significance and importance of his position on the topic. In the first draft he wrote: "As a sports fan, I agree that TV is the only way that a lot of people can attend a game. I am also convinced that TV has done more to hurt amateur and professional sport than anything else." In his final revision, the personal reference has gone, and he focuses on the game, other people's relationship to this, and the wider significance that the topic has for the community. He writes, "In much the same way some people cannot afford cinema prices. . . . But just like all things there is a price to pay for the entertainment. Networks control the sports we watch." Of the students in this sample, Ian and Meera achieve the goals of using their experiences to generalize about the subject in ways that include their readers and comment on the concerns of the wider community most effectively.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

In their writing, both native and non-native speakers in this study describe experiences from high school and from the communities where

they live and work. The topics they choose to write about and the ways they express themselves reflect these influences. They focus on personal relationships and discuss the pressures of trying to balance the demands of work and college. The non-native speakers write about balancing the demands of their parental culture with the American one, while the native speakers relate their experiences of high school to those of college. The design of this study does not allow for an assessment of how the students choose their topics. Such a question needs to be addressed in future research, where class observation, for example, is part of the research design. However, the students' written assignments show that they focus on their current experiences in the U.S., and this suggests that the writing needs of Generation 1.5 students can be met in classes where they use the same texts and assignments as native speakers (Harklau "Representing Culture"). As Harklau writes, it is by understanding and writing about personal experience in greater depth and complexity that students develop as writers. The instructor's comments on their papers encourage these students to analyze their experiences in order to find ways of developing the ideas in the texts. Meera's and Ian's essays, particularly, show how they relate their personal experiences to other people's and make assumptions about the topics of their essays.

This study does not suggest generalizations about ways native and non-native speakers use their experiences to develop their ideas and express them in writing. The non-native speakers have different strengths in these respects. Rahul and Vijay have difficulty contributing to class discussion, while Meera participates orally in class but needs help in editing her work. She has spent the least amount of time in the United States, but her background in India and in an American high school has given her most exposure to spoken English and native speakers. Her papers are "fluent" in the sense that she writes at length and develops her ideas. Rahul and Vijay write more accurately than Meera, which may be a result of the focus on grammar in their high school ESL classes. There is a similar difficulty in characterizing the native speakers' work. For example, like Meera, Marian has come from a general English class in high school. However, like Rahul, she writes short essays that are accurate at the sentence level, but the ideas remain undeveloped throughout the drafting process.

Both native and non-native speakers require individual orientation to the requirements of the preparatory class. For example, the data from this study do not suggest that the non-native speakers need to focus on grammatical accuracy, as Rahul and Vijay make fewer errors than some of their native-speaking peers like John. Similarly, as far as these students are con-

cerned, it is not necessarily the non-native speakers who require help with developing the length of their essays, as Meera's drafts are better developed than Marian's. In this sample of students, both the native and non-native speakers require individual help to fulfill the requirements that are necessary to pass the class. Each student is an individual with specific needs.

Class participation and involvement are important factors for all the students. The instructor's description of Vijay echoes Reid's comments on the "cool" appearance of a Generation 1.5 student, who works hard to fit in with recent fashion statements. Vijay's attempt to blend in with his peers, however, gives the impression that he is aloof and superior, and both he and Rahul are perceived by the instructor as critical, in different degrees, of the American culture. The students' comments echo the instructors' perceptions of them. However, from their own perspectives, it is not a feeling of "aloofness" that stops them from participating in class. In contrast, Vijay and Rahul stress that their lack of confidence in their oral competency is the factor that keeps them from voicing their opinions in class. Although John struggles more than Rahul and Vijay as a writer, the instructor comments that he is "supported by his feeling of being a member of the class." The experience of these students suggests that silence can be interpreted in different ways. In her case study of a Chinese nursing student, Leki stresses that some of the student's difficulties could be explained by the fact that there were no college courses which would help her to develop the essential oral communication skills that she needed ("Living Through College Literacy"). It is in the preparatory classes that communicative competency should be addressed.

Both native and non-native speakers of English need time to put their high school experiences into perspective. As a result of their previous negative educational experiences, the native speakers feel a sense of relief when they reach college. In contrast, the non-native speakers feel tension in different ways, and this affects the way they perceive themselves in the class. Having come from an education system in India that they perceive as inflexible, they find high school in the United States manageable. Meera, like Jan (Leki " 'Pretty Much' "), looks back on high school as a relatively easy experience. Rahul's frustration at his college placement contributes to his lack of motivation to revise his papers. He does not make the progress he wants to; therefore, he feels that he achieved more in high school. However, the frustration that all the non-native speakers feel does not influence their progress in the same way. Meera was as disappointed with her placement as Rahul and Vijay, but she works hard to achieve the best results that she can,

while Rahul and Vijay do not. Muchinsky and Tangren comment on the lack of “academic motivation” (223) they perceive in Generation 1.5 students. The experiences of the students in the present study suggest that such a generalization cannot be applied to all Generation 1.5 students. Although Meera feels frustrated, she makes more progress than Marian, who feels comparatively relaxed in the class. Marian does not rewrite her papers and, like Vijay and Rahul, could have “done so much better,” in the instructor’s opinion. Like the other native speakers, Marian begins with negative ideas about herself as a student, but the atmosphere of the class dissipates her negative feelings. For Marian and John, the improved relationship with faculty seems to hide the need for changes in academic commitment, however, while Ian appears to thrive in the college environment.

Most students in this open-access college work full-time to finance their tuition in the preparatory classes, and, as a result, their studies suffer. Similarly, many of these students resist revising their essays in a significant way. For the students in this study, the factors that most influenced their progress are the extent to which they are able to balance the conflicting demands of their lives, the motivation to thoughtfully revise their essays, and their overall attitude to the class. These factors are more important for their progress than whether or not they were born in the United States.

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