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 WHEN THE FIRST LANGUAGE YOU USE IS NOT ENGLISH

Challenges of Language Minority College Composition Students

Patti Wojahn, Beth Brunk-Chavez, Kate Mangelsdorf, Mais Al-Khateeb, Karen Tellez-Trujillo, Laurie Churchill, and Cathilia Flores

Despite the fields of composition and second language writing evolving until quite recently as separate disciplines (Matsuda, 1999), researchers such as Braine (1996), Ferris (2009), Harklau, Losey, and Siegal (1999), Horner and Trimbur (2002), Matsuda (2006), and Silva, Leki, and Carson (1997) have continued a call for recognizing if not valuing the linguistic diversity in composition classrooms. Canagarajah (1999) wrote against what he described as “linguistic imperialism” and in 2013 argued for an orientation toward language in which multilingualism, as opposed to monolingualism, is perceived as the norm. Given the diverse linguistic makeup of the United States, this call makes great sense.

Although English is considered by many as the country’s “official” language, with various groups arguing for English-only policies, the United States is and always has been a multilingual nation. According to the U.S. Census (2014), about 13% of those living in the United States are foreign born, and nearly 21% of the U.S. population speaks a language other than English in the home. This trend is particularly notable for young people. One in four young adults aged 18–34, or 17.9 million people, speaks a language other than English in the home. That number is up to one in three in states such as New Mexico, Texas, and New York, and as high as one in two in California.

Not surprisingly, at the U.S.-Mexico border where our study takes place, multilingualism is prevalent and highly visible. However, the benefits of multilingualism, such as increased cognitive development and greater metalinguistic awareness (García, 2009), are frequently erased due to educational, economic, and linguistic structures that disadvantage many multilingual school-aged students. Significantly, the prevalence of standard language ideologies, which stigmatize language-blending and privilege monolingual English speakers of the “standard” language,
separates multilingual children from their linguistically rich home environments and prevents them from drawing on their linguistic and cultural knowledge while in school (Mangelsdorf, 2010). As a result, students who transition into higher levels of schooling might not perceive their multilingual fluency as a resource to draw upon. Moreover, even at the border, the “myth of linguistic homogeneity” (Matsuda, 2006) is alive and well at institutions of higher education, where faculty members across campus too often assume that schooling has prepared students to write in “English” narrowly defined, a static English unwelcoming to linguistic diversity.

While scholarship has been published on academic, economic, social, and familial factors contributing to college students’ persistence and success, few studies have asked students about their linguistic transitions in college-level writing classes. And despite Matsuda’s (2006) advice that “all composition teachers need to reimagine the composition classroom as the multilingual space that it is, where the presence of language difference is the default” (p. 649), we still need to know more about students’ educational experiences, attitudes, challenges, and strengths to avoid stereotyping them or making pedagogical changes based on hunches rather than data. Thus, we begin this study in the context of broader questions: As linguistically diverse students transition to higher education, what helps or hinders their progress? To what extent are the strengths and challenges of those for whom English is not a first language considered in higher education?

To explore such questions in a local context, we address characteristics of—as well as circumstances experienced by—domestic students for whom English is an additional language at New Mexico State University (NMSU), a land-grant and Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) located near the U.S.-Mexico border. Challenges at HSIs have been treated elsewhere (see, for example, Garcia, 2012). Our survey-based study seeks to identify aspects that might interrupt or disrupt students’ educational trajectory. We compare responses about obstacles faced in first-year composition from students whose first language was not English to those of students who had used English all of their lives. We also look at whether responses from language minority students who did not pass first-year composition provide different responses than do those who earned a top score in the course. Finally, we share strategies for supporting not just the growing number of U.S. students with a home language other than English, but also all students new to academic institutions.

Methods

To identify characteristics of NMSU students taking ENGL 111, we conducted two surveys, one a survey eliciting open-ended, multiple-choice, and Likert responses. For the 4-point Likert scale, 1 equaled “Not at All,” 2 designated “Occasionally,” 3 indicated “Often,” and 4 “Always.” Students who earned an “A” along with the collective group of students who did not pass the class (leaving the course with “D,” “F,” or “W” [the latter indicating that the student withdrew from the course]) were emailed a link to a 50-item online survey made available just after the semester in which they were enrolled in the course. The survey asked about students’ backgrounds (e.g., when they began learning the English language, their eligibility for financial aid), their experiences in both high school and first-year composition (e.g., the extent to which reading or writing in English posed difficulties for them), and thoughts about their performance. We also sought to hear more about experiences outside of the classroom that might have helped or hindered their progress, such as transportation, access to the Internet from home, a sense of control over their grades (for more on this factor, see Dinther, Dochy, & Segers, 2011), finances, job or volunteer commitments, use of campus resources, and family and personal relationships (for more on this aspect related specifically to Latino students, see Torres & Solberg, 2001). The survey allowed us to home in on distinctions based on linguistic diversity while preventing us from focusing only on student deficits.

Overall, 27% (164 of 601) of “A” students and 9% (20 of the 233) of “DFW” students completed the survey. Among these 184 respondents, 15% (27) reported a first language other than English. Among these 27 students, 20 left the course with an “A,” while just 4 did not pass the class, a number too small to draw conclusions about.3 We were interested in hearing whether transitioning between a home language (such as Spanish) and an academic language (such as academic English) might appear as a challenge, and the extent to which any challenges varied by grade in the first-year composition course. By using a high grade (“A”) and the three non-passing grades (“DFW”) as a framework, we attempt to extract what Yosso (2006) has called “the array of cultural knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed by socially marginalized groups that often go unrecognized and unacknowledged” (p. 69). What patterns might we identify in responses from language minority students, and could those responses help us better understand strengths and needs of those who excelled in as opposed to those who did not pass ENGL 111?

To learn more specifically about students’ use of languages other than English, we additionally canvassed all first-year composition courses in a given semester in a separate Language Background survey that students could complete in class. As we share the results, we will identify which survey we are discussing.

Survey Results: Language Minority Student Responses

So that we can better support U.S. multilingual students, our research is interested in the comparative experiences between U.S. students who reported learning English as a first language and those who used it for some but not all of their lives. Unless otherwise noted, for the results shared below, we conducted a 2 (“A” vs. “DFW”) × 2 (1st Language English vs. Other) ANOVA to identify distinctions among the various groups who had responded using the scale of “1” indicating “Not at All” to “4” indicating “Always.”
Before sharing differences found by employing ANOVA, we begin with descriptive statistics on our demographic data to provide more context for the NMSU student population.

**Students' Language Backgrounds**

**Contexts for Using Language Other Than English**

In response to the Language Background survey, 22% (197 of the 895) of participants in non-international sections of first-year composition reported learning a first language other than English. To understand where these students employ their first language(s) as opposed to English, we asked about contexts of use. Table 12.1 indicates the extent to which students reported predominately using their initial language in various contexts.

As seen in Table 12.1, the most likely context in which students use a language other than English is when communicating with their parents, and a good share of the students use their first language for writing and reading at home, including reading for pleasure. Yet they used English almost exclusively when they read or write for school purposes. These data allow us to see a need for great facility in transitioning as audiences and contexts change, at times from moment to moment. Primarily reading and writing in English for school and primarily interacting in another language with parents and occasionally with friends or siblings can present challenges. But such experiences also provide opportunities to enhance rhetorical and other communicative abilities.

**Strongest Language for Various Purposes**

Among Language Background survey respondents reporting a first language other than English, only 64% reported English as their best language overall; just over half (51%) consider English their best language for speaking. However, the majority listed English as their best language for various purposes: 80% listed English as their best language for reading and 79% as best for writing. Table 12.2 lists additional percentages of respondents selecting various languages as their best for specific purposes.

Here we see what could be considered an obstacle for a number of students: finding one's best language for reading and writing to be English but one's best language for speaking another. Gaining facility for all of these purposes requires linguistic innovation and being rhetorically attuned. But might this situation also lead to challenges?

**Challenges Experienced by Language Minority Students**

In this section we note (1) general differences between those students whose home language was English as opposed to another language and (2) differences between language minority students who earned an “A” vs. “DFW” in ENGL 111.

**Access to Course Textbooks and Technologies**

Costs of higher education include more than tuition. Textbook costs have continued to rise, and keeping up with technologies such as home computers, laptops, and other educational devices can cost a great deal. Economic realities in the U.S. reveal differential situations for those in different ethnic categories, a situation that was supported in our results. We were interested to learn whether students with different linguistic backgrounds report varied levels of accessing items contributing to college costs.

**Access to Textbooks**

Access to textbooks varied both by first language and by grade. With an average score close to “Always,” students whose first language was English (m = 3.75, sd = .60) reported more access to textbooks than did language minority students.
Access to Technologies

As the only first-year writing course, ENGL 111 is four credits rather than the three most other courses carry. However, just over a decade ago, the course was hybridized as one of the four contact hours was moved online for activities and discussions as well as assignment submissions, all of which currently occur on Canvas, a learning management system.

We often think that today’s students are totally “wired,” that they grew up not just with computers and the Internet but also with substantial experience in using computers to read, write, and interact. But do all students share similar experiences with technologies? When asked the extent to which they can readily access a computer, most students reported nearly always having access to a computer. There was no statistical difference in reported access to technology with respect to students’ first language. Those whose first language was English averaged 3.73 (sd = .63), a score close to “Always,” while the average for those whose first language was other than English, at 3.56 (sd = .75), a score just between “Often” and “Always,” was similar. However, there was a significant difference with respect to reported technology access among those who earned an “A” (m = 3.76, sd = .60) and students who did not pass the course (m = 3.20, sd = .83; F[1,180] = 3.85; p = .05).

“Basic” Skills

Reading, writing, and arithmetic—and knowledge of the English language—are often considered educational staples in the United States. Yet not all students enrolling in institutions of higher education possess strengths in these areas. Our survey asked students about the extent to which they encountered challenges with reading, writing, and using the English language in their ENGL 111 course.

Reading

With respect to reading, we found a difference by first language: students whose first language was English (m = 1.36, sd = .73) reported less challenge with reading than did their counterparts whose first language was other than English (m = 1.85, sd = .91; F[1,180] = 7.42; p = .007). Although students among the latter category who did not pass the course averaged a rating above “occasionally” finding reading for ENGL 111 challenging (m = 2.25, sd = 1.50), the number of students in this category was so low (4 students total) and the variation in responses so wide that we can make no claims about the latter result. With respect to challenges with reading, we were surprised to find no main effect for grade, that is, no mean differences between students who received an “A” (m = 1.42, sd = .80) as opposed to students who received a “DFW” (m = 1.60, sd = .88) in the course.

Writing

With respect to challenges with the writing assigned in ENGL 111, there were no significant differences overall by first language or grade group. The overall average for all respondents was 1.92 (sd = .95), close to the response of “Occasionally” experiencing challenges with writing. However, a custom hypothesis test allowed us to identify a difference among those whose first language was English by grade group (F[1,179] = 4.67, p = .032). More specifically, among students whose first language was English, those who did not pass the course reported a greater level of challenge with writing (m = 2.31, sd = .70) than did their counterparts who earned an “A” in the course (m = 1.79; sd = .90). Unfortunately, we did not have a large sample of students whose first language was other than English who did not pass the class to draw firm conclusions about distinctions among them. Twenty-three language minority students earned an “A” in the course and averaged a mean of 2.30 (sd = 1.06) just above “Occasionally”). Just four participating students whose first language was other than English did not pass the course. Their average of 2.75 (sd = 1.50) approached the response of “Often” experiencing challenges with writing, indicating substantial challenges in writing for the course. But with so few students in this latter category (coupled with the great variability in responses among the 27 language minority students), the data we gathered are not usable for making claims about writing challenges among those whose first language was other than English.

English Language

When asked about the extent to which they experienced challenges with the English language, students not surprisingly differed based on first language. With respect to the extent to which they reported challenges with the English language, we found differences in challenge levels reported by students who had spoken English for all of their lives (m = 1.31, sd = .83, a score close to “Not at All”) as opposed to challenge levels reported by language minority students (m = 1.92, sd = 1.06, a score close to “Occasionally”). This difference was significant (F[1,179] = 8.15; p = .005).

Academic Behaviors in First-Year Composition

We know that behaviors such as attending class regularly, completing homework on time, and submitting all work assigned contribute to success in first-year
composition courses. We wondered whether these behaviors differed among any groups of students.

**Attendance**

With respect to self-reported attendance, students overall differed by grade earned, with "A" students averaging 3.94 (sd = .29), a score very close to "Always," and students not passing the class averaging 2.85 (sd = .93), a score approaching "Often" (F(1, 182) = 47.70; p < .001). A closer review of the data revealed an interesting finding among the group who did not pass the class: In contrast to their counterparts for whom English was a first language, students whose first language was other than English reported attending at quite high rates (m = 3.5; sd = .58), a score between "Often" and "Always." This rate was similar to that of the students overall who had earned an "A." In other words, in contrast to their first language counterparts, the language minority students who received "DFW" reported attending regularly, but they did not pass the course. Unfortunately, given that only four students were in the DFW category coupled with a first language other than English, we must, again, qualify this finding. We see this as a potential trend warranting further research with a larger pool of participants. Since attendance seemed a primary factor for first language students who didn't pass the class, more research is needed to identify specific factors at play among language minority students who do not pass the class.

**Assignment Submission**

We found no significant difference between the reported rates of submitting assignments between those whose first language was English or another language. The rate at which students completed and turned in assignments once again differed by grade. Students who earned an "A" reported submitting assignments nearly always (m = 3.90, sd = .41). In contrast, students not passing the course on average reported submitting assignments at a point between "Occasionally" and "Often" (m = 2.65, sd = .41). This difference was significant (F(1, 180) = 54.89, p = .005).

Students who first learned a language other than English provided some explanation for not submitting all assignments, most of which acknowledged, at least to an extent, their own role in this behavior. Several times, students reported not understanding an assignment but being reticent to ask for clarification. For instance, one "A" student for whom English was an additional language acknowledged: "Through out the entire semester I think I only missed one assignment and it was because I didn't know what to do and was embarrassed to ask my instructor (big mistake)." In such explanations for not submitting work, students for whom English is an additional language in particular seem to be embarrassed by their lack of understanding of an assignment or strategy.

**Accessing Resources**

In responding to the Language Background survey, students whose first language was not English overall did not vary much with respect to their reports on accessing academic resources in comparison to counterparts for whom English was a first language. The Writing Center proved to be the resource students reported accessing most prevalently. Descriptive results revealed that 38% of students for whom English was an additional language reported visiting the Writing Center, compared to 23% of students whose first language was English. Students reported accessing other resources, such as visiting instructors during office hours, at quite similar rates. Given that the Writing Center serves as one of the only sites where domestic English language learners can access assistance related specifically to language, it clearly plays a critical role at our institution.

**Language Minority Students' Thoughts about Writing Ability**

When asked the extent to which they believed they were "good writers" and why, one "D"-earning student's comment was not surprising given that the student learned English as an additional language: "I'm still learning the basic stuff about the English language." A multilingual "A" student recognized writing in English as an accomplishment: "English being my third language, I am a good [writer]." Yet one "A" student who had a first language other than English acknowledged a challenge in articulating ideas because "there are words I don't know." Another "A" student whose first language was not English stated that when it comes to writing in English, "it's still hard, even with my speaking I still make simple errors." Here we see students acknowledging the challenges they face when writing in a language that was not their first and, in particular, possessing differing facility in aspects of speaking as opposed to writing in English, their additional language (for further discussion of this phenomenon, see Cummins, 2000). We also see awareness that academic writing can extend the limits of their language backgrounds in ways they—but perhaps not their instructors—are well aware of.

**Summary of Findings**

When compared to their first language English peers, language minority students reported more challenges with reading and with using the English language. Qualitative explanations from language minority students included concerns about use of standard academic English. Correspondingly, a larger percentage reported visiting the Writing Center. Language minority students mentioned more challenge in gaining access to textbooks, which continue to rise in cost. The handful of language minority students surveyed who did not pass the class reported attending at the same levels as did students overall who earned an "A," but because of their small numbers, we cannot include this as a finding. Still, we want to mention the
possible trend among the small population of “DFW”-earning language minority students, who were more likely to differ from their “A”-earning counterparts as well as, in some cases, other “DFW”-earning students. Therefore, it is this subset of students—“DFW”-earning language minority—we suggest universities in general and writing programs in particular can research and consider more fully.

Given that these students are already showing commitment to attend class regularly, we are left with a number of questions: Can we learn more about why some students don’t take advantage of resources such as the Writing Center, instructor conferences, textbooks, supplementary online course activities, and campus technology? Can the university do more to consider costs of textbooks, support students with the learning management system, provide more hours for computer labs, and advertise the purpose of office hours—strategies that would help all students, not just this cohort?

As our Language Background survey data revealed, at our institution, 22% of students in ENGL 111 (a course for non-international students) first learned a language other than English. Possessing facility in multiple languages is an asset that ENGL 111 and other courses can draw and build from. Despite the challenge of using academic English, “A” students whose first language was not English consistently provided ratings similar to those of their “A” counterparts who had learned English from the time they were born. We suspect we have much to learn from the “A” students whose first language was not English, specifically their strategies or habits of mind that can inform all students as well as suggestions for at-risk language minority counterparts.

Still, among the 22% indicating a language other than English as their first in the Languages Background survey, a majority listed English as their best language for reading and writing, but only half listed English as best for speaking. This finding supports the notion that rather than language users being “balanced bilinguals,” or equally competent in all contexts, most bilinguals have “diverse and unequal experiences with each of the two languages” (García, 2009, p. 45). The language transitions that these students make on an everyday basis as they switch, in our institution, primarily from English to Spanish (and Spanglish) and back again indicates a kind of rhetorical sophistication that monolingual students might not possess. The rhetorical and linguistic transitioning performed by language minority students on a daily basis is impressive, indicating abilities that ideally can be tapped into—and shared among monolingual students—within writing classrooms and beyond.

**Conclusions: Closing the Gaps**

This study on the strengths and the challenges students face in first-year composition as they transition into higher education and between languages has implications for writing programs beyond the U.S.-Mexico border because, as Kanno and Harklau (2012) emphasize, language minority students are the “fastest growing demographic subgroup in the U.S. educational system” (p. 1). Institutions of higher learning, particularly land-grant and public universities, admit students with a wide range of entry-level strengths, interests, and abilities. Yet we still can’t answer the question of how to optimize learning experiences of diverse students in our writing courses at the institutional, programmatic, and course level.

To build on multilingual students’ strengths and address their challenges, changes can be made at the institutional level. For example, a recent internal NMSU grant brought 15 campus entities together to discuss how English language learners, both international and domestic, are or are not taken into account in programs, offices, or departments across campus. This effort revealed that our institution has much work to do before we can more fully assess performance, persistence, needs, and completion rates of English language learners, many of whom are local, Hispanic, and/or first-generation college students—critical populations that we admit in large numbers and want to support. Additionally, institutions can gather more information about students’ language backgrounds upon enrollment and elsewhere to plan and allocate resources accordingly. For instance, when data from the NMSU Writing Center revealed that one-third of its clients reported a language other than English, the center was awarded a new line: an associate director with expertise in second language writing.

Similarly, at our nearby institution, the University of Texas-El Paso (UTEP), surveys of entering students ask about their first and other languages. Such data have already allowed UTEP to track students for whom English is not a first language, providing institutional awareness of the substantial number who fit this category and the ability to plan programmatic approaches accordingly.

Institutional data gathering can lead to programmatic changes. For example, additional data at NMSU also supported our provost’s recent decision to move two faculty who teach first-year composition for international students into the Department of English, home to “the” writing program. Previously, composition courses for U.S. residents and international students—and their instructors—were separated by departments. Because of the additional staff who are sharing their second language writing expertise, all instructors can now enjoy professional development and extended conversations about how to work effectively with linguistically diverse students in their classrooms, in the Writing Center, and beyond. Faculty and Writing Center tutors alike can participate in discussions on issues relating to multilingual students, such as second language acquisition and research on effectively responding to multilingual student writing. WPs and instructors can encourage students to attend the Writing Center and also collaborate with writing centers to design specific language-related interventions for multilingual students (Brunk-Chavez et al., 2015). Moreover, we can continue to do more to prepare our graduate students and other instructors for today’s realities of a growing multilingual population in their classrooms.

The small number of participating language minority students who did not pass the class reported less regular access to course textbooks, and when explanations
were provided, they were nearly all related to finances. While the university bookstore now offers textbook rentals as well as a temporary charge system allowing students to purchase their textbooks on credit until their financial aid check arrives, the writing program is making efforts to reduce costs as well. We place textbooks on reserve in the library; we’ve tried, though without success, using the less expensive online versions of textbooks; and we are seeking to reduce the number of required texts as well as seeking textbooks that cost less than those currently being used.

The results regarding challenges with reading, writing, and English language ability suggest that colleges and universities can do more to support students for whom English is an additional language. Support structures in place for international students as well as students studying languages other than English might provide effective models, such as a Language Laboratory, where students can use computers with multiple language dictionaries and links to software provided by publishers of textbooks used to teach the various languages. Students with first languages other than English could likely benefit from a listening lab for hearing English or taping themselves speaking English. Such students might also benefit from an “English Conversation Corner” where participants can practice the language among others interested in improving their language abilities.

At the course level, instructor preparation and attitude can improve the experiences of the growing number of U.S. resident students whose first language is other than English (Miller-Cochran, 2010). A crucial aspect of supporting students in a writing course is perceiving multilingualism as an asset rather than as a deficit. Jordan’s (2009) study of multilingual writers in composition highlighted students’ lexical competence, awareness of cultural contexts, and sensitivity to group dynamics. In her study of multilingual writers, Leonard (2014) also described their rhetorical attunement: they “hear something distinct in language. They hear cultural history, differences, politics, negotiations, ‘mess’” (p. 243). In our study, multilingual students described the various domains in which they use Spanish and English—home, work, with friends and family, in school. Multilingual writers’ constant transition between languages and cultures helps support this increased awareness of rhetorical and cultural complexity, an awareness that could benefit monolingual students as well.

To learn more about students earlier on in—and throughout—our classes, we can take advantage of a range of approaches. For instance, to learn more about students’ language backgrounds and transitions entering college, we can ask students to write literacy narratives at the start of the semester (Ortmieer-Hooper, 2008; Sharma, 2015). We can promote our availability during office hours and through email so that students with questions are more likely to come forward without embarrassment, as some mentioned experiencing when they didn’t understand an assignment. We can offer culturally relevant readings, give students opportunities to write in their home languages, and develop assignments in which students can draw on their cultural knowledge and skills (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2013). We can avoid timed writing (which can disadvantage multilingual students), carefully scaffold projects, and use technology to deliver information in various modes (Goen, Porter, Swanson, & Vandommelen, 2002). As some students in the study suggested, instructors can be more “flexible,” “understanding,” and “less judgmental.” Students also suggested that it would help if the instructor took more time to “let students know how they are doing in the course.” At NMSU, for the first time, the provost is now insisting on midterm grades so students are more aware of how they are doing while there is still time to improve. These types of activities benefit all students, not just multilingual students.

At UTEP, awareness of linguistic strengths has already impacted the curriculum of the writing program, which has instructors encouraging students to write in Spanish or other home languages in their early drafts and to continue to use that language in later drafts when the rhetorical situation is appropriate (Brunk-Chavez & Fredricksen, 2008). Many instructors at UTEP are multilingual themselves, though this is primarily a fortunate accident of geography rather than an intentional practice.

Furthermore, WPAs need to invest time in collaborations between high schools and college to ensure smoother transitions for students. In general, instructors and WPAs need to see themselves as advocates for multilingual students in writing classes designed primarily for native English speakers (Brunk-Chavez et al., 2015; Ruecker, 2014). Most relevant to this study, we can advocate for better access to and students’ awareness of the benefits of technology and textbooks, among other resources.

As the “CCCC Statement on Second Language Writing and Readers” (College Composition and Communication, 2009) states, we should “include second language perspectives in developing theories, designing studies, analyzing data, and discussing implications of studies.” As our study indicates, by considering language as a factor rather than looking at broad characteristics of students, we are able to identify specific aspects that might challenge some populations more than others and address these challenges accordingly. Such considerations can also allow writing teachers to follow the CCC statement’s argument that we “take responsibility for the regular presence of second language writers in writing classes . . . and to develop instructional and administrative practices that are sensitive to their linguistic and cultural needs.”

Similarly, such considerations can better position us to take up the call to identify and then optimize assets that language minority writers bring to our composition classroom, for instance, what Canagarajah (2006) describes as rhetorical creativity. Facility in multiple languages can, he explains, enable multilingual students to better “understand possibilities and constraints of competing traditions of writing” and draw from “multiple identities,” working to “modify, resist, or reorient themselves” to match what writing contexts require (p. 602).

It will take work, but we can effect change, particularly if we seek to understand the academic, cultural, and linguistic transitions students make. In addition
to transitioning between high school and college, multilingual students transition between languages in their everyday lives. These linguistic transitions involve more than language—they involve resources, contexts, and identities. By optimizing multilingual students’ strengths and identifying multilingual students’ challenges in their writing classes, we can better support all as opposed to just some students in achieving their goals in higher education and beyond.

Notes

1. According to the U.S. Department of Education, HSIs are federally designated colleges and universities in which at least 25% of students are of Hispanic ancestry. Such institutions aim to provide access and opportunity to this “historically underserved population” given the federal funding for which this designation makes them eligible (Ruiz & Valverde, 2012). At NMSU, 47.3% of students recently listed their ethnicity as Hispanic (2012–2013 NMSU Quickfacts). Just 6.3% of students reported as international, with 33.6% of students overall reporting as white.

2. International students at NMSU take an alternative writing course focused more specifically on English language issues.

3. Although the sample size of the “A” group was much larger than the “DFW” group, we used the analysis of variance (ANOVA) in SPSS to divide values by the number in the group to compare proportional variances by group size. Even when one group (e.g., the “A” group) is larger than the comparison group, they are standardized by dividing each variance from its own “n” in order to make them comparable. With the t-test, we employed Levene’s test for equality of variances to learn whether the average variance for each group is significantly different. In that event, we use the “equal variances not assumed” line in the t-test results. In this line, SPSS adjusts the degrees of freedom for the t-test to account for this discrepancy in variances.

4. We used the threshold of p < .05 for defining “difference.” In other words, when we report something as “different,” it was statistically significant at that level.

5. Although we asked questions related to aspects outside of the classroom (such as transportation, job commitments, and personal relationships), we found no differences between average responses from those who listed English or another language as their first.

6. All students’ responses are verbatim.

Bibliography


Re-envisioning Faculty Development When Multilingualism is the New Norm

Conversations on First-Year Writing at a Hispanic-Serving University

Kimberly Harrison

Florida International University (FIU), an urban, multi-campus, designated Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) in Miami serves over 50,000 students, of which 88% are classified as racial/ethnic minority. Hispanic students, in particular, comprise 63% of the university’s student population. In our first-year writing classes, 57% of our students identify as resident ESL students, those whose home/first language is not English, who reside in the United States, and who have American K–12 experience.1 While our writing classes are linguistically diverse, the training of most of our program faculty was not so diverse, the result of what Paul Kei Matsuda has described as the disciplinary division of labor (1999). Most of our writing faculty had not been exposed to L2 research that could inform classroom practice. Additionally, our department does not have an ESL program. The pedagogical norm in our mainstream writing classes was to apply best practices in teaching writing for a monolingual English-speaking audience.

In response to our context, we drafted a proposal for a professional development program for our writing faculty and teaching assistants with the goal of adapting our first-year curriculum to better serve our multilingual students.2 We argued the need for training all of our writing instructors to understand research and best practices in working with multilingual writers. Our proposal outlined an ongoing program with visits by national consultants, a series of face-to-face in-house workshops, and the development of online training modules. Along with faculty training, we planned for curricular changes in the first-year writing classes to better meet the needs of our students. We also proposed adapting the teaching assistant training courses to incorporate throughout the curriculum readings, discussion, and practical activities focused on working with multilingual student writers. Such professional development and curricular changes only make