



## **Bilingual Hispanic and Southeast Asian Students' Challenges in a Freshman History Course**

In this pilot study, participating Hispanic and Southeast Asian freshmen took a writing-intensive history survey course with a weekly analytic journal task. The study examined the helpfulness of the weekly journal and the scaffolding steps provided by the professor and teaching assistants, by peers in their learning community, and by out-of-class tutors. Students completed a survey about their perceptions related to the analytic journal task, their self-assessment of their reading comprehension, their views about the helpfulness of the social learning opportunities offered from peers in the course and from tutors, and the time they spent on the journal task. The survey was administered early and late in the semester. The findings show that when students wrote every week in response to primary sources, they got regular practice in reading, critical thinking, and writing. This study suggests that regular reading practice along with scaffolding by a university history professor, while helpful in certain ways, does not seem to be sufficient to help the participating students overcome challenges with reading comprehension and vocabulary of assigned history texts. This pilot study offers practical ideas for instructors of college or university ESL, for those assigning reading and writing journals, and for tutoring center tutors and coordinators.

### **Introduction**

**T**he increase in the number of English Learners (ELs) in the US in the past 2 decades has been significant. Between 1979 and 2003, there was a 161% increase in the number of 5- to 17-year-olds who spoke a language other than English and a 124% increase in the number of students who said they spoke English less than “very well” (Maxwell-Jolly, Gándara, & Méndez Benavídez, 2005). This change in demographics is present in all levels of education in California. While these students are likely to become reasonably fluent in face-to-face interpersonal communication skills in English in about 2 years, their development of the language needed for cognitive academic language proficiency is likely to take 5 to 7 years and sometimes longer (Cummins, 2000).

Recent studies indicate that many English Learners (ELs) are not succeeding at the secondary education level (Maxwell-Jolly et al., 2005) and thus are not prepared for the challenges of university education. In a large-scale study of three tiers of higher education in California (Clark et al., 2002), faculty who teach introductory or first-year courses at colleges and universities reported their expectations of entering students and their ratings of recent first-year students' competencies in different aspects of academic literacy. The findings demonstrate that many first-year students in California, particularly those from bilingual families, face difficulties when trying to complete academic literacy tasks.

In this article, several terms are used to describe different groups of second language (L2) learners. Kindergarten through 12th-grade students with L2 issues are referred to as ELs; these students are given this classification after language assessment. Students attending a college or university who are enrolled in ESL courses are referred to as English as a second language (ESL) students. A subset of the growing population of college and university students who grew up in bilingual families in the US are referred to as Generation 1.5 students. These students have graduated from U.S. high schools and they are often fluent in conversational English, but even though they have difficulty with academic literacy, they are sometimes not enrolled in college or university ESL courses. In the literature, the term "Generation 1.5" was first used by Rumbaut and Ima (1988) to identify refugee children who have some features of first-generation immigrants while also having features of second-generation immigrants. In this study the term is not restricted to refugees.

University faculty not directly involved in teaching ESL students typically view academic literacy development as an issue for young students and their teachers (Ruiz-de-Velasco & Fix, 2000). Thus, the presumption among these university professors is that students are proficient enough in English by the time they enter college that they should be able to read the assigned texts. As a result, professors in general are less inclined—and often lack the training—to work with their students on improving their basic academic literacy. Some of them focus on teaching the academic content of their specific discipline with little or no instruction about the academic discourse of their specific discipline.

To address this challenge, the authors of this study, an ESL/linguistics professor and a history professor, gathered data from students in a freshman American History course. Specifically, we sought to understand the benefit of peer support and scaffolding from the history professor and teaching assistants (TAs) in improving aspects of academic literacy among Generation 1.5 students enrolled in the course. We also compared their perceptions concerning the weekly analytic journal task early and late in the semester.

This pilot study does not focus on all of the students of bilingual backgrounds in the history class. Unfortunately, some history students were absent on one of the days when the survey forms were completed in class and therefore could not be included in the research. The study does not include international students. Instead it focuses on 20 Southeast Asian and Hispanic freshmen because most of the bilingual students were of this background; therefore, it is

important to understand these students' needs in particular. The participating students were under the age of 22, were from bilingual families, attended U.S. high schools, achieved verbal SAT scores that ranged from 230 to 500, had English Placement Test (EPT) scores for reading that ranged from 120 to 153, and were in the first generation of their family to attend university. To call these students ESL students or ELs would be inaccurate given that they were not international students, they were not enrolled in ESL courses, and as a group they had achieved high levels of fluency in English when they used it for social purposes; the term "Generation 1.5" was more appropriate. Roberge (2009) offers a recent overview of the term "Generation 1.5." He notes that "like most terms in the field of education, it is used in varying ways by individual teachers and scholars" (p. 5). One of the features of the operational definition of Generation 1.5 students used by Foin and Lange (2007) was that Generation 1.5 students had SAT verbal section scores below 520. The SAT scores of students in this study fit this score profile.

There are also challenges with assessment of L2 students' academic problems. Maxwell-Jolly et al. (2005) argue that the current testing technology does not allow us to understand the root cause of many L2 students' academic problems. Are some of these students failing because they do not know the material, because they lack the motivation to study it closely, because they do not have the metacognitive strategies that would help them with difficult academic tasks, or is it because of language barriers and the reading and writing challenges related to language barriers? While Leki (2007) does not rely on tests to examine these issues in four L2 undergraduates, her 5-year-long qualitative research finding was that all of them had language barriers and reading and writing challenges in their university courses. The students in Leki's study had different majors—engineering, nursing, business and social work; 3 were international students and 1 was an immigrant from Poland. As a group they varied as to how motivated they were when working on university assignments. The Leki study focuses mostly on a population that differs from the group of Generation 1.5 students included in this study.

To examine aspects of academic literacy in our pilot study, we developed an instrument to gather data about freshman students' perceptions of metacognitive aspects of a weekly journal task, their experiences as readers, and their use of social learning. The categories for data collection and analysis were selected after considering key issues raised in two empirical studies (Clark et al., 2002; Leki, 2007) and issues raised in two research handbooks—one on college reading (Flippo & Caverly, 2009) and the other on L2 students' reading (Grabe, 2009). Our instrument provides useful data for understanding aspects of academic literacy of these students. In this paper, academic literacy is operationally defined as "the activity of interpretation and production of academic and discipline-based texts" (Leki, 2007, p. 3).

The university in which this study was undertaken offers three academic paths in its freshman writing program: a three-semester option that includes an ESL course taken in the first semester, a two-semester option, and a one-semester option; students self-select one of the options. The second path, which of-

ferred peer support through learning communities, was selected by the students participating in this study. For students selecting this path, the assumption was that content area learning and improvement in academic literacy would occur without considerable explicit instruction in reading comprehension and in critical thinking in the history course.

In this pilot study a cohort of students was enrolled in both freshman composition (English 5A) and in a survey course in American history (History 11). The survey course consisted of a large lecture class and smaller weekly discussion sections led by paid teaching assistants. The TAs were students in the History Department's master's program and were required to attend a 2-day, instructor-led teaching seminar at the start of the academic year. The seminar covered a wide range of topics, from how to manage a classroom to effective methods for leading class discussions. Each TA was assigned two discussion sections, both of which were linked with a freshman composition course. The TAs were also paid tutors in the History Department's writing lab, despite not receiving formal training in tutoring.

The pilot study is part of a larger project that tried to help all students enrolled in the history course build their academic literacy, and especially their academic reading, while also learning the content covered in the history course. Since the scaffolding offered in class was designed to help all students with their history literacy task, not just struggling students, it did not offer in-depth instruction in the use of academic reading strategies. Intervention of this type, which is often the focus of ESL courses, has been discussed in empirical studies of postsecondary students enrolled in ESL courses in the US (Leki, 2007; Pritchard & O'Hara, 2006), English as a foreign language courses (Shokrpour & Fotovatian, 2007), and summer preparatory courses (El-Hindi, 1997). In this particular study, we examine the helpfulness of scaffolding steps provided by the professor and TAs, peers in their learning community, and tutors by examining change in students' self-assessment of three aspects of their history analytic journal task. The areas studied are the students' perceptions related to metacognition applied to the journal task, students' self-assessment of their reading comprehension, and their views about the helpfulness of the social learning opportunities offered from peers in the course and from tutors.

The research questions are as follows:

1. Did students' metacognition related to the history journal assignment change over time?
2. Did students' self-assessment of their reading comprehension for the journal assignment change over time?
3. Were students' social forms of support (the learning community and work with tutors outside of class) perceived to be more helpful toward the end of the semester compared to earlier in the semester?
4. Were the changes (see questions 1 to 3) statistically significant?
5. Did students spend more time on their most recent journal assignment later in the semester?
6. What were the students' expected final grades?

## **Academic Literacy in History and Challenges English Learners Face in History Courses**

This study draws together two important issues that the existing literature suggests students face in university-level history courses. The first is the development of academic literacy, or the student's ability to read, think, and write like an historian. According to Colombi and Schleppegrell (2006), disciplines have particular ways of constructing meaning, and students are socialized into the discourses of communities through scaffolded participation. One way to study the discourse students use in history is by examining the choices they make when writing about history. Cortes (2004) identified the lexical bundles (e.g., four-word sequences) that are used by published writers of history and by native English-speaking (NES) students writing for a history course. In addition, she compared the frequency of use of these lexical expressions by the two groups of writers and found that students were generally not using the lexical bundles that were preferred by the published history writers. In a subsequent study, Cortes (2006) found that even after several short lessons on the use of these expressions, 3rd- and 4th-year university students did not significantly increase their use in regularly assigned history essays. Clearly, learning the discourse used in history is challenging for many students, including NES students.

The second related issue has to do with the additional challenges faced by all English ELs and Generation 1.5 students. Traditionally, work that examined the literacies of linguistic-minority students was viewed through either a cultural-mismatch or cultural-deficit lens (Bartolome, 1998). More recent research focuses instead on a sociocultural perspective of literacy. Gee (2001) asserts that language and literacy are intrinsically linked to situated contexts and that different genres and discourses are appropriate in various situations. For students to acquire new discourses, the forms must be explicitly taught, and the students must be given multiple opportunities to practice the forms in authentic situations. While Gee argues for explicitly teaching the new discourses, a related challenge is that, as Cortes (2006) has shown, there is a gap in the literature on how to teach aspects of this discourse so that students show evidence of improvement during a university semester.

On the first issue, the extensive literature suggests that 1st-year college students lack the basic critical-thinking and writing skills that are necessary in the study of history. Wineburg (1991), in his comparative study of how high school students and college professors read primary source historical texts, discovered that each group approaches the material in very different ways. While the latter sought to evaluate and then contextualize the information, the former merely searched for facts (Barton, 2004; Calder, 2006; Lorence, 1983; Wineburg, 1991, 1992). In other words, professors see an argument in primary-source texts that they are forced to grapple with, while high school students see historical truth and thus are interested only in pulling out the relative facts. Similar studies show that when presented with a historical source, even high-performing mainstream high school students with a genuine interest in the subject of history prefer to "paraphrase rather than analyze, summarize rather than criticize

texts” (Haas & Flower, 1988, p. 170). While well-prepared students at the university may be more familiar with summarizing and paraphrasing than with analyzing and criticizing texts, Generation 1.5 students struggle with written paraphrases and summaries of assigned readings as well as with critical literacy. Hynd-Shanahan, Holschuh, and Hubbard (2004) argue that the failure of students to go beyond fact finding is most likely the result of two related issues: a lack of knowledge about the subject and the absence of the necessary reading and thinking skills specific to this discipline.

Some work has been done in the field to confront these specific problems. Wineburg and the Stanford University School of Education’s PhD program in History Education has partnered with George Mason University’s Center for History and New Media to create a website, [www.historicalthinkingmatters.org](http://www.historicalthinkingmatters.org), which offers resources to improve students’ academic literacy in the history discipline (Martin & Wineburg, 2008). Within our pilot study, the history professor sought to develop the students’ factual knowledge and thinking skills through the weekly reading and journal assignment and through the various forms of scaffolding used by the professor and teaching assistants. The data collected in this pilot study allow us to understand the helpfulness of these scaffolding steps.

### **Journals in College and University Classes**

Since the 1980s it has been understood that journal keeping promotes students’ intellectual growth and may promote opportunities for less teacher-centered classroom authority (Fulwiler, 1980, 1987). Journal writing has been found to help students develop as writers (Mlynarczyk, 1998) and to help students make personal connections with college course content. Cisero (2006) defines journal writing as “meaningfully interacting with the reading material by applying information to personal experiences, analyzing and critiquing information, synthesizing information, or creating a product based on the information” (p. 231). This definition includes “short writes,” which are prepared in class so that students get involved in the reading (Leki, 2007), and out-of-class writing as occurred in this study. We use many aspects of Cisero’s definition in this study except for the option to create a collage or visual product. Also, applying information to personal experiences appears less likely in an analytic history journal than in Cisero’s psychology journal. Journal assignments in different disciplines lead students to make different kinds of connections. In this paper journals represent a type of academic task that includes regularly assigned, “single” draft writing completed by individual students after engaging in critical thinking about course readings.

A variety of uses for journals are described in the literature. In college ESL writing classes, journals are assigned to encourage students to think creatively by freewriting or by actively responding to reading (Mlynarczyk, 1998, 2001). Furthermore, in psychology courses, autobiographical journals have been assigned (Hettich, 1976, 1980, 1990), while in an earth science course journals have been used to write about class activities or to summarize readings (Johnstone, 1994). This paper will not include further discussion of autobio-

graphical or of freewriting journals since they differ from the analytic journals used in this study.

Journal writing assignments reported in the literature have differed in the amount of guidance given to students. Some journal assignments are open ended while others guide students' reading and writing by offering one or more questions (Cisero, 2006) or steps (Lee, 2007) that prompt students to read texts closely and apply specific strategies. Use of a step-by-step analytic process was found to help undergraduates write responses to case studies (Lee, 2007). The journals assigned in this study are called analytic journals to emphasize that students' work is mediated by analytic steps—in this case a set of sentence frames and questions that help students apply strategies (e.g., summarizing and making connections between information found in the text and related historical background covered in the course). Another difference in journal assignments lies in how frequently they are collected, read, or assessed by the teacher. In Leki's case study, students (2007) reported that they sometimes ignored assignments that were not graded so feedback is important. In this study, journal responses were collected every week, were used as the springboard for weekly class discussion, and were evaluated regularly.

The impact that journals have on students' grades and presumably on their learning has also been studied. Students enrolled in psychology classes that had assigned journals had higher final grades than those enrolled in identical classes except for the journals (Cisero, 2006; Connor-Greene, 2000). But other researchers found there was a complex relation between the type of reading/writing task (e.g., journal writing or annotating a reading) and grades on tasks. In a study of postsecondary students in a learning-strategies course, Hynd, Simpson, and Chase (1990) researched the effectiveness of annotating a novel compared to writing journal responses about the novel; they found that the annotation resulted in higher grades on multiple-choice tests while journal writing led to higher grades on essays.

While the research has shown that journals of various forms benefit students, Generation 1.5 students may face special challenges with analytic journals in university general education courses such as history. Previous studies have not examined this issue.

### **Metacognition and Reading and Writing Tasks**

A complex task such as analytic journal preparation requires students to apply metacognition, which has been recognized as an important component of reading comprehension (Flavell, 1978). Metacognition "involves awareness and control of planning, monitoring, repairing, revising, summarizing and evaluating" (Grabe, 2009, p. 223). The factors contributing to metacognitive reading strategies of mainstream university freshmen have also been studied (Taraban, Kerr, & Rynearson, 2004). In the Taraban et al. study, students indicated how frequently they used each of the listed reading strategies. A major finding was that freshmen who reported earning higher grades also reported more use of analytic strategies. Thus, having freshmen use analytic strategies is related to higher academic performance. Taraban et al. did not discuss the

role that instructors may play in helping students learn to apply metacognitive strategies. In ESL courses, international students can be taught to apply effective metacognitive and cognitive reading strategies (Pritchard & O'Hara, 2006). In the history course discussed here, the professor assigned an analytic journal task and prompted students to use analytic strategies by giving them critical thinking questions (see Appendix A) to consider before, during, and after reading texts; furthermore, he discussed the purpose for having students use them. When students think about the purpose of a literacy task, about the process for completing it, and about the professor's expectations as expressed in the grading rubric, they can plan their approach to the reading and writing task.

Other researchers emphasize the importance of metacognition in writing as well as reading (Leki, Cumming, & Silva, 2008). There are few studies, however, that examine change in university students' metacognition after specific intervention. El-Hindi (1997), when studying college-bound students in a reading/writing course, noted that when students write about their reading, their reading and writing processes become interconnected and, therefore, metacognitive awareness becomes a key component of students' effective reading and writing processes. In the pilot study, because of the journal assignment, students' reading and writing processes were interconnected. In this study, metacognitive awareness is examined by studying change in students' perceptions early and late in the semester concerning their understanding of the purpose of the journal task, understanding how to complete the journal task, and their views about the helpfulness of the standards expressed in the grading rubric.

### **Scaffolding of Learning**

Along with journal writing, the study examines the application of the scaffolding hypothesis of L2 learning (Littlewood, 2004) and applies it to academic-literacy development linked to a journal-writing task. As noted by Littlewood, the hypothesis is closely linked to sociocultural theory (see Lantoff & Pavlenko, 1995) and to Vygotsky's work on learning (1978). Several studies have examined the learning effectiveness of scaffolding with K-12 learners (Guthrie, Weber, & Kimmerly, 1993; Guthrie, Wigfield, & Perencevich, 2004).

Researchers have also studied scaffolding by university faculty. Lee (2007) and Leki (2007) noted that undergraduate L2 learners sometimes thought that some faculty made no effort to help them learn course content and that students recognized that only some teacher scaffolding was helpful. Leki's research suggests that it is important to study professors' scaffolding of literacy tasks and also to examine students' perceptions of their learning outcomes after the scaffolding. In our study, scaffolding was provided by the instructors, by peers such as students participating in a learning community, and by students with greater expertise who worked as tutors.

There is no previous research on scaffolding of international or immigrant students' analytic journal writing in academic disciplines outside of English or ESL. As a result, a more qualitative research design was selected for this pilot study, because specific variables that one might study have not been identified. Additionally, we could not control all variables.



## Method

### *The Participating Students*

Students who were enrolled in the freshman American History survey class at a medium-sized urban state university were part of the larger study, but only students who were Southeast Asian or Hispanic freshmen, who grew up in bilingual homes, who had SAT scores below 520, and who were in the first generation of their families to attend a university were included in the present pilot study. Furthermore, participating students signed consent forms indicating their willingness to participate in the study and completed three surveys. The student background survey was used to identify possible participants. Students who did not wish to participate or who did not complete one of the surveys were not included in the study. Twenty freshmen met all criteria. Of these, 9 were Hmong, 1 was Laotian, and 10 were Hispanic. All of the Hispanic participants were women; 6 of the Southeast Asian participants were women and 4 were men. Overall, 80% of the participants were women. Most (85%) of the participants were between 16 to 18 years old while 15% were between 19 and 21. None of the participants were international students. Participants did not receive a stipend for completing surveys, nor did they receive extra credit.

### *The American History Class and Its Analytic Journal Task*

The history survey course met during the fall semester. The class, with a total enrollment of 280 students, was taught in a large lecture format twice a week and in 40-student discussion sections taught by TAs once a week. Students were required each week to read several short primary texts in American history (between two and five pages). They then were to choose one source and write an analytic journal response of approximately one to two pages in length; the assignment was due at the start of class on Fridays. The practice of weekly writing assignments sets the course apart from the academic assignments discussed by Leki (2007). She found that in many university courses, except for English courses, little writing was required and course readings were not linked to course writing assignments. In the reading and writing journal task, students were required to explain the content of the primary source, place it in its proper historical context, and finally, discuss its significance within the specific historical period in which the source was written. This analysis was the focus of their journal entry.

### *Scaffolding the Analytic Journal Task in the History Class*

The history professor offered several different forms of scaffolding for writing the weekly journal assignments in an effort to appeal to as many students as possible. Collecting and grading the journal task each week is a form of scaffolding. Having a graded weekly journal assignment contrasts with a more common approach in which students have a journal due at the end of the semester and are not held accountable for working on it every week. The second form of scaffolding occurred through the use of written teaching materials and particularly the preparation questions. The professor gave the students ques-

tions (see Critical Thinking Questions in Appendix A) to encourage them to read the text analytically, he posted an example of a well-written journal entry on the course website, and he provided a grading rubric. The questions helped focus the students' reading of the source and provided them a structure to ask the appropriate questions of the text they were reading. These questions asked students to first pull out the relevant facts of the document they were reading, a skill most of them were comfortable doing. But then the questions turned to the more difficult and ultimately more important task of critically analyzing the text. These questions centered on two important strategies often lacking in 1st-year college students: the ability to contextualize information and the ability to explain the significance of the ideas put forth by the author of the text.

The third form of scaffolding included classroom conversations. The professor discussed the purpose of the journal assignment in class and he modeled use of the questions. He spent time during the first few weeks explicitly tying the weekly readings into the course lectures. He gave students feedback about written work. He offered more feedback than usual on their weekly assignments during the first few weeks of class. The fourth form of scaffolding involved peer interaction and learning in a social setting. The history students participated in a learning community that resulted in a cohort of students having the same classmates in two of their courses. Early in the semester, the professor had the students work together to produce a well-written journal entry; throughout the semester students discussed the readings with peers on Fridays. Furthermore, students were encouraged to get help with their journals from tutors.

### ***Data Collection and Methods of Analysis***

Students completed a permission form and three questionnaires: a student background survey, the first journal assignment survey (pretest), and the second journal survey (posttest). The student background survey was administered early in the semester; the journal surveys were administered approximately 10 weeks apart. All of the instruments were completed in class.

Both journal assignment surveys included core statements that were identical. The core statements are called the Journal Assignment, Reading Comprehension, and Social Learning Survey (JA-RC-SL). The JA-RC-SL included statements concerning students' perceptions of the most recent journal task assigned in the history course (i.e., they understood the purpose of the most recent journal assignment, understood how to complete the most recent journal assignment, and thought the journal grading rubric helped them complete the journal assignment); statements on students' reading comprehension (i.e., they had sufficient background in history or historical concepts to understand the reading, critical thinking questions helped the student understand the journal assignment, they understood most words in the reading, and they understood the reading for the most recent journal assignment well or very well); and statements related to social learning (i.e., the participation in the learning community helped the student to do better on the most recent journal assignment and a tutor helped him or her to do better on the most recent

journal assignment). Students responded to the JA-RC-SL by selecting *agree* or *disagree* for each statement. The statements were contextualized because students reported their perceptions concerning their most recent journal assignment. In addition to the core statements, there were also questions about the time students spent reading and writing for the most recent journal assignment on both surveys. Furthermore, the first journal survey asked about the highest level of schooling of the students' parents, and the second journal questionnaire replaced the question with students' predictions of their final grade in the course.

To analyze JA-RC-SL data, the number of students agreeing with each statement was tallied to determine frequency counts in the pre- and postsurveys. These counts, shown in Table 1, show change through time in the number of students agreeing with each statement. To prepare to test for significance, index score means were determined for the task index, reading comprehension, and social learning, after identifying the sum of the number of statements in each index (JA, RC, and SL) with which each student agreed. To test for statistical significance with SPSS, a 2x2 repeated measure of multivariate analysis of variance was used to determine whether students had gains through time for the journal task index, for reading comprehension, and for social learning.

## Results

*Did students' metacognition related to the journal assignment change through time? Did students demonstrate significant change in metacognition about the journal assignment?*

Table 1 shows frequency counts and percentages of students agreeing with each of the three statements that make up the journal task index. Early in the semester, the majority of the students (80%) understood the purpose of the journal task. One additional student indicated he or she understood its purpose late in the semester, so there was some improvement. For the second question about understanding how to complete the journal assignment, almost all students (95%) agreed with it early in the semester, and late in the semester all students agreed with it. This question received the highest number of affirmative responses of all questions asked in the survey. The third question, which probed students' perception whether the grading rubric helped them complete their journal assignment, had the lowest initial score (75%) for this index early in the semester. By the end of the semester, 1 additional student agreed with the statement. The findings in Table 1 suggest that some improvement occurred through time for items making up the journal task index, which examined students' metacognition; thus almost all students understood these aspects of the journal task. The findings also reveal that more students positively assessed their metacognition concerning the task than they did their reading comprehension and social learning. Consequently, the scaffolding conversations related to the task seemed helpful. The statistical test indicates that students did not have statistically significant gains through time in this area.

**Table 1**  
**20 Southeast Asian and Hispanic Students' Self-Assessments**  
**of Aspects of Their History Journal Task**

	<i>Number of students agreeing with each statement early in the semester</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>Number of students agreeing with each statement late in the semester</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
<b>Perceptions related to the journal task (The task index items)</b>				
I understood purpose of the most recent reading journal assignment for this class.	16	80%	17	85%
I understood how to complete the most recent journal assignment.	19	95%	20	100%
The journal grading rubric helped me complete the most recent journal assignment.	15	75%	16	80%
<b>Self-assessment of reading comprehension (Reading comprehension checklist items)</b>				
I had sufficient background in history or historical concepts to understand reading for the most recent journal.	12	60%	13	65%
The critical thinking questions helped me understand the reading for the most recent journal.	15	75%	17	85%
I understood most words in the reading.	7	35%	13	65%
I understood reading for the most recent journal assignment well/very well.	10	50%	9	45%
<b>Views about the helpfulness of social learning opportunities (Social learning index items)</b>				
My participation in my learning community helped me to do better on journal assignments.	13	65%	14	70%
A tutor helped me to do better on the most recent journal assignment.	13	65%	9	45%
<b>Time spent on the journal task</b>				
I spent more than two hours reading and writing for the most recent journal assignment.	5	25%	7	35%

*Did students' self-assessment of their reading comprehension for the journal assignment change through time? Was student self-assessment of their reading comprehension for the task significantly better toward the end of the semester compared to earlier in the semester?*

Table 1 shows frequency counts and percentages of students agreeing with the four statements that form the reading comprehension index. Findings about helpfulness of the questions used to guide students when writing journal responses showed that three-quarters (75%) of the students thought the questions were helpful early in the semester and 2 additional students (85%) saw them as helpful much later in the semester. The item, helpfulness of critical-thinking questions, received the most affirmative responses of all items on the checklist closely related to reading comprehension. The findings indicate that the scaffolding conversations and regular analytic reading practice seemed to have been helpful. Other findings showed that less than two-thirds of the students (60%) thought that they had sufficient background in history or historical concepts to understand the reading early in the semester. This number increased by 1 student (to 65%) late in the semester. While background knowledge is viewed as an essential component of reading comprehension, many students thought that their background knowledge in history was insufficient for the journal task. The statement "understood most words in the reading for the most recent journal assignment" received the lowest affirmative score (35%) of all of the items in the JA-RC-SL early in the semester. Later in the semester the number of students agreeing with the statement almost doubled to 65%, but about one-third of the students continued to have difficulty understanding the words appearing in the reading. Only half of the students agreed with the statement "understood reading for the most recent journal assignment well or very well" early in the semester; of all the statements in the JA-RC-SL, this is the only one that elicited fewer affirmative responses later in the semester. The findings also indicate that, despite the scaffolding, about half of these students thought that they were not adequately comprehending the assigned reading. Even though almost twice as many students noted that they understood words in the reading later in the semester compared to earlier, and there was a 10% increase in the number of students indicating they benefited from the journal questions later in the semester, the statistical test results revealed that the change in the reading comprehension index was not statistically significant.

*Were students' social forms of support (the learning community and work with tutors outside of class) perceived to be more helpful toward the end of the semester compared to earlier in the semester? Was the change statistically significant?*

In a separate question students were asked to indicate how frequently they met with a tutor; possible responses were from 1 (never) to 5 (always). Four of the 20 students indicated that they never met with a tutor to work on their journal assignment. Hence, about three-quarters of the students made some use of tutoring. But only 1 student indicated often or always meeting with a tutor. The most frequent responses were either sometimes or rarely. Thus the majority were not meeting with tutors weekly or regularly despite having problems with

reading comprehension. For the statement about benefiting from help from tutors, the number of affirmative responses dropped by 20% during the semester, the only big drop in the JA-RC-SL survey results. The infrequent use of tutors is one likely reason for the low assessment of the tutors. Another finding is that about two-thirds of the students thought the learning community helped them do better work on their journals. Later in the semester 1 additional student (a total of 70%) agreed with the statement. The statistical test measuring change in students' perceptions about social learning indicated that the change in the social learning index was not statistically significant.

*By the end of the study, did students spend more time on their most recent journal assignment?*

Time on task is an aspect of student engagement in learning. Table 1 shows findings about the number and percentage of students spending more than 2 hours reading and writing for the most recent journal task. If students were to annotate the reading, look up words that they did not understand, and revise their writing, or if they were to meet with a tutor to discuss a reading, they would need more than 2 hours to complete a journal task. The findings demonstrate that there was a 10% increase in the number of students reporting more than 2 hours of work on the task late in the semester compared to much earlier. However, most students spent less than 2 hours on their most recent journal assignment both early and late in the semester. Table 2 provides details about the time students reported spending on the most recent journal task.

**Table 2**  
**Frequency Counts of the Time Hispanic and Southeast Asian Students**  
**Reported Spending on the Most Recent Journal Task**

	<i>Responses early in the semester</i>	<i>Responses late in the semester</i>
Less than 30 minutes (barely attempting the task)	0	0
Between 30 minutes and an hour (attempting the task)	7 (35%)	8 (40%)
Between 1 to 2 hours (engagement on the task)	8 (40%)	5 (25%)
More than 2 hours (careful engagement on the task)	5 (25%)	7 (35%)

The findings were that between 1 and 2 hours, and between 30 minutes to an hour, were the most frequent amounts of time students spent on the journal assignment early in the semester. Much later in the semester there were more students spending just 30 minutes to an hour on the journal task compared to earlier, but there were also more students spending over 2 hours on the task compared to earlier. Therefore, much later in the semester three-quarters were

either carefully engaged in or attempting to complete the task. Students spending up to an hour on the task probably spent too little time on the task; in future studies researchers could compare the amount of time students spent on a task with the quality of journal writing so that the relation between the two is clearer.

*What were the students' expected final grades?*

Based on students' self-reported anticipated final grades for the semester, 12 students (60%) expected to receive an A or B, 5 (25%) expected a C, and 3 (15%) expected a D or F. Therefore, 85% expected to earn a final grade of C or better. Taraban et al. (2004) found that freshman students' predictions of their grades were reliable measures of their actual grades. This study roughly concurs with such findings. Fifteen students (75%) received an A or B, 3 (15%) received a C, and 2 (10%) received a D. As a group 90% received a grade of C or better. More students actually received a final grade of C or higher than the number who had anticipated such an outcome.

### **Discussion**

*Was the journal assignment helpful? Did the scaffolding of the assignment help Southeast Asian and Hispanic students succeed in the freshman history course?*

Because of the journal task, students regularly applied analytic reading and writing strategies and engaged in the metacognition needed when integrating reading and writing. While we did not get statistically significant support for the claim that weekly journal assignments, supported by various forms of scaffolding, led to improved reading comprehension of history texts, the self-reported student course outcomes and the students' actual final grades were very positive, with most students in the study receiving final grades of C or better. Thus, the scaffolding and students' work on journals seemed to contribute to their positive course outcomes.

*What were the academic literacy challenges that the participating students faced in the history class? How can some of the challenges be addressed?*

1. *The majority of the students thought they could not understand the primary sources that they were trying to respond to in their journals.* They became even more aware of this problem with comprehension later in the semester; the types of primary sources assigned weekly varied in content and thus could be challenging to read. Nonetheless, this finding suggests that even though students seemed to improve in some areas such as understanding vocabulary in their reading, it is ultimately very difficult to help students improve their reading comprehension in a content-driven course such as this one. One way to try to address this challenge is by adding more out-of-class peer and tutor scaffolding. Allowing students to work with peers on journal tasks early in the semester may help Generation 1.5 students. These small groups of history students can meet with tutors who are history majors and who are trained to facilitate the small-group discussion; tutors can help students in the group analyze primary-source texts by using the analytic steps provided by the professor.

There are some drawbacks to tasks completed in groups if the discussion is not carefully structured. In Leki's case study research (2007), she found that when a L2 learner was assigned to groups that presumably consisted of mostly native English speakers, the L2 learner did not actually do much work on the group project. Leki's group projects, however, were not facilitated by tutors who could be trained to watch for this possible problem.

Another way to help students improve their reading comprehension is through college ESL, reading, or study-skills courses in addition to freshman composition courses. But the courses need to address not only reading comprehension but also analytic reading. Further, it would be helpful if these courses integrated reading and writing instruction since such integrated instruction is likely to lead to more metacognitive strategy use.

2. *Early in the semester many of the students thought they could not understand most of the words in the reading; later in the semester the situation had improved but a third of them still felt challenged by the vocabulary.* This suggests that students may benefit from glosses and/or glossaries that explain some historical concepts appearing in the reading. We have found that it is not unusual for undergraduate textbooks to have glossaries in separate sections in textbooks. When preparing glossaries for Generation 1.5 students, having the more challenging words, including historical concepts, glossed on the same page as the reading (as margin notes or footnotes) would most likely be more helpful than having them combined in a long glossary section at the end of a textbook or as a separate document available online. In addition, students may benefit from training in the use of dictionaries, including learner dictionaries designed for L2 students, so that they can become self-reliant; however, they would need to take the time to look up unknown words. Furthermore, the course reading questions could be edited so that a vocabulary item is added: it could ask students to identify three to five unknown words in a reading, look them up, and explain them. Then, in discussion groups that meet either in class or with tutors, a few minutes could be set aside for students to discuss words that they had selected and looked up with peers. The instructor could pay attention to words or concepts that students cannot explain in groups and could briefly discuss them with the entire class.

We found that many of the students in this study probably did not spend enough time on the assignment to actually look up words they did not understand when they were not required to do so; therefore, one or more of these additional measures may help students build their word knowledge for their journal assignments and build their academic literacy. Nevertheless, this is challenging to implement in a class where only some of the students are Generation 1.5.

3. *Despite high expectations on the part of the professor and TAs, many of the students did not spend as much time on the journal task as the history professor had expected.* Perhaps some of them would spend more time on the task if early in the semester they were told how much time they were expected to spend on the task. In future studies, researchers could examine whether prompting students to spend a minimum amount of time on the task increased the actual



amount of time on task. Also, students could produce two drafts: They might complete and turn in the first draft of the journal entry (responses to the analytic steps in the template) before the class discussion, then revise their entire journal entry at home after class discussion, and turn in both drafts the following week. When they revise their draft, they should have more background knowledge that they gleaned from class discussion. While it is not common for students to turn in multiple drafts of journal entries, analytic journal entries that are graded are more challenging than traditional journal responses; therefore, two drafts may be helpful, especially at the beginning of the semester.

4. *The history class is a survey course that undergraduate students must take, and a majority (if not all) of the students in this study are not history majors and may have little interest in studying U.S. history. In other words, the class topic may have affected students' motivation.* Given this challenge, it seems especially important to encourage students to take advantage of office hours and conversations with peers and tutors so that their socioacademic interactions can help students build their motivation to study an area that is not part of their major. Tutoring centers could try to put more emphasis on building socioacademic relations, particularly between Generation 1.5 students and their tutors. The professor could also spend more time developing the student learning community, which will encourage peer interactions.

5. *Many students thought that the tutoring was not helpful.* The tutors were knowledgeable about history but they were not prepared to assist Generation 1.5 students; they were not familiar with tutoring techniques to use to help students with reading comprehension and critical thinking; they needed more tutor training. As a result of our research, we have identified innovative areas for tutor training: background about the diverse types of students (including Generation 1.5 students) who are enrolled in undergraduate classes, strategies for building student motivation by creating socioacademic relations between tutors and freshmen, and techniques for tutoring academic-literacy strategies along with history. Additional areas of tutor training that are specific to the history class include reviewing the background knowledge needed to analyze a specific primary source and modeling, using think-aloud techniques, and how a good history learner uses the critical-thinking questions to comprehend and analyze a primary source. Future research could study the effect of institutionally supported tutor training on various outcomes of Generation 1.5 students' learning.

### **Conclusion**

This pilot study took place at a university that offers instruction intended to meet the needs of a diverse student population that includes Hispanic and Southeast Asian Generation 1.5 freshmen who are in the first generation to attend college. In our pilot study, we were unable to control many variables, but findings based on survey data and the history professor's observations reveal that the participating Generation 1.5 students face challenges with reading comprehension in a freshman-level university history course that has a strong analytic reading and writing component.

Overall, in this pilot study the scaffolding of the weekly journal task appears to have helped the Southeast Asian and Hispanic Generation 1.5 students succeed in the undergraduate history course. The scaffolding consisted of in-class discussion, specially designed written learning materials related to the journal task, use of learning communities, and tutoring. However, we do not have statistically significant findings to strengthen our claim that the scaffolding was helpful in improving students' academic literacy.

While the participants' self-assessed course outcomes and actual final grades were positive, many of them reported struggling with reading comprehension and with vocabulary even after the scaffolding had been implemented. Intervention by faculty for one semester, while useful, is not enough to help students overcome problems with academic literacy in an academic discipline such as U.S. History. Many Generation 1.5 students need planned academic-literacy intervention in and out of class for more than one semester of university study.

A related finding was that many students did not spend enough time working on the analytic journal assignment, and they did not seek help from tutors regularly. We have offered practical suggestions that may lead Hispanic and Southeast Asian students to spend more time out of class on the reading and writing assignments; we have also offered ideas to strengthen tutoring.

It is surprising that so many students reported satisfactory course outcomes, that is, an expected final grade of C or better, when many of them thought that they had not understood the reading assignment for their most recent journal task, and they often indicated that they had not understood the vocabulary in the reading. It appears that students were successful despite these challenges because most of them appeared to have regularly engaged in metacognition and use of some effective reading strategies while completing their weekly journal task. The survey responses showed that students had been successful in a number of ways. When using a 75% cutoff as the measure of achievement (i.e., 75% or more of the students agreed with a statement shown in Table 1), the Generation 1.5 students met this criterion on all items in the task index (they understood the purpose of the task, they understood the process they would use for completing the task, they thought the grading rubric that they learned to use was helpful), and they indicated that the critical-thinking questions that were emphasized in the course helped them understand the reading. With a slightly lower 70% criterion for determining achievement, by the end of the semester participation in the learning community was viewed as helpful by most students. When students engage in planning their work by thinking about the purpose of an assignment, about the processes that they will use to complete the assignment, about assessment criteria that the professor and TAs will use, about the questions that they can ask themselves as they read, and when they seek help and support from classmates, they are using effective strategies. The use of these strategies, most of which were explicitly discussed by the history professor and TAs, may have helped these freshmen compensate for weaknesses in reading comprehension and vocabulary in their 1st-year history survey course.

Future research can study the areas discussed in this article with larger groups of students; future studies can also examine the effectiveness of our proposed interventions on improvement in students' reading comprehension and on improvement in college course outcomes. It is our hope that insights from this study will be useful when planning classroom instruction and tutoring for college and university freshmen of linguistically diverse backgrounds.

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## Appendix A

### Critical Thinking Questions

1. The author(s) of this source is \_\_\_\_\_.
2. This source was written in \_\_\_\_\_.  
(Be as specific as possible with the date the source was written.)
3. The author(s) audience is \_\_\_\_\_.  
(Be specific in describing the intended audience.)
4. The key question or idea the author(s) is/are addressing is \_\_\_\_\_.  
(Figure out the question or reason that motivated the author(s) to write the source.)
5. The most important information in this source is \_\_\_\_\_.  
(Figure out what evidence the author(s) use to support his or her idea or argument.)
6. The main conclusion(s) of this source is/are \_\_\_\_\_.  
(Identify the conclusions the author(s) comes to in trying to answer the key question or idea.)
7. The context in which this source was written is \_\_\_\_\_.  
(Identify the specific reasons why the author(s) wrote this source when he, she, or they did.)

### The Final Question

WHY IS THIS SOURCE SIGNIFICANT FOR OUR UNDERSTANDING OF AMERICAN HISTORY?

## **Appendix B**

### **How the Collaboration Developed**

We will briefly describe how our collaboration developed. We hope that this information will be of interest to faculty who wish to collaborate across disciplines and engage in similar studies on their campuses. The collaboration between the applied linguistics professor and the history professor occurred as an outcome of their service on an ad hoc University Reading Committee at California State University, Fresno, which was organized by Dennis Nef, dean of Undergraduate Studies at CSUF. Dean Nef asked several faculty and staff members from the School of Education, the School of Business, the School of Arts and Humanities, the library, and the learning center to meet for approximately three semesters to discuss challenges students face with reading at CSUF. During the first semester of meetings, the focus was on defining the aspect of the general reading problem that the campus should address; the group jointly wrote a proposal to request in-house funding to try to solve aspects of this problem. Ellen Lipp served during the initial phase of this committee. During the second semester, after the committee had been successful in obtaining funds, the focus shifted to examining the specific reading needs related to specific courses taught by various departments. Dean Nef asked Brad Jones and others to join the committee because they taught high-stakes content courses taken by many freshmen. These professors were invited to discuss examples of their typical reading assignments. The Reading Committee was then invited to identify ideas as to how to improve students' reading in these classes. Suggestions included workshops for faculty and developing a reading center. As the academic year was coming to an end, Ellen Lipp and Brad Jones suggested to the committee that they collaborate on efforts to improve students' academic literacy in the history course and to study students' challenges with an analytic journal task in this course. Brad Jones and Ellen Lipp were able to begin to build a working relationship while serving on the committee.

Dean Nef provided funds to Ellen Lipp to cover the costs related to questionnaire drafting and development, data collection, and data analysis. Dean Nef provided an additional small grant to Brad Jones to give input on all the research documents and to develop new teaching materials that scaffolded the journal task. The CSUF Graduate Office provided funds to pay graduate students to tutor students taking history courses. Dean Nef was central to setting up the learning community described in this study. Preliminary outcomes of the larger study were reported to the committee. Funding from the university in the form of a sabbatical provided time for Ellen Lipp to draft this article with Brad Jones contributing to several sections and to the revision of the paper overall.