

# Language Minority Student Transitions

By Emily Suh

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During the fall of 2014, Lina finished work at 7AM, brought her children to school, and drove an hour to Southeast Community College's (SCC) Introduction to College Reading/Writing, ENGL0960. Lina's story is common in Lincoln, Nebraska where 5,500 refugees from over 40 countries have been resettled (Mitrofanova, n.d.). SCC is a small, multicampus community college serving 9,300 students, 82% of whom identify as Caucasian (Southeast Community College-Lincoln, n.d.). The college does not track students' home languages; however, as Lincoln continues to receive refugees and other immigrants, it has seen an increase in language minority students, who are speakers of a language other than English at home but may not attend English as a Second Language (ESL) classes (Rodriguez & Cruz, 2009). Earning a college degree is an important goal for many language minority students and new Americans, and because of its open doors policies, flexible hours and affordable tuition, SCC offers the opportunity to achieve this goal.

Unfortunately, the journey to college can be lengthy for immigrants who must demonstrate English proficiency by completing a series of ESL classes while balancing work, family, and school (Blumenthal, 2002). At SCC, the sequence ranges from classes in Beginning ESL to ESL for Academic Success, none of the classes is eligible for financial aid. As a result, Lina and many others chose to prematurely exit ESL by testing into developmental coursework.

At SCC, developmental English faculty have perceived a growing population of nontraditional, language minority students who required language support perhaps best delivered in ESL. As a result, the department

was interested in determining whether students whose first language was not English were being appropriately placed in developmental English. SCC does not track the number of language minority students entering developmental English courses or their pass rates. There is a similar absence within developmental education research.

## Theoretical Underpinnings and Research Design

This practicum is unique among those produced from the Kellogg Institute in that its primary purpose was to contribute to scholarship rather than implement and assess programmatic change (although two courses were (re)developed resulting from the practicum). Given the sparse literature on language minority students, particularly *adult immigrant, nontraditional ESL*

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*students* in developmental education, it was felt an intervention could not be proposed until research explored the phenomenon of these students, referred to here as Generation 1 learners, entering developmental English. Linguistic diversity has been understudied in developmental education research and policy, which fail to distinguish between traditional versus nontraditional, foreign versus U.S.-educated, or language minority versus ESL students (i.e., Bailey, 2009; Complete College America, 2012). Language minority students have completed ESL classes; "English Language Learner" (ELL) and ESL students still receive targeted English language instruction. Research within the field of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) examines Generation 1 learners in ESL classes, their investment within imagined communities of practice (Baynham & Simpson, 2010; Skilton-Sylvester, 2002), identity formation (Norton, 1997, 2010), and language use as agency (de Costa, 2010; Miller, 2014) but not their transition into developmental classes—the entry point to higher education for many immigrants.

Placement and advising are important developmental education components (Boroch et al., 2007), and the placement of Generation 1 learners into developmental English highlights several key issues identified in a survey of community college English faculty as under-researched: These include "writing placement and assessment," "basic/developmental reading and writing," "language-level instruction, particularly for linguistically diverse students," "the needs and experiences of the student populations... particularly... first-generation, and adult learners," and "issues of student success" (Toth & Sullivan, 2016, p. 264). These findings suggest instructors' commitment to serving Generation 1 learners despite the paucity of literature on doing so.

This practicum used a mixed methods design to determine the number of language minority students, including Generation 1, testing into SCC's Developmental English program and to understand Generation 1 learners' experiences entering developmental English through the Transitions Lab (T-Lab), a campus tutoring and advising center. Understanding how Generation 1 learners' transition from ESL into developmental English enhances practitioners' ability to utilize or modify existing resources to meet students' linguistic and academic needs. In addition to increasing understanding of SCC's student population, the research contributed to the local teacher-scholar community of practice (Toth & Sullivan, 2016) through inter- and intradepartmental cooperation at the college.

## Data Collection and Analysis

### COMPASS Scores/Enrollment

In the 2014 calendar year 378 students self-identified as non-First Language English on the COMPASS Test, suggesting that many language minority students are interested in attending SCC's credit courses (Suh, 2015). Students whose COMPASS scores qualify for Pre-Foundations (Adult Basic Education) or Foundations (developmental) courses are referred to the T-Lab. Students who register with the T-Lab display a high level of motivation for entering college; thus, T-Lab records may more accurately indicate the number of language minority students planning to enroll at SCC. Ninety-two students self-identified as language minorities in the T-Lab. Sixty (63.7%) of these completed at least 10 hours of study, qualifying for COMPASS retesting. Of the 312 language minority students whose COMPASS scores made them eligible for developmental writing or composition courses in 2014, 74 began developmental English writing, and 39 began composition.

*In addition to the lab's tutors and online study program, students appreciated assistance from advisors.*

**Table 1**  
*Participants*

Name	Country of Origin	Level of T-Lab Study
Mary	Kenya	Low (3hrs of computer study)
HaeJin	Korea	Low (<10hrs of computer study)
Diep	Vietnam	Moderate (10hrs of computer study)
Josefina	Mexico	Moderate (10hrs of computer study)
Kojo	Togo	Moderate (10hrs of computer study)
Manuel	Mexico	Moderate (10hrs of computer study)
Mariam	Iraq	Moderate (10hrs of computer study, advising)
Sabina	Iraq	Moderate (10hrs of computer study)
Simon	Southern Sudan	Moderate (10hrs of computer study)
Zada	Iraq	Moderate (10hrs of computer study)
Lina	South Sudan	High (>10hrs of computer study; advising, writing tutoring)
Regina	Brazil	High (>10hrs of computer study; advising, writing tutoring)
Labiba	Pakistan	High (>70hrs of computer study; advising; writing, math tutoring)
Zaara	Iran	High (>100hrs of computer study; advising, math tutoring)

## Interviews

To understand Generation 1 learners' academic goals, perceptions of SCC, and use/awareness of college resources, I conducted 14 in-depth interviews following protocol by Marshall and Rossman (2011). The participants were all Generation 1 learners who immigrated to the U.S. as adults after completing their K-12 education overseas. Table 1 includes students' names, countries of origin, and levels of participation in the T-Lab.

Interviews highlighted salient themes analyzed within the post-structuralist framework of learner investment. According to this theory, students invest in the target language and identities as speakers of that language with complex social histories and multiple desires to learn and use the language (Norton, 2010). The practicum's qualitative findings suggest how Generation 1 learners invest in the English language and their "college student" identity. I presented the themes to Lina and Mariam for member-checking. Quotations from interviews are identified by participant first names.

**Academic goals.** Overwhelmingly, students cited an academic goal of college graduation which was critical to "get better job and better life" (Zaara). Their perception of SCC as a transfer or diploma resource supports research documenting that immigrant students are most likely to attend a community college (Teranishi, Suarez-Orozco, & Suarez-Orozco, 2011). The learners invested in their future identities as working professionals by attending SCC.

**Perceptions of SCC.** Students described SCC as a linear series of required classes including ESL, developmental, and content classes, resulting in mastery of English and the knowledge of their chosen field. They appreciated the supportive ESL director and teachers but criticized ESL as not academically rigorous. They were highly motivated to begin

developmental classes which marked their status as college—rather than ESL—students and which qualified them for financial aid. Students also spoke extensively about T-Lab support. Many viewed the lab as a course in its own right and felt pressured, either internally or externally from lab staff, to utilize lab resources. Aside from ESL and the T-Lab, students exhibited limited awareness of college resources, such as advisors, the writing center, or offices for registration or financial aid.

**Use of campus resources.** Access to on-campus resources was often limited by students' additional responsibilities. Interviewees frequently described splitting time between full-time jobs, family, and school: "It's really challenging to me if I have homework due and I have to work, so sometimes I'm like, 'God, I don't know if I'll make it.'... I do really want to study, finish school, and get a nice job" (Mary). Mary's perceptions about college and her ability to complete her homework were closely connected to her sense of self and her ability to overcome challenges. Kanno and Harklau (2012) note that a strong self-image as a college-bound student is essential to college access and attainment. In sharing about the stresses of their complex and competing identities, the students connected with teachers, peers, and others in the school community. This relational engagement

was symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1991) essential to students' perceptions of SCC and their place in it, and interviewees overwhelmingly described resources in terms of information about college. The value students placed on relationships with knowledgeable teachers, peers, and others explains their apparently contradictory views of ESL which they criticized while appreciating its instructors and director.

Because the T-Lab is not a required course, student use varied. However, many students described the help they received there. In addition to the lab's tutors and online study program, students appreciated assistance from advisors regarding retesting, registration, and other information about the college. Students who accessed the lab may have become more familiar with available campus resources and more comfortable asking for assistance than others.

## Practicum Impacts

As a result of the practicum, supplemental reading and writing courses were created and revised through collaboration between developmental English and ESL faculty and staff. The courses were designed to support students transitioning from ESL to developmental English but were opened to and now also enroll native English speakers.

The classes are evidence of the practicum's contribution to SCC's teacher-scholar community of practice. Scholarly engagement is an integral part of the department's daily practices and faculty professional identities in teacher-scholar communities of practice (Toth & Sullivan, 2016). Teachers-scholar activists use scholarship to legitimize their experience and inform their classroom practice (Calhoun-Dillahunt, Jensen, Johnson, Tinberg, & Toth, 2016, pp. 3-4). The practicum and resulting course design were a unique contribution to the local teacher-scholar community of practice because they broke through the traditional disciplinary silos artificially dividing language minority student learning based on course prefix.

Although ESL and developmental English serve the same Generation 1 learners at different points in their educational journey, collaboration between the departments is rare. The practicum has provided an important point of intersection contributing to research on Generation 1 learners, who are under-represented in literature and underserved in community colleges which typically do not recognize the importance of transition from adult ESL to developmental, and, eventually, credit-level courses. This practicum has given voice to adult immigrant, nontraditional students entering developmental English, and it resulted in coordinated efforts to assist their transition through supplemental instruction. Community colleges are the most common point of entry to higher education for immigrant students (Teranishi, Suarez-Orozco, & Suarez-Orozco, 2011); supporting their success is an integral part of the community college open-access mission and an essential task for developmental educators.

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