



EMBRACING GENERATION 1.5 LEARNERS

Through the Teaching of Writing

By Jan Lacina and Robin Griffith

Jan Lacina is the Associate Dean for Graduate Studies and a professor of literacy in the College of Education at Texas Christian University. She began her career as a Texas public school teacher. She is the co-editor of the journal *The Reading Teacher* and has published widely in the areas of writing instruction and teaching English language learners. She can be reached at j.lacina@tcu.edu.

Robin Griffith is an associate professor of literacy in the College of Education at Texas Christian University and co-editor of *The Reading Teacher*. Her research focuses on teaching decisions in literacy instruction and job-embedded professional development for literacy teachers. Prior to teaching at the university, she taught in Texas public schools and trained literacy coaches in numerous states. She can be reached at r.griffith@tcu.edu.

Abstract: This article highlights the learning that took place among teacher candidates as they taught Generation 1.5 students during a yearly writing camp. The article also offers suggestions for supporting this group of adolescents.

Keywords: writing instruction, English language learners, support for students

Embracing Generation 1.5 Learners Through the Teaching of Writing

“One language sets you in a corridor for life. Two languages open every door along the way.”

—Frank Smith

As noted above, Smith (1983) reminds us of the value of two languages, and his view of language as an asset. The National Center for Educational Statistics (2017) notes that 15.5 percent of Texas public school students are English language learners (ELLs). This high number of ELLs in our public schools supports the need for all teachers to have knowledge of research, skills, and teaching strategies that are relevant to this group of learners. Within this larger ELL population is a subgroup known as “Generation 1.5” (Rumbaut & Ima, 1988). Unlike ELLs who are learning English for the first time, Generation 1.5 students are familiar with U.S. customs, and English is their dominant language. Even though they have been in the country for many years, if not all of their school years, they are still acquiring language. Generation 1.5 students face distinct literacy challenges because they have less experience with academic reading and writing. For that reason, it is important for preservice and in-service teachers to be familiar with this group of students in secondary schools. To address this critical need, our College of Education conducts a yearly writing camp in which teacher candidates instruct Generation 1.5 students. This article offers suggestions for supporting Generation 1.5 learners based on the ten years of holding the camp.

Generation 1.5

Typically, Generation 1.5 students struggle academically because of a lack of skill preparation and background knowledge (Goldschmidt &

Miller, 2005). Unlike newcomers to the U.S., Generation 1.5 students are familiar with the U.S. culture and may be educated solely in the United States (Forrest, 2006; Goldschmidt & Miller, 2005; Rumbaut & Ima, 1988). Although Forrest (2006) notes examples of Generation 1.5 students in high school settings and provides recommendations for developing effective literacy programs for such students, most of the articles published about Generation 1.5 student focus on Generation 1.5 students at the postsecondary level and enrolled in first-year writing composition classes (Harklau, 2003; Matsuda, Saenkhum, & Accardi, 2013); there is little research available at the secondary level.

Writing Instruction for Generation 1.5 Students

Generation 1.5 students struggle with writing because of a lack of experience with academic writing and being able to show what they know through writing (Harklau, 2003). From years of experience working with Generation 1.5 students, we have learned the importance of a supportive environment, one in which students are comfortable sharing their writing. As well, there is a need for more English teachers, as well as preservice teachers, to have second language (L2) writing preparation and training as they prepare for teaching within high schools and in college composition classes (Harklau, 2003; Matsuda et al., 2013). As part of a decade-long partnership between a university and an urban high school, we conduct a yearly writing camp that serves at-risk students. The goals of the writing camp include the following:

- › Providing intensive literacy experiences for high school students most at risk in the areas of reading and writing.
- › Empowering at-risk high school students to see college as a realistic possibility.
- › Equipping future teachers with the skills and strategies for challenging at-risk high school students to read, write, and think critically.

Each March, teacher candidates from the College of Education at the local university teach 100 to 150 high school students from a local high school. These ninth through twelfth graders are selected based on their English teachers' recommendations that they could benefit from this type of intensive, small group writing instruction. Most of the students are Generation 1.5 students, based on the descriptions of such learners in the research literature (Forrest, 2006; Goldschmidt & Miller, 2005; Matsuda, Saenkhum, & Accardi, 2013).

Prior to the actual camp, we work with lead English teachers from the high school, who present professional development training to our teacher candidates, such as demonstrating strategies for teaching critical reading, writing, and thinking. This experience enables teacher candidates to better understand teaching in an urban school context, and they learn strategies for teaching high school students who struggle academically. At the camp, we teach strategies on how to write an effective essay, including how to respond to an expository essay prompt. Our goal is to empower these youth to develop a love for reading and writing and to see college as a very real possibility. We also host a lunch in the university cafeteria for the high school students, which provides a unique experience for many of the students who have not visited a college campus. The following recommendations for teaching Generational 1.5 students are based on the many years of reflecting upon this camp, the narratives from participating teacher candidates, and the relevant research literature.

Recommendation 1: Build Students' Academic Language by Also Building L2 Oral Language Proficiency

Building academic language is important in writing instruction. We have found it to be especially imperative for Generation 1.5 students, as academic language competence enables students to use new English words to express their thoughts and feelings. When academic language is built, students feel more confident about expressing themselves in both spoken and written form. There has been much research on the influence of language upon academic achievement. That research indicates that bilingual proficiency, and biliteracy in particular, positively impacts academic achievement in both Spanish and English (Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, & Christian, 2013). This research is consistent with those ELLs who receive instruction and support in their first language (L1), whereas students who participated in only short-term instruction in their L1 and who received no special intervention performed at the very lowest levels (Genesee et al., 2013; Lindholm-Leary, 1992), including those students with the highest dropout rates (Thomas & Collier, 2002). Most importantly, teaching students academic language prepares them for future academic success.

At the writing camp, we intentionally provided time for academic conversations prior to any instruction. This conversation time was bridged with conversation about content, such as short texts the students read and reflected on as well as vocabulary they were learning through a reading passage. One teacher candidate noted the importance of building oral language through informal conversations as a way to begin writing instruction. Katie explained, "The most effective approach to interacting with and instructing the high school students was giving the students a chance to speak, ask questions, and [to] show a genuine interest in their lives and learning." Making explicit connections to students' first language helps build academic language. Providing time to talk about academic content is important and allows adolescents the time to connect to their background knowledge as well as the opportunity to ask questions to clarify content.

Recommendation 2: Model Reading/Writing

Modeling, demonstrating, and sharing writing has long been known as an effective technique for teaching writing (Calkins, 1994; Cunningham & Allington, 2002; Graves, 1994; Ray, 2001). Teaching the craft of writing as well as its conventions during the writing process of rehearsal, drafting, and revising helps Generation 1.5 students better understand how they may structure sentences within their own writing. As numerous writing scholars (Anderson, 2000; Lacina & Espinosa, 2010; Ray, 2001, 2002; Smith, 1983) recommend, the use of mentor texts to show students how to read like writers is an effective way to connect reading and writing. Showing adolescents how authors structure sentences, develop paragraphs, and use adjectives in interesting and creative ways promotes the refinement of their writing craft. Abby, one of the teacher candidates, noted how modeling benefitted her group of students during the writing camp:

I found that scaffolding the students was effective because I would teach the students a strategy and show them an example. Then the students were able to model and follow along. When we taught the students how to make a plan before writing using a story map, the students clearly understood why this strategy was important. All of the students expressed how helpful the story map was when they wrote their paper.

Likewise, another teacher candidate, Melissa, noted the importance of modeling and how she now knows that she should have been more specific with her modeling. She explained,

Something I learned and also struggled with during the writing camp, and specifically during the persuasive writing portion on Wednesday morning, was working with ELLs who needed more guidance and support. I found that scaffolding the students was effective because I would teach the students a strategy and show them an example.

The influence of technology in the landscape for teaching adolescents cannot be ignored. Teachers must now find ways to model writing while using technology to meet the needs of a new population of students. Exposing adolescent Generation 1.5 students to writing on the computer is important. NAEP results (White, Kim, Chen, & Liu, 2015) indicate prior exposure to writing on the computer is associated with improved writing performance. The NAEP study is an indicator of the academic advantage of those adolescents who have been taught computer-based features while composing text via computer. With the access to everything from iPads to desktop computers both inside and outside of schools (Martin & Lambert, 2015), computer technology must be a significant component of writing instruction for Generation 1.5 students.

Recommendation 3: Confer Throughout the Writing Process

Conferencing has long been an important component of the writing process, but for Generation 1.5 students, conferencing is essential for building their academic writing skills. These students need the direct support of teachers who encourage them to show what they know through the writing process. Even more important, they need the opportunity to talk about their writing, to talk about their ideas for writing, and to talk about the revision and editing processes. Oral language development, and specifically academic language, is reinforced through ongoing writing conferences. The writing camp environment provides the unique opportunity for the small group and ongoing conferences that benefit a Generation 1.5 student. The teacher candidates who taught Generation 1.5 students recognized the value of conferring at the camp. Catherine reflected,

Throughout the whole writing process, I made it a goal to continuously give each student direct feedback. I would read what they had written so far at each stage and [give] those tips for what I thought could be improved and point out things they did I thought were strong. I made feedback as specific as I could. For example, at one point I told the boy in my group that I liked how he started his intro with a personal experience because when I read it I immediately felt drawn into what he was writing and wanted to learn more.

Another teacher candidate wrote how she learned the importance of ongoing assessment:

Throughout this camp, I really learned a lot about writing, giving feedback, and assessing older students. To begin, I learned the importance of assessing students along the way versus just as the end of their writing. Because if I am assessing students along the way I am able to see how on track they are, and if they really understanding what they are writing about.

I also realized that through checking in and checking the progress of my students, I was able to give them constructive feedback.

Many of our teacher candidates had limited teaching experience with Generation 1.5 high school students, but through this writing camp, they learned the value of ongoing conferencing and ongoing discussion of writing. Providing teacher candidates with the experience of teaching L2 writers before they enter schools as classroom teachers is essential (Matsuda et al., 2013). By equipping teacher candidates with the skills, strategies, and experiences in teaching L2 writers, they will be better prepared for understand the specific needs of second language learners in their future classrooms.

Conclusion

Based on research that explains the unique needs of Generation 1.5 students, teachers must recognize that these students have distinct academic needs, different than those students who are learning about a new culture and language. Teachers must plan instruction that takes in account this group of students' academic needs as well as their strengths. In part, the high school students benefitted from this writing camp experience because it provided intensive small group teaching by teacher candidates who were more like peers because of the age proximity. The experience provided teacher candidates the opportunity to interact with lead English teachers and high school students and to learn strategies for challenging Generation 1.5 high school students to critically read, write, and think. Returning to the opening metaphor from Smith (1983), we assert that Generation 1.5 students should be empowered to open each door along the way, confident in using the skills and strategies needed for successful academic writing. Possessing proficient academic writing skills is foundational to success in college composition classes as well as success in the job market, both possible pathways to a literate and successful life.

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