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## COMING TO TERMS: GENERATION 1.5 STUDENTS IN MAINSTREAM COMPOSITION

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### Abstract

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The purpose of this essay is to complicate the current terms used to describe students who are immigrant U.S. high school graduates still in the process of acquiring English but who are placed into mainstream college composition classes. Beginning with a brief description of the growing presence of this group of students, this author argues that terms such as “Generation 1.5” do not accurately reflect the diversity of such students’ experiences. As a solution, this author suggests that alternative terms be used to describe students who belong to Generation 1.5 but who enroll in mainstream composition classes, rather than ESL classes. As a way to educate mainstream composition instructors, this essay also describes some of the principles of second language acquisition as a prelude to outlining the most salient characteristics of cross-over students, including the ways in which Generation 1.5 students who cross over are different from their international ESL peers. While the essay is written for mainstream instructors, other educators who are unfamiliar with this group will also benefit from this author’s description of what it means to be a cross-over student in today’s American universities.

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I am the new generation of my parents. I will have different ideas to live my life. I will have to separating myself and to show them that I am different. I am the new generation [ . . . ] Entering a new community, yes, it is hard, I found frustration all the time not knowing what to do.

--Excerpt from Nhat Huynh’s Freshman English Placement Exam Essay, based on a writing prompt from “Crossing” in *New Worlds of Literature*

Nhat (a pseudonym) is just one of many students who represent the “new generation” of college students who are placed into and enroll in mainstream college composition courses, despite the fact that their writing may contain features consistent with English as a Second Language (ESL) writing. Typically, these students are placed into mainstream composition classes merely because they are graduates of U.S. high schools and meet the requisite SAT or ACT scores and/or other placement standards for mainstream composition classes. While it is nearly impossible to know just how many entering college students belong to this new generation (because college applications do not typically ask for information about language use from U.S.-educated students), there is ample evidence that suggests this population is growing rapidly. According to Fix and Passel (2003), “[d]uring the 1990s more than 14 million immigrants entered the United States; [ . . . ] and children of immigrants are now 1 in 5 students grades K-12”

(p. 1-2). They also asserted that in 2003, there were “10.5 million students who are the children of immigrants—one quarter of these are foreign-born” (p. 2). The ensuing result is that students with relatively limited English backgrounds are attending and graduating from U.S. high schools at increasing rates across the country, even in areas that are not immigrant-heavy locations. And, according to Harklau (1998), these students are entering college at astounding rates: “Upon initial examination, in comparison with native-born peers, the demographic profile of immigrant participation in postsecondary schooling appears quite robust. Immigrants are more likely than American-born peer cohorts to attend college and, once there, to persist and receive a degree” (p. 636). Therefore, more and more students who belong to this new generation will be accepted into postsecondary institutions across the country, including large four-year universities, where they will encounter teachers with little experience or understanding of their English language needs and abilities.

No longer can mainstream instructors afford to ignore the presence of this student population, even though they may seem like an insignificant cohort of the total student population at times. In fact, every mainstream instructor needs to recognize the presence of this group because mainstream composition classes will increasingly include students like Nhat. In his 2004 dissertation about ESL students in English composition, Sadler found that at the University of Arizona, “only nine sections (out of a total of 264) of Freshman Composition for Native Speakers of English . . . contained solely native English speakers” (p. 5). Furthermore, Sadler found that while some sections contained only one second language learner, “the average number was approximately three” out of 25 students per class, and the majority of those students were immigrants or the children of immigrants (p. 6). Sadler’s findings echo those of Van Lier (1988), who argued that:

[w]e increasingly find classrooms in which only a few, or maybe just one, of the learners speaks a native language which is different from the language of instruction. For these learners, every classroom is an L2 [second language] classroom, and unless they are left to sink or swim, every teacher in such a classroom is at least a part-time ESL teacher (p. 7).

Similar to the new generation of students who entered college in the early 1970s and which prompted the Conference on College Composition and Communication’s 1974 document, *Students’ Right To Their Own Language*, the new generation of college students today prompted the Second Language Writing Special Interest Group of the Conference on College Composition and Communication to argue successfully for the need to educate CCCC constituents about the increasing numbers of ESL students who enroll in mainstream classes (and the ensuing ramifications for those students, their teachers, and administrators of writing programs). As a result, the CCCC Committee on Second Language Writing published the *Statement on Second-Language Writing and Writers in College Composition and Communication* in 2001, which states:

[w]e urge writing teachers and writing program administrators to recognize the regular presence of second-language writers in writing classes, to understand their characteristics, and to develop instructional and administrative practices that are sensitive to their linguistic and cultural needs. We also urge graduate programs in writing-related fields to offer courses in second-language writing theory, research, and instruction in order to prepare writing teachers and scholars for working with a college student population that is increasingly diverse both linguistically and culturally (p. 669-670).

This statement was also endorsed by the Teaching English as a Second or Other Language (TESOL) Board of Directors in 2001. It is indeed probable that students like Nhat increasingly will enroll in four-year colleges and universities and will likely, at some point in their college careers, enroll in mainstream composition courses.

### **A New Term to Describe This Group: Cross-over Students**

In this essay, I will introduce a new term to refer to this new generation of students, which includes students such as Nhat, whose placement essay excerpt frames this essay's discussion. I use the term "cross-over student" in order to provide a very precise description of the students in this new generation. Cross-over students are college students who immigrated to the United States at some point during their formative years: they enter the U.S. educational system early on or for the last several years of secondary school; they typically begin their U.S. schooling in ESL classes but, at various points and for various reasons, they graduate from ESL to mainstream instruction, and they receive high school diplomas from U.S. high schools. Most importantly, after high school, they continue their education in America's colleges and universities and are placed into mainstream composition courses. And, as Roberge (2001) reported, "virtually every public college and university in the U.S. must now contend with this new student population" (p. 4-5). In this essay, then, I am only concerned with those students who belong to this new generation of college students and who enroll in mainstream composition at the college level.

I use the term "cross-over student" instead of the more widely recognized and more widely used term, "Generation 1.5," because that term includes students who continue to enroll in ESL classes at the college level, and that term has the potential, as Harklau (2003) has argued, to become "reified" and used to refer to students who are not still actively engaged in learning English (qtd. in Matsuda et. al, 2003, p. 156-57). However, it is important to understand how the term "Generation 1.5" originated and is currently used because cross-over students are a sub-set of Generation 1.5 (the sub-set who enrolls in mainstream composition as opposed to ESL classes). Coined by sociologists Rumbaut and Ima, the term "Generation 1.5" was used first to describe the population of Southeast Asian refugee youth they studied in San Diego in 1988. They stated that the students of

'1.5' generation [ . . . ] are neither part of the 'first' generation of their parents, the responsible adults who were formed in the homeland, who made the fateful decision to leave it and to flee as refugees to an uncertain exile in the United States, and who are thus defined by the consequences of that decision and by the need to justify it; nor are these youths part of the 'second' generation of children who are born in the U.S., and for whom the 'homeland' mainly exists as a representation consisting of parental memories and memorabilia, even though their ethnicity may remain well defined. Rather, the refugee youths in our study constitute a distinctive cohort; they are those young people who were born in their countries of origin but formed in the U.S. (that is, they are completing their education in the U.S. during the key formative periods of adolescence and early adulthood); [ . . . ] they are in many ways marginal to both the new and old worlds, for while they straddle both worlds they are in some profound sense fully part of neither of them. (p. 22)

Generation 1.5 students can be found in elementary schools, high schools, community colleges, four-year colleges and major universities across the country, and they appear at all levels of writing curriculum, from ESL-designated courses to basic writing classes, traditional first-year, “regular” composition classes to honors composition. Generation 1.5 students are an extremely diverse group. Offen-Brown (2004) contended that, unlike their basic writing peers of the 1960s and 1970s, Generation 1.5 students are much more diverse in terms of socioeconomic status and educational backgrounds. In this essay, however, I will focus only on those students belonging to Generation 1.5 who cross over—those who enroll in mainstream college composition courses, not ESL classes or classes designed specifically for this population.

Another reason to use a new term is that the existing one, “Generation 1.5,” is overused and its meaning has been diluted so that it no longer serves to be very useful in identifying, describing, and placing such students. The term “Generation 1.5” has been used to describe a broad range of students (e.g. those who left their home countries prior to any schooling, those who were born here but live in ethnic enclaves, and sometimes it is even used to describe second generation students), even though Rumbaut and Ima originally defined the term to include only those students who were not born in the U.S. but who have received at least the latter years of their secondary schooling here in the states. The distinction is important because students who have received almost all or all of their schooling in the U.S. are bound to have different schooling needs and abilities than those who have straddled two countries’ educational systems, sometimes becoming only partially literate in both languages.

Even in the book most associated with research about this group of students, *Generation 1.5 Meets College Composition: Issues in the Teaching of Writing to U.S.-Educated Learners of ESL*, the term is used loosely. Editors Harklau, Losey, and Siegel state that the collection explores the complexities of “providing appropriate writing instruction to second language learners arriving from U.S. high schools,” allowing readers to assume that U.S.-born English language learners could be considered part of “Generation 1.5” (p. viii). Although Harklau et. al stray from Rumbaut and Ima’s original use of the term “Generation 1.5,” they make it clear in the opening essay that it is quite difficult even for ESL scholars to come to an agreement about defining this part of the college student population. They stated:

The fact that authors differ on something so fundamental as a name for U.S.-educated English language learners shows just how difficult it is to fit these students into current ways of categorizing linguistically diverse college writers—ESL, developmental, regular (and by implication, how problematic those categories are) (p. 4).

Not only do the contributors not agree on terms, but the editors show just how complicated a task it is to name this group, as seen in their use of at least eight terms to describe the student population that their collection addresses. They use the following terms interchangeably: “nonnative language college writers educated in the United States,” “Long-term U.S. resident English learners,” “English language learners,” “U.S.-educated linguistically diverse students,” “language minority writers,” “nonnative language speakers and writers of English,” “second language learners arriving from U.S. high schools,” and “U.S.-educated second-language learners” (p. vii-ix). Notice that some terms include a reference to being educated in the U.S., while others focus on the fact that these students are categorized as “other” in some way, as evidenced by the words “minority,” “nonnative,” and “second.” Thus, it is important to find ways to identify and describe students from this new generation of students that are more

accurate and specific. The term, “cross-over student” does just that—it describes the segment of Generation 1.5 students who enrolls in mainstream composition classes at the college level.

I use the term “cross-over student” not only as a descriptor for the particular type of student this essay addresses, but also as a way to blur the categories currently in use in composition (mainstream vs. ESL), which are too polarized, given the current college population emerging in the U.S. Traditionally, undergraduate students have been placed into one of two types of English composition: mainstream classes, designed primarily for American students; or ESL classes, designed primarily for international students with little to no previous schooling in the United States. Nhat, and others like him, represent a third type of student who does not fit neatly into either category.<sup>1</sup> This is the student who straddles at least two cultures and two languages, to varying degrees. These students cross over in many ways, some more literally and some more dramatically than others, all of them attempting to overcome obstacles that for some are mountainous. They cross back and forth from one language to another, one culture to another, one set of social circumstances and expectations to another, one government’s laws to another, and one educational system to another. The term “cross-over student” provides those in composition with a useful term that complicates the categories of students who enroll in college composition classes. It also just may help mainstream instructors begin to understand why and how these students wind up in their classes.

### **Understanding Cross-over Students**

While there have been numerous essays by ESL scholars that describe the differences between international ESL students and Generation 1.5 students (Harklau, 1994; 2000; Harklau, Losey & Siegel, 1999; Leki, 1992; Matsuda, 2000; Reid, 1997; Roberge, 2001; Sadler, 2004;), no one has yet to describe these differences in terms of how mainstream composition instruction could be affected due to the increasing presence of Generation 1.5 students who cross over. Many mainstream instructors often assume that any student who is still in the process of learning English should be placed in an ESL class; understanding that there are gradations of “ESL” is as important as educating mainstream instructors about the existence of Generation 1.5 students. Mainstream instructors need to understand that there are significant differences between traditional ESL students (those students who come to the United States for the first time to pursue an undergraduate education—often known as international students or visa students) and students who cross over, differences which should make placements into mainstream classes an option to such students, even though many mainstream instructors often do not know how to help them succeed. While it’s crucial to understand some of the defining characteristics of cross-over students and traditional ESL students, it’s just as important to recognize that there is a wide spectrum of experiences for each group. Therefore, while such categorizations can be helpful when trying to understand why some cross-over students may be more comfortable in mainstream classes than ESL classes, this list of characteristics should not be set in stone or used to characterize any student without gaining first-hand knowledge about a student’s own experiences.

Cross-over students come from extremely diverse circumstances (including issues such as diverse socioeconomic status, educational background in their home countries, immigration

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<sup>1</sup> I only mention a third type of student here, although there are certain to be more types of students who do not fit neatly into the existing categories. It is beyond the scope of this essay, however, to investigate the other possible types of students that have not been considered when categorizing, developing, and assigning composition classes.

experiences, and familial separation, to name just a few). The following list illustrates a sampling of the diverse nature of cross-over students:

- Newly arrived<sup>2</sup> students with adequate formal schooling in their home language and some formal schooling in English
- Newly arrived students with adequate formal schooling in their home language but none in English
- Newly arrived students with some formal schooling in their home language but none in English
- Newly arrived students with very little formal schooling
- Long-term U.S. residents<sup>3</sup> with little schooling in their home language but many years of English schooling and use
- Long-term U.S. residents with schooling only in English (but orally fluent in home language)
- Long-term U.S. residents with many years of English instruction and some formal schooling in their home language (while in the U.S.)

There are also “differences within the differences,” argued Joy Reid (1997), which include: parental attitudes toward education that include the belief that women should not attend college; a prior education system that values rote memorization or teacher-centered classrooms in which students do not participate orally; a culture that values reflective thought or cooperation above the analysis, confrontation, and competition valued in many U.S. classrooms. Finally, there are individual student differences in personality, learning styles, learning strategies, and motivation. (p. 1)

Keeping these diverse set of circumstances and experiences in mind, the following discussion does, however, provide mainstream instructors with a starting point from which to learn more about the cross-over students they will undoubtedly encounter at some point in their careers.

### **A Preface: Second Language Acquisition Principles**

To begin, it’s crucial to understand that the process of acquiring and learning a second (or other) language can be very difficult, especially for cross-over students. Collier (1989) synthesized research on academic achievement in a second language and cited a study by Cummins, who argued that “immigrants took approximately 2 to 3 years to reach proficiency in basic communicative skills in English, or context-embedded, cognitively undemanding aspects of language,” also referred to as BICS-- Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (p. 516). To complicate matters, Collier reported that mastery of basic language skills does not “correlate highly with the type of language needed for context-reduced, cognitively demanding language tasks, as measured on standardized tests . . . or with the more abstract thought required in the upper elementary grades and secondary school,” let alone with college expectations (p. 516). Not only do students require two to three years just to be able to communicate in English at a very basic social level, but they require much more time to acquire academic English, or

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<sup>2</sup>“Newly arrived” refers to students who arrive in the United States as older adolescents, attending high school for just one or two years before graduating and entering the university.

<sup>3</sup>“Long-term residents” refers to students who have been in the United States for many years, often completing seven or more years of school in the United States before graduating from high school.

CALP—Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency. In fact, Collier reported on three studies that all found that it takes at least five years for students to score at the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile of standardized tests, even for students from strong educational backgrounds and socioeconomic stability (p. 519). According to Collier and others, becoming fully literate in a second language takes up to ten years or more, depending on a person's age, the age of immigration to the U.S. and literacy level in his or her first language (Collier, 1987; 1989, p. 516; Collier and Thomas, 1988; Cummins, 1981; Cummins et. al, 1984; Roberge, 2001, p. 41). In sum, mainstream instructors need to understand that cross-over students will not typically enter their composition classes having completed the process of acquiring academic English; they will be in the process of learning it, and some will be more advanced than others. Additionally, cross-over students are not likely to be able to achieve native-like English prose in one or two semesters of college composition, no matter how much or how hard their instructors work with them.

Another principle of second language acquisition is that literacy in a first language helps students acquire and learn a second language. A student who has never learned to read or write in his or her first language typically will find learning to read and write in a second language all that more difficult because that student will not know that there are specialized vocabularies for each school subject, or that different school subjects approach information by using different methods of investigation and reporting. Students who learn these differences in their first language can carry that general knowledge about language use into their acquisition of a second language. But it takes a long time to acquire that knowledge in a first language. Collier (1989) argued that children need a minimum of twelve years to learn their first language, and that there are two periods of learning that children must complete in order to be linguistically capable of succeeding in school:

From birth through age 5, children acquire enormous amounts of L1 [first language] phonology, vocabulary, grammar, semantics, and pragmatics, but the process is not at all complete by the time children reach school age. From ages 6 to 12, children still have to develop in the first language the complex skills of reading and writing . . . . For school purposes, language acquisition also must include the vocabulary and special uses of language for each subject area, such as metalinguistic analysis of language in language arts classes and many other learning strategies associated with the use of language in each content area (p. 510).

Therefore, if a student begins to learn a second language before completing the process of learning his or her first language, it will be more difficult for that student to understand that there are complex ways of using language, depending on the subject and purpose for communication. In fact,

[s]econd language acquisition research has found that this process of . . . [first language] development has a significant influence on the development of L2 [second language] proficiency. . . . [and that] the lack of continuing L1 cognitive development during second language acquisition may lead to lowered proficiency levels in the second language and in cognitive academic growth (Collier, 1989, p. 511).

In other words, students need at least twelve years of uninterrupted, active learning to be fully literate in their first language and, if they begin to learn a second language during that time, instruction in both languages will be crucial to their success in both.

Another related obstacle students can encounter when trying to learn a second language is their age. Among second language acquisition scholars, it is common knowledge that there is a critical period for language learning that ends around puberty<sup>4</sup>; when students attempt to learn a second language starting after the onset of puberty, they will have to learn the language using “mechanisms other than those that children employ,” argued Adamson (2004, section 3.1.1.4). In essence, this means that students who begin to learn English as adolescents will have to learn it rather than acquire it like a child would be able to. Children watch, listen, and imitate others speaking English and, eventually, they get it. Adults, even though they may also watch, listen, and imitate, their reproduction of language will not be as natural as a child’s. For immigrant students, second language acquisition depends largely on the age at which they arrived in the U.S. and began to learn English. Collier (1989) states that “[b]efore puberty, it does not matter when one begins exposure to (or instruction in) a second language, as long as cognitive development in the first language continues up through age 12 (the age by which first language acquisition is largely completed)” (p. 511). It’s important to understand that Collier argues for development “up through age 12” although she means that students receive twelve years of active learning that is uninterrupted.

Therefore, for students who come to the U.S. during their elementary years, learning English for basic social interaction will be relatively easy, compared to learning academic or school English, because these students will not have had adequate time in their home countries to learn the language of school in their first language. Conversely, students who come to the U.S. as adolescents with adequate schooling in their first language will find acquisition of school English less difficult, in some ways, than their younger counterparts (Collier, 1989, p. 516). However, it’s important to keep in mind that even students with adequate schooling in their first language will struggle to keep up with the demands of academic coursework in English, primarily because of the limited length of time they have known and used English, and because their schooling has been interrupted due to immigration (for some, this is extreme; for others, it means only a few months of missed school). Thus, it’s important to learn when students came to the United States as well as the extent to which they learned their first language because their experiences will determine not only what instructors will need to teach, but how to teach it.

### **Distinguishing Characteristics of Cross-over Students**

It’s important for mainstream instructors to recognize that cross-over students often have a very limited knowledge of English (oral or written) upon arrival in America. Reid (1997) argued that “these two groups of students have learned their English differently, so their language problems have different sources and different solutions” (p. 17)<sup>5</sup>. Cross-over students learn English by necessity—they are abruptly immersed in American life and need to use English

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<sup>4</sup> For more information on the “critical period hypothesis,” see Johnson and Newport, who tested ESL students in the U.S. of varying ages, to determine what age range represented the best at which to learn English. They found that those students who were pre-pubescent learned better than older students. Adamson argued that their data actually shows no difference between 13 year olds and 19 year olds, but that a difference does occur after age 20. I include this description and Adamson’s refinement of the data as a way to illustrate that although people often talk about the critical period, a more important finding related to it is the fact that, “as learners mature, individual and cultural factors become more important in the acquisition process” (Adamson, 2004, section 3.1.1.4).

<sup>5</sup> Reid differentiates international students and “U.S. resident” students, which does not necessarily include cross-over students. However, for the purposes of differentiating traditional ESL students from those students who were at least partially educated in the U.S. I do not distinguish between her categories and mine.



to communicate in almost every aspect of their lives. Reid argued that these students are “ear-based” learners who have picked up the language from listening to others use it (p. 18). They have made rules based more on what they’ve heard, not what they may or may not have been exposed to through formal instruction in the language. In fact, many cross-over students learn English by listening to peers (who often also speak the same first language) talk in English, which enables cross-over students to learn American slang and idioms. Even if their use of these forms is somewhat foreign-sounding, they’ll experiment with these sayings and so, on the surface, it might appear as if cross-over students are extremely familiar with the language. However, their ear-based learning method also means that they internalize what they hear, which is often not grammatically correct English. As a result, cross-over students make up rules about English that are not always accurate. International students, on the other hand, often learn English as a school subject in their home countries by studying grammar extensively, but they do not often have the opportunity to use English in spoken conversation or in substantial writing tasks above the sentence or paragraph level for communicative purposes, nor do they acquire the everyday language that their cross-over peers do.

Because the two groups have learned English differently, each group has different needs in the classroom. Because cross-over students have in large part been “ear learners,” they often do not have the metalinguistic knowledge that international ESL students have and therefore cross-over students often have little or no vocabulary for discussing their English knowledge, nor do they realize what gaps exist in it (Reid, 1997, p. 18). An added burden exists when cross-over students are not fully literate in their first language. They will not have any sense that there exists a metadiscourse by which to discuss any language or the special kinds of language use employed by different disciplines. Therefore, while international ESL students are typically conversant with parts of speech and the grammar of English, cross-over students often are limited by their lack of knowledge in this area, which can deter them from successfully completing assignments and courses if teachers and/or peers make sweeping references to editing for grammar or using the grammatical metadiscourse that they are not familiar with.<sup>6</sup>

A second defining characteristic of cross-over students is that they likely will not be academically proficient in English upon graduation from U.S. high schools. Even though these students have graduated from a U.S. high school, they are still in the process of learning English. Often, cross-over students begin elementary and/or secondary schooling in ESL programs, but these programs often only offer students a brief relief from constant input in English. In areas with very few students of the same language background, there is often no educational input in their first language, so students quickly have to learn how to communicate with their peers and their teachers in English. Even when certain geographic locations in the United States contain large populations of a single ethnic group of such students, the students are typically funneled through ESL programs quickly and must find ways to communicate with their mainstream peers and teachers once they’ve graduated from ESL classes.

There are many reasons for fast-tracking students through ESL programs. The recent conservative political climate in the U.S. has prompted reductions in bilingual programs across the country, particularly with the No Child Left Behind legislation, which severely limits the amount of instruction students are allowed to receive in their first languages while in the process of learning English. As I have discussed briefly earlier in this essay, research shows that literacy

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<sup>6</sup> I contend that mainstream instructors who use this metadiscourse of grammar without faithfully explaining their terms and providing real-student examples do an injustice to all students, not just cross-over students. There are many U.S.-born American students who also have never learned the language of English grammar.

in a person's first language greatly increases a person's ability to acquire and learn a second or other language, which is why bilingual programs that offer instruction solely in students' first language can benefit the students in those programs, if they are given enough time to acquire academic literacy in their first language before having to learn and perform exclusively in English. Unfortunately, there is often not enough time or support for such programs. For instance, many students begin their U.S. educations (and English learning) at an age that precludes enough years of language learning. Before they acquire academic literacy in their first language (let alone their second language), they are eighteen or nineteen years old and graduate, in many instances, in large part due to their age, not the number of years of school they have completed.

One area of the country in which this situation occurs frequently is San Jose, California, where there is an extremely large Vietnamese immigrant population. In the mid 1990's when I taught at a large high school there, many of these immigrant students began school with little formal education in English. In large part because of their numbers and the availability of educators who spoke Vietnamese, these students were able to attend ESL classes for the majority of the school day that were conducted solely in Vietnamese when they first enrolled. However, like many ESL programs, this school also had limited funding for the ESL program and most of the students I encountered in "sheltered" English classes<sup>7</sup> had graduated from the ESL program by the time they were seniors. Unfortunately, a large portion of these students had only been in the country for one or two years and thus had received only one or two years of ESL instruction. As a result, in the best case scenarios, they only had acquired a basic knowledge of non-academic English and they struggled to understand their teachers and the coursework. It was common knowledge at this school, however, that many immigrant students lie about their ages on high school enrollment forms so they could spend an extra year or two in high school, learning English and preparing for college.

These students' experiences appear to be typical for cross-over students across the country (Duran, personal communication). Once graduated, their status as English language learners, immigrants, Vietnamese, and/or other markers that could help colleges support them better is deleted, simply because of their status as U.S. high school graduates. Oftentimes, they are considered to be American students by college application standards. Therefore, mainstream composition instructors who teach these students need to realize that just because they've graduated from a U.S. high school doesn't mean that they have had enough years of ESL or schooling in their first languages. So while cross-over students may seem to be able to function just fine in English on the surface, many of them do not have the requisite years of formal education in English (let alone a formal education in their first language) that will enable them to participate equally with their American peers in mainstream composition classes at the university level, at least without substantial support.

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<sup>7</sup> "Sheltered" English is a term used to describe classes in between ESL and mainstream English that utilize techniques to make the content of the course more comprehensible for continuing English learners (such as presenting material orally and through the use of overheads, graphic organizers, and other visual aids). Although this term has since been replaced by "Continuing language learners" and "English language learners," those classes truly were sheltered, as they offered students a means to continue to develop cognitive skills while acquiring English, without having to compete with their mainstream peers. Many students I encountered were in "sheltered" English until they graduated; they never transitioned to mainstream English classes, mostly because they ran out of time.

Even though cross-over students are not likely to be academically proficient in English upon graduating from high schools in the U.S., they are familiar with U.S. educational culture. Unlike their international ESL peers, cross-over students have had exposure, to varying degrees, to the American educational system and American English classes—they know how American education works and what’s expected of them, even if some of them do not feel comfortable with the culture of American education. For instance, most likely, they have been exposed to practices such as class discussion, small group work, and an expectation on the part of teachers to speak up in class if a concept is confusing or if a student disagrees with something the teacher says. In addition, cross-over students likely have been exposed to the types of writing assignments typical of U.S. high school English classes and perhaps the types of assignments to come in college. Similarly, these students have been exposed to American forms of discourse, such as direct argumentation, linear progression of ideas, and the Western, Christian tradition of listing support for one’s claims in groups of three. Cross-over students will vary greatly in the level of comfort they express for each of these areas, but the mere fact that they have had exposure to the culture of American education puts them in a different category than the traditional ESL student, who likely has never experienced such informal and at times, chaotic and perhaps disrespectful-seeming classes, not to mention the forms of discourse expected. Therefore, immigrant students who find themselves in college ESL classes often resent such placement because they are already familiar with how American education works (Harklau, 2000). As a result, cross-over students have often by-passed, complained about, and contested placements into classes for traditional ESL students, where there is often an emphasis on American educational culture and expectations.

Because cross-over students have spent some time, if not quite a few years in American schools, they often have begun to identify with their American peers and, as a result, many do not want to be labeled “ESL.” Conversely, international students have reported that they like to be known as ESL students, for it gives teachers a way of knowing that they are just learning the language (Leki, 1995). For instance, some international students tend to use the ESL label to their advantage, such as Ilona Leki reported in her 1995 study of ESL students at the university level. She reported that one student said, “I am Chinese. I take advantage,” meaning she used her ESL status as a way to evoke “sympathy and support” from her teachers (qtd. in Harklau, 2000, p. 48). For cross-over students, however, the ESL label can be harmful to their identity. Many of these students identify English as their primary language, even when they are not completely fluent in it. In addition, many cross-over students consider English to be their first language, as they often do not speak and/or write fluently in their home language. As such, they cannot easily be categorized in terms of language use. For example, in Chiang and Schmida’s (1999) study of language identity, when a Vietnamese research participant was asked about the definition of “native” vs. “nonnative” speakers, the student responded in such a way that demonstrates the limitation of those terms and the complexity of identifying with one or the other:

- Researcher: What does the term nonnative speaker mean to you?  
 Nguyen: A person that English wasn’t their first language.  
 Researcher: And how about when you hear the word “native English speaker?”  
 Nguyen: Like, they constantly use English, and I think, like, their first language.  
 Researcher: Are you a native or nonnative speaker of Vietnamese?  
 Nguyen: I’m not sure. I don’t know [pause] I think I’m a nonnative ‘cause my Vietnamese isn’t that great.

Researcher: And what about English?

Nguyen: I think I'm native. (p. 89)

This short conversation brings home the complex nature of labels such as “ESL” and “native speaker.” Instructors and administrators would do well to understand this complexity and the consequences students face once labeled as such; student identities are wrapped up in the languages they use and their perceptions about the ways in which they use those languages. As Harklau (2000) argues, “labels given to students in classrooms and institutions [can] have consequences for students’ classroom behavior and ultimately for students’ motivation or investment . . . in English and academic learning” (p. 38). Therefore, instructors and administrators should be wary of using labels such as “native speaker,” “non-native speaker,” and “ESL” to categorize students without their input. Students’ self-proclaimed identities should be taken into consideration whenever possible and labels such as “ESL” and “non-native English speaker” should not be used or, if at all, should be used with caution.

Some students have resisted the ESL label for fear that they will be stigmatized as “less-able” and held back. In fact, the ESL label (and the classes that students enroll in when they’ve been so labeled) only hinders some of these students’ progress educationally. Williams (1995) found in a survey of 78 institutions that in large part (77% of the time), ESL classes were prerequisites to required mainstream composition classes (qtd. in Matsuda, 2000, p. 65). While one could argue that the ESL class as prerequisite hinders international students as well as cross-over students, cross-over students are hindered not only in their progress toward a degree but in social and linguistic ways as well. These students have been in classes with their American peers for varying lengths of time and, many times, they cite a desire to continue to be in classes with Americans. They want to be around native speakers of English; they realize that international students are just learning the language and they’d rather be in class with students who have spoken English for their entire lives (Chiang and Schmida, 1999, p. 91; Harklau, 2000; Matsuda, 2000; Leki, 1992<sup>8</sup>, 1999, p. 28-29; Slager, 1956, p. 28). Therefore, it is wise to recognize that not only are the labels themselves inadequate in describing such students, it is the labels that can also segregate these students from the very students they went to high school with and which can prolong unnecessarily their time spent in first-year writing classes.

Labels such as “ESL” and “second language learner” are not the only labels that can be harmful to cross-over students. When labeled “basic writers,” cross-over students’ specific needs often are not met. Cross-over students share some of the essential characteristics of basic writers, but their needs go beyond those of basic writers’. Cross-over students, like basic writers, have in large part learned English by using it—that is, they have developed rules about English that come from listening to it and using it, not by learning it formally in school. Likewise, their particular use of English is often not the brand of English spoken and used at school by teachers. Cross-over students have often been tracked into lower, basic skills English classes in high school and have not had exposure to the kinds of academic writing that is expected in college. Their basic writing peers have encountered similar tracking, in large part due to their low socioeconomic status and lack of support for school learning at home (Bartholomae, 1993; hooks, 1993; Rose, 1989; Shor, 1997; Villanueva, 1993). However, as Offen-Brown (2004) has argued, Generation 1.5 students are not exactly like their basic writing peers, largely in part because of their diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. Indeed, not all cross-over students have

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<sup>8</sup> However, Leki also describes a scenario in which an immigrant student was held back because of her insistence on enrolling in mainstream composition class, which further demonstrates the diversity of cross-over students’ experiences.

come from lower socioeconomic status in which education is a luxury few can afford. In fact, despite the sociopolitical factors that contributed to their immigration, many cross-over students come from cultures that value and support educational opportunities. Despite the diversity of cross-over students' experiences, however, it remains that many of these students, like their basic writing peers, lack the background in using academic English that is crucial for their success at the college level.

However, cross-over students must contend with more than a lack of academic English. Leki (1992) provides an excellent illustration of the differences between cross-over students and basic writers. She begins by summarizing Bartholomae's description of basic writers: they "are not thirteenth graders writing like seventh graders; rather they have an idiosyncratic version of SWE [Standard Written English]. They are not learning the language; they are learning to use a particular variety of the language in a particular way" (p. 34). Leki then describes ESL writers, saying that they "are not thirteenth graders writing like seventh graders either; they too have an idiosyncratic version of SWE. But they *are* learning the language [her emphasis], both the spoken and written variety (p. 34). Even though Leki uses the term "ESL" to describe both international and immigrant students, the way she distinguishes basic writers from ESL writers is useful. When cross-over students are equated with basic writers, their status as students who are still in the process of learning English is lost. It is important to recognize that cross-over students have an additional burden than basic writers—they are still learning English, not just learning how to use it appropriately. Cross-over students may fare well in basic writing classes, given the right circumstances, but they should not be equated with basic writers.

Cross-over students are not just struggling for command over the English language. They are also learning English at the same time as they are working to help support their families and so are learning about balancing work, school, and home. While most beginning college students must learn how to balance these distinct parts of their lives, cross-over students also have to contend with conflicting cultural norms. For many, their home cultures value family above all else, which contrasts greatly to the concept of individualism that American teens are exposed to and taught in school (Bellah, 1985). In addition, cross-over students often have to act as interpreters for their parents, who often do not speak much English, so they are juggling family obligations which require a familiarity with both languages and both cultures, even though for some cross-over students, they are themselves still learning the nuances of American culture. Cross-over students are also beginning college students, just like any other first-year student, learning more about themselves, the world around them, and how they fit in it, but they have an extra burden of straddling multiple cultures, multiple educational systems, multiple languages, multiple lives.

Given the complex nature of cross-over students, there is no easy college composition placement solution for them as a group. This "new generation" of students does not fit easily into any traditional composition classes because of their distinct needs and abilities, experiences and sense of identity. They don't necessarily fit in an international student ESL class, which often employs assignments geared toward international students' experiences in their "home" culture because many cross-over students identify with the U.S. as their "home" culture, not the country from which they emigrated, sometimes at a very young age. Nor do they necessarily fit well in mainstream classes, where instructors assume that students should be able to participate fully and equally with their American peers. They also often do not fit well into basic writing classes, where the stress on academic writing often eliminates necessary instruction in the English language. When thinking about placement, it is important to understand that cross-over

students are more likely to be placed into mainstream classes than ESL classes, sometimes because of the simple fact that they have graduated from U.S. high schools. This placement trend, which is being discussed by many ESL scholars, makes it crucial for those in mainstream composition to learn about cross-over students: their backgrounds, abilities, and needs.

Just as placement is a complicated matter, so is the very act of defining and describing Generation 1.5 students who enroll in mainstream composition classes. Cross-over students represent an extremely diverse sub-set of Generation 1.5 students at the university level, and the sparse research that is available has come from ESL scholars, not those who work most closely with this group, those in mainstream composition (Matsuda et. al, p. 155). Just as Nhat said in the excerpt that opened this essay, "I found frustration all the time not knowing what to do," so too will mainstream instructors continue to encounter frustration until more is known about this group of students. As a mainstream composition instructor myself, I urge others to engage in research to better understand the experiences and needs of Generation 1.5 students who cross over, because these students will increasingly enter our classrooms and we must become better informed if we want to meet their needs sufficiently. It is time to enter the conversation about Generation 1.5 students who cross over. Coming to terms is a difficult process, but it is perhaps one way to better understand just who are the students entering our mainstream classes and what it means for those of us in mainstream composition to teach them.

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