

Quality language support services for all non-native speakers on campus!

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Abstract

Who are the non-native speakers (NNSs) on our campuses and what language support services do they need? All NNSs – international students and generation 1.5 students – must be provided with quality language support services to aid their academic success. It is imperative that professionals working in institutions of higher education understand that the academic success of NNSs often depends on the availability and quality of these services. In order to provide quality services, institutions must be prepared to understand the language needs of these groups, plan, and implement these services accordingly. Learn how one institution of higher education embarked on this process of identifying and developing services for the NNSs on their campus.

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Introduction

In the fall of 2008, I was teaching a class entitled *Introduction to Phonetics* at a public state college in New Jersey, U.S. All the students in this class were native speakers of American English except two students. These two students were native speakers of Spanish but they were orally proficient in American English. I had just introduced the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), and they were having trouble transcribing American English into IPA; I was aware that the trouble stemmed from their non-native pronunciation of American English. Ultimately, despite the encouragement and the extra help I offered, they dropped the class and changed their intended program of study, which was speech pathology and audiology. How unfortunate it was that they could find no source of language support at the college to help them through the difficulties they faced in the class. This is not an isolated case at my institution. I have personally spoken with instructors who are aware of the difficulties that NNSs have in their academic classes, yet up until now there has been nowhere to send these students for help and support in this area. I decided it was time to determine how my institution could meet the needs of these students, and at the same time forward its goal of internationalisation by retaining these students and helping them integrate into the college community.

Who are the NNSs on our campuses and what are their language needs?

Since the time of the Jamestown settlement in 1607, the United States has been a destination for immigrants. Since its first settlement in 1620, New Jersey, the state directly below New York, has attracted immigrants because of its proximity to New York City, availability of jobs, and long established ethnic communities. According to a 2008 Migration Policy Institute Report entitled *Children in Immigrant Families*, 32.2% of children under 18 in New Jersey live in a household with at least one foreign-born parent. This statistic is confirmed in a 2008 report by the Eagleton Institute of Politics entitled *Destination, New Jersey: How Immigrants Benefit the State Economy* which states that: “Nearly one-third of all children in New Jersey live in immigrant families, that is, families where at least one member (usually a parent) is foreign-born.” According to a 2008 report entitled *Kids Count* published by the Annie E. Casey Foundation (based on the 2000 Census Data), 26% of children (under 18) in New Jersey come from households where English was not the primary language (Kids Count Data Centre Report, 2008). Since New Jersey has such a high population of children for whom English is not a native language, it is not surprising that all the institutions of higher education in New Jersey have many applicants who are NNSs.

The United States has also become the host country for many international students seeking a U.S. education. The number of international students at colleges and universities in the United States increased by 8% to an all-time high of 671,616 in the 2008/09 academic year while the number of “new” international students – those enrolled for the first time at a U.S. college or university in fall 2008 – increased by 16%. This represents the largest percentage increase in international student enrolment in almost thirty years (Open Doors 2009).

There are two types of second language (L2) learners in the U.S.: international second language students (IL2) and Generation 1.5 second language students (G1.5). IL2 students attend institutions of higher education after having completed high school or some college in their home countries. In contrast, G1.5 students have completed all or part of their formal education in U.S. schools (DiGennaro, 2009).

While students in both groups are non-native speakers of English, the backgrounds of G1.5 students are especially diverse.

There is great diversity among them in terms of their prior educational experience, native and English language proficiency, language dominance, and academic literacy. Some of these students immigrated to the United States while they were in elementary school; others arrived during high school. Still others were born in this country but grew up speaking a language other than English at home. (Harklau, 2003, p. 1)

Harklau (2003) goes on to further describe G1.5 students as having social and conversational skills in English but at the same time having less skill in the academic language associated with school achievement and writing.

Harklau, Losey, and Siegal (1999) assert that existing research on distinctions between these two groups reveals that IL2 students often bring with them a more rigorous academic experience and higher degree of literacy in their first languages (L1) while G1.5 students have bring a more varied experience with educational and cultural practices in the U.S., and a greater familiarity with American slang. DiGennaro (2009) concurs that IL2 students display stronger writing abilities and knowledge of formal grammar explanations while G1.5 students who have

acquired their L2 through immersion in non-academic settings rely more on oral and aural skills and their metalinguistic knowledge of L2 grammar may be limited.

Another problem often faced by G1.5 students is a lack of a fully developed oral, written or both systems of L1, having never received formal L1 education or their formal L1 education having been limited (Thonus, 2003). In investigating the role of educational background for G1.5 students in higher education, Boshier and Rowekamp (1998) noted that the difference in educational background for G1.5 students might differ from IL2 students in several important ways. G1.5 students have: “1) higher probability of limited or interrupted educational backgrounds in L1, 2) higher probability of having acquired English informally by having lived longer in the U.S., and through ESL curricula at the secondary level that focus on communicative competence rather than reading or writing, for academic purposes, and 3) higher probability of limited acquisition of content knowledge at the secondary level” (p. 36). In addition, research by Collier (1987) shows that arrivals at 12-15 years of age required as much as 6–8 years to reach grade level norms in academic achievement when receiving instruction in L2 only. These students would most likely not be academically prepared for the academic rigours of higher education.

Boshier and Rowekamp (1998) remark that there is little formal data on the impact of different academic experiences on language acquisition between G1.5 and IL2 students even though educators have made informal comparisons between these groups. Sherman and Rowekamp (1990) also claim that research on ESL students in higher education has focused almost exclusively on IL2 students.

McBrien (2005) focused her research on the specific obstacles faced by refugee students but also acknowledged that there is insufficient data separating the needs of immigrant students in general from the needs of refugee students. Even though her research demonstrates that there are considerable differences between refugees and immigrants, she states: “... without comparative studies, teachers, administrators, and policymakers have no reliable information to differentiate teaching and services to provide best practices for these groups” (p. 357).

Valdés (1992) asserts that institutions of higher education must come up with a system to differentiate these students. She goes on to point out that once out of ESL, NNSs enrol in classes with native speakers and they are expected to compete with individuals who have native-speaking strengths. “Generally, very little systematic accommodation is made to the essential nature of the difference between these students and their native-speaking peers” (p. 89). The first group is still in the process of learning the basics of English while the latter group no longer needs basic English instruction, but may use nonstandard forms of English and/or has not acquired academic English (Singhal, 2004).

DiGennaro (2009) notes that quantitative research to date into observable differences between these groups has been qualitative and based primarily on learner characteristics (cf. Frodesen & Sterna, 1999; Harklau, 2000). Despite the scant research on these differences that is currently available, practitioners who work with these learners assert that differences exist and are demonstrated in their writing ability. This conclusion points to the need for more quantitative data on these differences.

How do we meet these needs?

For academic and faculty advisors in U.S. institutions of higher education, placement of NNSs can be problematic. Keeping in mind the aforementioned different needs of these two diverse groups of NNSs, while IL2 students may find it helpful to learn about the new culture in which they are living, G1.5 students often *live* between two cultures.

At home, they [G1.5 students] speak their native language and participate in the rituals of their native culture. At school, they speak their second language and try to fit in with American cultural routines. These students sound orally fluent, but they may not be academically fluent. Many of these students have lost or are in the process of losing their home languages without having learned their writing systems or academic registers. Unlike international students, generation 1.5 students lack a basis of comparison in fully developed oral, written, or both systems of a first language. (Thonus, 2003, p.18)

“U.S. high school graduates from minority language backgrounds are placed variously in college intensive English programs, ESOL academic skills sequences, regular composition programs, basic writing sequences, or academic assistance sequences depending on the specific practices of the postsecondary institution they enter” (Harklau, 2000, p. 63). Roberge (2003) asserts that the overwhelming majority of G1.5 students test and are placed into developmental classes due to their weakness in reading and writing skills; however, developmental writing and/or reading classes are geared toward native speakers with learning challenges, while language classes for NNSs address the issues of students who have had both limited exposure to the native language and culture, and may have limited reading and writing skills. Therefore, neither developmental nor traditional language support classes provided for these students meet the needs of G1.5 students. At the same time, mainstream college classrooms, which are geared toward native speakers, do not meet their needs either. G1.5 students, while having native sounding oral ability, may not be able to write or read as well as the native speakers in the class (Singhal, 2004).

G1.5 students are often left in limbo with no appropriate college class to help them with their specific language issues. They begin their college careers thinking they will be successful but some of them begin dropping classes or dropping out of school when they discover they lack the necessary academic language or support they need for success. For many G1.5 students, academic success is their ticket to freedom and success. If they are not successful in school, disillusionment hits them hard and it is psychologically difficult to overcome (Harklau, 2003). Thesen (1997) calls for greater institutional and educator awareness of how these students feel about their language struggles. It is of paramount importance to begin this process of serving G1.5 students in any institution by implementing a system of identification and offering them appropriate language support services.

How do we identify these students?

While it is relatively easy to identify international students because of their separate application process and additional required paperwork (e.g., visa requirements), it is often not quite as easy to identify G1.5 applicants. For years, my institution has admitted G1.5 students who meet the admission criteria. Many of these students who are accepted by my institution have completed ESL programs during their K-12 school years, and all have obtained a high school

diploma. Unfortunately, in the U.S., possession of a high school diploma does not necessarily mean a student is ready for college-level academic work.

If an incoming freshman submits a low but passable score on a college admission test, this student is guided into basic skills classes. His/her records are reviewed and it usually becomes obvious if this student has been enrolled in a high school ESL program. If s/he has not gone through an ESL program (some G1.5 students are not in ESL classes), this student may not be identified as a NNS.

Some U.S. high school graduates choose to enrol in community colleges before going to four-year colleges. Community colleges in the U.S. are a less expensive and less academically rigorous option to start one's college education. Many community colleges have two-year degrees and also offer ESL programs. These ESL programs usually consist of a three-course (non-credit) sequence, and once the student completes the courses successfully (i.e., gets passing grades and passes an exit exam), s/he is then able to register for credit bearing mainstream classes at the community college.

When a student enters my institution as a transfer student from another college, s/he does not have to meet the same admission criteria as an incoming freshman. It is assumed that similar admission criteria at the prior institution of higher education have been met. It is also assumed that the student's language needs have been previously met and this student is usually placed directly into regular academic classes at my institution.

Stuart and Flinspach (1990) have observed that: "to complicate matters, many of these [G1.5] students do not seek out assistance and usually initially resent any ESL classes they may be required to take. They generally avoid language-intensive classes and typically choose majors in technical fields, whether or not they are interested in or have aptitude in these areas" (Bosher & Rowekamp, 1998, p. 24).

When I began my working at this college in the fall of 2008, I was amazed that there was no system in place to identify these students and offer them language support. Since there was no initial system of identification (e.g., no question on the application asking about native language), my institution had no information about the G1.5 students in our programs. There were members of the college-wide faculty and professors in the School of Education who were concerned about these students and understood the need for this information. I immediately decided to address this need (following the experience of the discouraged students in my phonetics class) by proposing a pilot study to identify these students and provide services to support them to aid their academic success.

In 2009-2010, I applied for and received a research grant from my institution. The project was entitled *Identification, service and support of non-native English speaking students at [my institution]* and had the following objectives:

1. to identify the students who are NNSs of English and who might be struggling to achieve academic success in their classes due to limited academic proficiency in English
2. to determine what services the students want by asking them to complete an online survey
3. to support this population by offering services such as (but not limited to):

- Writing Centre tutors trained specifically in second language acquisition-related writing issues
- a student orientation geared to needs of NNSs
- a class to help them improve their academic English.

What language support services do we need to offer?

Once out of ESL, non-native speakers enrol in classes with native speakers. Whether placed in the basic skills or non-mainstream English compartments, these new speakers of English are expected to compete with individuals who come into English composition courses with native-speaking strengths and abide by the standards set for them. Generally, very little systematic accommodation is made to the essential nature of the difference between these students and their native speaking peers. (Valdés, 1992, p. 89)

Since this is exactly what was happening in my institution, beginning in the spring of 2008, I began to talk to my colleagues to try to understand their feelings about and ideas on this issue. I included several key staff members in these conversations including writing centre personnel, advisement and admissions representatives, and faculty who had expressed a desire to help this group of students. The findings of these conversations encouraged me; there were faculty members who really wanted to help the students and learn more about their language needs.

I began my project by visiting the admissions department because I discovered that there was no question on the application requesting information about primary home language and no system in place to identify G1.5 students. I requested that a question be added to both the freshmen and transfer applications asking for the applicants' native languages. I met with no resistance and this question was added to our fall 2010 applications.

I then met with the director of student records and together we came up with the idea of a creating an online survey and putting it on the college's website encouraging NNSs to self-identify and indicate which services they would use if provided. In October 2009, I created the survey and posted it on the school website home page with a message requesting the participation of the multilingual and international students. There are 6,000 students at this school but it is impossible to know how many visited the school website and saw the survey. I received 89 responses (1.5 % of the total student population) indicating that if offered a class that reviewed the basics of English for academic writing, 63% of the respondents would be likely to take it. In addition, 90% of the respondents said they would go to the writing centre if tutors were trained to work with non-native English speaking students. Even though the response rate was low, the returns suggested ways to better support these students.

The academic advisement centre was an important resource of help as it is the job of the counsellors in this department to give guidance to students as to which courses they should take to help them meet their academic goals. They were very attuned to the problems NNSs have and were more than willing to work with me on piloting a placement test for those students who self-identify as speaking a language other than English as home. One of the advising staff contacted each of those students who had self-identified as NNSs and invited them to come in and take a placement test. Our college was already using a commercially developed

math and writing placement test, so we used an ESL placement test put out by the same company. Unfortunately, since it was voluntary, very few students actually chose to take it.

In the spring of 2010, I created a course entitled *Academic English Workshop* specifically designed for NNSs. This course was offered the fall of 2010 and I had planned to differentiate the goals of the class to meet the needs of all the NNSs who took it. Since only IL2 students enrolled, the need to differentiate for these two groups was unnecessary and the main goal of the class became the improvement of students' oral and aural skills.

In addition to this course, I concurrently offered a tutor-training course for writing tutors interested in working with NNSs. I paired the each student in the *Academic English Workshop* class with a student in the *Advanced ESL Tutoring Workshop*. This arrangement was an extremely positive experience and well received by both the NNSs and the tutors.

At about the middle of the semester when it came time to begin advising students for their next semester, I was approached by the students in the *Academic English Workshop* and other professors asking me to offer another class next semester for these students. The consensus of everyone was that there was a need for a writing class. It was suggested that a section of the Rhetoric and Composition for NNSs would be extremely helpful. I am currently in the process of writing the class in conjunction with the director of the writing program to make sure it will meet the institution's goals of writing classes and also meet the needs of NNSs. Hopefully, G1.5 students will enrol for the course, as well as IL2 students, and I will have an opportunity to observe and make comparisons between the groups.

I also plan to continue to continue offering informal discussions on helpful teaching strategies for NNSs. I made such a presentation to the faculty at a lecture series at our college in the fall. In addition, I am constantly reminding the faculty that I am available for support and ideas for the NNSs in their classes. Tutor training sessions will continue as this project was successful and the students enjoyed having consistent tutors and the tutors enjoyed working with specific individuals for the entire semester.

I have enlisted faculty and staff colleagues to spread the word and recruit G1.5 students for my language support classes. I hope that a positive word about these classes and tutoring opportunities will spread and that we will have students acknowledge that they need help and begin to ask their advisors about them and enrol in these classes. I also hope more faculty and staff will become sensitised about this population's support needs and will be ready to come to their aid in any way they can.

Like many other institutions across the globe, our faculty has chosen *internationalisation* as one of its strategic goals for the next ten years by agreeing on the need to make international students a high priority by improving orientation services, academic and non-academic counselling, peer support programs and other support initiatives by making them more accessible to international students. I have challenged the faculty to consider that international students are not the only students who need language support; *all NNSs*, IL2s and G1.5 students, bring cultural and linguistic diversity to our campuses. "Internationalisation in learning and teaching in higher education is largely constructed around the spirit of internationalism; that is, it fosters concepts such as interconnectivity, plurality,

interdependence and respect for and openness to people and ideas from other countries and cultures” (Sanderson, 2010). All NNSs are important resources to help bring us closer to our goal of internationalisation.

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