

DAPRE NOU MENM:¹ WRITING EXPERIENCES OF HAITIAN-AMERICAN GENERATION 1.5 STUDENTS ACROSS EDUCATIONAL CONTEXTS

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Students from a Haitian ethnic background are well represented in public educational institutions in states such as New York and Florida. An important subset of this student population are Haitian-American Generation 1.5 students, young people who began their education and academic language acquisition in Haiti, then immigrated to the United States to continue their education and language acquisition. This Brief Report describes some of the findings from a larger study exploring Haitian-American Generation 1.5 students' writing experiences across primary, secondary, and post-secondary language courses in both Haiti and the United States. Qualitative interview data exploring three Haitian-American Generation 1.5 participants' perspectives on their writing experiences were collected and analyzed; findings illustrate the disjunction between language class writing practices in Haitian primary schools, U.S. secondary schools, and U.S. post-secondary institutions. Based on these findings, recommendations for writing instruction that meets the needs of Haitian-American Generation 1.5 students are provided.

Keywords: academic writing; college composition; Generation 1.5; Haitian; qualitative

Generation 1.5 students—adolescents and young adults who have life and educational experiences in two or more countries and languages—are differently prepared for college composition courses than their domestic and international peers (Matsuda, 2006; Ortmeier-Hooper & Ruecker, 2017). Among Generation 1.5 students, Haitian-Americans, who attend New York and Florida educational institutions in large numbers, have distinct educational backgrounds that create unique pedagogical needs in college composition courses (Buchanan, Albert, & Beaulieu, 2010; Nicolas, DeSilva, & Rabenstein, 2009). This brief report summarizes the key findings of a larger study tracing the writing experiences of three Haitian-American Generation 1.5 students from primary school to community college and gives recommendations for providing instruction in writing to Haitian-American Generation 1.5 students in college composition courses.

Literature Review

Haitian-American Generation 1.5 students begin their education in Haiti, where schools and students face challenges common in developing nations. There are few free public schools. In fact, 92% of students attend tuition-charging private schools, which are sometimes exclusively profit-driven, with little focus on student learning. Due to a lack of family financial resources, many children attend school only intermittently. Teachers are frequently untrained and use instructional methods no longer practiced in most U.S. educational settings, such as instruction through lecture and assessment through oral recitation. In addition, Haitian schools often lack instructional materials and facilities, such as textbooks and libraries (Dejean, 2010; Luzincourt & Gulbrandson, 2010).

Haiti has two mutually unintelligible official languages: Haitian Creole and French. According to linguists, approximately 95% of Haitians are monolingual Haitian Creole speakers (DeGraff, 2005). Nonetheless, instruction in Haitian schools is almost universally given in French, a second language for students and teachers alike (Dejean, 2010). Perhaps due to the provision of literacy instruction exclusively in French, children attending school in Haiti seem to acquire literacy more slowly than their global peers, and writing instruction is limited (RTI International, 2014).

After their initial educational experiences in Haiti, Haitian-American Generation 1.5 students immigrate to the United States, where the challenges they face are similar to those of other immigrant students. In U.S. secondary schools, Generation 1.5 students frequently receive literacy and writing instruction in self-contained English as a second language (ESL) classes or low-track English courses that do not sufficiently prepare them for college reading and writing (Callahan, 2005; Kanno & Kangas, 2014).

After high school, Generation 1.5 students enrolled in colleges or universities are required to take composition courses, where they engage more deeply with reading and writing tasks that are often novel to them, such as critically reading literature and writing essays that must adhere closely to the conventions of standard written English (Addison & McGee, 2010). Due to a lack of adequate preparation, their ability to complete these tasks may be limited, and their instructors may criticize their written language use (Matsuda, 2006).

This literature review suggests that, prior to enrolling in college, many Haitian-American Generation 1.5 students have received little writing instruction that would be helpful to them if they intend to go to college. In addition, whatever writing instruction they do receive is always in a second language: French in Haiti and English in the United States. As a result, they have unmet pedagogical needs in college composition courses. With the goal of providing findings that may contribute to improvements in writing instruction for Haitian-American Generation 1.5 students, this study has been guided by the following research question: How do Haitian-American Generation 1.5 students describe their writing experiences prior to and during a first-year college composition course?

Method

These are the findings of a qualitative study conducted at Gulf College² (GC)—a Florida community college with a significant Haitian population. Participants who had educational experiences in both Haitian primary and U.S. secondary schools were invited via email to participate in this study, and three in their first semester at GC were chosen: Rudy, age 18; Steph, age 20; and Jean, age 18. During the study, all of the participants were enrolled in at least four courses, including a state-mandated Composition 1 course³ in which they were required to complete a minimum of 4,000 words of instructor-evaluated writing, including one research paper. Five interviews, ranging from 45 to 75 minutes with each participant, were conducted over the course of the semester. Data were transcribed and analyzed using consecutive rounds of constructivist-grounded theory coding (Charmaz, 2014). Member checking was conducted to establish validity and data were triangulated using instructor interviews, course observations, and participant Composition 1 writings (Lather, 2007).

Findings

Rudy

After the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, Rudy's parents sent him and his younger sister to live with their aunt, a nurse's assistant in Florida. When he moved to the United States, his parents stayed in Haiti and maintained their professional lives; Rudy's father owned a construction business and his mother worked in an administrative role in a court. Prior to enrolling in eighth grade at a public middle school in a middle-class suburban area of Florida, Rudy had been educated at a private Catholic school in Port-au-Prince.

Although both of his parents were proficient in French, Rudy identified his first and home language as Haitian Creole. As he stated,⁴ “Everyone speaks Creole . . . even here [the United States], we speak Creole.”

When Rudy had begun school in Haiti, however, the language of instruction and communication was French. Rudy recalled that “it was required to speak French at school. If you didn’t . . . you would have detention . . . if you got caught.” At school, Rudy learned to read and write exclusively in French. Of learning to write in French, Rudy recalled, “Before we started doing essays, we were doing practice and stuff . . . learning the French rules. . . . Starting in fourth grade, at the end of every term, we had to write an essay in class.” To assess the essays, Rudy remembered his teachers would “look for grammatical errors . . . and are you on topic.” Rudy believed he was a successful writer in his school in Haiti. On an essay exam in the fourth grade, he and his classmates had to describe a store that they had been to. “I did good on that one,” he said.

When Rudy moved to Florida and began to attend high school there, he recalled that writing in English class was “not something we did often” and that assignments were judged sufficient “as long as you have half a page.” When asked why he had written so little in his high school English classes, Rudy recalled that class time had been spent completing “workbook pages” in preparation for the state standardized reading test.⁵ Rudy’s most significant memory of writing in high school was in the context of an elective technical program that prepared him for certification as an emergency medical technician (EMT). At the end of the program, he wrote a ten-page report, which he described as the high school writing experience that had taught him the most about writing.

When he began attending Composition 1 at GC, Rudy did not feel fully prepared to write assignments of the required length. When describing his Composition 1 essays in general, Rudy said, “I tend not to extend them [essays] . . . Sometimes I just get to the point, but sometimes you have to include details to make them lengthy.” In spite of this challenge, Rudy had prior academic experience studying science, on which he drew when writing in Composition 1. When reflecting on his writing of an essay comparing and contrasting two political candidates, Rudy recalled, “[I]n biology class . . . when they ask you a question, it is like compare this one to this one. It’s not an essay, but it’s like the base. . . . It [the compare and contrast assignment] is just longer.”

Rudy’s schooling prior to college had provided him with limited writing instruction, both in French in Haiti and in English in Florida. However, he was able to draw on his past academic experiences to successfully complete Composition 1 assignments and pass his college writing course.

Steph

In 2011, after completing the ninth grade at a private Catholic school in Port-au-Prince, Steph moved to Florida and enrolled in the 10th grade in a public high school located in a middle-class suburban neighborhood. Steph moved to the United States with only her mother, leaving her father and siblings in Haiti. In Florida, Steph’s mother worked as a cook, and Steph worked part time at a fast-food restaurant while also attending GC full time.

Steph described Haitian Creole as her first and home language. When asked about the role of French in her community in Haiti, Steph explained, “Some people, even though they [were] born in Haiti . . . don’t know French. You have to go to school for that.” In her school in Haiti, Steph learned not only to speak in French but also to write in French through dictation exercises, which she described in the following way:

You read the book . . . you study it, so you know everything. . . . When you go to class, the teacher takes the book, and everything he says, you have to write it down on a piece of paper without nothing wrong—no grammar mistakes, no different words. . . . So it turns out the paper and the book are the same.

Steph had been an outstanding student in Haiti, and she recalled with pride that she had been highly successful at completing these exercises.

When Steph moved to Florida, her mainstream high school English class writing assignments were “always book reports . . . you read the book and summarized it.” In this English class, Steph was again a successful writer. Recalling one of her book reports, she stated, “My teacher knew that . . . my accent, and my word, they wasn’t perfect.” Nonetheless, Steph submitted a book report that her teacher found “very brilliant. It was a surprise. He [the teacher] asked me ‘Did you do that? I am going to give your name to the front office so they give you a t-shirt.’ ”

After her success as a writer in her Haitian primary and U.S. high schools, Steph was initially a successful writer in her Composition 1 course. For her first assignment, she had to “tell about something you had to write when you were in high school.” After completing the assignment, Steph judged the task as having been “easy.” As the course progressed, however, and writing assignments became longer and more complex, Steph began to find the class challenging. During the final weeks of the semester, to prepare students to write an expository research essay, the instructor assigned an annotated bibliography. Before she began writing the bibliography, I asked Steph what she needed to do to complete the assignment. She replied, “To be honest with you, I don’t know. I know that I have to do some research and put all the information that I learn from it. . . . I really don’t know. I am sorry I am so stupid.”

Ultimately, Steph turned in a partially completed annotated bibliography and research paper and failed the course. Although she had been a successful writer in her Haitian primary and U.S. high schools, Steph’s prior writing experience had not adequately prepared her to complete all the assignments in her Composition 1 course.

Jean

Jean’s mother arrived in Florida in 2004 and worked in agriculture. After saving some money, she brought Jean, his father, his two sisters, and his brother to the United States. In 2007, when he moved to Florida, Jean had just failed the fourth grade at his private Protestant school in Port-au-Prince. Due to his age, upon arriving in Florida Jean was enrolled in sixth grade at the rural public middle school near his home. At the time of the study, Jean still lived in the same rural area with his family, and he drove his car one hour to attend classes at GC.

Like Rudy and Steph’s, Jean’s school in Haiti required that he use only French at school; however, he did not fully comply with his school’s policy. “On the school campus we had to speak French . . . I didn’t do it. I only said basic words when the teachers were around to get passed by.” At school, Jean was taught to write in French, but he was not a successful writer. He remembered that during the final exam for his fourth-grade French class, “We had to write a paper in French . . . I couldn’t do it. . . . I started, but I was repeating myself over and over again. So I was like, I am just going to make it [the paper] look like it’s filled.” When he received his exam result, he said, “I did not pass. . . . They [the teachers] made me redo it. It was hard. French is just a difficult language for me . . . the words, the grammar.”

When he began to attend his U.S. high school, Jean wrote very little. He explained that during English class, students used computers to complete online assignments that focused on “reading . . . and then [trying] to get the main idea.” When he did write, Jean recalled that generally each year he produced “three or four papers” approximately three paragraphs in length. He could not recall the details of any specific high school writing assignment.

From the start of his Composition 1 course, Jean found the length of the assignments challenging, and described all assignments by their required word count, such as “a 750-word essay.” For Jean, meeting these word counts was “hard for me. Sometimes I run out of words.” During the first half of the semester, when Jean completed Composition 1 writing assignments, his writing was returned to him with red ink obscuring the original text, which made him “feel like I didn’t do a good job at all.” After his early efforts

were criticized—instead of helpfully critiqued—by his instructor, Jean became discouraged and did not complete the final two Composition 1 assignments, which resulted in his failing the course.

Jean had not been a successful writer in French in his Haitian primary school, and he had had few opportunities to write in his U.S. high school. With so little previous experience from which to draw, Jean was quickly overwhelmed by the demands and criticism of Composition 1, and he failed the course.

Conclusion and Recommendations for Instructors

This study's Haitian-American Generation 1.5 participants had knowledge of spoken Haitian Creole and written French and English from which to draw in their Composition 1 courses; however, they were not encouraged to use such knowledge as a resource when writing. If provided with college writing instruction facilitating connections between their existing linguistic knowledge and the writing tasks assigned in their composition courses, students like Steph and Jean—and most Haitian-American Generation 1.5 students—could be highly successful academic writers. The recommendations that follow provide strategies for instructing all Generation 1.5 students—and specifically Haitian-American Generation 1.5 students—in college composition courses.

Recommendations for Instructing College Writing to Generation 1.5 Students

- Provide explicit instruction for composing longer writing assignments: Many Generation 1.5 students have accrued only minimal experience in constructing arguments over the course of several paragraphs or pages. These students can benefit from plentiful examples and explicit instruction—instead of criticism—about developing thesis sentences with multi-part arguments and rendering these ideas into multi-paragraph written pieces.
- Provide explicit instruction for writing in a variety of rhetorical modes: Generation 1.5 students may have limited experience writing in a range of modes. To facilitate their writing in an assigned mode, instructors can bring attention to and provide plentiful examples of the linguistic and rhetorical features of a specific writing mode.
- Encourage the application of multilingual knowledge to writing: Haitian-American Generation 1.5 students frequently have proficiency in three or more languages (Haitian Creole, French, and English), but have been taught in monolingual educational environments. When writing essays, they should be encouraged use their entire linguistic repertoire to think and write during the brainstorming, organizing, and drafting stages of an assignment. During the editorial revisions and finalization, Generation 1.5 students can produce a written assignment that is fully in English.
- Stress the communicative purpose of writing: Many Haitian-American Generation 1.5 students have experienced writing primarily as a means to demonstrate second language proficiency (French in Haiti, English in the United States), rather than as a means to communicate in-depth academic arguments. When instructing these students, educators should stress that the purpose of a written assignment is not only to demonstrate knowledge of the formal rules of writing, but also to communicate a writer's ideas and arguments.
- Emphasize the importance of original ideas and innovative ways of instruction that change the traditional dictation method: Dictation activities are common in Haitian schools and tend to limit students' understanding of what writing could be. When teaching Haitian-American Generation 1.5 students, it should be emphasized that many college instructors highly value original ideas, and students should be respectfully encouraged to devote time to conceiving of novel, well-developed arguments in their writing.

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Notes

¹Translation from Haitian Creole: According to us.

²All institution and participant names are pseudonyms.

³Here, Composition 1 is a general term referring to the first-year college writing course all students attending a public post-secondary institution in Florida are required to complete. In Florida, students who have reached the minimum cut scores on the state's standardized high school reading comprehension test are not required to take a college writing placement test. They are automatically enrolled in Composition 1.

⁴All quotes are transcriptions from oral interviews with the participants. In some cases, quotes have been edited for clarity.

⁵Attaining a minimum score on a standardized reading test was a high school graduation requirement. Workbook pages and computer exercises in Rudy and Jean's high school English classes helped prepare them to pass these standardized tests and graduate from high school.



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