

# A Generation in Transition

## *A Study of the Usage and Attitudes Toward Public Libraries by Generation 1.5 Composition Students*

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*Generation 1.5 students are those who appear fully conversant in American English and culture but are still in the process of learning English when they enter college. This study, based on the findings of a 51-question survey administered to 285 students in a first-year college composition course, examines the effect and role that public libraries have in the success of Generation 1.5 college writers. The findings raise questions about the role public libraries play in preparing students for college. The article suggests reasons for heavy public library use by Generation 1.5 college students, even when academic libraries are available to them.*

**T**he current study investigates the attitudes toward public library usage held by Generation 1.5 students in a university composition course that has as its main function teaching the research paper. Generation 1.5 students are those who appear fully conversant in American English and culture but are still in the process of learning English

when they enter college.<sup>1</sup> They exhibit reading and writing difficulties, which are especially problematic in university writing courses. The findings have implications for how public librarians and college composition instructors can help assist these students.

According to the latest census figures, there are nearly 10 million people living in the United States between the ages of 5 and 17 who are members of non-English speaking households. This represents 18.4 percent of this population, compared with 13.9 percent of the population in 1990. In California, 42.6 percent of school-aged children are members of households where English is not the primary language.<sup>2</sup> This situation is particularly acute in California's San Joaquin Valley, where this study took place.

With the increase of Generation 1.5 student immigrant populations in the United States, it has become urgent for public libraries to identify and assist these students in their transition from high school to college. In the present study, the primary focus was on chil-

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dren of Mexican immigrants, a group highly represented at California State University, Bakersfield (CSUB), where this study took place.

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## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Academic Literacy Skills

In the field of second language acquisition, there is a fairly long history of looking at the academic literacy needs of second language learners and the academic tasks that face second language college students. Saville-Troike, Bridgeman and Carlson, Horowitz, and Ostler for example, used surveys to assess what types of academic activities students were performing at the college level.<sup>3</sup> Other studies, (Christison and Krahnke, Leki and Carson) have examined the students' own perceptions of their academic needs.<sup>4</sup> Other studies (Currie, Shuck) have looked specifically at the needs for writing classes.<sup>5</sup>

The debate has also been informed by the work of Cummins, who proposes a distinction between Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP).<sup>6</sup> BICS are cognitively less-demanding skills needed for daily social interaction and are employed by English language learners "when they are on the playground, in the lunch room, on the school bus, at parties, playing sports and talking on the telephone." CALP, on the other hand, refers to the more cognitively demanding skills of "listening, speaking, reading, and writing about subject area content material." This level of language learning, which Cummins claims may take from five to seven years to attain, is the level that is essential for students to be successful academically.<sup>7</sup>

### Definition of Generation 1.5

The term Generation 1.5 itself comes from Rumbaut and Ima, who used the term "'1.5' generation" to describe refugee youth from Vietnam, Cambodia, Indochina, and Laos.<sup>8</sup> They state that such students "are neither part of the 'first' generation of their parents, the responsible adults who were formed in their 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."<sup>9</sup>

In an approach somewhat parallel to Rumbaut and Ima, Reid has made the distinction "U. S. Resident ESL Writers," also called "ear" learners, and "International Student Writers," also called "eye" learners. According to Reid, traditional international students are made up of those who "have chosen to attend postsecondary schools in the U.S., in much the same way that U.S. college students spend a semester or a year 'abroad.' Many of these nonimmigrant, visa-holding students come from relatively privileged and well-educated backgrounds. They are literate and fluent in their first language, and they have learned English in foreign language classes." These students, who Reid refers to as "eye" learners, "have learned English principally through their eyes, studying vocabulary, verb forms, and language rules." Because they have studied English grammar extensively, they understand and can explain its rules. While they are often highly capable readers, they may exhibit poor listening and speaking abilities that are "hampered by lack of experience, nonnative English-speaking teachers, and the culture shock that comes from being immersed in a foreign culture."<sup>10</sup>

Generation 1.5 students, in contrast to international students, are those who, according to Harklou, "enter college while still in the process of learning English."<sup>11</sup>

Reid describes these students as "ear" learners who "have learned English by being suddenly immersed in the language and the culture of the U.S." She explains that these students learn English principally by hearing it and interacting with people in the community such as teachers, friends, and other members of the community. Television may also play a role. These students "subconsciously began to form vocabulary, grammar, and syntax rules, learning English principally through oral trial and error."<sup>12</sup>

As Harklau points out, these students may have well-developed English language social skills and therefore appear to have native-like conversational skills.<sup>13</sup> According to Reid, Generation 1.5 students have often graduated from American high schools and are conversant in American culture, with advanced oral and listening abilities. Because of these experiences they "understand the slang, the pop music, the behaviors, and the 'cool' clothes of the schools they attend. Their background knowledge of life in the U.S. is, in many cases, both broad and deep: Their personal experiences have made them familiar with class structures and expectations; they have opinions on current controversies and issues; and they recognize cultural references to, for instance, television programs,

cartoon humor, and advertising.”<sup>14</sup>

The term “Generation 1.5” took on new currency with the publication in 1999 of *Generation 1.5 meets college composition: Issues in the teaching of writing to U.S.-educated learners of ESL*, edited by Harklau, Losey, and Siegal. The volume, which gives the best definition to date of “Generation 1.5,” examines the students themselves, using “case studies and interviews to develop in-depth profiles of the backgrounds, attitudes, and college experiences of language minority students with writing.”<sup>15</sup> It also examines “the high school and college classroom settings in which language minority students learn to write” then explores “the strengths and weaknesses of various configurations of writing programs for U.S.-educated second-language learners.”<sup>16</sup>

In the preface, Harklau states that the intention is to “bridge this gap and to initiate a dialogue on the linguistic, cultural, and ethical issues that attend teaching college writing to U.S. educated linguistically diverse students.”<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately, there is virtually nothing in this text on library use by Generation 1.5 students.

More specialized studies have followed. Thonus, for example, examines how the university-writing-center support service can help Generation 1.5 students develop the writing skills necessary for academic success, looking at the assumptions that writing center personnel make about Generation 1.5 students, as well as making several suggestions for dealing effectively with such students.<sup>18</sup> Holten describes a specialized collaborative composition course designed for Generation 1.5 students that blends together courses from both an English-as-a-second-language program and a writing program.<sup>19</sup>

Other studies have focused on developing more comprehensive programs to deal with such students. At the high school level, Forrest provides recommendations for developing an effective literacy program for high school Generation 1.5 students, giving suggestions that focus on the curriculum, the needs of learners, and the influences of educators.<sup>20</sup> At the university level, Goldschmidt and Ziemba describe a course cluster program that asks groups of Generation 1.5 students to collectively take an American-studies course cluster, consisting of a first-year seminar, as well as courses in American studies, English grammar, developmental composition, and college reading and study skills.<sup>21</sup>

Unfortunately, none of these authors focuses on the role of the library in helping Generation 1.5 students succeed.

## Obstacles to Library Access

The literature on the connection between Generation 1.5 and public libraries is limited. Professional library literature has largely devoted itself to identifying the obstacles that block immigrants’ paths to libraries. Bala and Adkins found that Spanish-speaking immigrants tend not to take full advantage of public library services, even if they live near branches.<sup>22</sup> Of the 41 immigrants they interviewed in their study, 78 percent had not visited a library in six months and 34 percent said they did not visit the library because of linguistic barriers.<sup>23</sup> While the article concludes that more outreach and Spanish-language materials are needed in libraries, one finding that is particularly relevant to this paper is that more than half the people interviewed said they wanted the library to teach them to conduct research.<sup>24</sup> In other words, these interviewees recognized their own information competency needs and wanted to remedy them.

What goes largely unaddressed in the literature is how the public library can open the door to higher education to those whose first language is Spanish. One area that has been researched is access services studies. Focusing on Spanish speakers, Marquis describes cataloging enhancements to Spanish and bilingual materials that would improve access to collections.<sup>25</sup> While libraries often build Spanish-language materials into their collections, they often fail to make those items readily accessible in their catalogs. Cataloging enhancements, like those suggested by Marquis, help those who function in both Spanish and English by providing alternatives that can improve their information competency skills.

Overall, the largest limiter to Hispanic participation is the well-documented shortage of Hispanic librarians. Programs, such as the internship at CSUB and others, are attempting to change the face of librarianship, but the road toward equitable representation by Hispanics in libraries is uphill and steep.<sup>26</sup> Spanish-speaking librarians can perform bilingual reference interviews and help with the selection and cataloging of materials. The ability to provide such service is the ideal circumstance but unfortunately is one that few Generation 1.5 library users experience.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This paper, which is part of a larger study that examines the attitudes and experiences of Generation 1.5 students in a college-level composition course, examines the effect and role that public libraries play in the success of college writers.

In the spring of 2006, we administered a

51-question survey to 285 students in a first-year composition course. A general-education course required of all undergraduates, it is designed to introduce students to, and give students practice in, writing expository essays. The major focus of the course is writing college-level research papers, which requires extensive library research in which students must search for, critically read and analyze, and effectively integrate a minimum of seven print sources into a seven-to-ten-page MLA formatted paper. Students are required to achieve a balance between books, journals, other periodicals, and electronic/Internet sources. This final research paper accounts for 30 percent of the final grade for the course.

In addition to regular coursework, students in the course are also required to attend four times a library lab taught by a librarian, beginning in the fourth week of the term. The lab is intended to help students learn basic research skills and accounts for an additional 10 percent of the grade.

The survey was administered to the students early in the quarter (prior to their attending the library lab) so that we could test their preconceived notions toward college-level library research and how their public library experiences influenced their attitudes and abilities.

To be categorized as Generation 1.5 students, the subjects had to answer positively to at least two out of ten specific questions that provided information about their linguistic backgrounds. Using these criteria, we identified 140 Generation 1.5 students, representing 49 percent of the students surveyed. Nearly all were of Mexican descent and spoke Spanish at home. As a Hispanic Serving Institution, about 41 percent of CSUB students on the main campus are Hispanic, and 35 percent of those students are of Mexican heritage. At CSUB, the vast majority of Generation 1.5 students are Spanish-speaking children of immigrants. Therefore the results of our survey closely mirror the makeup of the general population of CSUB.

In this study we attempted to learn about Generation 1.5 students' use of, and attitude toward, the public library versus the uses and attitudes of non-Generation 1.5 students. Eight questions in the survey dealt specifically with public library use, and a ninth question dealt with possession of a home computer.

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## RESULTS

In this study, there was no distinguishable technology gap between Generation 1.5 and non-Generation 1.5 students. Home computer ownership levels were nearly identical. Only 7.7 percent of

Generation 1.5 students did not have a computer at home, compared with 6.8 percent of non-Generation 1.5 students. It is likely that those that did not have computers were the poorest students (economically) in either group, but this question was not tested in this study.

Despite the nearly identical levels of computer ownership, Generation 1.5 students were far more likely to be regular public library users. Nearly a quarter (24.3 percent) of Generation 1.5 students reported visiting the public library more than once a week, while only 6.3 percent of non-Generation 1.5 students reported visiting the public library as often. In fact, the majority of non-Generation 1.5 students (53.8 percent) reported visiting the library less than once every six months, as compared with only 30.1 percent of Generation 1.5 students. This heavy public library usage is discussed in more detail below in the "Discussion" section of this paper.

Even though the Generation 1.5 students use the public library more frequently than their non-Generation 1.5 counterparts, they are less likely to have a library card. In their dealing with reference librarians, Generation 1.5 students are more likely to avoid asking a question because they are concerned about communicating their question incorrectly and appearing stupid.

Of those students who list reasons for not visiting the public library, there is an interesting subset of 28 Generation 1.5 students and 28 non-Generation 1.5 students. In the Generation 1.5 subgroup, 25 percent reported that they did not have a way to get to a public library. Comparatively, only 10.7 of the non-Generation 1.5 students reported an inability to get to the library as a reason for rejecting its services. Interestingly, only 28.6 percent of Generation 1.5 students said they did not use the public library because they preferred to purchase or own their materials, while 42.9 percent of the Non-Generation 1.5 students in the subset preferred to purchase and own materials than to borrow them from the library. While economic factors were not part of this study, there may well be an economic component to this response.

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## DISCUSSION

Our results indicate that many Generation 1.5 students who are attending college are visiting their public libraries regularly. One inference that can be drawn from these results is that there is a direct correlation between Generation 1.5 students who are heavy public library users and those who attend college. More research should be done at the high school level to see if there is a relationship

between teen public-library use and subsequent enrollment in college.

While this study raises important questions about the role public libraries play in preparing students for college, it more specifically asks how and why public libraries are being used by Generation 1.5 college students. Obviously, college students have an academic library at their disposal, so the fact that these particular students are using the public library instead of, or in addition to, their campus library indicates that public libraries are fulfilling a need for them. These students may well be more comfortable in the public libraries that they used before they began attending college than in their academic libraries. The value of the library as a physical place (as opposed to a connection point for information) is particularly worth examining in light of these findings. For those students without sufficient space or silence at home, the public library may be providing the place where they can focus their attention on school work.

While these students may recognize the value of the public library in their lives, our survey indicates that many Generation 1.5 students appear unwilling to take full advantage of services offered there. Public libraries may well be missing opportunities to help these students develop the research skills they need in college. There is a profound lack of awareness about these “between-generation” students, not just among librarians but among educators and policy makers at every level.

In general, it is our view that librarians need to build cultural literacy about Generation 1.5 into their professional development programs and to aggressively seek these students out and actively encourage their use of services. Academic librarians need to focus their attention on Generation 1.5 students and help them make the transition to their university library. Information literacy and active marketing of resources and services aimed at familiarizing students with the library are two ways librarians can help these students with the transition. Perhaps most importantly, academic librarians need to encourage students from Generation 1.5 backgrounds to pursue librarianship as a profession, which would help erase cultural gaps.

Finally, among the students who do not use public libraries, our research indicates that Generation 1.5 students reject libraries for reasons different from those of their non-Generation 1.5 counterparts. Students who are non-Generation 1.5 are more likely to have the economic resources to overcome their lack of visitation, that is, to purchase materials they want to read. For obvious reasons, there is a particular urgency for

the Generation 1.5 students who lack economic resources to use the public library. It is equally urgent for libraries to have materials they want and need, and for reference librarians to teach these students to access resources. Finally, our study found that of those Generation 1.5 students who did not visit libraries, one fourth faced transportation difficulties. Many Generation 1.5 students in our study live in rural areas, where public libraries have limited hours and face staffing difficulties. Public libraries have always sought to bring rural residents books and information, first via bookmobile and later by computer. The information gap, however, between urban and rural people still appears to exist.

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## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to examine the role that usage and attitudes toward public libraries play in the success of Generation 1.5 students in a university composition course. The results of this study have valuable implications for both public and academic libraries, as well as for composition instructors. This study found that Generation 1.5 students tend to take advantage of public library services more regularly than their non-Generation 1.5 counterparts. On a policy level, this study is evidence of the benefit that public libraries can have on communities of individuals in the process of learning English.

We recommend that more research be conducted in the area of pre-college use of the public library and its relation to college attainment. Additionally, it is obvious from this study that public libraries need to develop cultural literacy about Generation 1.5 students and to develop proactive programs that reach out to these students and encourage their college ambitions.

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