

## Generation 1.5 – A Different Kind of Millennial Student

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Much attention has been paid to so-called “millennial students” in recent years, particularly regarding their relationship to technology, learning, and communication. Less notice has been taken of another kind of millennial student increasingly represented in our classrooms – those who were born in another country, but received a significant amount of their schooling here. Often referred to as Generation 1.5 because they have language characteristics in common with first- and second-generation immigrants, these bilingual students are a valuable resource for the physician assistant (PA) profession. However, just as teaching native-born millennial students may require some adjustment of instructional methods, Generation 1.5 students will require PA educators to pay closer attention to some aspects of teaching and learning. This article will discuss some of the particular challenges that Generation 1.5 students face and will argue that these challenges can be met in ways that are likely to help other nontraditional students as well.

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### INTRODUCTION

The physician assistant (PA) profession has taken a stand calling for diversity and multicultural competence as a standard of practice. One aspect of that commitment must include the recruitment and retention of students who can help serve multilingual communities. This article discusses a population of students, sometimes referred to as Generation 1.5, who immigrated to the United States as children and have attended school here for a number of years. These students, while thoroughly American in many ways, share language characteristics of both first- and second-generation immigrants. For reasons that will be discussed, they are the most likely subgroup of English Language Learners (those whose first language is not English) to be recruited into PA programs across the country. In order to support these students, whose multilingual skills are valued, faculty will need to engage in specific pedagogical

approaches and strategies. While this will require attention to teaching methodology and delivery, it need not require special accommodation or remediation. It will be a major contention of this article that many of the methods likely to assist Generation 1.5 students are, in fact, sound approaches for the student population in general and can serve to support so-called “underprepared” and nontraditional students as well. At the same time, these methods will help to prepare native English-speaking PA students to negotiate across language differences, framing PA education in a context more reflective of the world of practice they will be entering.

“Teaching the new population of this country, especially students who come from non-English-speaking backgrounds, will involve much more than ‘celebrating’ cultural differences.”

— Valdes<sup>1</sup>

## What Characterizes Generation 1.5 Students?

As an introduction to this discussion, consider the following composite portraits of two students, Jung and Julia, and a PA instructor, Professor Wilson.

Jung was born in Korea and came to the United States 8 years ago. On the college admissions database, he is listed as English L3 (meaning English is his third language) with more than 4 years in an English-speaking environment. He attended school in the United States beginning in the sixth grade with ESL classes, but was then “mainstreamed” to study alongside native speakers. Korean is the predominant language spoken at home since neither parent is at ease with English. He identifies as a speaker of Korean and English and claims equal comfort with both. His spoken English is accented, but mostly fluent, with occasional idiomatic errors. He has no apparent difficulty understanding instructions or questions in class. However, in contrast to his everyday speech, his writing is often tangential with frequent grammatical errors. Despite his difficulties with writing, his meaning is usually discernible. Compared to some of his classmates, Jung must devote extra time to complete lengthy reading and writing assignments, but he commits the time necessary to maintain his grades and recognizes that he needs to work on writing in particular. Because his family lived in Venezuela for several years prior to moving to the United States, Jung also speaks Spanish, which is frequently useful in his Texas community.

Though she was born in Puerto Rico and is a frequent visitor there, Julia’s accent marks her as a New Yorker. However, from an early age it was her responsibility to translate for her Spanish-speaking grandparents, with whom she lived. She considers

herself a native English speaker, but writing in English does not come easily for her. She reports that she has always had trouble in classes in which writing is a large component. As a result, she often procrastinates on writing assignments and turns them in late or without revision. However, she shines in classes where little or no writing is required, and she is often chosen by peers as a study group leader.

Professor Wilson teaches in a PA program in Southern Illinois. He has several students in his class who could be referred to as English Language Learners. He often admires their determination and commitment to become PAs, but he can’t understand why they seem to have so much trouble when writing patient histories and physicals. He is puzzled to note that while most of them seem perfectly fluent when they speak, their writing is far less proficient.

Jung, Julia, and the students that concern Professor Wilson are part of the growing population of Americans sometimes referred to as Generation 1.5.<sup>2,3</sup> These students were born in another country (or, as in Julia’s case, in another language community) but have received a large part of their formal education in the continental United States in English. However, at home and in their local neighborhoods, a different language often predominates. They have been called Generation 1.5 because they have linguistic similarities to both first- and second-generation immigrants. Most identify as Americans and think of English as their main language. They are fluent in US culture and in everyday English but may not have as strong a grasp of the more formal English required for writing in an academic setting. For the sake of clarity, in this article, the term Generation 1.5 or Gen 1.5 will be used to refer to this subpopulation of English

Language Learners who possess a high level of English proficiency but still have some challenges, as will be discussed. In contrast, the larger population of English Language Learners encompasses a spectrum of expertise from beginners to highly advanced.

An awareness of Generation 1.5 students is particularly important for PA educators, because they are the English Language Learners most likely to be accepted into PA schools. Because the profession’s international expansion has extended mostly to English-speaking countries, PA programs do not receive applications from many of the traditional international non-native English-speaking students who come to the United States as graduate students. They also do not generally admit students who would be designated ESL level (a term usually based on testing and used for placement), because these are typically learners who have not yet acquired enough English to succeed in the pre-admission interview. Therefore, the English Language Learners most likely to be found in PA classrooms are Generation 1.5 students who seem very American, are fluent enough to do well in an interview, and sufficiently culturally adept to be successful in dealing with patients. Recruiting from this group of students is also vital to the profession, since they have skills needed to form linguistic bridges to serve their language communities’ health care needs. However, in order to support Generation 1.5 students in their academic pursuits, it is important to have an understanding of who they are and how they arrived in PA school.

Gen 1.5 students are typically “ear learners”<sup>4</sup> who learned English largely by immersion (in contrast to international students, who are more commonly “eye learners,” having

studied their home language's grammar in addition to formal study of English). Since Gen 1.5 students have learned much of their grammar intuitively, they have typically acquired the rules by inference.<sup>5</sup> They may have had some ESL classes early in their education, but these are often presented in a patchwork fashion and withdrawn once basic conversational skills are acquired. Many have had repeatedly interrupted schooling due to economic or social factors, which results in chunks of learning being overlooked or jumbled. Because they live in households or communities where other languages predominate, they "lack native-like intuitions about what sounds right on paper."<sup>5</sup> As a result of all these factors, Generation 1.5 students often have far stronger everyday oral communication skills than they do writing or reading skills.

### Conceptualizing Language Challenges

Cummins and others have pointed out that there are at least two "registers" of English<sup>6,7</sup> — everyday conversational English and "academic English." (The true picture is probably more complex,<sup>7</sup> but for this discussion, these two registers will be useful to consider.) Proficiency in everyday English is usually acquired fairly quickly, especially if the student is younger when first arriving in this country.<sup>3,8</sup> In contrast, academic language takes much longer to master and in some cases may never be completely developed to the near-native speaker level.<sup>9,10</sup> While it is clear that native speakers must also learn both of these linguistic registers, it has been pointed out that most native English speakers have mastered basic conversational English by the time they enter grammar school and spend K-12 mastering different types of academic English, which are then further developed in college.<sup>6</sup> For PA

educators, the essential point to understand is that a student's grasp of conversational English is not a reliable indicator of strong academic language skills. Therefore, more attention may be needed to teach students the academic language register explicitly<sup>9</sup> — a subject we will return to later.

Another aspect that needs to be considered when thinking about Generation 1.5 students' written work is that other languages and cultures may conceptualize writing in a different way (for an excellent introduction to this topic, see Panetta, et al).<sup>11</sup> In some Asian cultures, for example, it is considered insulting to the reader to spell out a point too clearly.<sup>12,13</sup> It is preferred that the writer present the elements of the situation and allow the reader to form his own conclusion. However, if an Asian student were to use this approach in American clinical writing, it would be considered ineffectual and possibly confused. Similarly, Russian students may seem to circumnavigate the point before arriving at it rather than going straight to it as is the convention in English writing.<sup>11,14</sup> This is the preferred convention in Russian rhetorical tradition. As one Russian student said, "Only uneducated people write with such short sentences."

While it is unfeasible for PA faculty to be familiar with all the many possible writing conventions represented in a multicultural classroom, it is nonetheless important to understand that rules of English academic writing that seem self-evident to a native speaker may not be apparent to a non-native speaker. Therefore, it may first be necessary to outline the context, structure, and constituent elements of the target writing style in order to make them clear to a non-native speaker. Otherwise, the student is unlikely to understand why what he has written is not what is

wanted.<sup>11,13</sup> Apprentice PA students need to learn to construct their writing as would be expected in American medical culture. They will be helped to do so if there is some acknowledgement that this is a particular kind of writing and possibly different from others they have worked hard to learn.

### All Teachers Are Writing Teachers

Just as different cultures define "good" writing differently, it is also important to understand that even within the English-speaking academic world, each discipline has its own way of writing. Furthermore, within a specific profession, there may be genres of writing with different requirements. Therefore, completion of the English Composition courses typically required in a college curricula does not confer expertise in writing an economic analysis or a medical case report, which clearly have different purposes, audiences, and vocabulary.<sup>15,16</sup> In fact, it has been demonstrated specifically that English Language Learners may develop near-native expertise in one academic genre and yet subsequently appear to "regress" when faced with a new one that requires new conventions or conceptual understanding.<sup>17-19</sup> Consequently, Generation 1.5 students often have far more sophisticated thinking than their initial writing products would suggest.

Bearing in mind these two principles — that writing in a particular discipline requires specific instruction and that mastery of a second language may deteriorate temporarily when new cognitive demands are high — it is easy to see why simply sending struggling English Language Learners to the writing center is not the solution. In this sense, "All teachers who have English Language Learners in their classroom are language teachers,"<sup>7</sup> because they must teach the

specific language and structure required for writing in their fields. In the process of learning to write in a medical context, the student acquires not just vocabulary, but also much of the thought process unique to the profession.<sup>20,21</sup> Therefore, it is crucial for the instructor to explicitly teach the characteristics of the professional writing targeted in that course — whether a medical history, an essay on medical ethics, or a thesis — all of which have different components, goals, and structural constraints.<sup>22</sup> With repeated exposure, as conceptual frameworks and content become familiar, students will regain access to the grammar and syntactic expertise they have mastered elsewhere.<sup>18,19</sup> This is particularly important in the highly compressed PA curricula, where instructors need to understand that without specific attention to these issues, even students with high-quality thinking and understanding may be left behind if they fail to capture the specific elements of professional writing and thinking early.<sup>15,23-25</sup>

A relevant example is the native English-speaking PA who has achieved fluency in conversational Spanish and has worked hard over a number of years to acquire enough medical Spanish to conduct a thorough history and physical exam. However, the same Spanish language learner PA might be challenged if asked to write a college-level essay on a story from that day's Spanish language newspaper. Despite being able to read the paper, understand the events, and form opinions about them, he might still lack the vocabulary and stylistic fluency to express those thoughts in an academic writing style and would likely need specific instruction to achieve the level of mastery required to complete the task.

### How Can We Help Multilingual Students to Acquire the Necessary Writing Skills?

Faculty in professional programs can find the needs of Generation 1.5 students overwhelming. A frequently heard response is, "How did they get this far without knowing this?" In response to this quandary, some faculty from fields other than English have joined with writing/rhetoric researchers to begin to look at ways to structure teaching and learning to offer greater support to these students. Interestingly, a recurrent theme has emerged — that far from requiring remedial or ESL-oriented approaches, good teaching for Generation 1.5 students turns out to be good teaching for all students.<sup>18,19,26-30</sup>

### Do We Need New Strategies Specific to Generation 1.5 Students?

While an extensive discussion of methods that can be employed to help Gen 1.5 PA students to succeed in writing is beyond the scope of this paper, two central elements are (1) attention to dissecting out the component parts of professional writing genres and articulating them clearly and (2) "scaffolding" of instruction. Both of these approaches have been documented to be effective with native English speakers but are perhaps more crucial when working with Gen 1.5 learners.

As a starting point, the importance of identifying and explaining the component parts of each task being set for learners cannot be overstated. In "Deconstructing the Disciplines," Middendorf and Pace point out that it is easy for faculty to lose track of the process by which they acquired expertise and to skip steps that have become automatic in their own practice, leaving students to uncover this more expert level of thinking by inference.<sup>31</sup> In their

project at Indiana University, Middendorf and Pace focus on how faculty might identify which elements of disciplinary thinking are most challenging for students and how these might be taught more explicitly. This requires, however, that instructors first clarify for themselves the characteristics of expert performance of a task. Once identified, these components can then be taught more explicitly.<sup>7,22</sup>

Expanding on that point, in the specific context of writing, it is easy to see that the struggle to learn by inference will be even more challenging for a Gen 1.5 student than for a native speaker. The ability to infer content or connections not explicitly presented often relies on shared reference points — exactly the area where Generation 1.5 students may differ most. Therefore, while it is important to identify and to teach the components of expert practice to all students, it is even more urgent when Gen 1.5 students are among the targeted learners.

A related idea is "scaffolding," the premise that as students build new skills, they need supports (scaffolds) that can be gradually withdrawn as mastery increases. It typically involves the common sense process of creating a series of learning activities that build in a sequential fashion.<sup>7,32</sup>

Learning medical academic and clinical writing is particularly suited to this approach.<sup>25</sup> For example, a method for scaffolding instruction on writing a history of present illness (HPI) was discussed in an earlier article.<sup>20</sup> Students were first given examples of successful and unsuccessful HPIs and the differences were identified — a first step in modeling effective use of the genre. A follow-up exercise asked students to rewrite the unsuccessful ones for improved clarity. A rubric was designed to make the task more specific and accessible

by delineating the elements of an HPI written at the expert level (eg, inclusion of the seven qualities, logical flow of information, follow-up on the hospital course, inclusion of pertinent positives and negatives). Each week a different rubric category was addressed in a brief writing exercise. This allowed students to attempt and discuss each element of expert practice separately. Concurrently, students made hospital visits where they took medical histories and tested the history-writing skills developed in class. In other sessions, students were asked to rate their own and each others' hospital HPis using the rubric — thus encouraging evaluative thinking related to the genre. In this way, the task was broken down into component parts, examined and practiced in small steps, repeatedly discussed and reconstructed, and tested in a real-life environment. By the end of the semester, the students were able to perform the task on their own, checking it against the rubric for its level of expertise.

Particularly where writing is concerned, Gen 1.5 students need opportunities to try out their newly acquired and task-specific English. Rosenthal<sup>27</sup> has pointed out that in order to gain expertise, non-native English speaking students must use disciplinary language in authentic contexts — and risk making mistakes. To that end, frequent “low stakes” formative assignments (quizzes or short assignments that provide practice and feedback, but do not account for a large part of the grade) allow opportunities to use language and test understanding before higher stakes assessment or performance is required. Such low-stakes assignments also promote an attitude of self-assessment and monitoring, which is useful for all students, but particularly important for English Language Learners who need to be

continually uncovering the places where more attention is needed.

### Diversity Pedagogy

The area of scholarship known as diversity pedagogy is a growing field comprised of educators attempting to construct classroom models that can accommodate differences in nonhierarchical ways.<sup>26,33</sup> Nelson, a biologist in higher education who has turned his scientist's eye to the literature on teaching and learning, points out that there are many circumstances where underachieving groups of students were suddenly able to succeed when the teaching methodology was changed.<sup>16</sup>

Similarly, Haggis argues that higher education needs to move away from focusing on any one group's special needs and towards a model centered on prioritizing clarity in academic work in order to remove barriers for students from diverse backgrounds.<sup>26</sup> Her analysis chooses to include a definition of diversity broader than the common focus on racial-ethnic differences. She argues that true diversity should also include students of diverse class backgrounds, ages, and first languages. Rather than framing the needs of any of these students as remedial, she points out that faculty in each field are responsible for teaching students “how to think, question, search for evidence, accept evidence, and put evidence together to make an argument that is acceptable *in that discipline*” (italics added).<sup>26</sup> Haggis and Nelson both conclude that in order to do so we must examine traditional educational practices that were designed for a fairly limited group of students and uncover those practices that have hindered rather than supported learning for many who are different from the typical college student of the past. Thus the priority shifts to designing instruction that makes both academic expecta-

tations and the process of acquiring expected competencies more transparent to novice learners across a broader spectrum of experience and preparation.

From this perspective, a sharper focus on writing skills within PA education has the potential to serve Gen 1.5 students better, but also to make acquisition of these skills more accessible to other nontraditional students, such as adult learners with little writing experience or disadvantaged students from weaker academic backgrounds. This is important to note for those who have concerns about weakening standards in order to accommodate these students — improved clarity of instruction is not remediation. It is simply good instruction.

Generation 1.5 is increasingly represented in PA classrooms now, and this trend is likely to continue for some time.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, as Hall has pointed out, “The new reality to which we must adjust in US higher education is that *multilingual learners are part of the mainstream*.”<sup>19</sup> Generation 1.5 students may arrive in the PA program with somewhat less-developed academic English, but they are seasoned college students who have demonstrated considerable expertise in multiple content areas in order to gain admission to PA school.<sup>19</sup> They also possess a skill that is highly valued in clinical practice — the ability to communicate effectively in more than one language.

As more Gen 1.5 students enter PA classrooms, native English speakers — both students and faculty — are challenged to negotiate communication when identical language sets and cultural reference points cannot be assumed. This can be framed as an obstacle or alternatively as an opportunity to model paradigms that account for a diverse community, more reflective of our rapidly global-

izing world. Therefore, as well as bringing new skills and perspectives, Generation 1.5 may also provide a catalyst for positioning one aspect of cultural competence as a foundational element rather than an elective activity.

The PA profession has a long history of bringing competent people from many pathways into PA training in order to address health care manpower shortages. Historically some of these students have come with years of experiential skills, but less developed academic skills. A new look at PA curricula to support learning for many types of students, including Generation 1.5, is entirely consistent with that history. This then is not a “dumbing down,” but a broadening out of educational methodologies to include a wider population. No standard needs to be reduced; rather, the approach to educating students needs to remain rigorous but at the same time to become more accessible, making the map from starting point to end objectives clearer. To that end, a well-articulated, scaffolded approach, building needed skills with clear attention to stepwise instruction, rather than assuming a uniform level of academic preparation, is an essential element of the profession’s commitment to “...provide a supportive and inclusive environment where all PAs and PA students can maximize their full potential...”<sup>35</sup>

**NOTE:** As noted above, a thorough discussion of strategies for working with Gen 1.5 students is beyond the scope of this paper. However, for those with more interest, to access an annotated bibliography containing most of the references in this article as well as direction to sources regarding specific aspects of teaching Generation 1.5 students and other nontraditional students, please see the blog page at:

[http://www.bestthinking.com/thinkers/society\\_and\\_humanities/education/higher\\_education/emily-j-davidson](http://www.bestthinking.com/thinkers/society_and_humanities/education/higher_education/emily-j-davidson)

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