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## In Their Own Voices

In our attempts to improve the articulation of ESL students across the segments, we often overlook the most obvious and in many ways the most reliable resource to help us improve what we do—our students. The following narratives by ESL writers in California schools describe the educational lands they have traveled through, how far they have journeyed, and how they have weathered the journey. These accounts provide important insights into what we as educators are doing well and what we can do better; they also underscore the critical need for increased and continued articulation.

### Method

To collect a range of ESL voices from elementary school to university, I asked two teachers from seven levels to have their students write a paragraph of no more than 300 words. The levels are elementary, middle school, high school, adult school, community college, the California State University system, and the University of California system.<sup>1</sup> The students represent a variety of geographical areas as well as differing backgrounds, ethnicity, and years in the United States. They were asked to address the following prompt:

In the space below, print or type a paragraph about your experiences in learning English in public school in California. Please limit the paragraph to 300 words. Begin by introducing yourself. Give your name, the language you speak at home, the number of years you have lived in the United States, and the number of years you have attended school in California. Then, include information about the kind of education in English you have received. Some points to consider are the types of English classes you have had, the preparation you have had to move from one level to the next, your successes and frustrations, and what has helped you the most.

From the writing received, I selected two samples from each level which best addressed the issues. The writing appears as it was written; I have edited only for length.

### The Voices

Some students speak directly to the issue of articulation, stating how their previous classes did or did not prepare them adequately. Others imply the presence of or the need for better coordination between levels, with comments about such issues as placement or the ability to change levels as needed. Still others talk about course content and techniques, letting us know what goes on at one level that has a direct bearing on the next.

#### Elementary

##### Kalda, 3rd grade:

*I am in the third grade. In school we speak English. At home I speak Cantonese and English. I have lived in America for 9 year. In school I have learned English because when I was in kindergarten I was so scared. My kindergarten teacher taught me to learn alphabet. In first grade I learn how to spell words. In second grade I learn how to read in third grade I learn how to write and I learn a lot of things in third grade.*

##### Linda, 5th grade:

*I was born in Fresno, California. When I was a little kid I didn't know how to speak in English. My family all speak in Hmong. When I was four year old I had attended school in California. It was pretty hard to speak other people words like in English. Also I thought I would never learn all of the words A, B, C and 1, 2, 3. It always get harder and harder on every grade I went up. I never knew I could become so good at writing papers and reading and also doing math but it also got gooder and I also got better.*

#### Middle School

##### Thien, 7th grade:

*I speak Vietnamese at home. I have been in the United States for two years and attended in school for almost two years. I now received ESL 5/6 advanced for English. When I was in sixth grade I received ESL 3/4 for English, to me the class is kind of easy. In my class, our teacher connected our assignment as a game for us to learn more easily. I'm trying to kept my grades as high as possible in order to move to a higher level like ESL 5/6 I'm*

*having right now. I am successful in reading but frustrated in speaking. I'm successful in thinking but frustrated in explaining. In sixth grade I had learned how to spell different words just like preparing for seventh grade. Right now I'm able to spell really well in the spelling part.*

##### Jing-Fei, 9th grade:

*I can speak three languages at home: english, spanish, and chinese. I have lived here in the united states for four years and have attended school in california for four years. My experiences after learning chinese and spanish was to start learning a new language, which is english in public school in california. The kind of education in english I have received was ESL (english as a second language) class, which was for bilingual people. The preparation I have had to move from one level to the next was to pay attention and work hard in the class to go to a higher level, have a better challenge, and learn more english. My success was to learn english so I could communicate with other people, and the frustration I had was to keep a person from acting what I wanted to keep an assignment from being carried out. Something that has helped me the most in learning english was the dictionary in which to help me to find words that I didn't understand and find the meaning of it. Now I am a trilingual person and I can talk to a lot of people.*

#### High School

##### Marcela, 10th grade:

*I was born in a small town called Cantabria in the state of Michoacan, Mexico. The language I speak at home is Spanish. I being living in United States for five years. When my family and I came to this country, we were living in Arlington, Texas. I went to an elementary school in fifth grade. For me it was a different world because the language, the people and the cultures were very different to the ones I have. All I did at school was by myself, because I could not express my feelings. Five months later, we moved to Oxnard, California. I went to another elementary school. In this school the 6th grade was easy, because in my class, the teacher separated all students that did not speak English. Then, I went to junior high. All my classes were in Spanish because no one speak English. I loosed all those three years in not learning English. Then I went to high school. Here in high school everything is different, because I start to learned English and all students are in their English level they need. The only reason that maked to keep up going was that finally I understood the importance that is to learn English, specially when the students like me are citizens, because their future belongs to this country and to the goals we have for the future.*

### **Xiao, 11th grade:**

*I'm from China, I speak Mandarin at home. I have lived in U.S. for 3 years. My first ESL class was at Sacramento, CA when I was in 9th grade. Now I'm taking sheltered English and sheltered U.S. History. I stayed in ESL for 3 years, during those 3 years, I really enjoyed learning English. I think that giving an ESL class for those immigrants who had just came to U.S. is very good idea, and a good way to learn English. In ESL class, I don't feel as nervous as in other classes, because in ESL class everybody is not native English speaker, no body speaks English well, so every body can concentrate with each other, and build speaking skills. In ESL I learned easy and basic English and then to medium and high level, by this way I learned and understand a lot of English. In ESL, I feel like I live in a family, because every body is very nice to each other, and the teacher is just like my parents, helps me on everything I don't understand. One thing I dislike in ESL is that in one classroom, there's too many students, and there's only one teacher teaching. Most of the students have different kind problems, and one teacher is unable to help out all of them. I hope that school will 2 or more ESL class separate all ESL students into different class, so that would be easier for teacher to help each student. Last thing I want to say is we should thank for those teacher who has been teaching ESL class because they've doing a even more hard job than other teachers.*

### **Adult School**

#### **Amsale:**

*I am from Ethiopia, Africa. My native language is Amharic. I lived in the USA for one and a half year. It is less than a month since I started attending this school. I was required to take a placing test. Sort of aptitude test. In fact the test was not difficult but the language used in the passages, the terms used in the mathematical problems made the test hard for me. So I was advised to attend the ESL class mainly the language lab. Most of the time we learn comprehensions both with the teacher and computer. I took that class for only one week and I quited because it is too simple for me. I didn't want to waste my time. Though the TOEFL class is same as I took in my country, it still differs in a way. I think it is important in many ways. I very much appreciate the teachers because they have the eagerness and the patience to teach. I have been taking English lessons for over twelve years but I still don't know English yet. I love the English language, I want to speak fluently and be comfortable in writing. I want to master the language but I never did*

### **Jose, United States:**

*United States, the place I was born but barely remember because I was raised in my parent's country, Mexico. First of all, the language was the first obstacle. I came here as one self-sufficient person, to live my own life. The first frustration was in the moment when I went to the school of English in order to take classes and somebody gave me an evaluation test. I was so nervous and I couldn't answer well. So that person sent me to the first level. That angered me because I had learned English during my first six years of life living in the United States. I was resigned to stay in the first level during the year, but the teacher encourage me to move to the next level. I felt really excited in the other classroom, trying to communicate my experiences with the others students in the class, until the teacher started to say it doesn't matter if we can't communicate each other, the most important thing is to understand, because she said that we, the immigrants who came to United States to work, just need understand and serve. That angered me more, so my purpose was to learn English, and I moved up again from that class. In the next level the situation was quite different, the teacher encouraged me to learn and to express my own opinions, doesn't matter if I spoke correctly or not, I just tried. Now, after almost eight months I'm taking the highest level in the community college the TOEFL class, and I think in a few more months I will be able to go to college.*

### **Community College**

#### **Darid, 1st year:**

*I'm just one more of the many persons that have had ESL classes. I was born in San Diego, California. But as many children from Mexican parents, I was taken to Mexico to live with my family. The language that I speak at home was only in Spanish and my only course of English was the radio or the television. I always wonder how would be the life on the other side of the border. After I finished my junior High School in Tijuana, I moved to San Ysidro. My knowledge about English was very insignificant. but I wanted to do something with my life. I started the tenth grade in Southwestern High School. Where I got my first classes of English as a Second Language. After I got my first level of English I realize that it was to easy for me. They made me do a test to pass to the next level. I proved myself that after you practice in your writing and speaking it make more comfortable to understand it. After being in intermediate level, we were told in order to be successful in the study of English you have to be constant in your effort to understand it. Every little rule that you learn, you have to practice, in order to understand it. As soon you pass from Advance ESL to Regular classes in English you*

realize that with a little of work you are in a level that is acceptable in any institution. I'm grateful about the classes of ESL I have had, because help me out a lot in the understanding of this new world for me.

#### **Mina, 2nd year:**

I came from Korea and I speak Korean at home with my parents. For the first time, which I got here, I had full of dream and excitement, but many times I had frustrations because of English. As soon as I got here, 4 1/2 years ago, I attended ESL courses about a year. At that time, I didn't realize how much I earned from the courses, but while I attending a college, I realize that I have basic knowledge of speaking, writing, and listening. I know that without ESL courses, I must had more difficulties in my college years. It is because, I learned how to write, speake, and listen in the courses, and I had to study for the next level. Even thought I took ESL courses, most of the time, I spoke Korean in the class, and outside of the class. There were many Korean students, so we rather spoke Korean than English. It didn't help my English speaking at all, yet we helped each other, under better understanding. After I got certificate from the ESL, I entered 2 years college. I took several English classes with good English speaker students. Most of the time, the instructors were so understandable. They all understood my situation, and I visited them often for help my English skills. I think the best way learning English is to visit and ask instructors.

#### **California State University System**

##### **Xing-Qin, 1st year:**

I speak Cantonese and Lon-dub in my house must of the time. I been living in the United states for more then ten years. I begin with my education in California started back with the English alphabet. I am now working on my Bachelor of Science Degree in California State University of Sacramento. I am having some difficulty in learning English because it is not my first language. Even thought I had received a lot of special helps while I was taking English course for some reason I am unable to keep I learn most of the time. When I was in elementary school, I had attained a ESL tutor session other then that I was also placed to study English with the first grader. Even thought I was learning English like every kinds that was to start from the very beginning materials, I was unable to absorbed what I was teach. It was because I was lacking a translation of what I was learning back to my first language in order to understand it. The lacking of basic knowledge of English I was unable to further use of what I know. During junior high, I attained another ESL English class. During junior high I

started to meet more foreign students, I started to see the success of most of them at able to use English as a normal American kids which started to build up my self essitem. Then during my eight grade, I was finally placed in a lower English class. But once again, I was placed back to another ESL class when I reached high school. The pattern of my English learning is a shift from ESL classes to regular English then back to where I started again, ESL class.

##### **Alberto, 2nd year:**

I speak Spanish at home because my parent are Mexicans and they do not speak english at all. I have been attending school here in california for ten years. But I still can not speak a perfect English because I do not practice it at home or outside of school. I have attended school the same number of year that I have lived here in the united states which is ten. When I started attending school I was enrolled in a bilingual class where they teached English and Spanish at the same time. Then I was transfered to an ESL class in their they thought me how to read and write and also how to put phrases sentences and essays together. Then I was transfered to regular english. But in that class I had some problems at the begining because I was being thought english. But the class that has thought me the most has been the ESL class I learned how to read and write in there. Now here in college I have been in ESL class for three semesters. It has helped me tremendously because now I feel that I can finally write a good strong essay with no run on sentences nor fragments. My frustrations have been failing English courses and my success has been passing them.

#### **University of California System**

##### **Daniel, 1st year:**

I speak Spanish at home. I've lived in the U.S. for seventeen years and have attended school in California for eleven years. When I returned from Mexico, as a child, I was enrolled in second grade and placed on the ESL/Bilingual Program. My mother was the one who chose this program for me, as she had a choice, and I'm very glad that she did because it has helped me make the transition from Spanish to English easier. From then on, I adopted quite well to the language. As a freshman in high school, a teacher saw my grades and achievements and placed me in Honors English with my consent. I have also passed the UC Subject A Examination on my first try. The problem that I begin to see in my writing—now that I'm in college—is that sometimes I write unclearly. I may try to say too many things in one sentence. As a child, learning English was easy, and fun, because it was like

*translating Spanish into English and English into Spanish. Because we took out time in studying visual flashcards and reading along in books while narrators read them through our earphones, learning English was a well-paced, and enjoyable pleasure for me; a pleasure of understanding the interesting environment around me. I am certain that I would have had a much more difficult time learning English if I hadn't participated in an ESL program.*

#### **Thomas, 1st year:**

*My original language is Vietnamese. I have been in the United States for almost five years. One of the most arduous struggles was my first year in high school. It was the hardest time I had because I had to learn a new language. I had to start off from scratch because I had no knowledge of the English language. I had to learn ten words a day through exercises and symbols. For example, My ESL teacher gave me a picture of a cat and showed me how to write and pronounce it. I also learned other things through symbols such as traffic signs and animals. I still remember when we learn about animals we had a chance to visit the zoo, which was very practical and beneficial. We learned from what we say. I liked the way my high school teacher taught me. She somehow clearly put the words in my memory. It took me about two years to get up to "regular" English. From there on, I learned more about literature. Through all these years, I always embarrassed myself by mispronouncing words and speaking with weird sentences structure, I got frustrated when people laughed at me because of all these things but the only way I could learn English was by making mistakes. I always have faith in myself and willing to strive to be better. It's very tough to learn a new language fluently but only a challenge can bring out the best in you.*

#### **Observations**

These samples reflect only a very few of the many L2 students who have moved and are moving through California public schools. However, even this small sample offers lessons, among them that we ought to talk more often to our students and attend more closely to their experiences, not just in our individual classes but at all levels of education in our state. Their comments directly relate to issues of intersegmental articulation, both in the sense of formal agreements between sending and receiving institutions and in the broader sense of communication and collaboration among California educators who serve L2 students.

#### **Articulation of Levels**

Several students speak about the progression they perceived as they moved from one class to the next. Linda for example said, "It always get harder and harder on every grade I went up," but in fact we know that no agreement exists about what students need as they move from level to level. Xiao says, "In ESL I learned easy and basic English and then to medium and high level." We need a way to describe *easy* and *basic*, *medium* and *high* levels that educators can use in common across the state, and we need a curriculum that moves students from one level to the next and that prepares students for the increasingly challenging academic demands they encounter at each new level.

As ESL professionals we need to be clear that our students can move not only through K-12 but onward into the colleges and four-year universities, so that we never say, as Jose's teacher did, that immigrant students, "just need to understand and serve." We also need to make sure that the articulation between bilingual programs and ESL or SDAIE programs are clear and that both parents and students understand the value of first language instruction in developing cognitive skills, so that they don't think, like Marcela, that the years spent in first language instruction are wasted.

#### **Articulation of Placement**

We also need to make sure that students are placed in the appropriate level of instruction, recognizing that students develop different abilities at different rates, or as Thien puts it, "I am successful in reading but frustrated in speaking. I'm successful in thinking but frustrated in explaining." Marcela is grateful that in her high school "all students are in their English level they need," but Amsala quit his ESL adult school class because it was too easy for him and did not meet his need to be able "to speak fluently and be comfortable in writing." Darid and Jose felt they were placed too low, but both triumphed through effort and persistence.

Students can, of course, be wrong in their perceptions about placement, but these students' words suggest that many students may not be placed correctly. As a profession we need to address their concerns, making sure we have valid and reliable placement procedures and a curriculum that is well designed to move students towards their goals, whether vocational or academic. As we know from the other articles in this volume, the current system is chaotic, with placement carried out in a variety of ways or not at all, with a lack of agreement about levels even between schools and certainly across segments, and with curricula that are as varied as the institutions that have created them.

## Issues of Reclassification

Xing Qin charts a pattern that is familiar to many ESL students: "The pattern of my English learning is a shift from ESL classes to regular English then back to where I started again, ESL classes." Because each level places more challenging cognitive and linguistic demands on students, a level of English proficiency that is acceptable at one level may not be sufficient at the next. Thus, students may move from ESL to regular English classes at one level and then be placed back in ESL classes at the next level. Again, articulation could improve this situation but perhaps never eliminate it, since the differences between elementary school, high school, community college, and university are real and since most L2 learners are not going to become indistinguishable from native speakers.

## Reexamining Language Acquisition Theory

However, Xing Qin's writing as well as the writing of many of the other students in this section also raises the issue that Lily Wong Fillmore has called "the ESL lifer" (see Scarcella, this volume). Some of these students have been in California schools for a very long time, yet their progress in academic English has not been notably successful. As Scarcella suggests, we as a profession must look again at the language acquisition theories we base our teaching on and the pedagogy that we practice to see if we are indeed serving these students in a way that will really prepare them for the next levels of their education.

## Responding to ESL Voices

This volume suggests many ways in which the issues raised by these students can be addressed. *California Pathways* (see Browning, this volume) documents the experiences that L2 students encounter as they move through the levels of education in California and suggests practices that can facilitate that movement, based on the many local and regional articulation efforts that are contributing to improving students' experience in our schools. The ESL descriptors in *California Pathways* offer a way to begin developing a common language for talking about our students' proficiencies, which in turn can help us assess them well and design curricula that are well sequenced to promote their acquisition of academic English. Thomas concludes by saying, "It's very tough to learn a new language fluently, but only a challenge can bring out the best in you." We as ESL professionals face a challenge of comparable magnitude; with cooperation and perseverance, it can bring out the best in us as well. ■

## Endnote

1. My decision to include students from adult school was deliberate. While there is little to no articulation between that level and those which precede it, there is a strong link between adult school and community college, which in turn leads to coordination with four-year schools.