# Improving the Placement of L2 Writers: The Students' Perspective

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**ABSTRACT**

*Much of the work focused on improving the placement of second language (L2) writers in writing programs has been researched and written about from the perspective of teachers and administrators. However, recent scholarship has drawn attention to student attitudes towards ESL and mainstream writing placements, finding that resident students may have different attitudes towards an ESL placement than international students. Building on more qualitative studies by these scholars and others, this article reports on a mixed methods study in which approximately four hundred students in mainstream and ESL writing classes were surveyed about their attitudes towards placement and linguistic identity labels. Using a student-centered, data-driven approach, the author of this article raises important issues and offers specific suggestions for WPAs to consider in improving the placement of L2 writers.*

Over the past decade, works such as Paul Kei Matsuda's "Myth of Linguistic Homogeneity in U.S. College Composition" have called attention to the increasing linguistic and cultural diversity of students in composition programs, noting the slowness of rhetoric and composition scholars, instructors, and administrators to respond to this diversity. A 2006 edition of *WPA Journal* responded to these calls, with the issue editors stating their goal as "to facilitate the process of integrating second language issues into the field of writing program administration by providing an overview of some of the key issues and by exploring possible approaches to such integration" (12). In that issue, Ana Maria Preto-Bay and Kristine Hansen draw attention to the "tipping point," writing that composition programs need to prepare for a demographic shift that has already begun occurring and will cause serious problems if WPAs fail to enact the needed changes to their

programs to support their changing student populations. Unfortunately, as evidenced by the limited number of presentations at WPA conferences and articles in *WPA Journal* (outside of the 2006 issue) focused on linguistically and culturally diverse student populations, it is clear that WPAs still need to focus more intently on the needs of second language (L2) writers. It appears that the "disciplinary division of labor" (Matsuda, "Composition") between L1 and L2 writing professionals still exists and is increasing the risk that writing programs will reach the "tipping point" without making necessary changes in course design and placement practices.

In the interest of pursuing informed changes, this article continues the discussion begun in the 2006 *WPA Journal* by examining student perspectives on the effectiveness of writing placement practices. Over the course of two semesters, I surveyed approximately 400 students at a major university in the southwestern U.S., both native and nonnative speakers of English as well as U.S. resident and international students, who were placed in both ESL and mainstream writing classes. In these surveys, students were asked to consider their attitudes regarding the way they are labeled, their feelings about placement, their conception of the difference between mainstream and ESL classes, and their ideas regarding how students should be placed. The findings from this study provide WPAs of both mainstream and L2 writing programs with student-centered data which raise a number of issues to consider in improving the placement of L2 writers. In particular, the data reveal the importance of considering the diversity of student perspectives regarding placement in order to design a writing program that effectively accommodates the growing number of L2 writers in higher education.

## WPA Work and L2 Writer Placement

Tony Silva, a foundational scholar in the L2 writing field, first drew attention to issues surrounding the placement of L2 writers in writing programs in 1994 with an article in *WPA Journal.* Here, he identifies four placement options for L2 writers: mainstreaming, basic writing, ESL writing, and cross-cultural composition courses. He writes that mainstreaming is the least desirable option because students would often be left to sink or swim in classes taught by teachers unprepared to address their needs. While Silva feels that cross-cultural composition is the best of the four options (see Matsuda and Silva for more on this option), the mainstream and ESL writing options have remained the top two avenues of placement for L2 writers. Later scholars have explored these types of placements, with George Braine reporting problems such as teacher and student antagonism towards L2 writers being a problem with mainstream placements. Matsuda ("Basic

Writing") has explored the presence of L2 writers in basic writing programs, arguing for a more inclusive definition of basic writing so that it includes all students subject to its policies.

Much of the work on WPA and L2 writers has taken a broad, administrator-centered perspective. Richard Haswell focuses on placement practices, namely the usage of direct and indirect testing. He explains that indirect testing (e.g. SAT, ACT, or TOEFL scores) is the most common placement method but also the most problematic. Haswell piloted a two-round placement method with non-ESL specialists reading essays the first round and ESL-specialists reading the second round. He reports that more tested students (40%, up from 20%) were mainstreamed through the new method and that chances of passing the placement increased if a student's ESL status and individual information about a student (such as grades, study habits, etc.) were known by the scorers. Deborah Crusan ("Assessment") takes an even stronger focus on placement testing, criticizing dependence on indirect testing and multiple choice placement exams even at major respected universities. She finds that an essay test is a better grade predictor than a multiple choice grammar test but using both in tandem is the most accurate predictor of student success.

More recent scholarship has focused on distinguishing between international and resident students, understanding that these two populations have different needs as well as placement preferences. This shift in focus is especially noticeable in the 2006 *WPA Journal* special issue, where Ana Maria Preto-Bay and Kristine Hansen make a distinction between domestic L2 writers and international students, with the former often being "involuntary minorities" with a sense of powerlessness while the latter, coming to study on student visas, are often members of the privileged classes in their own countries. Patricia Friedrich addresses these distinctions in more depth, distinguishing between international ESL, resident ESL, and monolingual basic writers. She explains that international students may be more comfortable with more formal, academic writing than other ESL students due to the quality of their previous literacy education. According to Friedrich, basic writers know how to use English but are acquiring the academic version while international students may be acquiring both with domestic ESL students somewhere in between.

In the same issue, Gail Shuck writes from a novice administrator's perspective, discussing the difficulties of being "the ESL person" on campus while raising a few salient issues concerning the myth of transience, linguistic containment, and monolingual ideology. She explains that her university provides a few ESL classes before a mainstream transfer, with the expectation that these few classes were all students needed in order to learn

English academic literacy. While they were in the ESL track, students were "contained," that is, they were not seen as part of the regular composition program. Like Silva, Shuck embraces the cross-cultural composition model but emphasizes the challenges it poses to administrators: maintaining an equal ratio of L1 to L2 writers, recruiting a sufficient number of native English speaking students, and finding instructors qualified to work with both types of students.

Susan K. Miller-Cochran has also written from the WPA's perspective about the WPA's dilemma, realizing that scholars have raised a call to action to address the increasing presence of L2 writers in writing programs without always providing specific directions on how to do so. After articulating various myths surrounding L2 writers and writing programs such as the misbelief that they are easy to identify, Miller-Cochran writes that WPAs are responsible for taking steps in "gaining an understanding of the linguistic and cultural influences that affect students and their written language" (217). Her recommendations for action include hiring instructors with backgrounds in L2 writing, incorporating L2 writing study in graduate programs, and providing workshops and other training to prepare TAs and faculty to work more effectively with L2 writers.

## Identity Labels and Student Placement Preferences

Some recent work focusing on the placement of L2 writers in writing programs has shifted towards examining identity labels and student attitudes towards these labels and placement. This conversation was largely initiated by Kimberly Costino and Sunny Hyon's article "'A Class for Students Like Me:' Reconsidering Relationships Among Identity Labels, Residency Status, and Students' Preferences for Mainstream or Multilingual Composition." Their study focuses more intently on the student perspective and the use of linguistic identity labels (e.g. native/nonnative speaker) than previous work had. For their study, Costino and Hyon interviewed nine students, two from the U.S. and seven from six other countries. All students viewed the native English speaker and bilingual labels positively in regard to English ability while others, such as English as a second language speaker, were seen positively by a few international students but negatively by the other international and U.S. students. All the students they interviewed were satisfied with their placement, with their reasons focused on the following: "(1) a desire to be in a class that addressed their language ability level and (2) a desire to be in a class with students 'like' them" (72). The U.S.-born students had been placed into mainstream sections and, when asked, emphasized that they would not have liked to be placed in an ESL section.

In discussing the implications of their study, Costino and Hyon feel that administrators should consider the labeling of students, especially when the ESL label may be seen negatively. They also emphasize the importance of involving student voices when making placement decisions.

More recently, Christina Ortmeier-Hooper reports on three case studies of U.S. resident multilingual students in an article with a telling title, "English May Be My Second Language, but I'm not ESL." Finding that her focal students did not identify with the ESL label but did in fact identify English as their second language, Ortmeier-Hooper problematizes our use of labels, pointing out the stigmatizing potential of labels like ESL, ESOL, or ELL. She explains how U.S. resident students may be less likely to identify with these labels and the courses to which they are attached, since they graduated from the U.S. K–12 system.

## Study Design, Participants, and Context

The project discussed here investigates and responds to a number of issues raised by the research reviewed in the previous section. Building on Silva's argument that the cross-cultural composition course should be a standard placement option, this study draws from student perspectives to articulate the insufficiency of the traditional ESL/mainstream dichotomy. It draws on the work of Matsuda, Braine, and others to explore student understandings of the different course options, arguing that there should be no one-size-fits-all option for L2 writers, especially given the differences between domestic and international L2 writers noted by scholars such as Preto-Bay, Hanson, and Friedrich. Following on work by Haswell, Crusan, and others, there is also discussion on the way students are placed, and students in this study join these scholars in revealing the problems with dependence on a single placement instrument. This study was most directly influenced by the works of Costino and Hyon and Ortmeier-Hooper, which raise concerns about the problematic nature of linguistic identity labels and their connection with the placement of L2 writers. Wanting to build on the valuable student-centered findings about labeling and placement satisfaction in these two studies, I constructed this study with the goal of having a larger sample size and an increased focus on placement and perceptions of course options. The study discussed here used a mixed methods design, as a quantitative survey instrument allows for collecting data from a large sample while adding open-ended responses to the survey along with interview data gives qualitative data to provide the depth needed to understand the complexity of student responses. For the purposes of this article, the focus on identity labels has been reduced in order to allow greater focus on

students' placement satisfaction, an issue that is a more immediate concern for WPAs.

This study was conducted at the University of Texas at El Paso, a 22,000-student university on the U.S.-Mexico border that draws most of its students from the region. The student body is over 70% Latino, with around 8% of the student body commuting daily from Mexico. Non-Mexican international students (mainly graduate students) constitute a small group, totaling about 3% of the student body (Center for Institutional Evaluation, Research, and Planning). As depicted in figure 1, based on this study's survey responses, the majority of students in both mainstream and ESL classes speak two or more languages. While 93.4% of the ENG 1311 students attended high school in the U.S., 94.7% of the ESOL 1311 students attended high school in Mexico.

Given the unique demographics of UTEP's student population, multilingual students are the majority at this institution. While these demographics make applying this study's findings to other institutions more difficult, they certainly provide advantages. For instance, unlike institutions where multilingual students comprise only a small minority, UTEP has a multilingual student population large enough to collect sufficient data for quantitative analysis. Additionally, as evidenced by the student responses in figure 1, UTEP is home to a large number of resident L2 and so-called generation 1.5 students, students who have migrated to the U.S. at some point during their lives before starting college. As discussed by Preto-Bay and Hansen, Friedrich, Ortmeier-Hooper, and others, resident L2 students have attitudes towards ESL placements that international L2 students may not possess.

As every institution is unique, and UTEP is likely more unique in its demographics than most, it is important to understand its demographics may result in different student perspectives and attitudes towards placement. For instance, ESL is generally less stigmatized in El Paso than elsewhere because the majority of inhabitants of the city and students at the various educational institutions are multilingual. Nonetheless, it appears the findings from this study are applicable in other contexts for a various reasons. For instance, as elsewhere in the U.S., the official language of all educational institutions in El Paso is English, and the vast majority of instruction outside of grade school bilingual programs occurs in English. Students in this study commonly exhibited attitudes found by researchers in other locations, such as resentment at being placed in ESL and a belief that mainstream classes were places where students learned more. However, one major area of difference from institutions where there are more international students may be students' concern that they would be speaking

mostly Spanish in an ESL class with fellow students. In a more international environment, students in an ESL class would be more likely to practice English with their peers, as this would be their common language. In sum, while the student body at UTEP is different than many U.S. colleges and universities, it provides a unique location for research on Latino resident or generation 1.5 L2 students, a student demographic that is becoming increasingly common throughout the U.S.

Table 1. Demographics of Surveyed Population

|  | ESOL 1311 | ENG 1311 |
|---|---|---|
| Surveyed students | 193 | 204 |
| Gender | 44.3% male, 55.7% female | 53% male, 47% female |
| Languages | 96.4% speak two or more languages | 80.8% speak two or more languages |
| Time in U.S. | 4.7% of have lived in the U.S. all their life, 52.9% part of their life, and 42.5% live in Mexico or another country | 70.2% have lived in the U.S. all their life, 23.9% part of their life, and 5.8% live in Mexico or another country |
| High school | 94.7% attended high school in Mexico | 93.4% attended high school in the U.S. |

When students at UTEP participated in this study, they were enrolled in one of two credit-bearing FYC courses: ESOL 1311: English Composition for Speakers of ESL or ENG 1311: English Composition, which are both first-semester courses in a two-semester FYC sequence. According to UTEP's placement policy, the following groups of students are required to take an English language placement test:

- Non-English speaking students who received their secondary education (high school) in a language other than English.
- Students who attended English as a Second Language or bilingual classes in high school.
- Students who have taken the TOEFL exam but did not attain the score required to be placed directly into regular courses offered in English.
- Students taking the *Prueba de Aptitud Academica* (PAA)[2] as part of the admissions requirements. ("ESOL Placement Exam")

If students score high enough on the first two multiple section choices on the placement exam to test out of lower ESOL sections, they are required to write an essay which will determine if they are ready for ESOL 1311. Once placed, "students in the ESOL program must continue taking ESOL courses until the required course sequence is completed. ESOL students cannot change from ESOL to English courses, or vice versa, unless special permission is granted" ("ESOL Course Sequence").

Per IRB requirements, informed consent was obtained electronically from the survey participants and via a paper form for the interviewees. Beginning of semester surveys were administered in class to 397 English L1 and L2 students from ten ENG 1311 and ten ESOL 1311 classes over two semesters. Much shorter surveys, designed to assess if placement preferences shifted, were administered at the end of the semester (See appendices A and B for the ESOL surveys—ENG surveys were virtually the same, with minor wording changes when inquiring about placement). Additionally, I interviewed nine students—five from an ESOL class and four from an ENG class—all identifying English as their second language. The surveys were designed and piloted over the course of a semester, with Zoltán Dörnyei's *Questionnaires in Second Language Research* providing guidance for the survey design process. The research questions driving the survey design and the data analysis were as follows:

1. What are multilingual students' attitudes towards various labels commonly used to describe students like them? Are these attitudes affected by students' self-identification with the labels or self-reported usage of English?

2. How do students view mainstream and L2 writing courses differently and how do course titles affect student perception of the courses? If multilingual students see certain labels negatively, will they be more likely to see the associated courses negatively?

3. If given the choice, would multilingual students placed into ESL and mainstream classrooms choose the same placements that the institution assigned them? Does their placement satisfaction change between the beginning and end of a semester?

The presentation of data in this article focuses mainly on questions 2 and 3, given that these would likely be of more immediate interest to WPAs. In order to answer these questions, the qualitative and quantitative survey data were analyzed together. Qualitative survey responses were generally a phrase or sentence in length and were read carefully using inductive data analysis, in which the "research findings emerge from the frequent,

dominant, or significant themes within the raw data" (Mackey and Gass 179). After reading through the responses, I formed categories, placed the responses within them, and further refined/consolidated the categories with repeated readings. Quantitative survey data were analyzed using filtering tools that were part of the online survey service, which enabled me to sort responses by reported use of English, U.S. residency status, and other characteristics.

The nine interviews were transcribed, read repeatedly, and coded for patterns. Codes were attached to stanzas, which James Paul Gee has described as a set of lines in a section of discourse dedicated to a certain theme. As with the qualitative survey responses, the categories were developed inductively while reading through the data. The interview data were analyzed in conjunction with the survey data.

## Placement Satisfaction

Questions 14 and 15 on the beginning of semester survey and questions 4–6 on the end of semester survey focused on obtaining data about placement satisfaction. For question 14, ESOL students were asked, "If given the freedom to choose, would you rather be in your current writing course ESOL 1311, or a 1311 course in the ENG department?" ENG students were asked the same question, with the ESOL and ENG names reversed. Looking at the responses depicted in Figure 1, there was a clear difference between the ENG and ESOL student placement satisfaction levels. ESOL students were clearly less satisfied with their placements, as 95.6% of ENG students preferred their current class while 72.9% of the ESOL students did. An analysis of the qualitative survey responses for this question gives more insight into the overall numbers.

vAmong ENG students, 7 of the 9 who desired to be in ESOL instead of ENG explained their choice. Of these, 2 appeared to have a mistaken understanding of the ESOL course, thinking that they would learn about different languages: "Only if I could learn and improvise some more with Italian and French." However, the other 5 students were concerned their English was not good enough for ENG 1311 or felt more comfortable with students like them. For instance, one wrote, "because I might be a little behind in the learning comparing to the rest of my class," while another wrote, "I feel better when I'm with people who speak the same language."

Among ESOL open-ended responses, 32 of 119 came from students who indicated they would have preferred to be placed in ENG instead of ESOL. These responses fell into several different categories including a desire to learn and speak more English (9), expectations of the course being
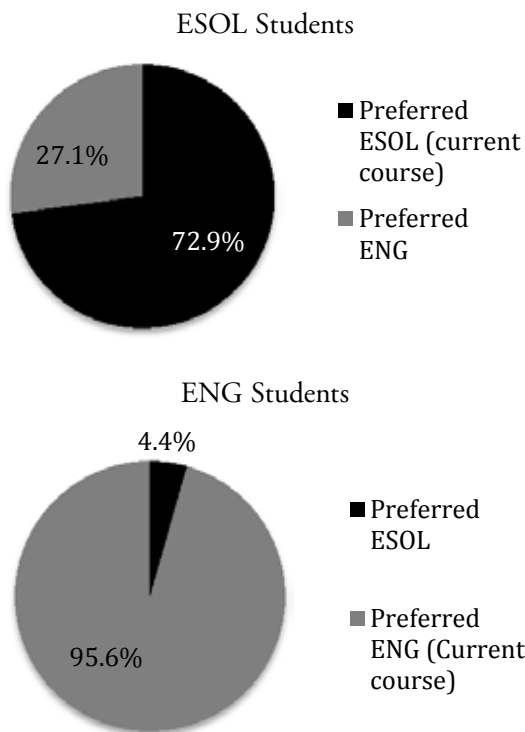
ESOL Students



ENG Students



Figure 1. Percentage of students who were satisfied with their current course or preferred the other option.

more challenging or faster (8), desire to be with native English speakers (NNSs) (4), belief that they knew enough English (4), simple dissatisfaction (3), anti-labeling/division (2), and a concern with course credits (2). One student whose response was placed in the first category wrote, "because I believe that in that department I could learn more than in the other one." A student in the second category felt that being in an English course would be more challenging so they would learn faster while a few other students thought they could graduate faster even though ESOL 1311 counted for the ENG 1311 credit.

The remaining open-ended ESOL responses, 87 of 119, came from students who were satisfied with their placement in ESOL. Like the responses discussed above, these fell into a number of categories: the course is better for their needs and can help them better (21), they have more to learn and are not ready (16), it is easier because others speak their language (14), it is more comfortable because students are at the same level (14), the teacher

or teaching style is better adapted to learning needs (10), simple preference (7), and they do not know what the ENG course is like (5). Some students in the top category, saying the course is better for their needs, reflected the attitude of Costino and Hyon's participant who described an ESOL class as a "class for students like me." One of the students in the present study described his preference for the ESOL class, writing, "because this course is made for the students like me who doesn't speak very well the English, and who need special attention in some areas that the English students already dominate." Another student, clearly understanding the limitations of a monolingual teacher who has tacit knowledge of the structures of a language, wrote, "because the teachers understand our necessities as a second language learners. and they can explain us better than a English teacher will do." Another large group (14) simply felt more at ease in ESOL, with these responses ranging from a simple "I feel more comfortable" to "I think its better because if I make a mistake my teacher will correct me and I won't be embarrassed."

To examine whether or not the students' placement satisfaction changed over the course of the semester, students were asked a question very similar to question 14 on the end of semester survey. Unfortunately, this survey only received 99 responses this question, compared to 193 at the beginning of the semester. This resulted from a lack of access to computer labs at the end of the one semester, requiring a number of students to take the survey voluntarily. An overall view of these responses finds 77.8% of students, slightly more than 72.9% at the beginning of the semester, preferred ESOL over ENG. Given the limited data, a better picture comes from tracking changes in individual responses. Using phone number identification data, I compared the beginning and end of semester responses of 53 students. 43 of these students did not change preferences while 3 shifted from preferring ESOL to ENG while 7 shifted from preferring ENG to ESOL. This information, combined with the overall data and the interview responses of Osvaldo,[3] whose placement opinion shifted from wanting to be in English to preferring ESOL, indicates that some students may have become more satisfied with their ESOL placement as the semester progressed.

Whereas responses to question 14 revealed that students had a diversity of preferences, with some anticipating more opportunities to improve English in a mainstream section and others preferring the comfort of an ESOL section, responses to question 15 revealed a new layer of complexity to student responses—a layer that demonstrates the value of cross-cultural composition courses and the inadequacy of placement systems solely dependent on an assessment tool. In order to understand students' preferences from a different perspective, question 15 asked them a question similar to 14, but

using different labels. It read, "Would you rather be in a writing course with all nonnative speakers of English (NNESs) or in a class that includes both native and nonnative speakers of English?" While only 27.1% of ESOL students wanted to be in a class in the English department, 79.2% wanted to be in a "Class that includes both native and nonnative speakers of English." This is almost a complete reversal of the results of question 14, indicating that students value a course dedicated to their needs but also see the value of a more mainstream environment. Among open-ended survey response for this question, 19 of the 133 were from students who preferred an all-NNES class, with responses falling into the following categories: being on the same level with the other students (8), feeling more comfortable (5), having similar needs (2), and 1 response each saying that they would have more confidence, be better than the other students, be able to speak Spanish, and learn more. The 114 responses that preferred a mixed class fell into several categories as well: the chance to practice more English (32), they would learn faster (19), possibilities for cultural exchange (17), belief that their English and Spanish were good enough for a mixed course (11), mixed is simply better (5), while the remaining few students said it would help build tolerance or had no preference. The responses here certainly connect with some of the qualitative responses for question 14 with the interesting aspect being that many students who indicated a preference for the ESOL course in question 14 indicated a preference for a mixed course in question 15. For instance, in question 14, a surveyed student explained their preference for ESOL, writing that "I'm with people with the same level of English that I am." In the next question, the same student indicated a preference for a mixed class, writing that "being in contact with native speakers is better." As discovered through survey filtering tools, this preference shift occurred in half of the total ESOL responses.

Turning to the interviewed students reveals a bit more about these seemingly contradictory responses. The interviewed students in ESOL explained their preference for the mixed class by explaining that they would be forced to speak more English if having to work with NES peers. However, Pamela's statement revealed an ambivalence that appears to have been shared by many of the respondents which helps explain the disparity in responses for questions 14 and 15:

> I think that in English, maybe I will be with people that speak in English, so it will be better to me because I will be forced, because for example, in the ESL classes, my classmates speak Spanish, so . . . the outlines and the teamwork's, they're in Spanish too, when the teacher

> say . . . speak in English, I do, but when she didn't notice, we speak in Spanish, and, I don't know, I, but I like the ESOL classes and I think that there are more, like, um, *como dedicadas* [like dedicated].

Here, Pamela reveals that Spanish is the dominant language among peers in the ESOL classes, and her concern that she does not practice enough English as a result. Nevertheless, she prefers this environment because it is "dedicated" to serving the needs of L2 writers, something that a mainstream English class is not. The importance of cross-cultural composition offerings and DSP in resolving this contradiction will be discussed more in the final section.

## Course Titles

Students were also asked if they would consider enrolling in a composition courses based on titles. English Composition and English Composition for Speakers of ESL are actual titles used at UTEP while English Composition for Native Speakers, English Composition for Multilingual Writers, and English Composition for Second Language (L2) Writers were hypothetical titles. As illustrated in Figure 2, students' current course titles were the most popular, with 84.3% of ENG students choosing English Composition and 60.2% of ESOL students choosing English Composition for Speakers of ESL. English Composition for Multilingual Writers was chosen about equally by students from both groups, albeit by a relatively small percentage (23.5% ENG and 22% ESOL) of respondents. English Composition for Second Language Writers was also a popular choice among ESOL students with 42.4% of respondents choosing it. 33.5% of ESOL students chose English Composition while 17.8% chose English Composition for Native Speakers, which reflects the strong desire of a number of students to either be in a more mainstream course and to work in closer contact with NESs with the hope to practice and learn English more quickly.

Students' conceptions of a course titled English Composition for Multilingual Speakers deserves more examination here. A number of the interviewed students picked the multilingual composition section as one of their choices and explained why they liked the title. Here is an exchange with Joanne:

> Interviewer: Down below I had asked about course titles . . . and for example you chose English composition and English comp for multilingual writers . . . Why did you choose those two and not the other ones?

Joanne: Because they don't label you, for example here, second language writer is ESL right? So, I don't know if that means you're not very proficient, you're not, but you wanna learn. So making that title will change that, I'm going to English, I'm not going to a secondary language, or something like that.

Interviewer: OK. And so, and you like this one even though it includes a label, English composition for multilingual writers. Why did you like that?

Joanne: Because you're not saying you're not proficient in one language. You're saying that you're proficient in more than one language.

In this exchange, Joanne reveals the problem with stigmatizing labels like ESL and is conscious of the way that they attempt to construct her as an inferior student, especially when compared to native speakers. While she was generally antagonistic towards labeling, she chose multilingual it because it labeled students in a positive way by indicating proficiency in multiple languages, unlike a name that includes terms like "second," "limited" or "non." Miguel shared Joanne's view, saying, "I don't really like that ESOL or that English, so I like the term bilingual and multilingual, cause, you know I think things are better." Both Joanne and Miguel had been placed in the ESOL section.

While students like Joanne and Miguel appreciated the title "multilingual," the term also has the potential to confuse and turn away students. In a question seeking how much students identified with different linguistic identity labels, not many students identified with multilingual because they thought it was defined as one who speaks more than two languages, a belief shared unanimously by the interviewees. When asked why he did not choose the English composition for multilingual writers course, Osvaldo replied, "For multilingual writers? Because those are, I think that those are for people who speak more than two languages and it's a little bit more complex, more complex right?" Interviewee Sandra and a number of students who responded to the open-ended part of the course title question on the survey held the belief that they would be practicing and learning other languages in the multilingual composition course. For instance, a survey respondent from ENG 1311 who indicated an interest in the multilingual course wrote, "I would love to learn how to write proper in German and Spanish."
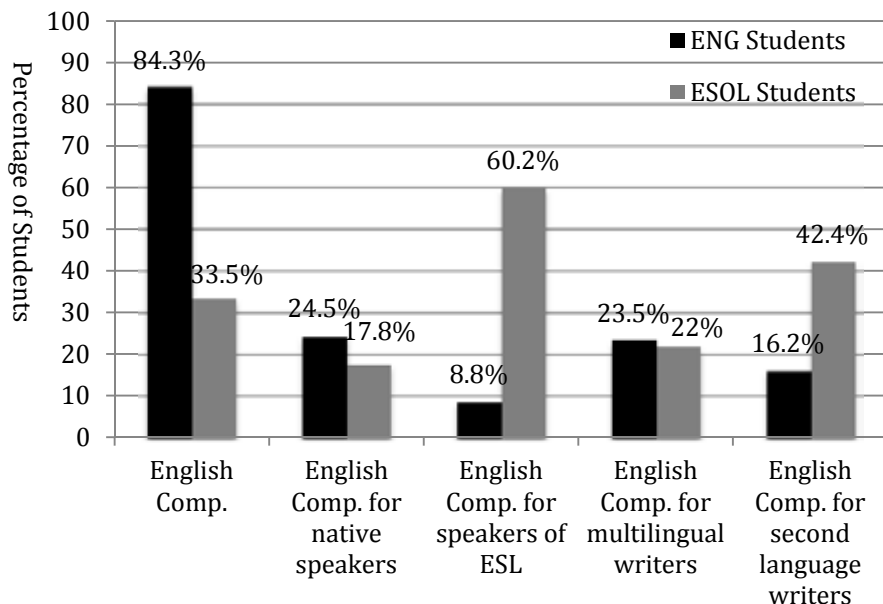
Figure 2. Percentage of students from the ENG and ESOL classes that indicated interest to take a course based on its title.

## Placement System Preferences

For another question, students were asked, "How important should the following be in deciding first year writing class placements for second language writers? Student opinion, test scores, high school English grades, and student advisors." They were asked to rate these as "Not important," "Not very important," "Important," and "Very important." Overall, the responses between the two groups were virtually identical and averages for each option were all closer to "Important" than any other answer choice. The largest difference between the groups was high school English grades, as the ESOL students ranked them slightly less important than the ENG students did. Test scores were valued the most highly by both groups while student opinion was valued second highest.

Several of the interviewed students felt that student opinion would be important and that they or others in their classes could have benefited from an interview to decide placement. For instance, Joanne, who was unsatisfied with her placement in ESOL, felt that she could have explained her case better in an interview. In fact, she approached the department chair in an attempt to avoid a course that she did not think she would benefit from;

however, he was unable to help her because of UTEP's rigid placement system. Pamela explained that other students in her ESOL 1311 class wanted to be in ENG 1311, something they could have expressed in a placement interview. On the opposite end, Andrea, who was placed in ENG 1311 but indicated on the first survey that she would have rather been in ESOL 1311, said interviews could be helpful to allow students to indicate they did not feel comfortable taking a mainstream course.

From the survey and interview results, it is clear that students believe an effective placement system should use a variety of information sources. The interviewed students in the ESOL classes recalled taking several tests upon beginning college in the U.S., and found them useful but problematic as their score could easily be affected by a bad night before the test or test-induced stress. In making an argument for a greater weight on high school English grades than test scores, Sandra pointed out that a "grade is like what you accomplished throughout the year, a test is what you take in one day." Miguel favored student advisors, because he felt they would know more about students: "if you see him on a regular basis, he will know your potential and everything." In contrast, Sandra pointed out that she did not relate well to her advisor, and rarely saw her, so she could not be as helpful as expected in deciding placement. All the ESOL students interviewed valued student opinion, arguing that they provided a different dimension to understanding student preferences and motivations that scores and grades could not. In sum, it appears that students thought all the surveyed elements should play some role in determining placements.

Discussion

Considering student perspectives in placement adds a new layer of complexity because student attitudes are intimately connected with identity, which Bonnie Norton describes as "multiple, a site of struggle, and changing over time" (14). Applying this understanding of identity to student placement preferences, I will draw on the findings discussed in the previous sections to articulate ways that mainstream WPAs can work with ESL WPAs (if separate positions) to examine their institutional contexts and improve the way L2 writers' needs are served at their institution. When programs are separated like at UTEP, addressing the issues raised by this study is certainly a task that requires cross-program collaboration. As a result, in addressing WPAs in the following discussion, I am generally referring to contributions by both mainstream and ESL WPAs.

The findings presented in the previous sections reveal the multiplicity of student preferences, as the majority of students felt satisfied in ESOL

courses but many of the same students desired more interaction with native English speakers. While some students in this study were concerned about embarrassing situations in a mainstream classroom or felt that the ESOL classroom would better address their needs, others felt that more interaction with NES students in a mainstream environment would help them learn faster. As seen by Pamela's interview response and the survey results, most students desired the best of both worlds—a desire that is not fulfilled at most colleges and universities where the ESL/ENG dichotomy is the norm.

In response to students' multiple preferences, WPAs can work to expand the types of placement options offered, focusing especially on options that promote interaction between L1 and L2 learners while addressing all student needs. Tony Silva and Paul Kei Matsuda have written about the value of a cross-cultural composition course taught at Purdue, with variations more recently implemented at other institutions. In a cross-cultural composition course, L1 and L2 students are intentionally placed in the same class and taught by an instructor has been trained to work with both types of writers, ideally someone who has had graduate work in rhetoric and composition with coursework focused on L2 writers. This results in an environment where L1 and L2 writers can comfortably interact and support each other, while including elements of cross-cultural learning. Because the instructor would have knowledge about working with both types of learners, L2 students would receive more specialized assistance than they would likely receive in a mainstream class. Unfortunately, while a cross-cultural composition course seems to be the ideal way to address the multiple preferences of the students surveyed in this study, it is has a reputation of being challenging to implement. For instance, it requires the creation of a new course, instructors who are specialists in L1 and L2 writing, informing students about this unique course option, and finding students to self-select the course.

As a simpler alternative to creating cross-cultural composition courses, WPAs and instructors from mainstream and ESL writing programs can collaborate in finding new ways to link courses and their content. This linking would ensure that all course options are credit bearing, which is the case at UTEP and an important point for students. Mainstream and ESL WPAs can coordinate course curricula, so that students have similar writing experiences in both classes, something that has also been done at UTEP. By having similar writing assignments, instructors can bring together students from different classes for certain writing projects and activities such as peer review. This way, students will have teachers and classes dedicated to serving their needs while having the opportunity to learn from diverse students via an exchange of linguistic and cultural knowledge.

The second point of Norton's definition of identity, that it is a "site of struggle," is obviously present in placement, which is a site of tension between student feelings about placement and the decisions that institutions make. In this study, the struggle is apparent in the 27.1% of ESOL students who indicated a preference for an ENG placement. It is perhaps most vividly clear in Joanne's comments and active resistance of her placement. As evident in the exchange quoted earlier, Joanne resisted the ESOL placement in part because she saw this label stigmatizing students, saying they were not ready for "real" college work. In the interview, she questioned the rationale that required her to take a sequence of ESOL courses after finding them overly easy while also receiving high grades in mainstream disciplinary courses, commenting, "I took history, I also took philosophy, I took sociology, so I'm like those are really hard classes for reading, so why should I go to ESOL." As Joanne's experience attests, unexamined course titles and placement systems can negatively influence student lives. Joanne's comments and the opinions shared by many students in this study reveal that students do pay attention to the way they are labeled and placed, and, when in the few cases like Joanne's where they challenge a placement, are often shown they may be unable to take the courses they feel would most benefit their education.

Unfortunately, WPAs are often constrained like Joanne in their ability to effect change in their institutions and there may also be tension between what WPAs see as best for their programs and broader institutional and political contexts. Placement systems may be coordinated by other departments that show intense resistance to change. Public institutions such as UTEP's may be even worse as placement systems can be dictated at the state level by people with very little knowledge of the local institution's context and student demographics. Nonetheless, change can occur and should begin by forging collaborations with other WPAs on campus and, together with them, conducting studies like this one to evaluate the placement of L2 writers on campus. By building alliances and collecting data, WPAs will gain a better understanding of the shortcomings with their system and have the data and alliances to argue for change whether to the department responsible for testing and placement or, if necessary, at the state level.

In order to mediate the tension between programs and students, WPAs can advocate for systems that place students more accurately and more fairly, involving student opinions in the placement process, and developing course titles that do not marginalize students. The students in this study felt that all elements on the survey, test scores, high school English grades, advisors' opinions, and students' opinions, should be considered because any element taken alone is too limited. Too often, placement systems rely on a

single test score, even though research by Crusan and others have shown this to be inadequate. Of all surveyed options listed above, student opinion is likely to be least considered; however, this has begun to change with the growing acceptance of Directed Self-Placement (DSP).

DSP, proposed for mainstream students by Daniel Royer and Roger Gilles, is certainly an option for L2 writer placement and has been more recently recommended by Edward White in *WPA: Writing Program Administration* and by the "CCCC Statement on Second Language Writing and Writers." In the Royer and Gilles model, DSP consists of informing students about the different placement options and letting them make the decision of whether a mainstream or basic writing placement would be best for them. Implementing such a placement program for L2 writers could work in a similar way, as the information session would focus on the advantages and disadvantages of both an ESL and a mainstream writing placement and, if available, a cross-cultural composition section. If deciding to implement cross-cultural composition sections, this information session would be an ideal place to recruit interested students. The results of this study have shown that students have varying and conflicting preferences but certainly value having a say in where they are placed, so an informed decision made by them might be the most effective way for placement.

For some WPAs and programs, moving completely to a DSP model may be a too radical or difficult step given their institutional politics, and some may find simply that their student population may not make appropriate placement decisions on their own. Instead of giving students complete say in their decision, gaining their opinion via a placement interview may be an option, but probably not very feasible for mid-size or large institutions given the cost and time involved in interviewing hundreds or even thousands of students a year. For those concerned about implementing DSP policies and the costs of placement interviews, Crusan has discussed an innovative Online DSP module for L1 and L2 writers that requests demographic information and other data, such as how often a student translates from their native language when writing in English. According to Crusan, it determines a placement by calculating an algorithm based on the questionnaire responses combined with more traditional data, test scores, GPA, and class rank ("Politics" 214). While Crusan admits that this is not completely self-placement, surveying students online becomes a cost-effective way to better know students, their experiences, and preferences when placing them into first-year writing courses. Although this survey would not give students complete power in the placement process, it would make them feel a larger part of the process and the results would provide programs with data to improve and reconsider their placement practices. By

keeping students' responses on file, WPAs could turn to these responses as an additional resource to discuss a student's placement if the student challenges it at some point.

As noted by Joanne and other students, course titles can marginalize students, making them more antagonistic about a certain course placement and increasing the tension between students and placement systems. Students in this study had clear and sometimes very strong opinions about what an ENG or ESOL class was, as well as what a course like English Composition for Multilingual Students might be like. Some did not like labels such as "ESL" and "nonnative speaker" being attached to courses as they saw them as stigmatizing, focusing on what students could not do as opposed to what they could. When considering the relation between labeling and language hierarchies in composition courses, there are two aspects to consider: the use of "English" to describe a composition course and the attachment of a linguistic identity label like "ESL." In order to avoid pushing an English-only ideology and to encourage the incorporation of multiple languages in students' research and writing processes, composition courses should be thought of and labeled as composition courses and not English courses. Concerned about the implications of attaching potentially negative linguistic identity labels to courses, WPAs at some schools have reported renaming course titles like "Composition for speakers of ESL" to "Composition for Multilingual Speakers" (Costino and Hyon; Goen-Salter, Porter, and vanDommelen). However, this move is complicated as students in this study felt they would have to know more than two languages to be in such a course. Some students even thought a course labeled "multilingual" would give them the opportunity to learn other languages.

The diversity of student perceptions regarding course titles demonstrates a clear need to educate incoming students about the actual content of courses so that they can develop more informed opinions about them. Such an information session could be incorporated into the summer orientation program and focus on the differences between the course options, ranging from the differences between assignments to the types of students who enter certain courses and succeed in them. While such an informational session would be essential when implementing a DSP program, it could also be useful for a university where DSP is not in place, as providing students with informed understandings of differences between ESL and mainstream courses may help potentially dissatisfied students become aware of the benefits of an ESL placement.

Finally, as student preferences are likely to change over time based on experience with courses, language development, or discourses they pick up from fellow students, placement systems need to be flexible. Among the 53

ESOL students whose preferences I was able to track from the beginning to the end of the semester, almost 20% changed their mind from the first survey to the last. One interviewed student, Amanda, was initially placed in ENG despite wanting to be in ESOL, although she later became satisfied with her ENG placement, saying, "Cause I didn't think I could do it. I thought it was too difficult . . . and . . . but now I think if the rest of my classes are going to be in English, I should start right now with that, practicing English." On the other hand, Pamela was placed into ESOL and initially preferred an ENG placement, but later became satisfied with ESOL.

Of the recommendations suggested here, creating a flexible placement system may be the easiest to implement. The system currently in place at UTEP requires students to take a sequence of ESOL courses, regardless of how they are doing in the courses, their opinions about them, or how they are doing in mainstream disciplinary courses. For instance, Pamela had to take not only two writing courses, but also a reading course and a few others before passing out of the full ESOL sequence, courses she would likely receive limited benefit from given her negative attitude towards being required to take them. In contrast, a more flexible system would allow a student like Pamela to move out of ESOL earlier, a decision that could be made based on student preferences or preferences combined with some kind of standard, such as a certain GPA needed in either the ESOL or mainstream courses completed or the student advisor's opinion. In evaluating the value of a flexible placement system, WPAs can monitor the success of students switching from one track to another in order to evaluate whether students generally benefit or suffer from these transitions. While this information should not be used to end a flexible system, it could be used to make recommendations to future students who question their placement.

Conclusion

Despite efforts to improve placement practices and find new ways to consider student opinion, no placement system will ever be completely effective due to the complexity of student preferences and abilities. As researchers have repeatedly shown, L2 students are diverse and measures of language proficiency and residency status will not account for other factors that are constantly shaping their preferences. Student preferences are multiple and shifting, often resulting from a confluence of discourses that include friends' experiences in mainstream and ESL courses, students' personal experiences, and discourses surrounding labels used to describe students and courses. Preferences are further shaped by the grades students receive in classes, the type of teachers they have and classes they take, and the value

they perceive in the ESL courses they take. Whenever writing programs place students, they simplify this complex and shifting reality; however, it is obviously necessary to categorize and place students in courses for students with similar yet diverse needs.

WPAs should strive to improve placement for L2 writers, understanding that institutional and state bureaucracies will often stand in the way of their efforts and that a perfect system will never exist. It is obvious from the voices of the researchers at the beginning of this article and the voices of students in this study that placement systems should be examined and improved. While UTEP may be unique in the number of L2 writers that it has, its students certainly share concerns of students from other institutions, as the participants in this study echoed the responses of students in the Costino and Hyon and Ortmeier-Hooper studies. Moreover, moves to improve placement with cross-cultural composition, DSP, and increased flexibility have been implemented at other institutions while a more linguistically diverse institution like UTEP remains behind the curve in this regard. Moving to a more effective placement system is certainly not easy and there is certainly no blanket solution for all contexts. Moreover, while this article has advocated a larger consideration of student opinion in the placement process, WPAs will always need to balance student opinion with more traditional data measures, such as how well students do in the classes in which they are placed.

Since the scope of some of the suggestions presented above may seem overwhelming, I will end by describing some first steps. Mainstream WPAs can begin making a difference by paying attention to research focused on L2 writers, starting with the 2006 *WPA Journal* special issue and attending more presentations focused on L2 writing issues at conferences. They can ensure all their instructional staff have knowledge about working with L2 writers, even if it is simply a day devoted to L2 writers in a composition theory and pedagogy class for new TAs or occasional sessions devoted to L2 writers at program workshops. Then, they can form stronger collaborations with ESL and even basic writing WPAs at their institutions, if they are separate positions, joining with them to conduct formal or informal studies about the efficacy of placement for different types of writers at their institutions. They can then utilize these alliances and data to make the argument to implement some of the suggestions made above or other changes that may be necessary given their findings and local context. By understanding the complexity of the placement process, evaluating the efficacy of existing placement systems, and working together to implement some of the recommendations presented here, WPAs from both mainstream and ESL writing

programs can actively work together to improve writing instruction for all students.

Notes

1. English for speakers of other languages. As indicated by the course title, this abbreviation, along with ESL, is commonly used to describe L2 writing classes at UTEP. In this article, I use ESOL when referring specifically to the UTEP context and ESL when discussing L2 writing programs generally, since the latter is more widely used.

2. The PAA is a university entrance examination designed to assess native Spanish speakers.

3. This and all other student names are pseudonyms.

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## Appendix A: Beginning of Semester ESOL Survey

1. By checking this button and clicking next, I confirm that I have read the above and agree to participate in this study. I know that being in this study is voluntary and I choose to be in this study. I know I can stop being in this study without penalty.

2. Please enter the last four numbers in your phone number. This will only be used to connect your beginning and end of semester responses.

3. What is your gender?

4. How many languages do you speak?

5. How well do you think the following labels describe you? Native English speaker, nonnative English speaker, ESL speaker, ESL student, English language learner, Limited English proficiency, bilingual, multilingual, monolingual? Not at all, not very well, somewhat, very well, perfectly? (Note: ESL=English as a second language bilingual=speaks two languages multilingual=speaks more than one language monolingual=speaks one language).

6. Do you think the following labels are positive or negative? Native English speaker, nonnative English speaker, ESL speaker, ESL student, English language learner, Limited English proficiency, bilingual, multilingual, monolingual? Very negative, somewhat negative, neutral, somewhat positive, very positive? Please explain why you marked some labels negatively.

7. How strongly do you identify with these aspects of U.S. culture? Language, food, music and movies, people, politics. Very weakly, weakly, somewhat, strongly, very strongly?

8. Which culture do you identify more strongly with: U.S. or Mexican? Only U.S., more U.S., U.S. and Mexican culture equally, more Mexican, only Mexican. If you identify with a culture not mentioned here, please name that culture and how strongly you identify with it.

9. How often do you speak English with your grandparents, your mother, your father, your brothers/sisters, your friends? Never, rarely, sometimes, usually, always, N/A.

10. How long have you lived in the United States: all my life, part of my life (please specify numbers of years in the box below), I live in Mexico, I live in another country and am studying abroad at UTEP (please specify home country in the box below).

11. Where did you attend high school? United States, Mexico, or other (please specify)?

12. Were you in a bilingual education program in high school? Yes or no?

13. If you were in a bilingual education program, how satisfied were you with the program? Very dissatisfied, dissatisfied, neutral, satisfied, very satisfied.

14. If given the freedom to choose, would you rather be in your current writing course, ESOL 1311, or a 1311 course in the English department? Current course or course in the English department? Please explain your choice.

15. Would you rather be in a writing course with all nonnative speakers of English or in a class that includes both native and nonnative speakers of English? All nonnative English speaker class or class that includes both native and nonnative speakers of English. Please explain your choice.

16. Based the following titles, which of the following writing courses would you consider taking? You can choose more than one answer. English composition, English composition for native speakers, English composition for speakers of ESL, English composition for multilingual writers, English composition for second language writers.

17. How important should the following be in deciding first year writing class placements for second language writers? Student opinion, test scores, high school English grades, and student advisors.

18. If you have comments about anything in this survey or would like to say something more, please do so here.

## Appendix B: End of Semester ESOL Survey

1. By taking this survey, I confirm that I took the beginning of semester survey and was informed of the benefits and risks of participating in this study.

2. Please enter the last four numbers in your phone number. This will only be used to connect your beginning and end of semester responses.

3. Have the reading and writing assignments in your 1311 class been too easy, too hard, or just right for your English ability? Too easy, too hard, just right.

4. If you had been given the choice, would you have chosen your current writing course, ESOL 1311, or a 1311 course in the English department? Current course or course in the English department.

5. Would you rather be in a writing course with all nonnative speakers of English or in a class that includes both native and nonnative speakers of

English? All nonnative speaker class or class that includes both native and nonnative speakers.

6.   You have to take another semester of first-year composition. Would you like to stay in the ESOL department or would you prefer to take a class in the English department? Stay in the ESOL department or take class in the English department.