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## 10 English Language Literacy and the Prediction of Academic Success in and beyond the Pathway Program

*Jennifer E. Haan and Karyn E. Mallett*

Widespread emphasis on internationalization in higher education has generated tremendous growth in international student enrollments at U.S. colleges and universities. In fact, from 2002/2003 to 2012/2013, the number of international students in the U.S. increased from 586,323 to 819,644, an increase of almost 40% over ten years (Institute of International Education 2013). These students are primarily multilingual, contributing varying levels of English proficiency and, often, a new sense of institutional diversity. In addition, these students often pay out-of-state tuition, making it possible for the university to diversify tuition streams as well. Partially motivated by these realities, and in order to attract and retain greater numbers of international students, many U.S. universities have developed various forms of “pathway” programs designed to support conditionally or provisionally admitted multilingual students as they advance their academic English proficiency and pursue undergraduate or graduate course work (in either degree or nondegree status).

As such programs arise, discussions of how best to determine pathway students’ English-language proficiency and academic readiness have arisen. Some university stakeholders appear interested in minimal language testing, crafting the easiest path into the university for prospective students. Others, however, argue that pathway students’ English proficiency *should* be assessed in order to determine these particular students’ admissibility and potential for retention and completion. Proponents of these stricter progression requirements argue for policies and program structures that require all pathway students to demonstrate a minimum English proficiency prior to full academic study. Still, others claim that any skills-based assessment of students’ English-language proficiency is inadequate and inaccurate, forcing the reduction of something fluid, uneven, and complex—language learning—into something discrete, measurable, and reportable.

At universities concerned with the notion of a minimal English-language proficiency threshold, one response has been to administer English-language proficiency tests at pathway program entrance and exit points. Generally, such tests include some combination of core skill areas—reading, writing,

listening, speaking, grammar, and vocabulary. However, though such an approach to English-language proficiency assessment may meet the institutional need to test and report language proficiency data, such programmatic language policies are limited by a narrow understanding of first language (L1) and second language (L2) literacy practices. Thus, as international enrollments continue to grow, these institutionalized language policies deserve the swift and critical attention of literacy researchers.

## LITERACY STUDIES AND SECOND-LANGUAGE LEARNING

A historic view of literacy as a set of skills—the ability to read and write—which, once acquired, could be easily transferred to all areas of life has been highly influential among educators and policymakers at all levels (Purcell-Gates 2007). More recently, however, literacy has been recognized as “a social practice, not simply a technical and neutral skill” and the concept of literacy has been expanded to acknowledge the ways in which it “is always embedded in socially constructed epistemological principles” (Street 2003). Research stemming from this more current perspective argues that “literacy practices are more usefully understood as existing in the relations between people, within groups and communities, rather than as a set of properties residing in individuals” (Barton and Hamilton 2000, 8) and has placed greater emphasis on the practice of literacy within particular domains (Barton and Hamilton 2000; Street 2000).

These more situated approaches to literacy (or literacies) are further complicated in second-language studies due to the complex and evolving relationship among second-language acquisition, literacy skills, and literacy practices. For example, the development of L2 literacy skills (i.e., the cognitive ability to read and write in a second language) is considered an integral part of the development of overall language proficiency. The relationship between literacy skills and overall language proficiency (i.e., across skills), however, is the subject of much debate. Historically, in the field of teaching English as a Second Language (ESL), there has been an expansion in the pedagogical approach to the teaching and learning of English. Specifically, there has been a shift away from isolated skills-based instruction (e.g. “Advanced Reading”) to an integrated approach (e.g., “Advanced Reading and Writing”) and further to context-driven English for Academic Purposes instruction (e.g. “Advanced Academic English for Business Majors”). In significant ways, then, these field-driven advances in our thinking of language teaching and learning—as, now, contextualized activities—affect our approach to scholarship/instruction in the field of ESL. In addition, this more integrated approach to language teaching and learning parallels the more current, situated understanding of literacy practices among literacy scholars. Together, these evolutions invite new interdisciplinary research questions with regard

to the ways in which literacy scholarship and L2 scholarship might inform and influence one another.

Second-language studies researchers have also debated the relationship between discrete “literacy” skills—reading and writing—and overall language proficiency. Some researchers focus on the hypothesis that literacy development in the L2 is most positively affected by L1 literacy abilities; in other words, both L1 and L2 literacy abilities share an underlying interdependence, and this underlying interdependence most significantly affects literacy development in an L2. Others focus on the relationship that overall L2 language proficiency has on L2 literacy abilities, arguing that a threshold level of proficiency in the L2 is required before language learners can be successful in reading and writing in an L2 (Cummins 2000; Grabe 2001). These hypotheses are not mutually exclusive; however, both focus on literacy as a skill (or set of skills) with some social element rather than as a set of socio-culturally and sociohistorically situated practices.

Furthermore, institutional policies and practices in U.S. higher education often reflect the contextual view of literacy in their testing and placement practices. For example, scores from standardized language tests, such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL<sup>®</sup>) and the International English Language Testing System (IELTS<sup>®</sup>) are commonly used to allow students entry to a university and to place students in particular programs or classes. Students who do well on these tests are expected to transfer these language skills to new learning environments in the academic context. But to what extent do these commercial tests account for diverse students’ literacy skills and practices as embedded in different domains across different cultures, academic and nonacademic alike? For, as Currie and Cray (2004) point out, “since social literacy is particular to a social context and its language(s), clearly those who are new to a culture and not proficient in the dominant language(s) must find ways to acquire the language *and* to understand the ways that written texts are used in the social environment” (111; emphasis ours).

Here, in this context of rapid internationalization of U.S. higher education, we see how the call from literacy scholars—to take up a view of literacy as contextually situated—is of particular importance. Specifically, the connection between the view of literacy as a language skill and the view of literacy as a social practice is important because of the highly complex ways perceptions of language and literacy interact and mediate our lives in multilingual settings. Scholars in both new literacy and second-language studies can look at the tension between these views as spaces for productive inquiry on the interactional nature of language and literacy skills and practices, as well as the multilayered positioning of literacy in multilingual spaces.

In the current research, the pathway program functions as a nexus point to contribute to conversations in both second language studies and literacy studies, examining the roles that literacy skills and practices play in the academic success of multilingual, pathway students. Specifically, we have

used quantitative analyses to explore the relationship between language test scores and academic success. In addition, we have conducted qualitative analyses to examine the ways in which student and faculty perceptions of prior and current literacy practices (in English and in their first languages) both foster and detract from academic literacy development during the pathway program year.

In order to more fully understand the role of literacy in the lives of pathway students in the pathway program, we aimed to complicate traditional literacy measures with pathway student and faculty perceptions of literacy and literacy practices. This led to two overarching research questions:

1. What kinds of predictions can be made from skills-based English proficiency tests about second language students' potential for academic success during the pathway and subsequent year?
2. How do pathway students and faculty describe and include academic literacy practices in terms of student academic success during the pathway year?

To address the first question, we ran least squares multiple regression analyses to explore the relationship between entrance English proficiency assessment scores and academic performance in the pathway and in the students' subsequent year. In order to address the second, we surveyed and interviewed participating faculty and students, asking questions focused on their course goals, perceptions of L1 and L2 academic writing and reading, pathway and pre-pathway educational practices, and general English-language proficiency.

## THE PROGRAM AND DATA COLLECTION

Established in 2010 at a large, Mid-Atlantic university in the United States, the pathway program in this study were developed specifically for international students who were deemed academically admissible to the university but who fell short of the required overall TOEFL or IELTS entrance score. The goal of the pathway programs is for students to earn credits toward graduation while receiving academic, cultural, and linguistic support throughout the year. Participants from this study included only the undergraduate pathway students and their faculty.

Student participants came from fourteen nations and a variety of majors. Over the course of four years, 2010 through 2013, proficiency test and grade point average (GPA) data were collected for 161 participating students; of those students, 68 students were surveyed, and 40 students were interviewed.

Seven faculty members who taught courses in the undergraduate pathway program during the 2010–2011 academic year also participated in the study.

These faculty represented history, communications, anthropology, higher education, and ESL. Their role in the program and their level of prior experience in working with international students varied. Three of the seven had significant experience teaching international students. The other four had limited experience and no formal training in working with multilingual students. All participating faculty had, however, opted to teach in the program and each participated in a two-day faculty orientation, which addressed a variety of issues in international student instruction.

## Testing

Pathway students' English-language proficiency data were collected at the entrance, midyear, and exit points of the yearlong program.<sup>1</sup>

## Surveys

Student survey questions covered a wide range of issues, including perceptions of their own English proficiency developments, cultural adjustments, feedback from faculty on assignments, academic strengths/challenges, and personal engagement with course work, writing assignments, and readings. Questions asked of faculty focused on their perceptions of academic, linguistic, and cultural challenges faced by students; experiences teaching in the program generally; perceptions of student progress; personal preparation to teach multilingual students; experiences with providing feedback on student work; and so on.

## Interviews

Interviews with faculty and students were semistructured and consistent across all students per initial, mid-point, and final interview. Student participants were interviewed three times during the pathway year. Faculty were interviewed one time toward the end of the program year. Interviews were conducted by the principle investigators or our research assistant and generally averaged thirty to forty-five minutes each. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by either one of the co-researchers or our graduate research assistant.

In order to explore the potential for entrance-level English-language proficiency scores—overall or subsections—to predict pathway student academic success, we analyzed individual and overall language proficiency scores in addition to specific linguistic skillsets as elements of language proficiency. To compare these against overall academic performance, we correlated overall scores on these incoming proficiency tests, as well as scores on the academic subsets of the tests, with the students' overall GPAs both in the pathway program and in the students' sophomore and junior years. Although we recognize that GPAs are not the only way to measure academic success, these types

of numerical judgments are valued in institutional assessment, and commonly used in studies predicting academic success (Daller and Phelan 2013).

## PROFICIENCY TEST SCORES AS INDICATORS OF ACADEMIC SUCCESS

Historically, studies examining the correlation between English proficiency test scores and student academic success have been inconclusive. The largest body of research examining this correlation looks at the most widely used proficiency tests, namely the IELTS and the TOEFL. A number of studies have found little to no correlation between IELTS and TOEFL test scores and academic performance (Elder 1993; Simner 1998); other examinations, however, have indicated relatively high correlations between overall test scores and GPAs (Bellingham 1993; Cho and Bridgeman 2012). When looking at literacy skills more specifically, studies have also indicated a correlation between reading and writing scores and student achievement (Cotton and Conrow 1998). Our analyses examined the correlation between scores on the Accuplacer-ESL test and student performance in the first year and subsequent years.

### Pathway Year

Cohort-based analyses produced mixed results, indicating that neither overall English-language proficiency scores, nor single subsection scores, nor combined skills based on task type proved to be solid predictors of academic success. In years one and two of the study, there was no significant correlation between incoming students' overall English proficiency scores or individual subsection scores (i.e., reading, writing, listening, or speaking) and academic performance during the pathway year. Students who had a combined higher score on productive language skills (i.e., speaking and writing) tended to be more academically successful during the pathway year than other students, but this tendency was not strong. In contrast, for year-three pathway students, a clear correlation was indicated between incoming listening subsection scores and academic success during the year. Furthermore, students with higher scores on receptive skills (i.e., reading and listening) tended to do better during the pathway year than other students.

Interestingly, however, when data from all three cohorts (2010–2013) were analyzed together, this larger data set indicated that incoming scores on the writing subsection of the English proficiency test correlated most strongly with academic performance (90% confidence level). Furthermore, students with higher combined literacy scores on reading and writing tended to be more academically successful than the others. Thus, while cohort-based results were mixed with regard to the predictive power of overall and combined skill-type English-language proficiency scores and pathway program academic performance, the larger data indicate that pathway students'

scores on the skills-based writing portions of the test seem to have the most predictive value for overall academic success during the pathway year.

### **Subsequent Years**

When examining the relationship between entrance-point English proficiency scores and academic success beyond the pathway year, results indicated that students who entered with higher speaking scores (90% confidence level) and better writing skills (83% confidence level) outperformed other students in their sophomore year. Furthermore, for the junior year, the data indicated that students with better incoming overall English language proficiency scores tended to have higher GPAs than those with lower overall incoming scores and that students with higher writing and speaking scores, in particular, seemed to have greater academic success when compared with other students, though these results were not as strong.

The preceding cumulative findings with the larger data pool indicate that overall English-language proficiency skills, and in particular writing subsection skills, as measured by the Accuplacer<sup>®</sup> test, had weak predictive value in relation to pathway student success, during and beyond the pathway year. Specifically, receptive skills tended to be the most important for students during their initial year, whereas literacy skills (reading and writing) tended to correlate positively with success beyond the pathway year. Overall, these findings indicated that students with higher proficiency in literacy-related subsections of the test tended to perform better than other students beyond the initial pathway year, but the overall effect of these scores in predicting academic success was still fairly weak.

### **FACULTY AND STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF LITERACY AND ACADEMIC SUCCESS**

As noted earlier, commercial language proficiency tests commonly conceive of L2 literacy as a set of measurable, discrete cognitive skills—reading and writing—combined. This perception of L2 literacy makes testing and reporting of students' language development relatively feasible, administratively speaking. Certainly, at the institutional level such an approach could also introduce or reinforce a notion of L2 literacy as a fairly uncomplicated, cumulative set of skills that “add up,” each following along a predetermined “developmental ladder” (Fischer et al. 2003) over time. This perception, as noted by Larson-Freeman (2006), generally leads to a false and uncomplicated understanding of language proficiency change over time in every regard. Thus, here, in response to the second research question, we wanted to push past the administratively easy (yet often institutionally necessary) approach to language skill testing in order to explore alternative, viable ways to consider multilingual pathway students' English-language activities and literacy practices over time.



## Academic Reading Practices Prior to and in the Pathway Context

When asked to talk about the role that L1 and L2 reading and writing practices play in influencing pathway students' success in undergraduate course work, the majority of faculty participants defaulted to a notion of literacy as a set of discrete English reading and writing proficiency skills. For example, in interviews with faculty at the end of the year, when asked to reflect on the ways in which L1 and L2 literacy practices influenced academic progress in his/her course, not one faculty participant mentioned the influence of L1 reading and/or writing skills. Instead, faculty responses focused exclusively on L2 reading skills. Furthermore, most faculty focused on the influence of students' pre-pathway academic literacy skills on their ability to successfully complete course work according to faculty expectations.

With concern over students' English reading skills, one instructor reflected,

Reading skills have been a major issue in my course. With no overt instruction on reading skills in the curriculum, I am afraid that many students are not getting the reading practice they need to succeed beyond the pathway year.

And another faculty member noted,

My own view is that requiring them [pathway students] to take a relatively intensive reading course in semester 1 might be asking too much from those students with the lowest proficiency levels.

Here, we can see faculty concern over perceived "low reading scores." From these and other faculty perspectives, the concern is not simply that the students seem "unable" to comprehend the assigned texts, although that is an area of concern, but also that the students seem unfamiliar with the literacy skills needed to successfully engage with academic texts. They did not, however, consider the broader context of student reading practices, the situated nature of academic reading, and the kinds of cultural and educational backgrounds that play a role in reading within this context.

In comparison, students indicated that they felt that they were able to read assigned texts (perhaps with some struggle and over longer periods) but that they were not sure what else—beyond decoding the words on the page—they were meant to "do" with the reading. As one student stated at the end-of-year interview,

Back home it's just like whatever is there is the fact, memorize it, understand and that's it. You're not supposed to ask why. But here they love to ask why . . . that's complicated.

And another student reiterated this point differently:

Here, when you start the program, there's certain experiences you have when you start reading any topic, but then you were never taught in India. You seem to agree with what the text is saying but you never pause to say "OK, why am I agreeing with the text?" So, the programs here after one semester, two semester, when professors say they are looking for critical thinking, [they ask] "Why am I agreeing with the text? Why am I agreeing with the author?"

As these responses indicate, when asked to reflect on L2 academic literacy practices and their course work-related experiences throughout the pathway year, students focused primarily on the academic activities that *surrounded* the English reading and writing skills they relied on to complete assignments and participate in the academic classroom. In other words, students primarily talked about the challenges they had in coming to understand and respond appropriately to pathway faculty expectations for their work, often comparing the ways they employed L1 literacy practices in their home countries and the ways they adjusted or developed those practices throughout the pathway program in order to succeed academically. It was not that they struggled with the skills necessary to succeed in the context of U.S. higher education; rather, they struggled with the practices involved in the academic reading and writing context.

### Academic Writing Practices Prior to and in the Pathway Context

When asked about academic writing, faculty reported concern over students' English writing skills, but they also reflected on the influence of their students' prior academic writing practices on academic success in pathway courses. In fact, faculty focus generally had less to do with the students' abilities to write well-formed, coherent prose and more to do with the differing expectations and experiences of students' home academic communities as compared with the U.S. context. Students, too, expressed a difficulty in understanding U.S. academic literacy practices in light of their previous literacy experiences. To make sense of the ways students and faculty were articulating their literacy experiences in the classroom, Yancey's (1998) three-part framework for curricula provides a useful tool for thinking about both faculty and student survey and interview data. This framework argues that there are three curricula that inform the academic experiences (and, thus, literacy practices) of students. The *lived curriculum* is composed of the explicit or implicitly acquired knowledge that students bring with them to class, either from their home communities or educational systems. The *delivered curriculum* includes the curriculum that the teacher contributes throughout the classroom in terms of lectures, handouts, assignments, discussions, and so

on. And the *experienced curriculum* refers to the way the student interprets the delivered curriculum through the lens of their own lived curricula.

With regard to literacy practices, both students and faculty in the pathway program reported tension between the lived and delivered curricula, and the ways these tensions affected both the experienced curriculum of the students as well as the approaches to the delivered curriculum by the faculty. So, while both students and faculty recognized the need for English proficiency in reading and writing for success in the academic context, the way students perceived the roles of reading and writing in the classroom, and the kinds of classroom challenges they discussed, seemed to be as much a result of students' previous literacy experiences, both in their L1 and in their L2, because they were a result of their proficiency level with regard to reading and writing skills. For example, students were quick to point out that the approach to writing in their home countries differed substantially from the expectations of their pathway program professors in the U.S. context.

One student commented,

You know, in English you talk, you talk and then, you know how you make a point and then you explain? In Arabic we don't do that, we just talk. I can repeat the same stuff over and over again and people will still listen and find it interesting.

And another student noted,

[T]he difficulties we're having in our English class, is when [the teacher] says, "You gave your main point but you're not explaining." And we're like "What do we need to explain? We just stated whatever she wants." And then she's like "But you're repeating the same stuff over again." I'm like "Isn't that what I'm supposed to do? Repeat it over and over again?" and she's like "No, but you're not explaining what your main point is." And I'm like "What do you mean explain? How do you want me to explain?"

Similarly, faculty reflected on the ways in which pathway students' prior literacy practices influenced their approach to their own delivered curriculum. One faculty member reflected on feedback she gave to students in class and on student draft essays, stating,

I kept prodding them to go deeper in their observations, to think critically about culture and not just on the surface level. Eventually, we got to some interesting points about how religion and politics plays such a significant role in the definition of knowledge and pedagogy and in the construction of education systems. It's been such a struggle to get them to reflect and analyze and I really really believe that once they get that and have that "aha" moment in their thinking, their writing will open up too.

**TEACHING IN THE TENSION BETWEEN LIVED AND DELIVERED PRACTICES**

This tension between lived and delivered curricula, between U.S. academic expectations and previous academic expectations, between previously encountered literacy practices and newly expected literacy practices, also contributes to a complicated interplay between the development of literacy skills and practices in the U.S. higher education context. Both faculty and students describe this tension, and many faculty describe challenges in approaching instruction that fosters development in both of these areas. One faculty described this challenge in terms of critical reading skills:

I'm really concerned about their critical reading skills. They struggle so much with reading comprehension (apparent in how many of them miss or misunderstand directions and also in their quizzes and discussion after we've assigned reading). Part of it is that they're not reading closely and part of it is that many of them come from school backgrounds where critical reading wasn't taught as an important skill, where the reader wasn't supposed to engage the text, but absorb it.

It is, however, in the tension among institutional expectations, lived literacy practices, and varying types of literacy practices that students and faculty are living and working in the classroom context each day. This difference in expectations produces much of the dissatisfaction in the educational experience, both for students and faculty who are teaching and learning in diverse, multicultural, multilingual contexts. When students and faculty approach literacy education without addressing and incorporating the lived literacy curricula of the students, it can lead to frustration on the part of the students:

The work is easy, if you do it but you just don't know what's the expectation. You just don't know what to expect from them. You know, you work really hard and you go like "Yes, I did good!" and then you go like (imitating the sound of crashing or falling down). She's like "This is not what I wanted or if this was like this."

Students are forced to examine their own expectations and alter their own literacy practices in this new context, but often it is not until they have failed to meet their instructor's expectations that they realize such an adjustment must be made. Faculty in this context are also forced to reexamine their own expectations of their students' own literacy practices:

My "pause" mostly has to do with explaining foundational skills that I am not used to explaining. For example, I can't just say, "I want you to brainstorm on your topic for the next 10 minutes." I need to explain

what brainstorming looks like, and not only that, but why it's important, and not only that, but how it fits into the writing process. Then, I realize, "OK, so now I have to explain the 'writing process' and how that's the approach to writing in the US academy . . ." So, it's just that everything requires more background/context. I knew that it would but didn't realize how much of writing pedagogy I've internalized and need to bring back to the surface and explain.

As this example indicates, faculty can no longer assume that their students come to the classroom with the same types of lived curricula that the faculty have experienced. In this, their teaching must be both flexible and reflective.

### DISCERNING AND DISCUSSING L2 STUDENTS' LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

While skills-based English-language proficiency data provide only a snapshot of the multiple roles of literacy among L2 students in the U.S. higher education context, it is the primary method used by institutions to discern and discuss students' literacy development. In the classroom, however, the picture looks much more complex. Results of our survey and interview data indicate that rather than focusing on literacy as a skill to be developed, much of the concern surrounding literacy efforts among both L2 students and faculty centers on the situated nature of literacy practice in tandem with literacy skills, as well as discussions of how the social and cultural expectations of literacy as practiced in the academic setting continue to be a source of difficulty for L2 students, even those whose literacy skills are quite well developed.

In order to discern a more comprehensive representation of students' literacy skills *and* practices, pathway student matriculation and progression standards should be broadened to include teacher recommendations, using evidence from course work in a rigorous curriculum to show students' academic literacy practices. Additionally, international and multilingual students should be encouraged to bring L1 academic skills and literacy practices into the classroom in order to better represent the classroom as a multilingual space for international and other multilingual populations. Finally faculty, in particular, should be reflective about their own instructional approach in multilingual, multicultural settings, so they can work with the students to make connections between the lived curricula of the students and the delivered curricula of the faculty.

Finally, in terms of scholarship on literacy, conversations around literacy practices require that scholars not simply critique former understandings of literacy, but also contribute to new understandings in concrete ways. This study has shown that, at the institutional level, and certainly in the context

of academic pathway programs for international students, the notion of literacy is often reduced to the measurement of L2 students' discrete, skills-based reading and writing scores. In other words, literacy skills and literacy practices are conflated, underexplored, and not representative of utilized (and underutilized) classroom literacy practices in either the L1 or the L2. In order to contribute to new understandings of literacy—both skills and practices—in concrete ways in the context of international pathway programs, we have proposed here, “positive proposals for interventions in teaching, curriculum, [and] measurement” (Street 2003, 82). Studies looking particularly at L2 writers highlight the hidden nature of literacy practices, offering literacy and L2 scholars the opportunity to further explore the complexity of literacy development across languages and across cultural and educational contexts.

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## NOTE

1. Accuplacer-ESL<sup>®</sup> is a computer-based proficiency test including sections on listening, reading, writing, grammar, and vocabulary.

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