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The Writing of Language Minority Students: A Literature Review on Its Relation to Oral Proficiency

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ABSTRACT
We reviewed literature on the school-related writing of students in English-dominant settings whose native languages were other than English to identify 2 kinds of difference: (a) among language minority (LM) students differing in oral English proficiency and (b) between LM and native English-speaking students. Sixteen studies met selection criteria. Despite a wide variety of dependent variables and outcomes, the trend was toward basic differences in the writing of native and non-native English speakers. However, findings were mixed for a large and growing population in U.S. schools: LM students who spoke fluent English and had been educated in English-dominant schools for at least 3 years (Generation 1.5). In some ways, their writing resembled that of English language learners, but in others it was highly similar to that of native English speakers. The review concludes that the field is currently at the beginning stages of understanding the writing of LM students and suggests hypotheses for testing in future research.

Language minority (LM) students, defined as individuals who speak a language at home other than the dominant language of a society (Kieffer, 2014), are a large and growing population in U.S. schools. More than 20% of the U.S. population has a home language other than English (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014), and more than 10% of public school students are English language learners (ELLs; Migration Policy Institute, 2010). The latter statistic does not include students who have exited English language instruction but may have some residual English language difficulties (O’Hallaron, 2014) or those who have never had such services but speak English in a nonstandard manner associated with a non-English primary language.

A large and growing population of LM students are non-native speakers of English who are relatively long-term residents of the United States and have been educated in the English language but speak a language other than English in the home (di Gennaro, 2013; Doolan, 2013). Members of this group, sometimes referred to as Generation 1.5, are described as (a) relatively fluent speakers of English who are not designated as ELLs; (b) individuals who have attended English-dominant schools for at least 3 years; or (c) second- and third-generation English speakers who have a small fund of academic vocabulary, use nonstandard grammatical constructions when speaking English, and tend to have low academic achievement (Moore & Klingner, 2014). Based on these criteria, the term Generation 1.5 is used here as a convenient, although admittedly imprecise, signifier for non-native (or L2) English speakers whose oral English language skills are fairly if not completely fluent. This group is of interest precisely because the field lacks clarity on how the group differs from both native speakers and ELLs, who, by definition, are not fluent in spoken English. Both Generation

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1.5 students and ELLs therefore constitute separate LM subgroups defined by their level of spoken English competence.

One of the most important points to note in reading the literature is that to date most studies of the writing skills of Generation 1.5 have focused on postsecondary students; however, this literature may be relevant to the kindergarten–Grade 12 population because it may suggest directions in understanding the writing of LM students in elementary and secondary schools, especially those of Hispanic/Latino/a background, who may be at risk for writing difficulties (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012).

Because oral language provides a foundation for literacy acquisition in general (Gough & Tunmer, 1986) and writing proficiency in particular (Apel & Apel, 2011), it might be expected that the English language writing skills of Generation 1.5 would differ from those of both ELLs and native English-speaking students (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005; Silva, 1993) and be of relevance for further exploration. Non-native English speakers are a heterogeneous group (Hedgcock, 2012), and differences in writing skill may be associated not only with the writer’s primary language but with the extent of difference between the native language and English, the level of proficiency both in the native language and in English, and the individual’s purpose of becoming literate in English (Fitzgerald, 2006; Hedgcock, 2012; Silva, 1997).

An overview by Hedgcock (2012) on the characteristics of LM (referred to as L2) writers, their composing processes and written products, and research on the contexts in which they write suggested that although it is not possible to “imagine or construct a generic L2 writer” (p. 222), important differences exist between native English and LM writers. These include linguistic knowledge, experience with peer or instructor feedback during instruction, and schematic and rhetorical knowledge about elements such as cultivation of voice in writing and expectations of native English-speaking readers. Earlier reviews (Fitzgerald, 2006; Harklau & Pinnow, 2009; Hedgcock, 2012; Kormos, 2012; Silva, 1993, 1997) compared native- and non-native-speaking writers in terms of productivity (i.e., essay length), grammatical competence, and genre structure in specific contexts. Overall, the reviews consistently reported more errors and lower quality in non-native writing, with word usage judged as less precise, less sophisticated, and less varied. However, findings on productivity tended to be mixed, with some studies reporting that LM students wrote longer essays and others finding shorter essays from LM than first-language (L1) students. Despite these trends, our experience in reviewing the literature corroborates Fitzgerald (2006), who noted that different linguistic features were examined in each study, making it difficult to synthesize information.

Although the findings from the previous reviews are of interest, two limitations impede understanding of the writing of non-native English speakers. First, the reviews did not clearly address the issue of possible differences in the writing of non-native speakers who vary in oral English language proficiency. Second, they rarely disaggregated findings for ELLs being educated in countries in which English is the dominant language (such as the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand) and learners of English as a foreign language (where the major language is not English; see Kormos & Trebits, 2012, for an example of a study of English as a foreign language writing). These problems limit the formation of implications for improving the writing of LM students, including both ELLs and Generation 1.5, in English-dominant schools. Our purpose in this article is to build on the previous reviews while at the same time systematically focusing on the relation between oral English fluency and English language writing skill and exploring studies of learners in English-dominant environments.

Theoretical perspectives on the writing of LM students

Writing in a non-native language has been studied within several disciplines, including applied linguistics, cognitive psychology, and composition studies (Mancilla-Martinez, 2010; Matsuda, Ortmeier-Hooper, & Matsuda, 2009; Moll, Saez, & Dworin, 2001). Theoretical orientations vary, and researchers have explored cultural, historical, and contextual influences on non-native writing.
(Beck, Llosa, & Fredrick, 2013; Collins, 2009; Leki, 2003); these studies are fairly common in the literature, with fewer studies focusing on individual differences (Kormos, 2012). Within the latter literature, current thinking is that writing ability is explained by a host of cognitive and linguistic variables that work together as a writer generates ideas and expresses them in written form. Key challenges for LM writing are hypothesized to include knowledge of word structure and meaning, syntactic knowledge, and spelling ability (Harrison et al., 2016; Schoonen, van Gelderen, Stoel, Hulstijn, & de Glopper, 2011).

Recent perspectives from genre theory (Bazerman, 2009), systemic functional linguistics (Schleppegrell & Go, 2007), and sociocultural theories (Englert, Mariage, & Dunsmore, 2006; Ortmeier-Hooper & Enright, 2011) situate language as a primary resource for making meaning and suggest that the writing development of learners of a new language is influenced by the writer's opportunities for social experiences and interaction (DiCerbo, Anstrom, Baker, & Rivera, 2014). Thus, writing depends as much on the genre, situation, and social activity system in which the writing takes place as it does on the characteristics of the writer and task environment (Bazerman, 2009). Writing proficiency, being closely related to oral language ability (August & Shanahan, 2006), is influenced not only by complex interaction in the development of native and non-native languages within individuals (Escamilla, 2006) but also by relationships between writing and reading processes (Shanahan, 2016).

Moreover, ELLs have long been identified as having different educational strengths and needs from those of native English speakers, particularly because of the linguistic demands of gaining literacy and understanding of complex content in a new language simultaneously (Hedgcock, 2012; Weigle, 2013). To illustrate, ELLs may rely on linguistic rules from the native language (related to orthography, phonemics, or rhetorical structures) that do not transfer to non-native writing (Escamilla, 2006). Some differences may reflect the writer's advanced knowledge of conventions in other languages (Matsuda & Cox, 2011). Because of these factors, writing development in the non-native language is different from that in the native language (Harklau, 2003; Ortega & Carson, 2010). Growth in each language leads to further competence in both (Canagarajah, 2014), and multilingual writers acquire lexical and syntactic competence in new languages over their lifetimes (CCCC Committee on Second Language Writing, 2001).

A cognitive perspective has also added important dimensions to knowledge of the writing of non-native speakers (Hayes, 1996; Kormos, 2012). This perspective’s focus on the writer’s thinking, memory and attentional processes, and motivation, in conjunction with simultaneous and recursive acts of planning, drafting, and revising (cf. Flower & Hayes, 1981), establishes a rationale for the study of individual differences that have a bearing on subsequent LM writing development. Because non-native writing production is often more effortful than native language writing and requires attention to linguistic features that are not automatized (DeKeyser, 2007), it follows that it is more reliant on working memory resources (Kormos, 2012) and may have an effect on text that is produced. Careful study of the interaction between individual differences (including oral language development in the native and new languages and genre familiarity) and context (including response to schooling) may lead to important insights into how non-native-speaking writers engage in planning, text generation, and revising.

Educators have also lent a valuable lens to understanding LM writing. Ferris and Hedgcock (2005) described three major differences among native and non-native English-speaking writers in the writing process that are consistent with a cognitive view of writing: There are differences in these students’ (a) knowledge of the target spoken language and the writing system that represents it; (b) knowledge of substantive topics and the rhetorical forms conventionally used to write about them; and (c) difficulties with some aspects of writing instruction, for example, expressing voice, understanding the nature of plagiarism, and applying revision strategies. It has been difficult to make general statements about these populations because of the high degree of heterogeneity among participants and a lack of clarity regarding spoken language proficiency in both the native and non-native languages, the specific native language spoken, demographic variables, cultural background,
and educational history in the native and new countries (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005; Hedgcock, 2012; Silva, 1997). However, identifying general trends in the research literature on the writing of non-native speakers is beneficial for the design of writing interventions to support students in this diverse population.

**Purpose and research questions (RQs)**

Our goal is to provide a comprehensive review of the literature on LM writing skills that covers all grade levels from elementary through postsecondary and searches for group differences as a function of linguistic profile (ELL, Generation 1.5, and native English speaker) in order to draw implications for writing instruction with diverse groups of non-native-speaking writers in English-dominant schools. We are particularly interested in gleaning information pertinent to the writing of LM students in elementary and secondary education.

The following questions guided our review: (a) Are there qualitatively different groups of LM writers as a function of their oral English language proficiency? (b) How does the writing of groups of LM writers differ from that of students who are native English speakers?

We limit this review to school-related writing, although we acknowledge the importance of the out-of-school writing experiences of non-native speakers of English (Moje et al., 2004; Yi, 2007). Also, because our focus is differences in the characteristics of writing between groups, studies that compare writing in the native and new languages within bilingual students (Davis, Carlisle, & Beeman, 1999; Tillema, van den Bergh, Rijlaarsdam, & Sanders, 2012) are beyond the scope of this review, as are findings on intervention effectiveness, developmental progression in given dimensions of writing, and observations of the use of writing processes.

**Method**

**Search procedure**

The ProQuest, ERIC, and Education Full Text (H. W. Wilson) search engines were searched using a combination of the following terms: L1, L2, writing composition, writing skills, English (second language), native language, academic language (academic English), academic discourse, academic achievement, writing ability, writing achievement, bilingual*, Spanish speaking, heritage speakers, Hispanic American students, immigrants, LM, writing instruction, writing improvement, writing tests, writing evaluation, essays, expository writing, informational writing, persuasive writing, argumentative writing, genre, grammar, linguistic, oral language, speaking, elementary schools, middle schools, high schools, elementary school students, middle school students, high school students, college students, developmental education, and remediation.

We also hand searched the most frequently identified journals and the bibliographies of frequently cited articles for studies that met the following criteria:

1. The study analyzed some form of composition written in the English language for an academic purpose. Relatively few studies analyzed writing as a primary goal; therefore, if relevant, information about non-native writing was drawn from intervention studies, although the effects of such studies are beyond the scope of this review.
2. Participants included non-native speakers of English. To be selected, the study had to disaggregate findings for native and non-native speakers of English.
3. The study compared writing between subgroups of LM writers differing in oral English proficiency or between groups of LM and native English-speaking students.
4. English was the dominant language in the country where the research was conducted. This criterion eliminated studies of the writing of students learning English as a foreign language (i.e., students in settings where English was not the societal language).
5. Participants attended any level of education from elementary through postsecondary.
6. The study was published in a peer-reviewed journal or as a chapter in a scholarly book.
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*Note. LM = language minority; RQ = research question.*

*Qualitative study.*
We reviewed an initial pool of 156 papers published from 1982 to 2016. Of these, 49 (31 quantitative and 18 qualitative; see Table 1) were relevant and were scrutinized carefully. Of these, 16 were found to meet all selection criteria. Another 34 studies, listed in Table 1 but not discussed in this review, provided descriptive information on the characteristics of non-native writing of LM students in English language settings without the comparisons addressing our RQs.

**Method of review**

We reviewed each of the studies using a coding sheet. Criteria consisted of the following: authors, theoretical framework or purpose, target population, educational context, writing task, measures or constructs, design, RQs, findings, and strengths and limitations. Each study was also coded for relevant dependent variables (e.g., writing quality, grammar, use of language and vocabulary, linguistic proficiency, productivity, spelling and cognitive factors), and findings and interpretation for each of our RQs. We coded as quality measures both (a) direct measures, using a holistic or analytic rubric; and (b) indirect measures, using error frequency in mechanics, spelling, grammar, word choice, and other areas when the errors were not broken out by error type (e.g., Carlisle, 1989). The first and third authors reviewed the quantitative work and the second and fourth authors reviewed the qualitative studies. The first and second authors examined each set of reviews to corroborate findings. Differences of opinion were rare, but when they occurred they were resolved through discussion.

The studies reviewed here are organized by dependent variable and age group/grade level, type of comparison, and methodology. They are listed in Table 1. In presenting the findings, we use the terms L1 for writing by native English speakers and LM for the writing of ELLs and Generation 1.5 students.

**Findings**

*RQ1. Are there qualitatively different groups of LM writers as a function of their oral English language proficiency?*

We identified six studies that analyzed writing samples produced by LM writers who varied in English language proficiency (see Table 1). Five were quantitative and one study provided qualitative data. Besides comparing subgroups of LM speakers, three studies (Doolan, 2013, 2014; Doolan & Miller, 2012) also compared the writing of LM and L1 students (summarized in “RQ2. How Does the Writing of Groups of LM Writers Differ From That of Students Who Are Native English Speakers?”). All of the studies comparing groups of LM writers were of postsecondary students. One study (Muchisky & Tangren, 1999) was of students who had a single native language, whereas others were of native speakers of various languages, although the languages were not disaggregated for analysis. None of the studies used English proficiency as an independent variable or covariate. Rather, writing was compared between groups varying in length of residency and amount of schooling in the English-dominant country. None of the studies measured English proficiency directly, but we considered current enrollment in English as a second language (ESL) classes or recent arrival in the English-dominant country to signal limited English proficiency. Muchisky and Tangren (1999) provided more precision than the other studies by subdividing an LM group according to whether students had passed or failed an ESL course.

**Writing quality**

Writing quality is typically measured using holistic or analytic rubrics that intend to account for the degree to which the written product as a whole exhibits clarity and elaboration of ideas, a formal written register, precise vocabulary, cohesive devices, grammatical sophistication (e.g., verb tenses and morphology) and correct spelling. Using a wide variety of measures, the studies all found that writing quality varied by the level of LM students’ English language proficiency. However, the
direction of the differences varied across studies. Applying a comprehensive measure of correctness to the writing of native speakers of Vietnamese, Muchisky and Tangren (1999) found that Generation 1.5 students had lower quality writing than ELLs who had graduated from high school in the native country. Also, the Generation 1.5 students who had passed an ESL course had higher quality writing than those who had failed. The authors observed a lack of academic language, referred to as “speech written down” (p. 227) among the Generation 1.5 students, although those who had passed the ESL course (suggesting higher English language proficiency) wrote better organized essays, showed better use of transitional phrases, and produced more varied and complex sentence structures than those who had not passed.

On a quality measure, di Gennaro (2009) found that persuasive essays written by Generation 1.5 students showed greater “rhetorical control” (p. 539), defined in terms of the order of ideas, and support for those ideas, than did the essays of LM students who had resided in the United States for shorter periods of time and had graduated from secondary education in the home country. However, a similar study by the same author (di Gennaro, 2013) did not find group differences in writing quality. Doolan (2013, 2014) also found that Generation 1.5 students wrote higher quality essays than other LM students, using a holistic measure taking into account appropriateness of the content of the writing to the prompt, organization and development of ideas, use of supporting details and examples, language facility, and use of grammar and vocabulary.

**Grammar**

di Gennaro (2009) found no differences between Generation 1.5 and less proficient LM speakers on a “grammatical control” (p. 539) variable but in a later study (di Gennaro, 2013) found that the essays of Generation 1.5 displayed a major weakness on this variable. The author stated, “Despite their years of experience in an English-speaking environment and completion of high school in the US, grammatical control remains problematic for [Generation 1.5] learners in post-secondary writing courses” (di Gennaro, 2013, p. 166). In comparison, the less proficient English speakers (who had graduated from secondary education in their native countries) showed better use of grammar. Doolan (2013, 2014) found more errors, including grammatical errors, in Generation 1.5 than other LM writing despite the better holistic quality of the former. However, findings varied by error type. Doolan (2013) analyzed errors in (a) verbs; (b) words, including subject–verb agreement; (c) clauses, including run-on sentences and fragments; (d) word class, including determiners and prepositional phrases; (e) spoken features, including word deletions of that, use of contractions, and phrasal verbs; and (f) academic features, including nominalizations and passives. In comparison to ELLs, Generation 1.5 students, despite the higher holistic quality, displayed more errors in total as well as more word, word class, and verb errors. However, there were no statistically significant group differences in the frequency of the other types of errors. Finally, in a qualitative comparison of descriptive essays, Doolan and Miller (2012) found that Generation 1.5 students used a wider range of verb tenses and sentence structures than a group of ELLs with lower oral English proficiency.

**Productivity**

Two studies found that Generation 1.5 students wrote longer essays than ELLs (di Gennaro, 2009; Muchisky & Tangren, 1999). This finding stands out as uncomplicated in contrast to findings on the majority of variables in this literature, which are defined imprecisely or inconsistently; moreover, the finding supports the connection between facility with spoken and written language (August & Shanahan, 2006).

**Summary of findings comparing Generation 1.5 to other LM writers**

Findings for LM group comparisons were reported for writing quality, grammar, and productivity. The findings for two variables were inconsistent. Writing quality was found to be lower in Generation 1.5 than ELL students by Muchisky and Tangren (1999) but higher by di Gennaro (2009) and Doolan (2013, 2014). In addition, one study found better grammar among Generation 1.5 than ELL students.
(di Gennaro, 2013), but another found no group differences (di Gennaro, 2009), although, within subjects, the Generation 1.5 students showed weaker performance on grammar than other writing variables. Three other studies found different patterns depending on the type of grammatical error analyzed (Doolan, 2013, 2014; Doolan & Miller, 2012). Finally, in terms of productivity, Generation 1.5 students wrote longer essays than ELLs.

RQ2. How does the writing of groups of LM writers differ from that of students who are native English speakers?

Eleven studies (one qualitative, 10 quantitative) compared the writing of groups of LM and L1 writers (see Table 1). The full educational range was represented in these studies, although postsecondary continued to be overrepresented. The LM participants spoke a variety of native languages, but only one study (Hinkel, 2004) disaggregated findings by native language. As shown in Table 1, seven of the studies investigated writing quality; nine focused on grammar; four analyzed various types of errors; two investigated word usage; and three single studies focused on linguistic patterns, copying from sources, and productivity, respectively.

Writing quality

As in the research addressing RQ1 presented previously, writing quality measures and genres of student writing varied across studies. Cheng, Klinger, and Zheng (2009) assessed the holistic quality of summaries, news reports, and opinion and informational paragraphs written by immigrants and proficient English speakers attending secondary education. The LM participants were Canadian residents who were English learners and native speakers of English who had emigrated from countries where non-standard forms of English were commonly spoken. Four groups were formed based on whether students had passed or failed a province-wide literacy test from which the writing samples were derived: L2 pass, L2 fail, L1 pass, and L1 fail. On all but the summary, the rank ordering of holistic writing scores was as would be expected: L1 pass, L2 pass, L1 fail, and L2 fail. On the written summary, the L2 pass group showed higher holistic quality than the L1 pass group, and the L2 fail group outperformed the L1 fail group. Thus, the L2 students in the sample wrote better summaries than the L1 students at both higher and lower achievement levels.

In an analysis of essays written by fourth- and sixth-grade L1 students and native Spanish-speaking LM students in two types of dual language programs, Carlisle (1989) found weaker rhetorical effectiveness and overall quality and more errors in the LM than the L1 essays. Using a composite score computed from subscores for content and structure on a standardized writing measure, Harrison et al. (2016) compared the writing quality of Canadian ELLs and native English-speaking third graders. The two groups had similar subscores, and in both groups syntactic awareness was a predictor of writing quality. However, rapid naming was another predictor for the ELL children, whereas oral vocabulary was an additional predictor for the native English speakers. Furthermore, predictors of overall writing ability were different for the two groups, as only transcription (spelling and handwriting) was predictive for the ELLs but a fuller set of predictors (transcription, vocabulary, and syntactic awareness) was predictive for the native speakers.

In addition to the Generation 1.5–ELL comparisons described in “RQ1. Are There Qualitatively Different Groups of LM Writers as a Function of Their Oral English Language Proficiency?” Doolan (2013, 2014) compared the writing of postsecondary ELLs and Generation 1.5 to that of L1 students. Both studies found the same pattern for holistic quality: Generation 1.5 and L1 essays did not differ, and both groups were higher than the ELLs on this variable. Similarly, Doolan and Miller (2012) found that Generation 1.5 and L1 essays did not differ on holistic quality.

Beck et al. (2013) explored the challenges that LM writers experience when composing compared to L1 writers through a think-aloud task that involved persuading a friend to read a book or to watch a movie. Qualitative differences included the findings that LM writers were more likely to rely on narrative or to combine narration with argumentation rather than write true arguments and that L1
writers were more successful in staying on topic than their LM peers. However, an important caveat is that LM writers in this study may have had less exposure to instruction in writing persuasive essays, which might have caused an overreliance on narrative structures.

**Grammar and word usage**

Working with fifth- through eighth-grade students, Reynolds (2002, 2005) investigated the use of grammar in informational/explanatory and persuasive essays among proficient English speakers and ELLs. Most of the ELLs were native Spanish speakers, and the rest spoke Vietnamese and East Asian languages (findings not disaggregated by language). In her 2005 study Reynolds reported that approximately half of the proficient speakers of English spoke another language at home (mostly Spanish), meaning that they could be considered Generation 1.5 students. In this sense, this comparison was different from that in other LM–L1 studies, in which the comparison groups consisted of native English speakers.

Reynolds (2002) focused on causality markers, which have been theorized to reflect a transition from spoken to written forms of language (Kress, 1994). Causality markers consisted of clausal connectors and prepositions expressing different explanations of causes. Two kinds of causality markers were analyzed. First were regularity markers, which are proposed to be more characteristic of oral than written language in that they refer to relations between events without implying agency in the relations (the words and, then, when, and in). Second were power markers, which are more characteristic of written language, implying agency in the relation between events (the words because, so, therefore, thus, by, through, and with).

The author counted the frequency of regularity and power markers per 100 words in each essay. The LM and L1 students were similar in that the writing of both groups showed a greater frequency of regularity than power markers across prompts and grade levels. However, prompt effects were found in the ratio of regularity to power markers in the L1 but not the LM students. Overall, the LM students used more causality markers than did the L1 students, which was interpreted as suggesting a greater use of narrative forms of language in the LM group.

Reynolds (2005) analyzed essays written in response to the same prompts as in the 2002 study. This study analyzed five dimensions: (a) informational load, or noun frequency, nominalizations, passives, attributive adjectives, prepositions, and longer words; (b) lexical elaboration, shown in past-tense verbs; once-occurring words; higher lexical diversity in the form of type-token ratios; and public verbs such as say, assert, and explain; (c) personal involvement, shown in contractions, pro-forms, and deletions, which signal a degree of informality; (d) projected scenario (i.e., the use of be as a main verb); and (e) justification/explanation, represented in the use of second-person pronouns, if clauses, and the possibility modals can and could.

The ELLs showed weaker performance than the proficient English speakers on the informational load, lexical elaboration, projected scenario, and justification/explanation dimensions, and the reverse pattern was found for the personal involvement dimension. Furthermore, the ELLs appeared to be subject to prompt effects on several dimensions, whereas the proficient speakers’ performance was stable across prompts. The author interpreted these various findings as suggesting that the ELLs had a smaller lexicon with less sophisticated verbal expression than the proficient English speakers.

Doolan and Miller (2012) found that Generation 1.5 made more errors than L1 students in verbs, prepositional phrases, and word form but the same number in subject–verb agreement, sentence structure, use of determiners, vocabulary usage, and spelling. Doolan (2013) compared four types of errors in Generation 1.5, ELL, and L1 essays: verb errors, word errors, clausal errors, and word class errors. Spoken and academic features of language were also analyzed. The author observed high within-group variability on error rates but no statistically significant differences in any of the error categories between Generation 1.5 and L1 writers, both of whom made fewer errors than the ELL writers. Commenting on the similarities in the Generation 1.5 and L1 writing, the author suggested, “Generation 1.5 writers … may not be second language writers” (Doolan, 2013, p. 135). Doolan (2014) found a different pattern: Here, both Generation 1.5 and ELL essays showed statistically
significantly more word-level, word class, and verb errors than L1 essays, with Generation 1.5 scoring midway between the two other groups on each type of error. However, error frequency was similar between Generation 1.5 and L1 writers on subject–verb agreement, determiners, and vocabulary usage. It is interesting that Carlisle (1989) also found that syntactic maturity, measured by T-unit length, was similar in essays written by LM and L1 students.

Hinkel (2003) counted instances in persuasive essays of lexical and syntactic constructions, for example, use of the be-copula as the main verb, predicative adjectives, vague nouns (e.g., guy, man, people, society, stuff, thing, woman, world), public verbs (e.g., say, state, talk), private verbs (e.g., feel, learn, study), and expecting/tentative verbs (e.g., like, try, want). In comparison to L1 essays, the LM students’ essays showed words and constructions more typical of spoken than written language, such as a relatively large number of sentences with the be-copula as the main verb; predicative adjectives; vague nouns; and public, private, and expecting/tentative verbs. Predicative adjective use provides an example of conversational versus academic style. In referring to a condition rather than an event, these constructions are associated with simple clause structures and descriptive text more reminiscent of speech than written language (see Hinkel, 2003, p. 282). Hinkel (2003) also found that the vocabulary used in the LM essays was also more characteristic of spoken than written (academic) language. These findings were somewhat surprising, as the LM writers were high-achieving students who had been educated in the English language for a considerable number of years.

In his 2004 study, Hinkel compared L1 and LM university students’ essays on several syntactic variables. As in his 2003 study, the LM participants were native speakers of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Indonesian, Vietnamese, and Arabic. The L1 group consisted of freshman composition students who were not particularly strong writers. The writing task was a persuasive essay responding to one of several prompts in which use of the present tense was more appropriate than use of the past tense. The dependent variables were tense (past and future), aspect (progressive and perfect), and use of the passive voice. The frequency of each feature was calculated as a percentage for each essay. The LM speakers used fewer syntactically and semantically complex verb structures in their essays, with little use of complex verb phrase constructions such as the passive voice, perfect aspect, or predictive/hypothetical tense. The LM essays contained only about 25% of the use of the passive voice found in the L1 essays. Overall, there was less use of conventional tenses, aspects, and passive voice among the LM essays.

Hinkel’s (2004) study is rare in reporting findings separately for each language-origin group. The L1 students used fewer past-tense verbs than all groups of LM writers except the Arabic speakers, who used fewer past-tense verbs than the L1 writers. In other words, both the L1 and the native Arabic speakers appropriately used present-tense verbs in response to the essay prompt, whereas the other LM speakers tended to use the past tense inappropriately. The author explained these differences by referring to characteristics of the Arabic language, which contains three morphologically marked tenses. Furthermore, the author noted that classical Arabic writing is characterized by sweeping statements made in the present tense. In contrast, the Chinese, Japanese, Indonesian, and Vietnamese languages do not mark verb tenses. Hinkel’s (2004) analysis suggests that native language may influence LM writing skill, even among LM students with a relatively high level of English proficiency.

Unlike the Doolan studies cited previously, Hinkel’s (2003) LM participants had high English proficiency and were advanced university students, as were members of the L1 comparison group. The native languages of the LM group were Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Indonesian, and Arabic. More than half of the students had attended prior postsecondary education in the United States, receiving U.S. secondary education for 3–4 years. Thus, the LM group included Generation 1.5 students, but results were not reported separately for this subgroup.

Copying from sources

Keck (2006) studied the writing of participants in university English composition courses who spoke Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Spanish, French, and Arabic, although findings were not disaggregated by native language. The study is unique in this review in its focus on students’ use of written sources in
text-based writing. The writing task was to summarize an editorial from a weekly news magazine. Copying from source text, which may constitute plagiarism, is an ongoing practical issue in education (Weigle & Parker, 2012). Keck noted that “textual borrowing” (Keck, 2006, p. 262) ranged from appropriate paraphrasing to inappropriate copying and compared L1 and LM essays along this continuum.

Each essay was analyzed for the percentage of (a) exact copies of the source text, (b) attempted paraphrases, and (c) four types of paraphrases defined by the frequency of the copied words in the source text. The incidence of using words from the source in the summaries was similar for the L1 and LM essays, but the LM students showed more direct copying, whereas the L1 essays were marked by a greater proportion of appropriate paraphrasing, with an average of 5% of the L1 essays and 17% of the LM essays containing direct copying. In contrast, the L1 essays contained an average of 11% of appropriate paraphrasing of language from the source compared to the LMs’ 4%.

**Productivity**

In the one study that included productivity, Carlisle (1989) found that L2 and L1 essays were of similar length.

**Summary of findings comparing LM to L1 writers**

Writing quality was higher for L1 than LM writing in all genres analyzed except for written summaries, for which LM writing was better. When LM samples included Generation 1.5, the quality of their writing was similar to that of L1 students. In terms of grammar, LM writers made more errors and generally did not use various grammatical constructions as well as L1 writers. The pattern of differences between Generation 1.5 and L1 writers varied: In one study no differences in overall error rate were seen, but in another Generation 1.5 made more errors than L1 students. When specific types of grammatical errors were analyzed, patterns of difference varied across studies between Generation 1.5 and L1 and between ELLs and L1. Prompt effects were found in L1 but not LM writing on several dimensions of grammar. Mixed findings were found for oral versus written grammatical constructions in LM versus L1 writing, but LM language and word use were more typical of the oral register. LM and L1 writers were not found to differ in terms of productivity, and in text-based writing LM were more likely than L1 students to copy directly from source text.

**Discussion**

In this review, we focused on the school-related writing of LM students in English-dominant educational settings, asking (a) whether the writing of these students differed as a function of their oral English language proficiency and (b) how LM and native English writing compared. The studies addressing writing skills as a function of oral English proficiency reported mixed findings for both writing quality and use of grammar, the only two variables for which there was more than one study. The relative superiority of the quality of writing and use of grammar among Generation 1.5 compared to ELLs varied by study and the way in which the outcome variable was measured. However, from these studies we conclude that the quality and grammar of the writing of LM students differs as a function of English language proficiency, although the direction of the differences needs to be verified in future research. Furthermore, participants in these studies were in postsecondary education; findings need to be verified for kindergarten–Grade 12 students.

Twice as many studies bore on our second question, on the writing of LM versus native English-speaking students, although studies of postsecondary students were still overrepresented in this set. It is not surprising that writing quality, grammar, and language and word use were reported to be poorer in LM than native English writing in many of the studies, although the similarities in writing quality among Harrison et al.’s (2016) third graders was an exception. Another exception was the superiority of written summaries of ELL versus native-speaking secondary school participants (Cheng et al., 2009), which suggests the possibility of genre effects.
Another notable finding is prompt effects among L1 but not LM writers (Reynolds, 2002), which may be attributable to different levels of background knowledge and/or sociocultural context. It is interesting that Generation 1.5 typically write longer essays than ELLs, but overall LM and L1 students write essays of approximately the same word length. Generation 1.5 students tend to use grammar, language, and vocabulary more typical of the oral than written register despite writing longer compositions than ELLs (Muchisky & Tangren, 1999). Conversely, findings are mixed on these variables in comparisons of L1 and LM students. In one study LM writers as a group used grammatical constructions more typical of the written register (Hinkel, 2003), but in another (Reynolds, 2002) LM students used grammatical constructions in their writing that were more typical of oral language. The research samples were very different in these studies, mostly native Spanish-speaking fifth to eighth graders in Reynolds (2002) and university students speaking diverse native languages in Hinkel (2003).

It is clear from our synthesis of literature comparing LM to native English writing that differences existed on all variables for which comparisons were made, although patterns were different across studies. These findings seem unwieldy at first glance; additional research is needed using a systematic set of outcome variables to establish whether differences are attributable simply to the heterogeneity of the LM population (Hedgcock, 2012).

**Additional knowledge needed**

To serve the growing number of LM students in English-dominant schools (Hemphill & Vanneman, 2011), many of whom have weak writing skills, appropriate interventions need to be developed. However, the development of appropriate writing interventions for this population may be hindered pending a more nuanced and systematic body of knowledge of LM writing than is currently available. LM writing interventions are needed to address all substantive areas of writing investigated in the studies reviewed, including quality of written expression, grammar, and vocabulary usage. We see four types of additional knowledge that are needed in order to reach a fuller understanding of LM writing: (a) level of oral and written proficiency in L1, (b) level of oral and written proficiency in LM, (c) inclusion of younger Generation 1.5 students, and (d) studies of LM writing across the educational spectrum.

**Primary language of participants**

Of the 16 studies that directly addressed our two RQs, only one (Hinkel, 2004) reported findings by primary language. Also, the nature of the new language varied across studies. For example, the LM group in Cheng et al. (2009) included a subgroup of immigrants from English-speaking countries where the form of English was not standard for the new country (Canada), and some of the native-speaking students spoke a language other than English at home but were designated by the school as proficient in English. Similarly, half of the English-proficient speakers in the Reynolds (2005) study spoke Spanish at home. In this review we defined L1 not as monolingual English speakers but as proficient speakers of English, in line with the research reviewed. There may be unreported overlap between this group and Generation 1.5, as suggested by the Reynolds (2005) study. None of the studies reported whether the native English-speaking students were monolingual. In addition, none of the studies reported participants’ native oral or written language proficiency or country of origin, although linguistic and sociocultural theories (Canagarajah, 2014; Kormos, 2012) would predict differences in writing as a function of these variables. In particular, urban schools may serve native speakers of a large number of primary languages (Uccelli, Dobbs, & Scott, 2013). In future research, for each LM writer studied, researchers need to know the specific native language, proficiency in oral language, reading and writing in the native language, and country of origin. More careful characterization of research samples, including the inclusion of measures of oral English language proficiency, would bring more precise understanding of LM–L1 differences in writing. Furthermore, information about LM students’ relative proficiency in their native language would
permit an analysis of foundational writing skills such as spelling. For example, spelling patterns may differ in LM writing as a function of the phonemic structure of the primary oral language in the case of emergent writers and the orthography of the primary written language in the case of more advanced writers.

**Oral English proficiency**

The design of writing interventions for LM students should take into account spoken language and reading ability in English; however, this variable was not reported in the comparisons of ELL and Generation 1.5 students in the studies identified in this review. The only information that might suggest the level of English language proficiency among LM writers was length of residence and schooling in the English-dominant country. One study (Echevarría, Richards-Tutor, Canges, & Francis, 2011) provided a useful model of analysis in reporting performance on content area writing broken out by analytic writing score and level of English language proficiency but was not included in this review because groups were not compared. In view of the overlaps between reading and writing skill (Fitzgerald & Shanahan, 2000) and between oral and written language (Apel & Apel, 2011), the interpretation of findings in future studies of LM writing would benefit from analyzing performance as a function of LM reading and oral language measures.

**Generation 1.5 students in kindergarten to grade 12**

All of the studies in the current review that explicitly compared the writing of Generation 1.5 and ELLs or native English speakers were conducted in postsecondary settings. However, Generation 1.5 students may also be found in elementary through high school grades, as this group has been educated in English-dominant schools for at least 3 years. Many of the LM–native speaker comparison studies did not disaggregate the LM data by length of residence or number of years of schooling, missing an opportunity to understand the writing of Generation 1.5 students in comparison to both ELLs and native English speakers. The existence of differences in writing ability in the few studies located suggests that this information would be worthwhile for intervention development.

**Representation of education levels in LM writing research**

Postsecondary students were overrepresented in this body of research. However, it is important to know whether within-LM or LM–native English differences in writing quality, use of grammar, and vocabulary found at one education level are also found at other levels. For example, adolescent LM writers may be a distinct group because of possible discrepancies in the ways in which they and their teachers perceive the role of schooling in general (Kim & García, 2014) and classroom writing (Kibler, 2011) in particular. These discrepancies may affect adolescents’ motivation to write, in turn affecting writing quality and other variables. It is difficult to ascertain whether the group differences reported in the studies in the current review are consistent across the age span.

**Future directions**

Overall, the field of LM writing lacks a critical mass of research on any dependent variable that is sufficiently systematic and rigorous to inform intervention design. Little appears to have changed since Harklau and Pinnow’s (2009) observation that research on LM writing was “characterized by isolated studies with few sustained threads of inquiry” (p. 126). Our review has revealed that nearly all dependent variables are defined differently across studies, not only preventing a detailed understanding of specific constructs but obscuring relationships among constructs hypothesized to influence LM writing. For this purpose, it would be helpful if researchers captured specific constructs consistently (for an example of consistent definition of dependent variables, see Doolan, 2013, 2014; Doolan & Miller, 2012).

Besides the lack of consistent inquiry in the field, many quantitative studies in the current review had small numbers of participants, which limits the possibility of testing for interaction effects. Larger
samples would permit the identification of moderators such as group membership (ELL, Generation 1.5, native English speaker) on writing skills. Furthermore, the studies comparing Generation 1.5 and ELLs used only one genre, persuasive writing, perhaps because this genre is used on entry-level tests in postsecondary education. Including all of the major genres used in academic writing (e.g., descriptive, informational, and narrative) would be helpful for intervention development.

In addition, we found interesting information on LM students and their writing products in a number of studies that did not meet our selection criteria because their study designs did not provide for a group comparison. As reported by Hedgcock (2012), many sociocultural and cognitive variables affect students’ writing. In particular, comparisons are needed because Generation 1.5 immigrants have been more deeply socialized in the United States than those who have entered the new country more recently (Rumbaut, 2004), and personal views and perceptions of academic performance and writing skills will likely vary and differentially affect writing performance. Future research on LM writing should include a direct comparison of the products of ELLs, Generation 1.5, and L1 students.

**Intervention design**

Overall, LM students, both ELLs and Generation 1.5, display poorer writing skills than their native English-speaking peers. Pending an improved body of research that can inform targeted intervention design, we recommend that educators provide additional systematic support to promote LM students’ improvement in writing quality, use of grammar, vocabulary, and language using well-documented interventions (e.g., De La Paz & Sherman, 2013). Pending research on LM writing differences based on specific native language, it appears that priority would best be given to customizing existing writing interventions to meet the needs of students speaking Spanish and Chinese, as the majority of ELLs in the United States are from these groups.

**Conclusions**

In sum, differences appear to exist in the writing of LM writers as a function of English proficiency and between LM and native English writers. However, more research with direct comparisons of Generation 1.5, ELL, and L1 individuals is needed to broaden the findings reported here as well as to determine whether some conflicting findings are due to participant heterogeneity or to methodological differences, including different definitions of measures across studies. Finally, future research on writing with this population should attempt to overcome key methodological weaknesses found in much of the current work by including LM participants’ current level of oral and written English language proficiency and specific native language spoken as predictors of writing ability.

**References**


