



# Refugees in first-year college: Academic writing challenges and resources

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## Abstract

This article reports on a qualitative year-long multiple-case study that investigated the challenges refugee students face with academic writing in their first year of college and the resources they draw upon to overcome these difficulties. Participants were seven refugee students from four different countries who were admitted to a liberal arts college despite not being considered “college-ready” by traditional admissions measures. Data collection involved interviews with the focal participants and faculty, class observations, and written documents. All seven participants were successful in completing their first year in college, passing all the classes they registered for. At the same time, writing in college presented these students with challenges resulting from their still-developing English language proficiency. Findings reveal that these challenges were successfully addressed because of these students’ ability to draw upon the resources made available to them. The case is made that, within a highly supportive environment, refugees who graduate from high school not having reached the standard college admissions literacy level may still be able to cope with tertiary academic writing.

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## Introduction

Since 1975 the United States has resettled approximately 3 million refugees (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2013). A refugee is defined as a person who is outside his or her country of nationality and is unable to return to that country because of a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Convention and Protocol, 1951). According to most estimates, about half of any refugee population consists of children. In the past almost four decades, then, about 1.5 million school-age refugees have been resettled in the United States, the world’s top resettlement country, and, each year, approximately 30,000 new refugee children arrive in this country (Refugee Processing Center, 2013; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 1994).

Most of the research done with refugees, perhaps unsurprisingly, has explored the notion of trauma from a psychological perspective (Pinson & Arnot, 2007; Rutter, 2006). The educational experience refugees go through was the focus of a seminal study in 1988 by Rumbaut and Ima but has only recently started to draw attention from

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other researchers. Quite a few studies have now investigated literacy development of refugees in K-12 school settings (e.g., Pryor, 2001; Roy, 2008). Other studies have explored adult literacy (e.g., Hallaj, 2006; Warriner, 2001), while others have looked at family literacy (e.g., Lynch, 2005; Perry, 2007). The topic of refugees in higher education, however, remains “virtually unexplored” (Dryden-Peterson & Giles, 2010a). An exception on this landscape is a special issue in the Canadian journal *Refuge* (Dryden-Peterson & Giles, 2010b), which explores international concerns surrounding access to and policy in higher education for refugees. The articles in this volume emphasize the potentially transformative power of higher education for refugees as well as for the communities they come from and discuss the many economic and structural obstacles refugees face in their pursuit of a post-secondary education.

The limited access refugee students have to higher education (Duff, 2001) may help explain the scarcity of studies exploring their experience in this setting. Ferede (2010) illustrates the issue of access by saying that, among the different newcomer groups in Canada, refugees are the least represented in higher education. As Vásquez (2007) points out, the fact that going to college represents such a challenge for this population makes it even more important to conduct case studies of refugee students who manage to pursue higher education while still in the process of learning English. Understanding refugee students’ trajectories toward and through college, particularly in relation to how they cope with academic literacy demands, becomes all the more relevant considering that reading and writing are often key in determining college students’ success or failure and, in the current economy, most jobs require at least some postsecondary education (Harklau, 2000, 2001).

The few studies that have investigated the experience of refugee students with academic literacy in college come from the *Generation 1.5* literature. Generation 1.5 is a term that is often used in the U.S. to describe the population of immigrant students who belong neither to the first generation of their parents, who were born and raised in their home countries, nor to the second generation of children who are born in the U.S. (Rumbaut & Ima, 1988). At the college level, the term Generation 1.5 describes students who graduate from a U.S. high school and start post-secondary education while still in the process of learning English (Harklau, Losey, & Siegal, 1999). The growing body of literature on Generation 1.5 has turned this term into a useful heuristic (Roberge, 2009), especially to contrast the students it refers to with college students who complete secondary education in their countries of origin before coming to the U.S. to pursue higher education.

This study explores the subset of Generation 1.5 students consisting of refugees. Even though this was the population that Rumbaut and Ima (1988) investigated when they originally coined the term Generation 1.5, subsequent studies have generally not focused on refugees separately from voluntary immigrants. Whether the refugee category is useful for research in applied linguistics and related fields is an issue that has not been addressed enough in the literature. On the one hand, some scholars claim that refugee groups can be so different amongst themselves that the distinction between refugees and immigrants may not be helpful. Fennelly and Palasz (2003), for example, found more similarities between Hmong refugees and Mexican immigrants in terms of English language proficiency than between Hmong and Russian refugees. Similarly, Boshier and Rowekamp (1998) suggested that, as far as their academic success in higher education is concerned, refugee students who complete high school in their native countries are more similar to those students who complete high school in their countries and come to the U.S. to pursue higher education than to refugees who have a limited educational background. These authors argue, therefore, that educational background is more useful than immigration status when distinguishing between groups of students.

Gunderson (2000), on the other hand, found that refugees tend to lead similar lifestyles irrespective of educational background. His data indicated that refugee children whose parents were professionals in their home countries (e.g., lawyers, doctors) generally went to the same schools in lower socio-economic neighborhoods as the children of poorly educated refugee families whereas children of voluntary immigrants usually attended schools in more affluent areas. In other words, even though not all refugees had the same educational background in their home countries, their lives after resettlement tended to present some commonalities.

That refugees can vary widely in their characterization and experience seems hardly questionable. However, until more is learned about this population, it is difficult to tell how relevant their immigration status is for research purposes and educational practice. This study aims at contributing knowledge to this issue by investigating the experience of refugee students with academic writing in college. More specifically, it focuses on the challenges these college students face as they engage with academic writing and the resources they use to overcome these difficulties.

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