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### *Adolescents' Writing in the Content Areas: National Study Results*

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**Jeffery (left) and Wilcox**

*While many adolescents in US school settings do not achieve basic levels of writing proficiency, new standards and assessments hold all students, regardless of academic performance history and language background, to higher standards for disciplinary writing. In response to calls for research that can characterize a range of adolescents' writing experiences, this study investigated the amount and kinds of writing adolescents with different academic performance histories and language backgrounds produced in math, science, social studies, and English language arts classes in schools with local reputations of excellence. By applying categories of type and length, we analyzed the writing of 66 students from California, Kentucky, New York, and Texas: 26 English learners (L2) and 40 native English speakers (L1), of whom 19 were identified by school norms as lower performing and 21 were identified as higher performing. We found the majority of writing tasks adolescents completed did not require composing more than a paragraph. Exceptions were essays in English language arts and persuasive essays and reports in social studies—almost half of which were source-based tasks. In addition, considerable differences were noted in the range of genres and amount of extended writing produced among L1 writers with histories of higher performance in contrast with L1 writers with histories of lower performance and L2 writers. These findings are discussed in light of Common Core State Standards shifts and the implications they hold for content area teachers who teach adolescents with different achievement histories and language backgrounds.*

In light of the current trend toward increased expectations for disciplinary writing at the secondary level, in this report we discuss the kinds of writing adolescent English learners and native English speakers are producing in US secondary schools. Our findings are based on the National Study of Writing Instruction (NSWI), which included the collection of students' written work in their core classrooms (English language arts, social studies, science, and mathematics) in schools with local reputations for excellence in writing instruction (Applebee & Langer, 2013). We

were interested in comparing the kinds of writing tasks adolescents with different academic performance histories and language backgrounds were completing and how these tasks differed across subject areas. Our two chief concerns were whether there were notable differences in the amount and types of writing produced by these students, and what the patterns in writing among them might tell us about the instructional shifts needed in classrooms affected by new expectations for disciplinary writing that are being incorporated into state standards and associated large-scale assessments.

## **Adolescents and Writing Performance**

Despite an increasing awareness of the relationships between writing competence and college and career readiness (Graham & Hebert, 2010), many adolescents in US schools continue to perform poorly on standardized writing evaluations. For example, only 24% of 12th-grade students in the United States produced writing at or above the *proficient* level on the 2011 administration of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) writing exam, and only 1% of 12th-grade English learners scored at or above *proficient* (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). These figures represent trends that have persisted for decades and raise questions regarding how well adolescents' experiences of writing in their secondary classrooms match the expectations they face after graduation.

## **The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and the Context for Disciplinary Writing**

The CCSS that address writing, which have been adopted by the majority of US states, focus on preparing students for postsecondary academic and professional writing expectations. The CCSS for writing emphasize developing students' abilities to support claims; to examine and convey complex ideas clearly and accurately; to produce writing appropriate to different purposes and audiences; and to draw evidence from sources to support analyses (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010a). To that end, secondary CCSS ELA standards emphasize source-based writing in the disciplines of social studies, science, and technical subjects. For example, secondary CCSS writing standards for social studies include the expectation that students will "write arguments based on *discipline-specific content*" (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010b, emphasis in original). This disciplinary focus represents a major shift in how writing competence is conceptualized—a shift that is evident in the source-based, disciplinary writing tasks that are being incorporated into CCSS-linked large-scale assessments (Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, 2013).

Because data from this study were collected prior to the implementation of the CCSS, they are representative of an eclectic approach to writing standards that included little emphasis on writing outside ELA in most states. As such, the data provide an opportunity to inquire into the shifts in writing instruction that

rapid CCSS implementation might require of teachers who work with higher- and lower-performing students and those whose native language is not English.

### **The Current Study**

This study investigated the school-sponsored writing of adolescent native English-speaking (L1) and nonnative English-speaking (L2) writers. The sample was drawn from NSWI and included students in a variety of schools across the United States (Applebee & Langer, 2011). Since one of the purposes of the larger study was to identify promising practices in schools with local reputations for excellence in ELA instruction, schools were nominated by leaders in the field of English, and chosen after verification of high performance on state writing assessments in relation to demographically similar peers. The study focused on states with diverse approaches to high-stakes writing assessments, since previous research indicates that the kinds of writing assigned to students in their classrooms is oftentimes related in part to the high-stakes assessments required (Abedi, 2004; Villalva, 2006). Therefore, NSWI included students in California, Kentucky, Michigan, New York, and Texas (this report concentrates on the four states with the largest numbers of English learners and so did not include Michigan). At the time of this study, all NSWI states required writing of a paragraph or more on the high-stakes exit-level assessments in ELA, yet only New York required source-based writing of a paragraph or more in social studies. In addition, New York was the only state that required writing of a paragraph or more in science and mathematics, although students had a choice of whether to include writing from these subjects in their portfolios in Kentucky.

In each of the schools, teachers were asked to nominate L2 students who represented typical characteristics of intermediate proficiency by school norms. They were also asked to identify L1 students who represented lower and higher performance levels by school norms at each grade level (6, 8, 10, and 12). From the 43 L2 and 95 L1 participants in the larger study, we sought to draw a sample that would maintain a balance in the representation of L2 students, L1 students with higher and lower performance histories, male and female students, and middle and high school grade levels. This resulted in a final sample of 66 students: 26 L2 students, 19 L1 students who were identified as lower-performing, and 21 L1 students who were identified as higher-performing. The results of this study are based on an analysis of all the written work these 66 adolescents produced over one school term (approximately 13 weeks).

Since part of the intent of the larger study was to investigate any changes in writing instruction over the past few decades, students' work was analyzed using categories from a study by Applebee (1981). As in that study, writing was categorized by length. If the writer did not organize text segments of at least a paragraph in length, then the writing was categorized as not requiring composing (i.e., mechanical); writing of a paragraph or more that required composing was categorized as extended. In the remainder of this report, we summarize the results of the analysis of the 66 students' 4,485 responses to school assignments.

**Contrasts in Length and Type of Writing by Language Background**

The analysis of L1 and L2 students' work showed that most of the writing they produced did not require composing a paragraph or more. Writing that did not require composing made up 83% of the total sample of L1 writers' work and 89% of the sample of L2 writers' work (see Figure 1). Short answers (40% of the total for both L1 and L2 writers) and copies of notes or transcriptions of dictated lectures (16% of the total for L1 writers and 18% for L2 writers) were the most common types of mechanical writing.

**Contrasts in Length and Type of Writing by Performance History and Language Background**

When the results are viewed more closely in terms of student characteristics, the contrast in the amount of extended writing students produced is more pronounced by performance history than language background. For example, as shown in Figure 2, 23% of higher-performing L1 writers' work was extended, while 12% of lower-performing L1 writers' and 11% of L2 writers' work fell into this category. Another notable pattern is the consistently lower percentage of mechanical writing in the forms of short answer (35%), multiple choice (5%), and fill-in-the-blank (8%) that higher-performing L1 students produced in comparison with lower-performing L1 writers (44%, 8%, and 11%) and L2 writers (40%, 9%, and 11%).

**Contrasts in the Percentage of Extended Writing by Content Area, Language Background, Performance History, and Context**

As expected, all three groups of students produced the most extended writing in ELA (see Figure 3). For example, the percentage of extended writing produced for ELA out of the total was 51% for higher-performing L1 writers, 68% for lower-performing L1 writers, and 62% for L2 writers. The majority of pieces written in ELA were in the form of narrative essays (84%), but ELA work also included personal writing (e.g., journals) and imaginative writing (e.g., poems). While there

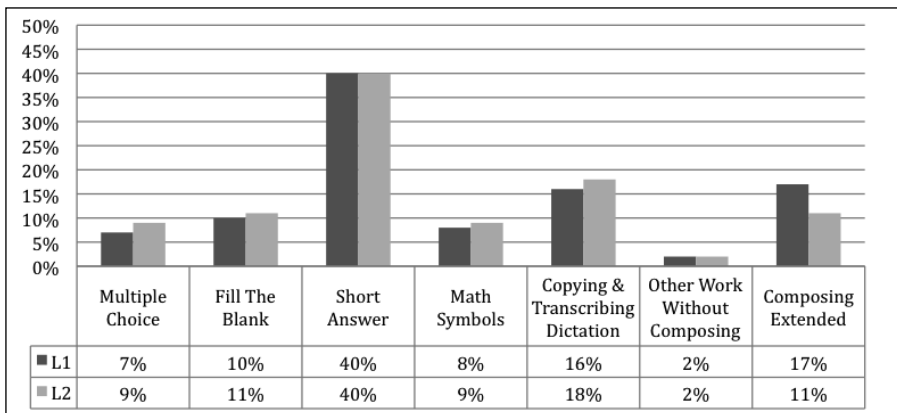


FIGURE 1. Percentages of different kinds of writing by language background (L1 or L2)

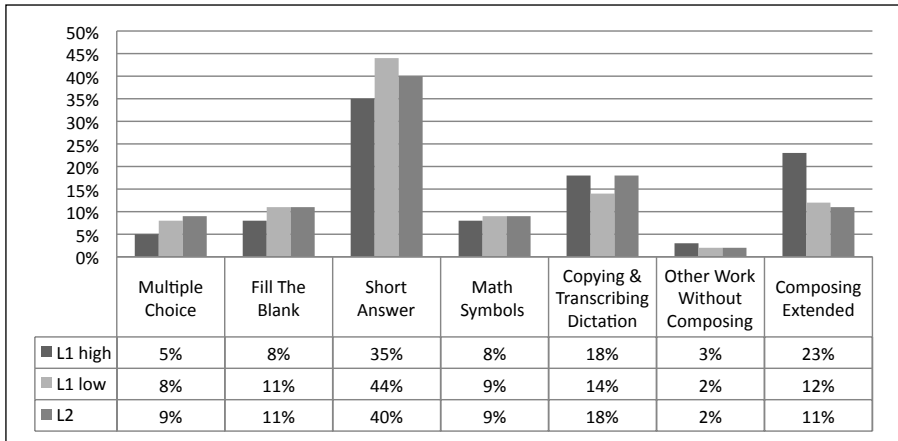


FIGURE 2. Percentages of different kinds of writing by student achievement (history of high or low performance) and language background (L1 or L2)

were differences between L1 and L2 students in the numbers of pieces of extended writing produced, there were no notable differences between L1 and L2 writers in the kinds of writing produced in ELA.

The greatest contrast between higher-performing L1, lower-performing L1, and L2 students' writing by content area was in social studies. The percentage of

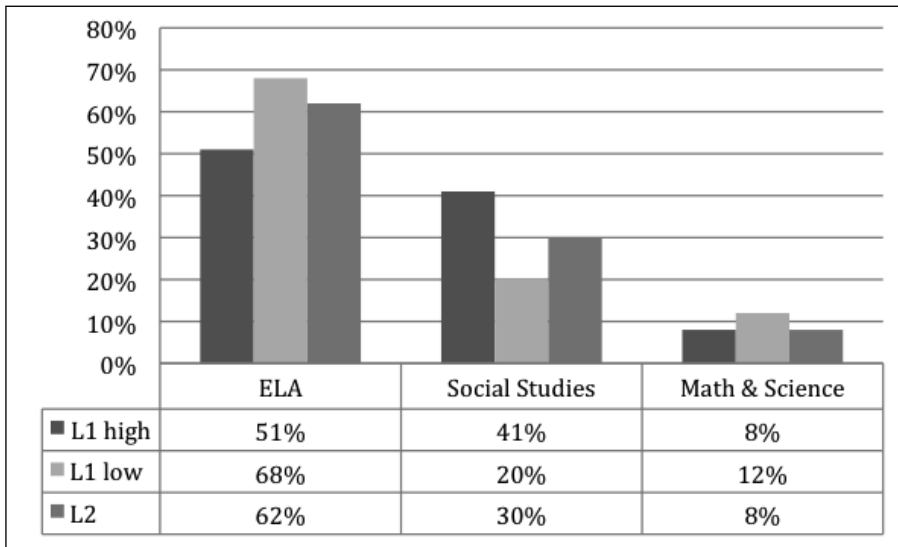


FIGURE 3. Percentages of extended writing by content area, student achievement (history of high or low performance), and language background (L1 or L2)

extended writing that higher-performing L1 writers produced for social studies was double (41%) that of lower-performing L1 writers (20%), and also considerably more than that of L2 writers (30%). Higher-performing L1 writers wrote, on average, five extended pieces in social studies, and both lower-performing L1 writers and L2 writers wrote only two. The samples of work in social studies were generally informational, such as persuasive essays and reports, but also included journals, diaries, and reflections. L1 writers produced a greater variety of types of writing in social studies than did their L2 peers. For example, articles, reviews, commentaries, and persuasive reports were only evident in L1 writers' work.

In science there were few examples of students' extended writing (students in all three groups, on average, wrote only one extended piece) and of these, all were informational in nature, including a preponderance of lab reports in New York and Texas, particularly in middle school. Students in other states and grades produced less writing in science overall, and informational essays and summaries constituted the majority of such writing. There were no notable differences in the kinds of writing students of different performance and language backgrounds produced for science, and almost no extended writing in math was evident in any student group in any state.

Since we were particularly interested in the CCSS emphasis on source-based writing, we also analyzed the sample for this characteristic. We found that of all of the extended writing produced, the highest percentage that required using source materials was in social studies (47%), followed by ELA (22%), and then science (9%).

In addition, to address Villalva's (2006) and Abedi's (2004) claims that the task content of high-stakes assessments may affect the focus of writing instruction in classrooms, we identified the following patterns in the emphasis on different genres by state context: Students produced a higher percentage of journals, diaries, reflections, and logs in ELA and social studies in New York, where such writing was encouraged in the state exams. Also, in New York, the only state that required extended writing in science, students produced high percentages of reports. Students from Kentucky produced the highest percentage of narratives in ELA, where the portfolio required a variety of genres. While the high-stakes exam in Texas did not require extended writing in subjects other than ELA, students from Texas produced the highest percentage of essays and stories across all content areas and also produced a slightly higher percentage of reports in science compared with students from New York. However, this may relate to the schools' writing-across-the-curriculum programs rather than the state assessment.

## **Discussion and Implications**

Before discussing implications, it is important to reiterate that the students whose work was analyzed in this study attended schools with local reputations of excellence in ELA instruction, and in this way the findings from the larger study were meant to highlight better-case scenarios rather than to generalize to all students. As expressed earlier, we sought to identify whether there were notable differences in the amount

and types of writing produced by higher- and lower-performing L1 writers and L2 writers, as well as to identify what patterns among these students might tell us about the instructional shifts needed in classrooms where new demands for disciplinary writing are embedded in the CCSS.

The first salient finding from this study was that the majority of writing both L1 and L2 students produced did not require composing: 77% of higher-performing L1 students', 88% of lower-performing L1 students', and 89% of L2 students' work did not require writing more than a paragraph. These kinds of tasks (e.g., fill-in-the-blank) hold limited value in developing students' competencies to support claims, examine and convey complex ideas clearly and accurately, produce writing appropriate to different purposes and audiences, and draw evidence from sources to support analyses, as the CCSS require.

A second finding was that after data were disaggregated by performance level, the patterns for the amount of written work in each category produced by lower-performing L1 students more resembled those of L2 writers than those of higher-performing L1 writers. This finding suggests that both language background and performance history relate to the kinds of writing students do. This may be associated with lower expectations in the regular or remedial-track classrooms in contrast with higher-track classrooms (Wilcox, 2011).

We also found that little extended writing was produced by L1 and L2 students outside of the ELA classroom. Of this writing, the majority was in the form of persuasive essays and reports in social studies (almost half of which were source-based) and summaries and reports in science (of which very few pieces were source-based). Furthermore, we found contrasts in the emphases of writing by state, which in some cases may relate to the high-stakes assessment and in others may relate to the school's emphasis on writing.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, the results of our study indicate that lower-performing L1 writers and L2 writers were producing little of the kinds of writing that would prepare them to successfully tackle the challenges of CCSS-aligned writing tasks and high-stakes exams. Even many of the higher-performing L1 writers produced very few pieces of the kinds of writing that would meet these standards. In light of the CCSS shifts for writing in social studies, the sciences, and technical subjects in US secondary classrooms, these results highlight the need for increased emphasis on extended writing. Specifically, this study suggests that students will need more opportunities to engage in more source-based, persuasive, and argumentative extended writing tasks in all subjects.

While these results draw attention to the need for increased emphasis on extended writing in content area classroom instruction, particularly for lower-performing L1 writers and L2 writers, how to do this effectively is another matter. A growing body of research provides some insight into what content area teachers might do: recommendations include prewriting or brainstorming, explicit teaching of writing strategies, collaborative writing, and process writing or writers' workshop



(Graham & Perin, 2007; Olson & Land, 2007). These strategies should work well with students regardless of academic performance history or language background and are effective—not only in ELA, but in other content area classrooms as well. Of course, requiring extended writing from students who are not typically offered these types of tasks will take instructional time and expertise (Freedman, Delp, & Crawford, 2005), yet numerous studies have also indicated that writing is a particularly effective way of promoting the kinds of literacy expected in the CCSS (Langer, 2011). If opportunities to engage in extended writing are used in lieu of more frequent but less challenging tasks such as multiple choice and fill-in-the-blank, they hold the potential to provide the scaffolding that adolescents need to meet the increasing demands for using advanced disciplinary discourse in high school and beyond.

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