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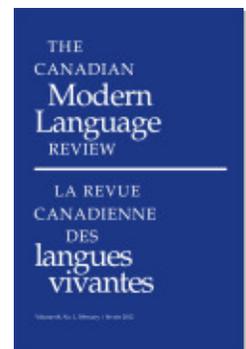
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## **Comments from the Classroom: A Case Study of a Generation-1.5 Student in a University IEP and Beyond**

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# Comments from the Classroom: A Case Study of a Generation-1.5 Student in a University IEP and Beyond

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Camilla Vásquez

**Abstract:** This case study examines the patterns of participation of one US-educated refugee student in a university intensive English program (IEP). Specifically, I illustrate how the focal student used her advanced oral proficiency and prior experience with US educational norms and practices to engage in various interactional behaviours, such as shifting participation structures, taking an active role in classroom management, and positioning herself as more knowledgeable than her peers. Using observational and interview data, I demonstrate that such behaviours resulted in teachers' constructions of this student as 'highly engaged and motivated' despite their assessment of her written work as 'poor-to-average.' Finally, I link this student's behaviours to classroom performance outcomes and show that although her 'good student' behaviours enabled her to complete her high school and university ESL programs successfully, those behaviours – and her highly advanced oral proficiency – were ultimately insufficient to ensure her academic success beyond the IEP.

**Résumé :** Cette étude de cas examine le type de participation d'une réfugiée ayant étudié aux États-Unis dans un programme universitaire d'anglais intensif. Plus particulièrement, l'auteur montre comment l'étudiante s'est servie de son niveau avancé de langue orale et de son expérience avec les pratiques et les normes d'enseignement américaines pour adopter divers comportements interactifs (p.ex. modifier les structures de participation, jouer un rôle actif dans la gestion de la classe et démontrer de plus grandes connaissances que ses pairs). À l'aide de données provenant d'observations et d'entrevues, l'auteur démontre comment de tels comportements ont donné l'impression à l'enseignant que cette étudiante était « très motivée et intéressée », même si le résultat de l'évaluation de ses travaux écrits est « faible à passable ». Enfin, l'auteur établit un lien entre le comportement de l'étudiante et ses résultats en classe, et démontre que même si son bon comportement lui a permis de terminer avec succès le programme d'anglais langue seconde de niveau secondaire et celui de niveau universitaire, son comportement – et son niveau très avancé d'anglais oral – n'a pas suffi à lui assurer un succès scolaire après le programme d'anglais intensif.

### Introduction

Various authors (Brickman & Nuzzo, 1999; Muchisky & Tangren, 1999) have remarked on characteristics that distinguish immigrant student populations from international student populations in university intensive English programs (IEPs). In some cases, the very different skill sets and instructional needs of these two groups have been conceptualized by IEP teachers and administrators as a source of tension and have led to difficulty in resolving questions about how to effectively teach to both groups simultaneously. Often, US-educated immigrant students in college or university ESL programs tend to have 'a greater facility with the spoken language and a higher level of listening comprehension compared to the international students' lower level of oral proficiency and greater facilities in reading and writing' (Muchisky & Tangren, 1999, p. 221). While this dichotomous characterization of immigrant/international students is, in many cases, an accurate one, it does not address the ways in which US-educated ESL students, who usually have more advanced oral proficiency, may be able to exploit their oral proficiency in university ESL settings. The primary objective of most university IEPs is to equip learners with the academic language and skills they will need in order to be successful once they enter degree programs. However, the dominant communicative language orientations of such programs may actually enable students with already advanced oral proficiency to be constructed and labelled as 'successful students,' regardless of their progress in acquiring important academic literacy skills.

The purpose of this case study is to describe the patterns of classroom interaction of one 'generation-1.5' student enrolled in a university IEP who, in terms of her English language skills, unquestionably fits the above profile of an immigrant student. Festina,<sup>1</sup> the primary participant in this study, arrived in the United States with her family at the age of 13 as an Albanian refugee from Kosovo, with no prior knowledge of English. She began and completed her high school education in the southwestern United States and subsequently enrolled in a state university in the same region.

In this study, I focus on Festina's classroom interactional behaviours, some of which may further distinguish immigrant student populations from international student populations in university IEPs.<sup>2</sup> I explore the implications of Festina's advanced oral/aural proficiency in English, specifically examining the ways in which she was able to use her advanced oral proficiency to position herself as a highly engaged and motivated language learner in her university IEP classes. By triangulat-

ing various data sources, I establish a connection between Festina's classroom behaviours and her teachers' assessments of her academic performance.

I begin with a brief discussion of research on immigrants and refugees and English language learning in North America and provide background information about my primary participant. Next, I describe the types of data collected and analyzed. I then present a discussion of Festina's overall patterns of participation, suggesting that some of those patterns may be due to her advanced oral proficiency and may also be related to her prior participation in a US high school. I also provide a number of examples of the types of relational comments Festina often produced during her classes, and I make connections between Festina's style of classroom participation and her teachers' impressions of her. I conclude by discussing larger considerations related to participation behaviours and academic outcomes for US-educated students in university ESL programs.

*Research on refugees/immigrants and language learning in North America*

Scholarly work related to both refugees and English language learning typically either describes curriculum design of adult transition/literacy programs (e.g., Mahnen, 1995; Seufert, 1999), or consists of evaluation reports of such programs (e.g., Mingkwan, 1995). To date, there have been no published studies focusing on refugee students continuing to learn language in a US university setting. Duff (2001, p. 105) has noted that an alarming proportion of refugee students drops out of high school, which may preclude them from continuing their studies at university. This draws attention to the need to examine the experiences of those members of this population who – after overcoming numerous barriers, in many cases – *have* had the opportunity to pursue post-secondary education.

Many studies of immigrants and language learning have focused on elementary school-aged immigrant learners of English (e.g., Hunter, 1997; Platt & Trudi, 1997; Toohey, 1996, 2001). Those studies concerned with adult immigrant language learners have usually taken place in settings such as community-based ESL courses (e.g., Peirce, 1995) or workplace/vocational ESL programs (e.g., Duff, Wong, & Early, 2000).

Recently, however, a small but growing body of scholarship has emerged that examines the increasing population of US-educated non-native speakers of English entering colleges and universities. This demographic is often referred to as 'generation 1.5.' Harklau (2000), for

example, has documented the transition of generation-1.5 students from secondary to post-secondary educational settings. Several other studies (e.g., Frodesen, 2002; Frodesen & Starna, 1999; Leki, 1999) featuring generation-1.5 students have been concerned with these students and their process of acquiring academic literacy in English. Such concerns are certainly well founded, because, for many members of this student population, the acquisition of academic literacy represents one of the greatest challenges of the university experience. However, the highly advanced oral/aural proficiency of these students is often assumed to be unproblematic and has remained under-explored.

Characterizing international versus US-educated immigrant students as two groups with complementary strengths and weaknesses in terms of language skills is, in many cases, accurate; however, such a description does not address the ways in which students from either population are able to exploit those particular strengths in the classroom. As I will illustrate, Festina, a US-educated immigrant student, was able to use her strengths (not only her advanced oral proficiency but also her familiarity with acceptable and valorized classroom behaviours in US educational settings) in possibly compensatory ways in her IEP classes. Here I explore how Festina's advanced oral proficiency, as well as her prior experience with North American educational norms and practices, have thus presented her with opportunities that her less orally proficient international student classmates (who were also less familiar with norms of US classroom culture) may not yet have had access to. I also address how these resources affected her classroom performance, in terms of both teachers' reactions to her as a student and their more objective assessment of her performance in their classes, by drawing an inference between Festina's classroom interaction style and her success in IEP classes. Finally, I suggest that, unfortunately, these resources may have ultimately been insufficient to ensure her long-term academic success in mainstream university courses.

*Social identity in language learning contexts*

My own identity crucially depends on my dialogical relations with others. (Taylor, 1994, p. 34)

Since the publication of Peirce's article "Social Identity, Investment, and Language Learning" (1995), there has been a growing awareness of the important role of social context in language learning. Among Peirce's key insights is the recognition that social identities are discursively constructed and negotiated. Whereas Peirce's analysis focused on adults

(i.e., immigrant women) and centred primarily on their ability (or inability) to claim the right to speak during interactions in their workplaces, Toohey (2001) examined the ways in which children were able to variously claim certain types of positions within an ESL kindergarten classroom. In her discussion, Toohey suggests a connection between the students' identities, which emerged through their classroom interactions with other students, and teachers' resulting ascriptions of particular 'school identities' (e.g., 'struggling' versus 'average') to those students.

As Gee (2001) points out, identity is not simply claimed by the individual; successfully achieving a particular identity also entails being *recognized by others* 'as a certain "kind of person" in a given context' (p. 99). To put it simply, identities are both achieved by an individual and ascribed by others. Gee further notes that 'acting and interacting in a certain type of way' (p. 109) combines with other factors such as physical appearance, non-verbal behaviours, and styles of speaking 'to get one recognized as a certain "kind of person"' (p. 110). With respect to identity in the ESL literature, Norton and Toohey (2001) have usefully illustrated how learners' identities are socially constructed in situated interactions, not only addressing how learners are assigned particular positions by others but also showing how these same learners can draw on a number of resources in order to position themselves in strategic ways in different social contexts.

#### *Relational talk*

Central to the following discussion is the distinction between 'interactional' and 'transactional' types of talk (Brown & Yule, 1983). Although this distinction has been given various labels (e.g., 'rapport talk' versus 'report talk'; Tannen, 1990), many discourse analysts find it useful to draw a distinction between talk that primarily orients to the accomplishment of some type of task or activity and that which has a more phatic, interpersonal, or relational function. This distinction is a particularly relevant one in institutional settings, where it is assumed that participants interact with one another in order to accomplish institutional tasks, activities, or goals.

In a recent study of discourse in diverse workplaces, Koester (2004) argues that 'relational' talk normally 'address[es] some aspect of the task but [is] not obligatory for the accomplishment of the task' (p. 1411). Relational sequences can vary in length from a single-word speaker turn to multi-turn sequences and can consist of '*comments* of some kind about [a] task,' humorous remarks, non-minimal response tokens, or evaluative adjectives, as well as echoing and repetition (p. 1411, emphasis

added). As markers of interpersonal involvement and solidarity, relational utterances often serve a number of interactive and affective discourse functions; they can be interpreted as showing appreciation, highlighting the significance of the activity in which participants are engaged (i.e., demonstrating why a task is important, and thereby validating its performance), or reaffirming and consolidating a relationship (i.e., contributing to a positive working relationship by showing affiliation and solidarity). In serving these various functions, Koester maintains, relational sequences offer speakers great potential for the negotiation of their institutional and discursive identities (p. 1425).

In classrooms, teacher/student question-and-answer sequences that orient to the topic of the lesson are typically transactional: their primary function is to advance students' understanding of a particular topic or content area. In contrast, other types of talk that may occur in classroom (i.e., what I refer to as 'comments') usually have a more relational function. In the discussion that follows, I demonstrate how, through her classroom interaction style, Festina was able to create discursive spaces in which she could forge personal relationships with teachers during class time. Festina's highly interactive and often personalized behaviours undoubtedly contributed to teachers' positive appraisal of Festina and to their unanimous construction of her as an eager and highly motivated language learner, in spite of her average-to-poor performance on reading and writing assignments and on formal assessments.

#### *Festina's background*

Having survived the war in Kosovo and several months in a Macedonian refugee camp, Festina and her family were flown to the United States in 1999. Festina began and completed her secondary education in a mid-sized city in the southwestern United States, where both her extended and immediate family settled. For three years, Festina attended two hours of 'sheltered English immersion' (ESL) courses per day; for the remaining five class periods, she and her ESL classmates were placed in mainstream classes, such as social studies and chemistry. In an early interview, Festina indicated that, for her, the first year in the United States was the most difficult and that after that year she was able to communicate quite well. Indeed, Festina's high school transcript reflects improvement over time, most likely due to her increasing English proficiency. Although in her first two years of high school she received mostly Cs, Ds, and Fs in content courses, by her third year, Festina earned nothing lower than a B.

In spite of what was, initially, an often frustrating experience, Festina's high school ESL teacher, Ms. Wheeler, describes her accelerated progress in English as 'amazing'; by her senior year of high school (i.e., Grade 12), Festina asked to be placed in a senior-level English class for native speakers of English. In December of that year, Festina took the TOEFL at a local university. Although she had made remarkable linguistic and academic progress during her four years of high school, she scored quite low on the TOEFL (PBT) (360). She was admitted conditionally to the regional university,<sup>3</sup> with the understanding that before taking academic courses she needed to achieve the level of language proficiency required to meet the university's primary undergraduate admissions criterion for non-native speakers of English: a TOEFL score of at least 500. Following her high school graduation, Festina enrolled in two summer sessions of English language instruction in the university's IEP.

Festina's TOEFL score of 433 at the end of her summer IEP coursework was still not high enough for her to be considered for regular admission to the university. However, because of her advanced oral proficiency, she was allowed to take one lower-level math course, Introduction to Algebra, concurrently with her first academic semester of ESL classes (fall 2003). At the time when the data for this study were collected, Festina was enrolled as a full-time student in the university's IEP as well as taking one 'outside class,' the lower-level math course.

As program coordinator of the university IEP, I began my own relationship with Festina in the summer when she first enrolled in the program. Immediately she appeared to be quite different from the majority of our international IEP students in her very advanced oral proficiency and her use of highly colloquial English expressions. Festina was the only student in the history of the university's IEP who had attended and completed high school in the United States. For these reasons, I identified her as exceptional and selected her as the focus of this investigation.<sup>4</sup>

### **Method**

Multiple sources of data collected include interviews with Festina, interviews and questionnaires with her current teachers (IEP teachers and math teacher) and former high school ESL teacher (Ms. Wheeler), my own researcher memos following weekly staff meetings with the IEP teachers, and a series of classroom observations. In the analysis, I triangulate these data sources in order to support and give greater validity to my personal observations and impressions.

I observed Festina on at least two occasions in four different classroom environments. Because she was enrolled as a full-time IEP student, I observed her in three IEP classes, each with a different student composition as well as different instructors. All the IEP instructors were graduate assistants concurrently working on MA-TESL degrees. I also had the opportunity to observe Festina in her math class, which was taught by a male adjunct instructor.

### **Festina's patterns of participation**

After my first few IEP class observations, it quickly became apparent that Festina's patterns of participation were markedly different from those of her international student peers. In addition to taking extensive field notes during the observation, I also counted the number and type of utterances made by Festina and by a different 'comparison student' in each class. Although there were no other US-educated students in the IEP, comparison students were selected on the basis of their overall similarity to Festina in other respects (e.g., gender, age, general levels of volubility).

I classified student utterances into one of three categories: questions, answers, and unelicited comments. In my field notes from several of the IEP classes, I observed that Festina very frequently provided responses to questions directed by the teacher to the whole class. In choral response activities, Festina's answers were typically the first and the loudest. Furthermore, the types of responses she gave to whole class-directed questions tended to be more informal and colloquial (e.g., *oh yeah!*, *nope*, *maybe*) than international students' more formal responses to the same questions. The summary of quantitative data (Table 1) illustrates that Festina typically offered more answers in class than the comparison student did and that such responses were most often related to the content of the lesson.

Even more striking about the data in Table 1 are the numbers of comments produced by Festina, in relation to the very few comments produced by comparison students. This was the case even in the Academic Writing class, where the comparison student was an outspoken German student who also frequently contributed questions and answers but who – as Table 1 shows – made fewer comments than Festina. In contrast, Festina tended to be less outspoken in her math class, a trend that might be due in part to the less interactive nature of the math class compared to the IEP classes, and also in part to Festina's higher level of confidence in the IEP classes, where her oral/aural English proficiency far exceeded that of her mostly international IEP peers.

TABLE 1  
Patterns of participation for Festina and a comparison student across different classes

Class (length of lesson)	Participant	Questions	Answers	Comments
Core* (110 minutes)	Festina	6	17	24
	Comparison student	5	12	1
Core (110 minutes)	Festina	10	10	11
	Comparison student	1	1	0
TOEFL (90 minutes)	Festina	9	10	17
	Comparison student	3	2	0
TOEFL (90 minutes)	Festina	5	37	29
	Comparison student	0	8	1
Academic Writing (100 minutes)	Festina	11	32	19
	Comparison student	11	15	9
Math (90 minutes)	Festina	1	4	2
	Comparison student	1	0	2

\* The Core course is the IEP's content-based integrated skills class, which complements some of the other more traditional skills-based courses in the curriculum.

### Types of comments produced

In the following section, I analyze Festina's comments and the ways in which these comments differentiate her patterns of classroom participation from those of other IEP students.

#### *Repetition and agreement comments*

The most frequent of Festina's comments consisted of agreement with or verbatim repetition of a teacher's statement, as in the following example from a question-and-answer session. This exchange took place after a lecture delivered by a guest speaker in a content-based IEP course:

Festina: Is Jupiter the biggest planet?  
Lecturer: Jupiter's the biggest. And Saturn's next.  
Festina [*nodding*]:<sup>5</sup> Saturn's next.

In addition to comments consisting of verbatim repetitions of teacher utterances, a number of Festina's comments could be characterized as expressions of agreement or positive assessments. In one of the TOEFL classes, Festina asked the instructor, Chris, a question about relative clauses; he provided an explanation, which she immediately followed up with a *yeah*. This kind of follow-up to a teacher's explanation was the most common type of comment she produced. Backchannels, overt

expressions of agreement, and repetition of others' utterances represent positive politeness strategies (Brown & Levinson, 1987), demonstrations of involvement, and ways in which speakers communicate solidarity with their interlocutors (Koester, 2004; Tannen, 1989). It is very likely that Festina's 'supportive' comments contributed to teachers' positive perceptions of her, as I suggest below in the discussion of teacher interviews and questionnaires.

*Creating a new 'F-move'*

Sinclair and Couthard's (1975) identification of a dominant IRF exchange structure, consisting of Initiation, Response, and Feedback or Follow-up, has been well documented by a number of studies of classroom discourse (e.g., Cullen, 2002; those discussed by Hall & Walsh, 2002). Festina's comments often followed a typical IRF sequence, with her own comment functioning as an additional follow-up comment to the teacher's feedback move. The following example – which took place after a prototypical IRF sequence – was recorded during a TOEFL class:

- Chris: What part of speech is 'era'?
- Festina: A noun.
- Chris: It's a noun.
- Festina: I knew it!

This type of 'follow-up' comment was not unusual for Festina and was documented across multiple class settings. In contrast, this type of comment, following a teacher's feedback move, was very unusual among other IEP students. In only one instance in an IEP class did I observe such a comment produced by an international student. Repetition, evaluative comments, and follow-up moves can all be considered relational utterances. In other words, in this particular context, such comments have little transactional value (they do nothing to further or advance the lesson); instead, they serve relational functions, such as highlighting one's involvement in a particular activity or underlining the importance of that activity.

*Shifting participation structures*

At times, Festina appeared to be shifting standard classroom participation structures (Philips, 1983).<sup>6</sup> On a number of occasions when the classroom participation structure consisted of either 'whole class interaction with teacher' (Philips, p. 79) or 'desk work' (p. 81), Festina

successfully engaged the teacher in one-on-one interactions. In the majority of cases, rather than facilitating further understanding of academic material, these interactions were opportunities that Festina seized to talk to her teachers during class time, illustrating a major function of relational talk: to mark interpersonal involvement. In the following example from a TOEFL class, the instructor (Chris) allotted 30 seconds for students to complete a word-recognition activity. After starting his stopwatch, Chris announced that the students had only 15 seconds remaining. The following exchange took place during the actual timed activity, while all the other IEP students were silently working:

Chris: 15 seconds!  
Festina: Are you serious?  
Chris: Yes I am!  
Festina: This is hard!

In another example from the same course, Chris asked the class to select one word from their vocabulary list that they wanted him to define for them. Characteristically, Festina was the first student to volunteer a word. The tone of the exchange was light-hearted and jovial, on the part of both teacher and student:

[Chris asks for a volunteer to choose a vocabulary word for him to define]  
Festina: 'Mulch.'  
Chris [smiling]: I was hoping no one would ask for that one!  
Festina: Why?  
Chris: Because it's hard to explain.  
Festina [laughing]: Well I don't know what it means!

Although neither of these examples formed part of a particularly lengthy conversation, Festina's initiation of one-on-one exchanges with her teachers during large-group or deskwork activities indicates a pattern of classroom interaction that was unique to her, at least within the IEP. Festina appeared quite adept at creating opportunities to engage in one-on-one interactions with her teachers during her IEP classes. These interactions typically neither furthered nor distracted from the lessons in any observable way, yet Festina's comments were topically relevant<sup>7</sup> and often served to demonstrate her involvement in, and attention to, a given activity. By initiating such comments during whole-class or individual activities, Festina appeared to be using her linguistic and interactional resources to do important relational work as well as important identity work: to create a personal bond with her IEP teachers

during class time<sup>8</sup> and to construct an identity for herself as an engaged and highly motivated student.

#### *Classroom management behaviours*

In addition to producing various types of relational comments that distinguished her from other students in the IEP, Festina also engaged in a variety of 'managing' behaviours: correcting her teachers, offering suggestions, and taking an active role in other matters related to classroom management.

#### Correcting the teacher and offering suggestions

In her math class as well as in two IEP classes, there were a few occasions during which Festina's comments functioned to correct the teacher. For example, in one session of the TOEFL class, Chris wrote a sentence on the board and then erased a portion of it. Festina commented aloud that the sentence was previously correct, and he thanked her for telling him. Interestingly, a number of students (including Festina) engaged in this behaviour in the math class: for example, pointing out if the teacher had accidentally written down the wrong number on the chalkboard, or if he had forgotten to write down a negative sign next to an integer. In the IEP classes, however, Festina was the only student I ever observed correcting a teacher. Festina also engaged in other classroom management behaviours, such as offering suggestions to teachers (e.g., [*loud lawnmower noise outside*] 'Can we close those windows? That noise is annoying!'); again, a behaviour that none of the other IEP students were observed to perform. In all such instances that I observed, the IEP teachers thanked Festina for her suggestions.

#### Additional 'facilitative' behaviours

Two of the IEP teachers observed appealed directly to Festina's 'role' as classroom manager. In one TOEFL class, Chris asked Festina to remind him where the class had left off in the textbook in a previous class meeting. In an Academic Writing class, when no student volunteered to answer a question, Sara called on Festina; this represented an unusual occasion in which Festina refused to answer Sara's question, saying 'Not me, I'm always the first.' It was not clear whether Festina refused to answer this question because she did not know the answer or whether she was simply complying with an earlier directive she had received from some of her other teachers, which was to wait and give other

students opportunities to answer questions. After this observation, I learned that Festina's Core teachers, Lauren and Elisabeth, had held individual conferences with their students. One of the points they emphasized with Festina was that she needed to allow other students to answer questions and participate. Lauren explained this on her questionnaire:

After a conversation with Festina where we encouraged her to slow down and think about her work and responses, she became more patient about waiting for classmates responses in class discussions, and began a funny sort of 'prompting' for her classmates when none of them were responding. When we don't get quick responses, or no one volunteers, Festina will sometimes say things like 'Come on guys, I always talk' or 'One of you guys go. I always volunteer first.'

Lauren's comments here indicate that Festina helped to manage the class in other ways, such as by encouraging her classmates to participate, illustrating yet another example of a pattern of participation that was unique to Festina in the IEP. Although Lauren's comments do not explicitly evaluate Festina's 'prompting' behaviours in either positive or negative terms, it seems reasonable to assume that Festina's compliance with her teachers' request<sup>9</sup> and her willingness to facilitate other students' participation in class met with teacher approval.

Quite possibly the most dramatic example of Festina's 'classroom management' behaviour occurred one day in the TOEFL class, when she sanctioned other students who were talking while the teacher was giving an explanation. Chris, the TOEFL teacher, mentioned this during a weekly staff meeting, as well as on his questionnaire, as an example of Festina's 'facilitative' classroom behaviour: 'Once during class, she berated other students for talking while I was explaining something, saying to the class that such behaviour was "disrespectful."' <sup>10</sup> When I asked Chris about this incident, he replied that he was rather surprised, and that the other students immediately stopped talking and listened to Festina. Chris expressed neither approval nor disapproval explicitly; however, his demeanour while relating this incident during the staff meeting suggested that he found the incident amusing, perhaps even endearing.

The examples discussed in this section demonstrate Festina's impressive social skills. Festina was not only able to successfully 'pull off' a number of face-threatening acts (Brown & Levinson, 1987) such as offering suggestions to – and even correcting – her teachers (though such actions, taken by a less socially adept student, could certainly have

resulted in offence being taken), she also 'assisted' her instructors with other matters of classroom management, such as encouraging her classmates to participate and reminding them when they needed to pay attention to the teacher's instructions. Indeed, these types of comments appear to have relational (i.e., showing solidarity with the teacher) and possibly also transactional (i.e., helping to manage the life and activities of the classroom) functions.

### *Group work*

Because of my physical location in the classrooms I observed, I was often unable to hear Festina's and other students' complete utterances during group work. However, the non-verbal behaviours I observed as Festina worked in groups correspond with her teachers' comments about how she interacted with other students:

Festina interacts well with other students. I think they kind of defer to her both because of their perceptions of her language skills, and also because of her somewhat dominating personality. She spends time with a lot of the students outside of class socially.... She is extremely supportive in group work, although sometimes her haste or eagerness in completing a task seems to motivate her to 'take over' the task. She does appear to be very patient working with classmates of all proficiency levels. (Lauren, questionnaire)

In her interactions with other students, she is sometimes domineering, but she genuinely tries to help others understand English, especially cultural aspects. (Chris, questionnaire)

Festina is an excellent group leader. She always encourages other members of her group to perform better. She is able to manage different tasks at the same time and she is always friendly and highly motivated. However, I have noticed that she likes working with lower (than she is) level proficiency students (if we ask them to match themselves in groups). In my opinion, it is due to her awareness of strength and/or dominance. In other words, she wants to be seen as the one who knows all [the] answers. (Elisabeth, questionnaire)

Although, in general terms, the teachers' questionnaire responses indicate their approval of Festina's interactions with her peers during group work, they also suggest ways in which Festina was able to use her particular strengths to position herself as a knowledgeable student and

an authority among her peers. For example, Chris's observation of Festina's attempts to help other students with 'cultural aspects' of language addresses an area in which Festina was certainly an expert and authority by comparison to her international student peers, who had all spent less time in the United States. Similarly, Elisabeth commented that Festina enjoyed being paired with lower-proficiency learners; this, too, could be construed as a way in which Festina was able to position herself as more knowledgeable than her classmates.<sup>11</sup>

### Teachers' assessments of Festina

The interview and questionnaire data indicate that Festina was very well liked by her teachers. They described her, using an assortment of positive terms: *personable, outgoing, sociable, confident, pleasant, positive, accepting*, as well as *very nice and friendly toward and respectful of teachers and classmates*. Speaking more directly to matters of classroom participation, her teachers reported that Festina was a very active class participant and appeared to be actively engaged in her own process of learning. Most teachers made it clear that they appreciated these traits:

Festina almost always pays attention in class, and is eager to participate at all times. In this way, she could be viewed as an ideal student. (Lauren, questionnaire)

I really like having her in class. She has a gift of being able to motivate the rest of the class and get them excited/interested in almost any topic (school or otherwise). (Chris, questionnaire)

I wish that I had a few more students like her. It was really rewarding to have her in class. (Ms. Wheeler [high school ESL teacher], interview)

It is very likely that Festina's highly verbal and highly involved style of classroom interaction – and, more specifically, her comments, which served a variety of relational functions – contributed to teachers' overall impressions of her as a 'highly active' and 'very engaged' learner. Furthermore, Chris's comment about Festina's ability to motivate other students directly addresses some of the previously discussed 'classroom managing' behaviours.

Only one teacher addressed Festina's classroom managing behaviours explicitly on the questionnaire, and he included no evaluative assessment of those behaviours. However, his comments suggest that

he regarded Festina's tendency to correct others as tempered by her willingness to acknowledge her own errors:

She readily points out others' mistakes (including the teacher), but she is equally willing to admit her own. (Chris, questionnaire)

Thus, the sum of Festina's verbal and non-verbal participation behaviours in the context of the IEP contributed to teachers' overall positive impressions and constructions of Festina as a 'highly active and engaged' student. Yet, when asked to rate Festina's written work, all of her teachers unanimously described it as between 'average' and 'poor.'

### **Classroom performance outcomes**

That, at the end of her first academic semester in a US university, Festina received a B in her College Algebra course is unsurprising, given that she had previously taken algebra twice in high school, failing it her sophomore (Grade 10) year and passing with a B in her junior (Grade 11) year. What may be somewhat more unexpected is that, in spite of the unanimous agreement among her IEP teachers about the average or below-average quality of her written work, Festina received As in five of her IEP classes – and one B, in her IEP Reading class. In terms of a more objective measure of academic language proficiency, Festina's institutional TOEFL score at the end of the fall semester did indicate improvement, both overall (an increase from 430 to 467) and on each of the test's three subsections. Unfortunately, the institutional TOEFL includes no measure of writing, the skill area that Festina's teachers felt was her weakest.

Because after her first academic semester in the IEP Festina had still failed to meet the university-required TOEFL minimum, she was obliged to take a second round of IEP classes in the following semester. However, thanks to the acceptable grade she received in her math course, she was granted permission to take two non-reading/writing-intensive university courses concurrently with her English classes in the following semester: another math course and Introduction to Computers.

### **Coda**

Of course, Festina's story does not end here. Having completed one summer and one full academic year of IEP classes, Festina scored 483 on

the TOEFL in May 2004. Taking into consideration her advanced oral proficiency, her successful IEP class performance, her satisfactory grades in her math and computer classes, and her consistent improvement on the TOEFL (as well as the instrument's 20-point standard error of measurement), a committee of IEP staff decided to allow Festina to enrol in academic classes the following semester, thus changing her status from conditional admission to that of a regular degree-seeking student. Admittedly, a number of factors were involved in this decision; yet it clearly illustrates how teachers' and administrators' constructions of learners' identities are often tied to high-stakes placement decisions – a point previously made by Harklau (1994) and Toohey (2001).

For the following two semesters, Festina was enrolled as a degree-seeking student at the same university. With each semester, however, her overall grade-point average fell. After the second semester, she had either failed or withdrawn from all the classes in which she was enrolled, and her cumulative GPA was 1.27. The most recent institutional data indicate that Festina is no longer enrolled as a student at the university. Whether this unfortunate outcome was largely the result of her struggle with academic literacy or whether it was due to additional factors remains unknown.<sup>12</sup>

### Discussion

Echoing the observations of Brickman and Nuzzo (1999) and Muchisky and Tangren (1999), one teacher described Festina as 'unusual, in that most of our [international IEP] students are relatively strong writers, and more inhibited speakers, and Festina is the opposite' (Lauren, interview). In this respect, Festina reflects the typical profile of a US-educated immigrant university IEP student. In the terms of Cummins's (1979) now-classic distinction, Festina – like many US-educated immigrant, or 'generation 1.5,' students – could be characterized as having advanced BICS (basic interpersonal communication skills) but far less developed CALP (cognitive academic language proficiency).

In the IEP, Festina's oral proficiency enabled her to behave in certain ways that might have been more difficult for other, less orally proficient students; for example, she was able to hold one-on-one conversations with her instructors during whole-class and individual activities. Throughout multiple observations, other IEP students very rarely, if ever, engaged in the majority of these behaviours.<sup>13</sup> One possible explanation for the difference between Festina's classroom behaviours and those of the majority of the IEP students is that the international

students may not have felt confident enough in their oral language ability to participate so actively and in such a variety of ways. Being less familiar with US classroom norms of behaviour than Festina (who had successfully completed four years in a US high school), these students may not have been aware that such behaviours are not only considered acceptable and appropriate but, in some cases, may be regarded by teachers as highly desirable.

Thus, Festina's oral proficiency, her habituation to US educational norms and practices, and her extroverted personality allowed her to enact many classroom behaviours that were *not* enacted by her international peers in the IEP. Festina was able to use her oral language proficiency to create interpersonal bonds with teachers during class time, to take an active role in matters related to classroom management, and to position herself as a knowledgeable expert during small-group interactions. Festina's repetition of teacher utterances and the other types of relational comments that she produced during her classes were interpreted by her teachers as a 'show of involvement, of willingness to interact' (Tannen, 1989, p. 52) and no doubt contributed to teachers' general impressions of Festina as a hard worker and a motivated student. Furthermore, this repertoire of classroom behaviours contributed to her teachers' overall positive appraisal of her, in spite of her less-developed academic reading and writing skills.<sup>14</sup>

The acquisition of academic literacy in a second language is a long and complex process (as documented by Spack, 1997, for example) and undoubtedly represented a major obstacle for Festina in her transition from the IEP to mainstream university classes. In Festina's case, the acquisition of literacy in English may have been further complicated by the fact that her prior literacy education had occurred not in her L1 (Albanian) but, rather, in Serbian, imposed as the language of education in Kosovo in the late 1980s.<sup>15</sup>

Virtually all the ESL teachers surveyed noted the great discrepancy between Festina's oral/aural proficiency and the written work she produced, which they collectively described as somewhere between poor and average. And yet, despite their consensus on the poor quality of Festina's written work (often accompanied by teachers' characterizations of her as rushing through her work, not taking the time to carefully proofread or edit, etc.), they uniformly expressed their approval of her motivation and willingness to engage in learning. Consequently, in the IEP setting, Festina constructed a 'good student' identity – primarily through the relational comments she produced, as well as through her other facilitative behaviours – and she was also recognized as such by others, most notably her teachers.<sup>16</sup>

### Conclusions

At the beginning of this study, I intended not only to add support to the existing literature on differences between immigrant and international students in university IEPs but also to identify some of the interactional opportunities that may be afforded to US-educated immigrant students as a result of those differences. As I have demonstrated, such students may be able to use their advanced oral skills in university ESL programs with a high degree of success; however, what those same skills enable students to accomplish later, in their university content courses, remains a crucial question, and one that clearly requires further exploration.

The present study raises a number of points that have important implications for college- and university-level ESL professionals. The first is that language learners who have well-developed social skills, as well as advanced oral proficiency, may be able to use those skills to create interactional opportunities in the classroom that contribute to teachers' favourable impressions of them and to position themselves as perhaps more knowledgeable than they actually are. Although Festina's teachers often expressed frustration with the poor quality of the written work she produced, their favourable impressions of her as 'motivated and eager to learn' were related, in no small part, to her classroom interactional style. This finding is supported by Harklau (2000), who observed occasions when ESL teachers rated ESL students' motivation as 'excellent,' which seemed to contradict important facts about the same students not completing assignments and scoring poorly on tests and quizzes.<sup>17</sup>

In any formal instructional setting, learners make choices not only about the types of behaviours that they choose to engage in but also about the skills they feel comfortable with using and practising. In this sense, it is likely that, in her IEP classes, Festina was able to capitalize on those skills with which she felt most comfortable, perhaps without needing to dedicate a great deal of time and energy to improving the skill areas (i.e., reading and writing)<sup>18</sup> that teachers and program administrators identified as her weakest. Regardless of how much energy Festina actually devoted to working on these skills, it has been documented that age of arrival and length of residence are critical factors in the acquisition of academic language skills (Collier, 1987/1988; Klesmer, 1994; Roessingh & Koever, 2002, 2003). For example, Roessingh and Koever (2003) suggest that even under the best of circumstances (i.e., students from affluent family backgrounds who have had previous formal exposure to English as a foreign language, etc.), those students who arrive around the ages of 10 to 14 face a very high risk of long-term academic failure. Roessingh and Koever argue that these students must

'beat the academic time clock' because it may take them anywhere from four to seven years to acquire a level of CALP that is comparable to that of their native-speaking counterparts. Consequently, in many cases, these students complete their high school studies 'under the wire' and must therefore 'continue developing CALP-like proficiency over time in a university setting' (Roessingh & Koeber, 2003, p. 8).

A number of factors (personal, financial, etc.) may have contributed to Festina's withdrawal from the university. However, a pattern of steadily decreasing grades in a number of progressively more difficult university courses (biology, psychology, composition, etc.) suggests that her ongoing struggle to master cognitive academic language skills may have played an important role in this unfortunate outcome. As a result, this small-scale study points to the critical need for longitudinal research documenting the long-term university educational outcomes both of generation-1.5 students<sup>19</sup> in general and of a sub-population of this group (refugee students) in particular, in order to better understand how these students fare once they leave the ESL environment and, more importantly, to determine what types of support can be most effective in ensuring their future academic success. Such research could help shed light on how college and university ESL practitioners might best serve the needs of these students, given the practical constraints of time.

English language educators and language program administrators have become increasingly aware that, although they may share an institutional identity as 'ESL learners,' immigrant (and refugee) students often have language and literacy needs that are quite distinct from those of their international counterparts. Although university intensive English programs can address some of the needs of both sets of students,<sup>20</sup> it is clear that longer-term institutional supports are needed to foster the ultimate academic success of immigrant and refugee students in North American universities. Because many university IEPs are just beginning to see students of this profile participating in their programs, designing and implementing such supports represents a particularly pressing issue, to ensure that future students like Festina – who have had to overcome many barriers prior to arriving in post-secondary educational settings – are not set up for failure once they leave the world of ESL instruction.

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### Notes

- 1 A pseudonym that she selected herself.
- 2 This study simultaneously addresses a wider gap in studies of classroom discourse, as Heath (1999) notes that 'educational researchers inevitably focus on the talk of the teacher to the student rather than on student-initiated talk' (p. 216).
- 3 In spite of having lived in the United States for a relatively short period, Festina was the only ESL student from her high school ever to attend a four-year university, according to her high school ESL teacher.
- 4 Before beginning the study, I obtained Festina's consent and the approval of the university's Institutional Review Board. Informed consent was also provided by the teachers who participated in the study.
- 5 In the IEP classes, Festina reinforced her oral participation with a variety of non-verbal behaviours: nodding *yes*, shaking her head *no*, shifting her gaze to focus on a speaker (teacher or student), maintaining direct eye contact with her teachers when speaking, smiling, laughing at teachers' jokes, and so on.
- 6 Philips (1983) has identified four different types of standard classroom participation structures: (1) 'whole class in interaction with teacher'; (2) teacher interacting with a small group of students; (3) 'one-on-one involvement between the teacher and a single student'; and (4) individual 'desk work' (pp. 79–81).
- 7 Koester points out that 'in order to "do" relational talk during a transactional encounter, speakers need to make it sequentially and topically relevant to the on-going task performance ... This means that brief relational sequences, such as single turns, are usually closely linked to the task at hand, involving for example evaluative comments about the task' (2004, p. 1421).
- 8 Some of the IEP teachers were critical of Festina's tendency to 'rush through assignments' in her desire to 'always be the first student to finish' during in-class writing activities. In one writing class that I observed for

teacher supervision purposes, Festina (characteristically) completed a summary writing activity well in advance of the other students in the class. I noted that she used this 'free' class time to engage in a one-on-one discussion with her teacher about her difficulty in finding library books related to the topic of her research paper. Although the topic initiated by Festina was related to a class assignment, it was unrelated to the immediate classroom task.

- 9 The following excerpt from an interview with Festina shows her intention to comply with her teachers' request to give other students opportunities to respond: 'Core is ... I'm trying to, like, to not say it [the answer], you know. Like when they [the teachers] ask a question, I just stay quiet until ... I try to lay back.'
- 10 Festina made an indirect reference to this incident during one of my interviews with her, when I asked what she would change about the IEP if she could: 'I wish I could change one thing: when the teacher is talking, the students [should] not talk. I wish I could change that. 'Cause it really annoys me. 'Cause when it's, like, Chris talking or something, there's like the other ones like they just talk to each other and stuff. That really annoys me ... because he's trying to explain something and I wanna listen ... When it's the teacher talking, the students are talking over him, which is, you know, really hard. You know that's like the only thing I wish I could change ...'
- 11 Of course, it would also have been interesting to determine how Festina's classmates reacted to her and how *they* interpreted her classroom behaviours. However, because of the small size of the program and related ethical considerations, I made a conscious decision *not* to interview other IEP students (i.e., Festina's classmates) as part of my study.
- 12 After leaving the IEP, Festina did not remain in contact with me or with any other IEP staff.
- 13 My observations in this respect were consistent with the IEP teachers' characterizations (obtained via questionnaires and interviews) of Festina's classroom interaction style compared to those of the other IEP students.
- 14 Norton and Toohey (2001) have raised the important question of what portion of participants' access to their individual social networks can be attributed to their race, colouring, and attractive physical appearance. Similarly, Festina's attractive appearance may also have been one of the many factors that contributed to others' favourable impressions of her.
- 15 Although Albanians were the ethnic and linguistic majority in the small Kosovo region of the former Yugoslavia, in the late 1980s their language and culture were actively suppressed. Tollefson (2001) reports that, in the late 1980s, 'Serb leaders shifted the medium of instruction in schools in

Kosovo from Albanian to Serbian and purged Albanian-speaking teachers and administrators from the educational system, despite the fact that the population was 90% Albanian' (p. 189). No measures of Festina's literacy in either Albanian or Serbian were available.

- 16 It is important not to overlook the importance of the many contextual variables that are obviously related to student identities in learning contexts. Festina was the *only* US-educated student in the IEP, and as a result she 'stood out' as exceptional, particularly when contrasted with the other (i.e., international) students, who were characterized by teachers as more reluctant to participate in class. This contrasts with Harklau's (2000) case-study students – representing a small minority of US-educated ESL students in a classroom with a majority of 'recent arrival' immigrants in community college ESL classes – who actively resisted their institutional identities as ESL learners and who were consequently constructed by their teachers as 'the worst' students in that particular setting.
- 17 'Aeyfer's physics teacher rated her attitude and behavior as excellent in his class ... even though he commented on a progress report that she needed to treat lab work more seriously, read assigned material, and do all assigned work; even though she had done poorly on a quiz and a test; and even though he rated her participation and organization as only satisfactory' (Harklau, 2000, p. 51).
- 18 When interviewed, several of the IEP teachers indicated that they felt Festina could have applied herself more in these areas.
- 19 Leki (1999) is a good example of such a study.
- 20 Festina's more than 100-point gain on the institutional TOEFL after one year of participation in the IEP suggests a positive effect for instruction.

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