

## Vietnamese High School Graduates: What Are Their Needs and Expectations?

- The California State University and University of California campuses have recently experienced an increasing number of nonnative speakers who enter their schools underprepared in English. This problem appears also to be common at community colleges. This study examines the personal backgrounds (e.g., age at time of arrival in the United States, number of years in American high schools, number of ESL classes taken in high school) of 54 Vietnamese graduates of American high schools and their perception of how prepared they are in English. The study also looks at what these students expect from ESL teachers and what classroom activities they find beneficial in ESL courses. While offering explanations for this particular group's underpreparedness in English, the authors conclude that (a) these students value well-organized, prepared teachers and (b) they would greatly benefit from additional focused study in grammar and writing skills.

At the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, a significant number of Vietnamese refugees settled in California. The majority of them started building new lives and going to school in the San Jose, Los Angeles, Orange County and San Diego areas. Many of the refugees who came to Golden West College<sup>1</sup> were professional and well-educated people with higher education diplomas. Over the last 25 years, however, the Vietnamese student population at our school has changed significantly so that today the Vietnamese student population comprises three major groups: older (age 50 +) and usually retired military officers; recent immigrants who have been here for four years or less; and younger, acculturated

students who have attended American high schools and may not be proficient in their native language. This last group of students is small, but given their exposure to American culture and education, we were perplexed by their lack of success in their college ESL classes. Why were some of them placing into our beginning and low-level classes and not passing them? Why were they weak in grammar when speaking and writing English? Why were they having difficulty with reading? In an effort to better understand these students and eventually help them be successful in their ESL classes, we undertook a survey of their backgrounds and needs.

### **Overview of Students Surveyed**

Vietnamese ESL students at Golden West College who had attended American high schools were surveyed over three semesters and a summer session (starting spring of 1996 and concluding in spring of 1997; see appendix for the survey instrument.) The 54 respondents included students from the lowest to the highest level ESL classes. From the first part of the survey, which covered their high school attendance history and ESL classes taken in high school, the researchers learned that out of approximately 725 students in 33 classes, 54 Vietnamese students had attended high school in the United States, and 88% had graduated. Those who did not graduate (12%) had attended between 1 to 4 years of high school in the U.S.

### **Results of the Survey**

The results of the first part of the survey indicate that the students' backgrounds vary tremendously. These students moved to the U.S. between the ages of 5 and 18. They started high school in this country between the ages of 13 and 18 and attended between one to four different high schools over an average of 1 to 6 years, graduating between 1991 and 1996. Some had no previous schooling in Vietnam while others had completed various grade levels (up to 12th grade) in their country. The number of ESL classes these students took during high school in the United States varied from 1 to 16; the number of hours of mandatory and elective ESL classes they took varied from 1 to 10 hours per week.<sup>2</sup> Table 1 summarizes the range of personal responses given by the respondents.

**Table 1**  
**Range of Personal Responses Given by Respondents**

Age of entry to U.S.	5-18
Age at beginning of high school in U.S.	13-18

Number of high schools attended	1-4
Years of U.S. high school attendance	1-6
Year graduated from U.S. high school	1991-1996
Last grade level completed in Vietnam	0-12th grade
Number of ESL classes taken in high school	1-16
Hours of ESL per week	1-10 hours

*Note.* This extreme range of responses yields insight into why Vietnamese students who have attended high school in the U.S. might be placed in community colleges anywhere between the lowest level ESL class and the most advanced.

### Student Preparedness in ESL

The second part of the survey focused on the students' perceptions of their preparedness in ESL and perceptions of their high school and college ESL classes and teachers. They were asked in which activities they regularly participated in their high school and college ESL classes (Questions 10 & 13). At both levels they reported spending the most time listening to the teacher lecture, writing, doing grammar exercises, and working in groups. These experiences indicate that Vietnamese students who have attended American high schools are somewhat familiar with the activities in college ESL classes. However, one of the questions that we were most interested in was how effectively the students thought their high school ESL classes had prepared them for college ESL classes (Question 11). Table 2 displays the responses received on this section of the survey:

**Table 2**  
**Responses to Question 11**

**Question: How effectively do you think your high school ESL classes helped to prepare you for college ESL classes?**

	very well	well	not very well	not at all
In speaking skills	12 (22%)	23 (42%)	16 (29%)	2 (3%)
In writing skills	2 (3%)	19 (35%)	29 (53%)	3 (5%)
In listening skills	14 (25%)	20 (37%)	17 (31%)	2 (3%)
In reading skills	8 (14%)	26 (48%)	15 (27%)	3 (5%)

*Note:*  $n = 53$ .

The results showed that most respondents thought their ESL classes had prepared them well or very well in speaking skills (64%) and listening-comprehension skills (62%). This is not surprising since they are high school graduates and would have spent 1 to 4 years communicating and interacting in English with native and nonnative speakers. It is important to stress that the respondents perceive that they are well prepared in speaking and listening-comprehension skills and can make themselves understood. Although we have noticed that this assumption is valid, the grammar in their speech is not always correct. As Scarcella (1996) indicates, although high school students study in classrooms in which the language of instruction is English, they communicate in a nonstandard variety of English with their peers. Similarly, a majority of the students (62%) felt that they were well or very well prepared in reading skills, but we have noticed that their comprehension of reading material and their vocabulary skills are weak. In contrast, 58% thought they were not very well or not at all prepared in writing skills. This would imply that, even though they can produce oral language, they do not feel competent to produce written language, which is what we have been observing in our classes. Why can these students converse reasonably comfortably in English but not write as well? We would suggest that they are limited both by their poor grammar and lack of vocabulary, which is supported by Scarcella's findings that "students were not exposed to academic English in their high schools; this might partly explain their difficulty using academic English appropriately in their writing" (p. 136).

When the students were asked in what areas they felt they needed additional help to be able to succeed in college (Question 12), a large majority (81%) replied that they needed additional help in writing skills. See Table 3 for responses to this question.

**Table 3**  
**Responses to Question 12**

**Question: In what areas do you feel you need additional help to be able to succeed in college? (Circle all that apply.)**

In speaking	28	(51%)
In writing	44	(81%)
In grammar	42	(77%)
In listening	22	(40%)
In reading	25	(44%)

These responses suggest a need to focus on writing in our ESL classes. Many instructors have large classes, and it is time consuming for them to correct and grade their students' writing; nonetheless, based on this study, correction and feedback seem essential for providing students with the skills they need to improve their writing. Focusing on writing requires focusing on grammar, which was also an area that the students wanted additional help in (77%). Students expressed a desire for clear and effective instruction in English grammar. This indicates a need for grammar instruction, which in turn might help students reach their goal of writing well and succeeding in mainstream classes and in college in general.

### Teacher Characteristics

Question 14 dealt with the characteristics of the high school ESL teacher that these students liked. The responses to this question are summarized in Table 4:

**Table 4**  
**Responses to Question 14**

**Question: What characteristics about your high school ESL teacher did you like? She/he...(Circle all that apply.)**

was patient.	25 (46%)
was flexible.	10 (18%)
was organized and prepared for class.	31 (57%)
was fair.	31 (57%)
was able to maintain class order.	18 (33%)
was not demanding (very easy).	10 (18%)
encouraged me to work hard.	32 (59%)
helped me outside of class.	17 (31%)
returned my written assignments to me within two weeks.	14 (25%)
let me hand in my homework late or whenever I wanted.	8 (8%)
let me come to class more than 10 minutes late.	4 (4%)
let me leave before class ended.	2 (3%)

The characteristic respondents liked most was that the teacher encouraged them to work hard (59%). The next most favored characteristics were the teacher's being organized and prepared for class, as well as being fair (57%). The fourth most important characteristic was being patient (46%). This is a reminder of a teacher's basic responsibility. It is necessary to prod students to be diligent in their studies. Perhaps we, as teachers, are among

the few people who can motivate them in their studies. An effective way of motivating them is to help them outside of class, which was the fifth most important characteristic (31%).

Interestingly, characteristics that we thought the students would have liked about their high school ESL teacher, such as not being demanding, letting them hand in their homework whenever they wanted, and letting them come late or leave early actually ranked low. If we look at the answers to Question 15, (i.e., the characteristics they would like to see in their college ESL teacher), they reflect the same opinions as in Question 14. In other words, being fair (64%), patient (57%), and organized and prepared for class (57%) ranked highest. Encouraging them to work is next, still ranking among the four most important characteristics (55%). Helping them outside of class (46%) came fifth, which is consistent with Question 14. Not being demanding, letting them hand in their homework whenever they wanted, and letting them leave late or early were also the characteristics that ranked lowest as in Question 14. Table 5 summarizes responses to this question:

**Table 5**  
**Responses to Question 15**

**Question: What characteristics would you like to see in your college ESL teacher? She/he should...(Circle all that apply.)**

be patient.	31	(57%)
be flexible.	18	(33%)
be organized and prepared for class.	31	(57%)
be fair.	35	(64%)
be able to maintain class order.	20	(37%)
not be demanding (very easy).	9	(16%)
encourage me to work hard.	30	(55%)
help me outside of class.	25	(46%)
return my written assignments to me within two weeks.	20	(37%)
let me hand in my homework late or whenever I want.	9	(16%)
let me come to class more than 10 minutes late.	10	(18%)
let me leave before class ends.	11	(20%)

We can deduce from the answers to Questions 14 & 15 that these students value professional teachers who are well organized and prepared for class and believe that having teachers who are patient and who encourage them to study hard is vital to their success.

The heart of the survey lies in Question 16, as summarized in Table 6. This question addresses the kinds of activities students from U.S. high schools find beneficial in college ESL classes.

**Table 6**  
**Responses to Question 16**

**Question: What activities in your college ESL class do you find beneficial? (Circle all that apply.)**

Group work (discussions, problem solving, etc.)	31 (57%)
Pair work (dialogues, interviews, etc.)	25 (46%)
Class discussion	28 (51%)
Oral reading	27 (50%)
Silent reading	11 (20%)
Writing	41 (75%)
Watching videos	12 (22%)
Listening to audio tapes	11 (20%)

The activity that stood out as most beneficial to the students is writing (75%), with group work (57%) coming in second. Students also want class discussion, pair work, and oral reading (50%). Oral reading is an activity which can be easily integrated into a class, is not time consuming, and does not require additional preparation or grading. Oral reading ranked much higher than silent reading (20%), which ranked about the same as watching videos and listening to audio tapes. This finding may suggest the need to rethink the use of videotapes and audio tapes in class as well as silent reading.

### **Conclusion**

This survey confirmed that the particular Vietnamese students in this study who graduated from American high schools feel strongly that they require additional focused study in grammar and writing once they enter college. This is consistent with studies that suggest that Asian American students value the study of grammar and writing (Scarcella, 1996). Therefore, if teachers want these students to succeed in ESL classes, it is their responsibility to focus on the teaching of grammar and writing in their classes and to give them as much help as possible in these areas. Scarcella advocates “form-focused ESL instruction” (p. 140), which includes specific grammatical structures such as verb tenses, adjective clauses, and modal auxiliaries. She further argues that besides providing form-

focused ESL instruction, community college teachers need to expose ESL students who are graduates of American high schools to academic English and show them how to write using this kind of English. Also, as we had mentioned previously, teacher correction and feedback are crucial to these students' success in ESL classes. Moreover, even though they may be somewhat proficient in speaking and listening skills, in addition to finding writing activities important, students also find oral reading very beneficial. Many of our students have expressed the desire to have their pronunciation corrected. As Scarcella (personal communication, 1998) suggests, pronunciation seems to be critical to the students. Hence, oral reading is an important area for further investigation.

This study also reveals that these Vietnamese students want and appreciate an organized, well-prepared, and patient teacher who encourages them to study hard. Vietnamese students who have attended high school in this country are articulate about the type of instruction that is effective in developing their English, and their voices must be attended to carefully.

## Authors

*Vân Dees is associate professor of ESL at Golden West College. Her research interests include second language acquisition and L2 reading. She is past stipends chair and current community college level chair for CATESOL.*

*Melissa McDonald has been an adjunct faculty member at Golden West College since 1992 and a quarterly contract instructor at the University of California Extension, Irvine since 1995. She has been involved in ESL, VESL, TEFL and business English. She has taught in Thailand and in Indonesia.*

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Golden West college is in Huntington Beach, Orange County. It is located within a few miles of Little Saigon, where one of the largest concentrations of Vietnamese immigrants live. Approximately 86% of Golden West College's ESL students are Vietnamese.

<sup>2</sup> For most (45) of the respondents, ESL classes at the high school level were mandatory. Only 9 respondents indicated that they had taken elective classes.

## References

Scarcella, R. (1996). Secondary education in California and second language research: Instructing ESL students in the 1990s. *The CATESOL Journal*, 9(1), 129-152.

## Appendix

### Vietnamese High School Graduates Survey

We are conducting a survey of Vietnamese high school graduates. We would appreciate your help in answering the following questions. All answers will be held in confidence. Please, do not put your name on the survey.

1. How old were you when you moved to the United States?
2. At what age did you start attending high school in the United States?
3. How many different high schools did you attend?
4. How many years of high school did you attend in the United States?
5. Did you graduate from high school in the United States?  
Yes, (*include month, year, and age*)  
No, \_\_\_\_\_
6. What was the last grade level you completed in your native country?
7. Did you take ESL classes in high school? If so, how many?  
Yes, (*put how many classes you took*)  
No, \_\_\_\_\_
8. How many hours per week were you in ESL classes?
9. Were the ESL classes mandatory?  
Yes, \_\_\_\_\_  
No, \_\_\_\_\_
10. In what activities did you regularly get involved in your high school ESL classes? (*Circle all that apply.*)
  - A. group work (discussion, problem solving, etc.)
  - B. pair work (dialogue, interviews, etc.)
  - C. class discussion
  - D. oral reading
  - E. silent reading
  - F. writing (journals, essays, paragraphs, etc.)

- G. grammar exercises
- H. watching videos
- J. listening to audio tapes
- K. listening to the teacher lecture

11. How effectively do you think your high school ESL classes helped prepare you for college ESL classes?

	<b>very well</b>	<b>well</b>	<b>not very well</b>	<b>not at all</b>
In speaking skills	_____	_____	_____	_____
In writing skills	_____	_____	_____	_____
In listening skills	_____	_____	_____	_____
In reading skills	_____	_____	_____	_____

12. In what areas do you feel you need additional help to be able to succeed in college? (*Circle all that apply.*)

- A. in speaking skills
- B. in writing skills
- C. in grammar
- D. in listening comprehension
- E. in reading skills

13. In what areas do you feel you need additional help to be able to succeed in college ESL classes? (*Circle all that apply.*)

- A. group work (discussion, problem solving, etc.)
- B. pair work (dialogue, interviews, etc.)
- C. class discussion
- D. oral reading
- E. silent reading
- F. writing (journals, essays, paragraphs, etc.)
- G. grammar exercises
- H. watching videos
- I. listening to audio tapes
- J. listening to the teacher lecture

14. What characteristics about your high school ESL teacher did you like? She/ He... (*Circle all that apply.*)

- A. was patient.
- B. was flexible.
- C. was organized and prepared for class.
- D. was fair.
- E. was able to maintain class order.
- F. was not demanding (very easy).
- G. encouraged me to work hard.

- H. helped me outside of class.
  - I. returned my written assignments to me within two weeks.
  - J. let me hand in my homework late or whenever I wanted.
  - K. let me come to class more than 10 minutes late.
  - L. let me leave before class ended.
15. What characteristics would you like to see in your college ESL teacher?  
She/He should...*(Circle all that apply.)*
- A. be patient.
  - B. be flexible.
  - C. be organized and prepared for class.
  - D. be fair.
  - E. be able to maintain class order.
  - F. not be demanding (very easy).
  - G. encourage me to work hard.
  - H. help me outside of class.
  - I. return my written assignments to me within two weeks.
  - J. let me hand in my homework late or whenever I wanted.
  - K. let me come to class more than 10 minutes late.
  - L. let me leave before class ends.
16. What activities in your college ESL classes do you find beneficial?  
*(Circle all that apply.)*
- A. group work (discussions, problem solving, etc.)
  - B. pair work (dialogues, interviews, etc.)
  - C. class discussion
  - D. oral reading
  - E. silent reading
  - F. writing
  - G. watching videos
  - H. listening to audio tapes
17. Outside of class, I learn English from...*(Circle all that apply.)*
- A. my friends at school
  - B. my friends outside of school
  - C. my relatives (brothers, sisters, children, etc.)
  - D. my neighbors
  - E. my community activities (church, youth groups, volunteer work, etc.)
  - F. listening to the radio
  - G. watching television
  - H. reading newspapers or magazines
  - I. listening to audio tapes
  - J. watching video tapes

