Innovative Practices

Benefiting the Educator and Student Alike:
Effective Strategies for Supporting the Academic Language Development of English Learner (EL) Teacher Candidates

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Introduction

The State of California has a particularly diverse demographic and linguistic composition, presenting both challenges and opportunities for teaching and learning in the state's K-12 public educational system. Currently, over 43% of California's K-12 students speak a primary language other than English (representing 56 different primary languages), and nearly a quarter of the state's students are classified as English Learners (ELs) (California Department of Education, 2009). Additionally, in the California State University (CSU) system, 50% of all students come from culturally and/or linguistically diverse backgrounds (CSU, 2007). It is further estimated that 60% of students who enroll in the state's public universities, two-thirds of whom are ELs, are required to take remedial English courses (Scarcella, 2003).

While programs have been established to support secondary level ELs in their transition to institutions of higher education (IHEs) (Alamprese, 2004), limited attention has been given to how to support adult ELs who struggle with the academic language demands of their college

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or university content-area courses. Research indicates that many EL students frequently struggle with academic language skills, including grammar, vocabulary, and writing (Taceli, 2004) throughout their postsecondary schooling. Nevertheless, IHE instructors often lack the knowledge and skills to provide appropriate assistance to these students, in part because there are so few professional development opportunities available that are designed to help instructors meet the academic needs of ELs in their content-area courses (Valdés, 1999).

It is of little surprise, then, that a number of students who enroll in teacher education programs in the CSU system are ELs who struggle with aspects of academic English. For example, in a given semester, ELs have comprised approximately 5-15% of teacher candidates enrolled in courses at San José State University. Because the CSU system does not currently include EL status in demographic information collected on teacher candidates, it is difficult to estimate how many ELs enroll in teacher education programs in the state of California. Nonetheless, serving these students is an increasingly important consideration for faculty at San José State University and other CSU campuses, especially when these teacher candidates earn their credentials and, in turn, work with an equally diverse K-12 student population, including many ELs. Specifically, when teacher candidates complete their credentials in California, they are certified with an EL authorization that signifies their mastery of second-language acquisition principles and their ability to support the needs of EL students and promote academic language development in English among multilingual students.

A number of teacher candidates who are ELs and who take credential courses in the Department of Secondary Education at San José State University are recent immigrants to the U.S. Often, these students have taken courses or received tutoring in English as a second language and are aware that they have not yet developed full proficiency in academic English. Additionally, there are EL candidates in the Secondary Education program who have been raised in the U.S. or who have lived in the U.S. for many years. These EL students may consist of immigrants and U.S residents born abroad as well as indigenous language minority groups (Harklau, Losey, & Siegal, 1999). At times, these teacher candidates have been surprised to learn that the papers that they have written for their classes include a number of grammatical, syntactical, pragmatic, and/or other usage errors. Their surprise at feedback from their instructors may stem from experiences in previous schooling in which they had been awarded satisfactory or high grades for similar academic literacy results.

According to Scarcella (2003), inadequate attention has been given to the academic language difficulties of ELs in their prior schooling, and, in many cases, these students (many of whom have completed much or all of their elementary and secondary education in the U.S.) are not even aware of the difficulties that they have with their academic English. This experience is illustrated by the following excerpt from a paper written by Maya,[1] a secondary level English teacher candidate whose native language is Tigrinya (spoken predominantly in Ethiopia and Eritrea). She wrote the paper for her "Language and Literacy Development of L2 Learners" course, a core foundations credential course. In this passage, Maya reflects on the academic language difficulties with which she struggled after graduating from high school and entering college:

> After graduating—even with a good grade point average . . . and [being placed] in a remedial English class, I attempted to challenge the English placement—arguing instead for my self-professed proficiency. I assumed my own competence—my teachers had always encouraged and praised me for accomplishing my tasks quite effortlessly. I certainly felt shocked and discouraged to discover that I couldn't identify a complete sentence, a run-on sentence—or pretty much any other grammatical component of the English language. I certainly didn't even know what role grammar had in English with the exception of grammatical worksheets that I completed quite effortlessly. Eventually, with dedication, I accomplished my English deficiencies—probably by my senior year in college, but the anguish of that experience certainly compels me to consider even my own teaching practices.

Although Maya was able to develop her academic English proficiency during the latter part of her college years, other ELs continue to struggle with aspects of academic English in their graduate-level teacher preparation courses. To date, little attention has been paid to the unique issues related to effectively serving EL students in teacher preparation programs; yet, related research that focuses on EL students in postsecondary mainstream writing courses has shown that these students' needs as ELs are usually left unaddressed or even misconstrued as under-preparation for university level coursework (Harklau et al., 1999). Similarly, these same EL students who enroll in graduate level credential programs may have particular needs for academic literacy and support. As such, we believe that it is imperative that teacher education faculty recognize and attend to the academic language struggles of EL student teachers, while also embracing the rich cultural and linguistic capital that these new teachers bring to the profession.

Proactively addressing the difficulties that EL teacher candidates have with academic English is especially important in light of current measures taken in Arizona, for example, related to non-native English speaking teachers who lack complete fluency in academic English.

An article in the *Washington Post* stated, “The Arizona Department of Education recently began telling school districts that teachers whose spoken English it deems to be heavily accented or ungrammatical must be removed from classes for students still learning English” (Jordan, 2010, para. 2). According to Jordan, teachers who do not demonstrate competence in areas such as pronunciation, correct grammar, and effective writing are provided opportunities to improve their English skills. If fluency continues to be a problem, however, school districts may reassign teachers to classes without EL students or even fire the teachers. The Arizona Department of Education (ADE) has based this action on their interpretation of fluency standards in the federal *No Child Left Behind Act* that requires that, to receive federal funds, ELs be instructed by teachers who are fluent in English (Jordan, 2010).

Actions taken by the ADE to “remove” some EL teachers from the classroom raise important questions about how state or local policies specific to EL teachers could affect the teacher workforce. For instance, if other states with high EL populations adopted a policy similar to the one in Arizona, how would such measures change the demographics of future teachers? Similar policies, for example, could discourage individuals with multicultural or multilingual backgrounds from entering the teaching profession and lead to less diversity among teachers. Given that approximately 83% of teachers are White and that many of them are fluent only in English (U.S. Department of Education, 2009), the prospect of measures that lead to an even more homogenous teacher workforce is disturbing. These current issues urgently lead us to consider the relationships among learning academic English, having accented or non-traditional English accents, and an EL teacher’s capacity to teach students, some of whom may be ELs themselves, through academic language.

While it is necessary to ensure that all teachers who enter the K-12 school system can support their students who are ELs by effectively modeling and teaching academic English, it is equally important that teacher candidates of diverse backgrounds are supported and encouraged throughout their teacher preparation coursework and experiences. This article details specific, research-based feedback strategies that we have found useful in working with and supporting the academic language development of EL preservice secondary teachers. These feedback strategies are organized and discussed in terms of the following four themes: focused feedback on student writing, focused feedback on oral communication, explicit modeling, and revision and assessment.

Focused Feedback on Student Writing

In helping teacher candidates explore appropriate ways to scaffold writing for their future students, as well as in helping EL teacher candidates develop their own academic writing, we frequently highlight the importance of focused feedback on student writing. In our courses, we emphasize how teachers should not "redline" (i.e., mark up and directly correct) every single mistake, which would overwhelm the student with corrections and revisions. Rather, feedback should suit the needs of each student in terms of specific literacy contexts (Scarcella, 2002). Although there are some who may champion a "hands-off" approach to feedback on EL writing, a growing body of evidence indicates that focused error feedback leads to improved accuracy and quality of student writing and language skills (Ferris, 2003; Ferris & Roberts, 2001). However, many teachers, including teacher educators, may feel uncomfortable giving the type of feedback needed for improving student writing. Some teachers may feel uneasiness about dealing with the specifics of grammatical rules. Yet, focused feedback, or feedback on a selected, limited number of errors, can be an accessible and effective way to help students improve their writing without overwhelming the author with excessive corrections. The primary goal of this type of focused feedback is to identify specific conventions for writers, provide scaffolding for learning or improving those skills, and then to follow up on subsequent writing to determine whether the writer is internalizing these skills.

Highlighting Errors and Providing Instructional Feedback Notes

One example of a focused feedback approach that Roya implements with teacher candidates in her foundations courses involves highlighting errors and providing instructional feedback on the errors in marginal notes. Recently, Roya used this approach with Amy, an EL teacher candidate from Taiwan, in a credential course. Amy immigrated to California in her early twenties and spent the next ten years raising her children and volunteering at their schools. Recently, she completed her BA in Chinese language and was pursuing a single-subject credential in Foreign Language for Mandarin Chinese. In a written reflection for Roya's course, Amy demonstrated that she had read an assigned article on academic language and that she understood the major arguments of the article. While summary and comprehension were strong points for her, Amy made multiple grammatical and mechanical mistakes in her written work, such as missing plurals, inappropriate use of articles, and several run-on sentences. In providing focused feedback on Amy's writing in her first reflection paper, Roya noted four sentences that contained a similar error. For example, Amy wrote "Picture is worth a thousand words," and also "Student like to have his/her own ideas . . . " While, contextually, she demonstrated the appropriate use of an idiomatic expression, *Picture is worth a thousand words* (a higher-level use of language), Amy struggled with putting the plural forms of nouns with the appropriate verbs. In the feedback, Roya highlighted the four instances where Amy repeated this mistake, all in the same color highlighter, and pointed to the margin, where she wrote: You can write "Students like . . ." or "A student likes" and likewise "A picture is worth . . ." or "Pictures are worth . . . " She gave three such examples, for which the articles, nouns, and verbs matched appropriately, modeling for Amy alternate ways to make her point using appropriate language. This was followed with an in-class discussion of the rationale behind using these alternatives and how Amy and other teachers can support their own students in using noun and verb forms appropriately.

For this paper, Roya focused on Amy's use of verb/noun forms as one area of emphasis, in addition to plurals. These are common grammatical mistakes for someone such as Amy, whose first language is Mandarin Chinese (many plurals are optional in Mandarin, and the error is typically a language transfer error).

With Amy's next paper, Roya revisited these items to ensure that Amy understood the grammatical rules for articles and plurals as well as focused on other usage items that were prevalent in Amy's writing, such as an overuse of commas. As with the previous paper, Roya used a color highlighter to identify similar errors and followed up with a short discussion of appropriate usage and how Amy could identify and provide feedback on similar errors in her own students' writing.

Roya has found that this focused, detailed feedback on a select number of grammatical/mechanical mistakes has been helpful for students, who typically correct these issues in subsequent papers. For example, Amy showed some internalization of the rules for appropriate verb/noun forms in subsequent writing.

Identifying and Labeling Errors

A focused feedback approach that Kendra uses in credential courses with EL teacher candidates includes a process of identifying and labeling errors. The overall goal of this approach is to promote autonomy for students in recognizing and correcting their own errors. Kendra begins this feedback process by conferring with students about some of the patterns of errors that are evident in their writing. As she talks with students about the specifics of their writing, she points out strengths of their writing in addition to certain errors that they exhibit. While focused-error feedback can lead to improved student writing (Ferris & Roberts, 2001), providing positive and motivational feedback is key to inspiring students to write more and to improve their language skills (Scarcella, 2003).

During these conferences, Kendra explains to students that, rather than directly correcting errors in their writing, she will use symbols to locate and label repeating errors and provide candidates with the opportunity to make the corrections themselves. Kendra currently uses a list of error symbols from a University of California, Irvine website. This website lists the error symbol and its meaning as well as provides an example of the error in a sentence (Figure 1 contains an excerpt from the website). The website also provides weblinks to online information and exercises designed to help students to improve their skills specific to the language errors listed. Kendra reviews the list of symbols with candidates and provides examples of how she will use the symbols in her feedback, and they practice using these symbols with sample student work. She also shares this symbol list with students in her "Language and Literacy Development for L2 Learners" class as one possible feedback option that they can use with their EL students.

During conferences, Kendra emphasizes to students that she will meet with them to provide additional assistance if they have difficulty correcting their errors. Once students begin to make progress in their academic writing, Kendra, to promote more independence, begins to remove some of the support. For example, she may begin by underlining only some repeated errors without supplying the error symbols. According to Scarcella (2003), it is important to mark errors in ways that demand more student attention and autonomy in each writing assignment as time progresses.

Kendra recently implemented this feedback approach to support the

Figure 1
UC Irvine Correction Symbols List Excerpt

Symbol	*Meaning*	*Example*	*Advice*
agr	agreement	Between you and *I*, each one of us needs *their* own job.	http://e3.uci.edu/programs/esl/agrlink.html
cs	comma splice	I had a question, I asked the professor.	http://e3.uci.edu/programs/esl/sslink.html

Source: University of California, Irvine (2011).

academic writing of Bridget, a teacher candidate whose first language is Mandarin Chinese. When Kendra first conferred with Bridget, she pointed out how the rich and illustrative details that Bridget included in her description of her classroom observation painted a vivid and holistic picture of the scene that she was describing. Next, they talked about some patterns of errors that appeared in Bridget's writing that tended to interrupt the flow of ideas for the reader. At one point, they focused on the following passage in Bridget's paper: "From my observation the student in this class seem to be separated almost directly down the middle, behavior-wise." Kendra talked with Bridget about a few of the errors present (as opposed to every single error) that also resurfaced in other passages in her paper. For example, they discussed Bridget's use of "seem" instead of the correct past tense form "seemed" and her use of the singular vs. plural form of "student." They then talked about how these mistakes are natural, given the differences between Chinese and English that often present grammar difficulties for Chinese speakers. For instance, the Chinese language does not use verb endings to show time relationships; rather, adverbs, word order, and context are used to achieve what English speakers might accomplish by changing verb forms (e.g., adding –ed to a verb to form the past tense; Scarcella, 2003).

After discussing with Bridget some of the strengths as well as patterns of errors in her writing, Kendra explained and provided her with the list of error correction symbols that she would use when giving feedback on Bridget's academic writing. Subsequently, Kendra used these symbols in responding to Bridget's course papers. The excerpt below (Figure 2) includes an example of this use of error correction symbols on one of Bridget's papers.

Figure 2
Use of Error Correction Symbols Example

The teacher's instruction appeared to be well-understandable to the

students, because when he had them name what kinds of angles were

formed by the lines and why this angle had to be the answer, the

t
students give the right answers. Thus, in my opinion, having these

t
frequent opportunities eventually help to lower the students' affective

vb
filters, because they could get accustomed to speak in front of others.

Bridget's revision of this paper included corrections of the errors identified with symbols (t = verb tense; vb = verb form error). Common examples of verb form errors include omitting the present participle (e.g., omitting the "ing" in *speaking* in the example shown above) or past participles (such as the "ed" in *completed*).

Focused Feedback on Oral Communication

Teachers not only need competent writing skills, but they also must be able to use oral language in meaningful and effective ways. Just as faculty members can model appropriate written feedback strategies with preservice teachers, this same type of approach can be beneficial for oral language development. Wong-Fillmore (2000) poignantly describes an instance in which a teacher's overcorrection of a student's oral language completely overwhelmed the child, who felt too discouraged to finish a narrative. Secondary education teacher candidates are mostly articulate and eager to contribute to course discussions. Classroom discussions typically allow for more informal use of language, and as long as there is not a breakdown of meaning or communication, overt correction of oral language should not be used. In cases in which there is a breakdown in communication, clarifying questions can often be used effectively to determine the speaker's meaning.

In some cases, however, more explicit attention to the oral language proficiency of EL teacher candidates is needed, particularly if it concerns meeting the needs of their own secondary-level students. Such was the case of Priya, who was completing her first phase of student teaching under the supervision of Roya. Priya, whose first language is Hindi, had a noticeable East Indian accent, and some of her vocabulary usage differed from standardized American English (e.g., she referred to *labs* in her science class as *practicals*). While Roya had little trouble understanding her oral communication, Priya's students in her student teaching placement and her resident teacher expressed concerns that they often were not able to understand what she was saying. Later, Priya herself expressed some fear that her students did not seem to understand her at times. Because of these concerns, the feedback on Priya's oral language needed to be more precise and pragmatic than that typically provided to native English-speaking teacher candidates.

During one-on-one conferences with Priya, Roya worked with her to identify the specific concerns that she had about Priya's oral language. Through discussing the precise times when Priya felt that communication broke down and that she "lost" her students, they were able to develop a list of strategies that could help Priya address these concerns. With coaching and repeated observations and debriefings, Priya learned to implement several of the strategies discussed. For example, she learned to slow down the pace of her speech to allow students time to process her words. She also engaged her students in an honest dialogue about her background, sharing with them the impressive fact that she speaks multiple languages and emphasizing that they should feel free to ask her for clarification and repetition if they need it.

This opened the door to future discussion and enhanced communication with her students. Priya also used key-point outlines to keep her students focused on the science content matter and began to routinely write central concepts, words, or phrases on the board as she verbally defined or discussed these words with her students. Moreover, Priya integrated technology (mostly overheads and PowerPoint slides) to illustrate what she was saying as she explained concepts to her students. Finally, Priya utilized more kinesthetic teaching strategies, such as allowing students to walk, circle, pair, and move around the classroom to discover and explore different science concepts. This method allowed Priya to take on the role of facilitator, as she was able to circulate around the classroom to check for understanding and to identify students who needed her support; standing in front of the class and lecturing did not give her the same flexibility.

In time, Priya's students learned to appreciate her different style and were able to learn from her more effectively. This was evidenced by improvements in both formal classroom assessments (e.g., quizzes) and informal ones (e.g., correct oral responses to teacher questions). Moreover, both her resident teacher and Roya noticed greater participation and engagement of students during Priya's classes. Ultimately, these oral language feedback strategies were an effective compliment to Priya's language abilities, helping her to improve her teaching. Interestingly, the methods that were most effective for Priya (e.g., slowing down her speech, emphasizing key points, incorporating kinesthetic learning activities) are, in fact, effective methods for teaching EL students (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2004). Thus, the same strategies that helped an EL teacher improve her communication and teaching are the very same strategies that have been shown to be beneficial in supporting EL *students* in their learning.

Explicit Modeling

In her "Content Area Literacy" course, Roya addressed and explicitly modeled for teacher candidates several strategies for improving reading comprehension, including surveying the text, paraphrasing, pre-/post-reading, and effective questioning methods. During the third class meeting of the spring semester, a male student named Jim (a Caucasian, native speaker of English) stayed after class and requested a private discussion. During this chat, Jim revealed that he had always struggled with comprehension of texts and that, as an Art major in college, he was barely able to meet the academic reading and writing requirements of his major. Jim further stated that the strategies that he had recently read about and seen modeled in class had given him helpful tools to improve his own reading. Jim indicated that he had been applying some of these strategies when wading through some of the denser readings for his credential courses and that he only wished that he had been aware of some of these approaches earlier in his schooling.

Jim's quiet admission was not surprising, as we already knew that many of our teacher candidates struggle with academic literacy tasks. What was significant, however, was the reminder that all of our students (ELs and native speakers of English) can benefit tremendously from content area literacy strategies while learning how to teach their own students. This dual benefit (to the teacher candidate and to the candidate's secondary students) is often overlooked. Just as Priya benefited from using sheltered instructional strategies to address her oral language challenges, Jim benefited from learning about content area literacy practices: The strategies ultimately provide support for both students *and* teachers.

Revision and Assessment

Because multiple revisions of academic work typically result in overall improvement of the work (Paulus, 2000), researchers emphasize the idea of building opportunities for revisions into the grading scheme (Ferris, 2003). As a result, both Roya and Kendra provide opportunities for students to resubmit their work with the appropriate revisions for additional credit. This provides students with the opportunity to revisit their initial work with a more critical eye. While it is sometimes the case that students respond only to the areas identified in the feedback, without broadening the feedback to the entire paper or applying it to future papers, modeling and scaffolding revision strategies can address some of these concerns. For example, we noted earlier how Kendra moves from identifying and labeling errors for students to just identifying the errors for them. To promote even more independence after students are able to address errors when they are identified, Kendra stops identifying specific errors, but instead includes a summary note asking the student to revisit the paper with attention to the patterns of errors on which they had been working.

In her courses, Kendra guides teacher candidates to consider how teachers can assess students in ways that hold them accountable for both mastery of content knowledge and the development of academic language skills. In doing so, she often asks candidates for input on how their own assignments should be assessed. She then works with them to develop a rubric or to modify an existing rubric that clearly outlines the grading criteria for their assignments. In addition to factors related to the understanding, application, and analysis of course concepts, one of the criteria that often surfaces as Kendra and her students co-construct assessment rubrics relates to the student's ability to professionally articulate his or her knowledge and ideas (either orally or through writing). For example, Kendra and her students developed a grading rubric for a case study assignment worth a total of 45 points, with a breakdown of possible points in each domain as follows: description of student's personal history (13 pts.), analyses of findings (13 pts.), applications and conclusions (13 pts.), and overall organization and presentation of ideas (6 pts.). The criteria for the overall organization and presentation of ideas component of the rubric are presented in Figure 3.

If a teacher candidate does not earn full points on this component of the rubric, Kendra, rather than simply giving back the paper with a finalized score, provides the candidate with the opportunity to revise the paper based on feedback points. For example, if a candidate presents complex ideas in a fluid and thoughtful manner but has some grammatical errors, she might score a 4 on the rubric. Next to this score, Kendra will write a brief explanation of the score and reference areas of the paper that need improvement (e.g., "You have a number of errors

Figure 3
Academic Writing Criteria of Assignment Grading Rubric

Overall Organization and Presentation of Ideas	May present ideas in a simplistic and/or repetitive fashion. Ideas may be marginally developed or poorly organized. Language has an accumulation of errors in mechanics, usage, and sentence structure.	Presents ideas in a way that shows some depth and complexity. Ideas and language flow well overall but may have a few errors in mechanics, usage, and sentence structure.	Presents ideas thoughtfully and in-depth. Ideas are coherently and logically organized. Has an effective, fluent style, marked by language that is generally free from errors in mechanics, usage, and sentence structure.
	1 2	**3 4**	**5 6**

in your paper with verb tense consistency and use of articles. Please see the areas in your paper that I have highlighted and coded with the error correction symbols that we have discussed in class"). Teacher candidates have expressed their appreciation for receiving specific feedback on language usage and for having the opportunity to revise and resubmit their papers, which suggests that it has been beneficial in helping them focus on and improve their academic writing.

Conclusions

Today, teacher education programs in California must ensure that the K-12 teacher candidates whom they prepare for the profession have the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to support the EL students whom they will be serving in school. As a result, programs have embedded courses and experiences in their curricula specific to helping teacher candidates understand and support the academic language development of their students. A major theme in these courses and experiences is that content-area teachers are also teachers of academic language and that it is not solely the responsibility of the mainstream English or English language development (ELD) teachers to support the language development of students. As such, it is incumbent upon faculty in teacher education programs to not only emphasize this theme in their content-area courses but also to model the approaches that they promote with their own EL teacher candidates.

Further, professors in teacher education could greatly benefit from professional development to learn how to find and articulate grammatical errors using the vocabulary of academic English. In informally sharing our work with colleagues, the authors have learned that many professors are not well versed in using some of the techniques discussed in this article and often feel underprepared to provide academic language support to their English learner teacher candidates. Administrators in universities could play an important role in helping faculty develop skills in this area by supporting opportunities for professional development in academic language feedback among their teacher education faculty, particularly by allocating necessary time and resources.

Lingering Questions

In working with our teacher candidates, we underscore the importance of engaging in the discursive processes of metalanguage (i.e., language about language). In this process, EL teacher candidates reflect upon and explicitly discuss how the language and literacy development strategies about which they are learning not only can benefit them but also should be used as tools in their own classroom teaching to benefit their students. The final step, the experiential connection to their own classrooms, is an area in need of further consideration, and we have several lingering questions that we believe warrant further exploration:

> What is the follow-through on these strategies?
>
> Do EL teacher candidates ultimately internalize and transfer what they are learning to support their own students' academic language development?
>
> How can instructors best structure and sequence teacher preparation courses and academic language support systems to serve these teachers?
>
> Finally, how can instructors more systematically track the progress that EL teacher candidates make during their time in their credential programs so that they can enter the profession skilled and confident in their academic English and effectively serve their own multilingual students?

Note

[1] All student names in this article are pseudonyms.

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