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Exploring the Experiences of Linguistically Diverse College of Education Student Writers

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Exploring the Experiences of Linguistically Diverse College of Education Student Writers

Abstract
Many linguistically diverse students at the post-secondary level have difficulty with academic language skills that are important to their success in content-area university courses. Although programs have been established to help English language learners (ELLs) transition from high school to college, little attention has been given to how students are supported in their college or university academic classes. In this paper, we present research results based on a survey administered to students enrolled in education-based programs exploring their perspectives on instructional feedback provided by university faculty on their academic writing. We present quantitative and qualitative findings from this survey with related recommendations for how faculty can infuse strategies in their instruction to assist ELL students who struggle with aspects of their academic writing. Findings from this research have important implications for colleges and universities in meeting the diverse needs of a growing post-secondary English language learner student population enrolled in content courses across academic disciplines.

Keywords
linguistically diverse, English language learner, education, university, writing, writing across the curriculum

Cover Page Footnote
Footnote 1: This manuscript focuses on data gathered from the student survey. Results from the faculty development component of the project are presented in another manuscript currently under review. Footnote 2: ELL status was determined by responses to demographic items on the survey. Respondents who indicated they spoke a primary language other than English and that they struggled with aspects of academic writing in English were categorized as ELL. Footnote 3: This survey was administered prior to the opening of a student writing center at the university. The university now houses a writing center that has tutors who provide students one-on-one tutoring and feedback on their writing.

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Introduction

Writing across the curriculum (WAC) is a pedagogical movement that began in institutions of higher education in the early 1980s, and continues to influence teaching and learning in colleges and universities today. WAC pedagogy, broadly defined, promotes writing as a mode of learning and developing critical-thinking skills**.** WAC pedagogy emphasises that academic and professional writing involves particular discourse conventions from different disciplines. As a result, writing should be practiced and nurtured in all areas of the curriculum, not simply in English courses (McLeod & Soven 1992). WAC is guided by the conviction that writing is a lifelong process, a process that develops not in a single semester or course, but throughout a student's academic career and beyond (Bridgewater State University 2010). A key tenet of WAC is that it is the responsibility of higher-education programs and faculty in all disciplines to support students in the ongoing development of their academic and professional writing skills (Mcleod et al. 2001).

In her article "ESL Students and WAC Programs: Varied Populations and Diverse Needs," Ann Johns (2001) describes how the student populations of institutions of higher education have become increasingly linguistically diverse since the initiation of WAC. According to Johns (2001) and others (Ferris & Thaiss 2011; Harklau & Siegal 2009**),** this increase in linguistic diversity can be attributed in large part to a growth in immigrant populations in the US and to a growing number of English-language learners (ELLs) whose linguistic and cultural experiences with English lie somewhere between the first and second language. ELLs, sometimes referred to in the literature as emergent English dominant or Generation 1.5 learners, may be born in the US or abroad, but have generally been educated in US K-12 schools (Harklau & Siegal 2009). In many cases, these students lack expertise in academic writing in both their first and second languages and may retain features of their first languages in their writing throughout their post-secondary schooling **(**Conference on College Composition and Communication 2009**;** Johns 2001).

Current Research on ELLs in Content-Area Courses

Despite increases in linguistic diversity in institutions of higher education, the professional literature on WAC indicates there is a paucity of research on the experiences of ELL writers in discipline-specific courses (Cox 2011; Zawacki & Cox 2011). Rather, previous and current second language writing research has focused primarily on ELL writers in ESL/TESOL or composition-course contexts (Ferris & Hedgecock 2005). Research that has been conducted on ELL students in discipline-specific university courses has primarily been from the perspective of scholars writing in their second language (e.g. Leki 1995, 2007), and has drawn mainly on case-study and interview data. Moreover, the majority of research in this area has focused on ELLs at the undergraduate level, with only a handful of studies centering on the experiences of ELLs in upper-division courses or at the graduate level (Cox 2010 and 2011 provide an annotated bibliography and in-depth review of the literature on ELL student writing across the curriculum).

Researchers highlight the need for WAC programs and research to be more inclusive of ELL writers, and to focus on effective ways of supporting these students across the curriculum. In particular, scholars emphasise the need for more collaboration among university campus programs to offer support for ELL student writers and to integrate language and literacy development across the curriculum (Cox 2011; Patton 2011). They also call for university faculty to conduct qualitative research on ELL writers to learn more about students' writing histories, writing experiences and needs, expectations from classes and strengths to build upon. Scholars further underscore the importance of learning about the wide range of ELL groups and backgrounds

represented in disciplinary courses, and of drawing on second-language writing literature to better serve these students (Conference on College Composition and Communication 2009; Cox 2011; Johns 2001; Patton 2011). Researchers further call for an increased focus among faculty members across subject areas on teaching disciplinary discursive practices in addition to academic English literacy conventions (Ferris & Hedgecock 2005).

College of Education ELL Writers

The need to learn more about the experiences of ELL writers in discipline-specific courses and how best to support these students is especially relevant for students in the California State University (CSU) System, particularly in the Lurie College of Education at San José State University (SJSU). In the CSU system, 50% of all students come from culturally and/or linguistically diverse backgrounds (CSU 2007). It is estimated that 68% of students who enroll in the state's public universities are required to take remedial English courses (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education 2010). A majority of these students are classified as ELLs (Howell 2011). The linguistic diversity of the CSU system is reflected in the student population of the College of Education (COE) at SJSU. ELL students in the COE are primarily upper-division and graduate students enrolled in credential, certificate and master's programs to become teachers, counselors, speech therapists or school administrators. These students represent a wide range of backgrounds. Some are recent immigrants to the US. Often, these students have taken courses or received tutoring in developing English as a second language and are aware that they have not yet developed full proficiency in academic English.

Other ELL students in the COE are indigenous language minorities born and raised in the US, or Generation 1.5 students (Harklau & Siegal 2009). Often, these students are surprised to learn that they retain features of their native languages in their writing, and that the papers they have written for their classes include a number of grammatical, syntactical, pragmatic and/or other usage errors. Many of these educational professionals are teacher candidates earning their credentials to work with an equally diverse K-12 student population, including many ELLs. These teacher candidates will teach content-specific or general writing skills to their students; they will be writing models for their students; and they will need to use academic writing in their teacher preparation and professional work.

Purpose of the Study

To address the need for more research specific to serving postsecondary ELL writers across the curriculum, and to better address the needs of our own college's linguistically diverse students, we set forth to implement an exploratory research project in the Connie L. Lurie College of Education (COE) at San José State University (SJSU). The project included a survey we administered to students enrolled in discipline-specific educational programs within the COE. The survey was part of a larger faculty-development project designed to help COE faculty members in different disciplines reflect upon and expand on the feedback strategies they used when responding to ELL students' written assignments. The student survey was a modified version of a survey designed by Dana Ferris (2003) on responding to students' writing, and included both closed- and open-ended items pertaining to feedback students had received from previous postsecondary instructors (at SJSU or other colleges and universities) relating to their academic writing. More specifically, students were asked to report on the types of feedback strategies that postsecondary instructors had most typically used when responding to their academic writing assignments. Students were also

asked to report their perceptions of the effectiveness of their instructors' strategies in helping them improve their academic writing skills.

Student Survey

The student survey included demographic and language background items (e.g., department affiliation, year in program, gender, ethnic background and first language spoken); closed-ended questions pertaining to feedback received from instructors on written assignments; and five open-ended questions pertaining to students' perceptions of feedback they received from instructors on written assignments. The open-ended questions elicited information such as what students did when they received unclear feedback from instructors on written assignments, and students' awareness and use of services provided by the university to help them improve their writing skills.

The survey was administered by faculty members to students enrolled in programs of study in six COE departments: Child and Adolescent Development, Communicative Disorders and Sciences, Counselor Education, Elementary Education, Instructional Technology and Secondary Education. The students who responded to the survey included 202 undergraduate, credential and master's-level students, of whom approximately 40% were identified as ELLs (primarily of Spanish, Chinese and Vietnamese native-language backgrounds). Fifty-three percent of respondents were in their first year of a credential or master's program in either teaching or school counseling.

The following sections first present descriptive results from closed-ended items of the survey related to ELL and non-ELL students' perceptions about faculty feedback they have received on their writing. After exploring responses to these items, they then present more in-depth findings from the open-ended survey questions specific to ELL students' experiences with instructional support for their writing. Finally, based on findings from the closed- and open-ended items of the survey, the paper summarises the insights gained and presents recommendations for supporting linguistically diverse student writers across the curriculum.

Student Perceptions about Faculty Feedback

In response to the closed-ended survey question "In general, how would you rate feedback received from instructors on your written assignments?", the majority of both ELLs (66%) and non-ELLs (60%) rated the feedback received from instructors as "good" (Table 1). Smaller percentages (ELLs = 14% and non-ELLs = 17%) rated this feedback as "excellent." This suggests that while students generally appear to be happy with instructor feedback, there is room for improving the quality of feedback instructors provide to all students on their written assignments, including English learners; strategies for achieving this goal are explored in more depth in subsequent analyses of the survey's open-ended questions.

Table 1. Student Ratings of Feedback Received from Instructors on Written Assignments

	ELLs (n = 73)	**Non-ELLs (n = 114)**
Excellent	10 (14%)	20 (17%)
Good	44 (66%)	68 (60%)
Fair	16 (22%)	24 (21%)
Poor	3 (4%)	3 (3%)

In response to the question "How often have you felt that comments you received from your instructors on written assignments were positive and encouraging?", a relatively small percentage of ELLs (26%), and 44% of non-ELLs, reported that they received positive and encouraging comments from instructors "most of the time" on their written assignments (Table 2). Both Scarcella (2003) and Jago (2002) suggest that instructional feedback should be designed to encourage students to improve their writing, and not discourage them. Jago (2002) states, "While a critical approach to teaching writing is meant to encourage good writing, it can sometimes discourage student writers forever. Forgetting to use encouragement in our responses can also turn what should be an intellectually stimulating task into a hateful task" (p. 95). Considering that ELLs typically experience more difficulties with their writing and tend to receive more critical feedback about it compared to non-ELLs, these results have important implications for faculty members in enhancing the learning experiences of ELL student writers.

Table 2. Frequency of Positive or Encouraging Feedback from Instructors on Written Assignments

	ELLs (n = 73)	**Non-ELLs (n = 115)**
Most of the time	19 (26%)	50 (44%)
Often	32 (44%)	41 (36%)
Sometimes	19 (26%)	20 (17%)
Seldom	3 (4%)	4 (3%)

Approximately 80% of both ELLs and non-ELLs reported that comments they had received from their instructors on past written assignments had been either "somewhat" or "very" beneficial in helping them succeed in their courses (Table 3). It's encouraging to find that the majority of both ELLs and non-ELLs found that their instructors' feedback helped them do well in their courses (specific feedback strategies that ELLs found beneficial are presented in subsequent analyses of the survey's open-ended questions).

Table 3. Frequency of How Beneficial ELLs Found Instructors' Comments

	ELLs (n = 72)	Non-ELLs (n = 114)
Very	27 (37%)	41 (36%)
Somewhat	30 (42%)	49 (43%)
A little	10 (14%)	20 (18%)
Not very	5 (7%)	4 (3%)

An interesting finding that emerged from survey responses was that although 79% of ELLs and 66% of non-ELLs reported that they felt they needed to work on improving their academic writing skills, only 45% of ELLs and 29% of non-ELLs reported that any of their instructors had indicated to them that they needed to do so. This suggests that students are not getting as much feedback about their writing from instructors as they believe they need.

When instructors did comment on students' written assignments, both ELL and non-ELL students reported that instructors commented most often about their papers' grammar and mechanics; content and ideas; and organisation. However, whereas a large percentage (41%) of ELLs reported that instructors' comments on their papers had most often been directed towards grammar and mechanics issues, a notable percentage (54%) of non-ELLs reported that instructors' comments on their papers had most often been directed towards issues of content and ideas (Table 4). This suggests that when instructors provide feedback on ELL students' written assignments, they tend to first focus on providing feedback related to grammar and mechanics issues before providing feedback on other aspects of students' writing, such as the development of content and ideas (or at least this is what ELLs perceive to be the case).

When asked what areas they felt they needed most improvement in, ELLs indicated that they needed to improve most in their grammar and mechanics (61%), organisation (25%) and vocabulary (17%), whereas non-ELLs indicated they needed to improve most in their grammar and mechanics (31%), organisation (30%) and content/ideas (18%) (Table 4). These findings suggest that both ELL and non-ELL students can benefit from instructional strategies integrated within their subject-area courses that focus on developing their academic writing, particularly in the area of grammar and mechanics. One way that instructors can do this is to have students submit multiple revisions of the same assignments (and provide them with instructional feedback on each revision) so that students have opportunities to develop their writing skills throughout the quarter/semester. An alternative to this is to "chunk" large assignments into smaller, more manageable assignments that allow students to focus more closely on the development of each component rather than rush to complete the whole assignment at the end of the quarter or semester.

Table 4. Areas Instructors Commented on Most vs. Areas in which Students Felt They Needed Most Improvement

	ELLs		Non-ELLs	
	Instructors (n = 74)	Self (n = 75)	Instructors (n = 117)	Self (n = 119)
Content/ideas	22 (30%)	8 (11%)	63 (54%)	21 (18%)
Organisation	15 (20%)	19 (25%)	16 (14%)	36 (30%)
Vocabulary	0 (0%)	13 (17%)	1 (1%)	14 (12%)
Grammar/mechanics	30 (41%)	46 (61%)	32 (27%)	37 (31%)
Other	7 (9%)	7 (9%)	9 (8%)	14 (12%)
Don't need to improve in any area	0 (0%)	4 (5%)	0 (0%)	12 (10%)

When asked about the best way for instructors to give them feedback on grammatical errors in their writing, the majority (61%) of both ELL and non-ELL students reported that instructors should circle their errors and identify the types of errors they made, rather than correct all the errors for them. While the effectiveness of directly correcting student errors is controversial,

research suggests that, in the long term, students benefit more from indirect error correction because it prompts them to engage more actively with finding the solution, rather than simply transcribing the teacher's corrections (Ferris 2003; Ferris & Hedgecock 2005). Thus, it is encouraging to see many students' desire to develop their academic writing skills by correcting their own errors rather than having instructors do it for them. Researchers (Ferris 2005; Ferris & Hedgecock 2005; Scarcella 2003) suggest that identifying errors in students' papers, or identifying the errors and indicating their type, are the most effective strategies for improving students' writing over time.

Table 5. Preferred Feedback Approaches for Grammatical Errors

	ELLs (n = 74)	Non-ELLs (n = 119)
Don't correct my grammar. Let me try to correct errors myself.	0(0.0%)	0(0.0%)
Only correct the most serious errors.	12(10.1%)	5(6.8%)
Circle my errors, but don't correct them for me.	21(17.6%)	12(16.2%)
Circle all my errors and tell me what type of error it is.	72(60.5%)	45(60.8%)
Correct all my errors for me.	14(11.8%)	12(16.2%)

ELL Student Voices

Students' responses to the open-ended questions of the survey revealed a number of noteworthy themes. To provide insight into how to better support linguistically diverse student writers across the curriculum, the information presented in this section focuses specifically on the survey responses of English-language learners.

Helpful Feedback Strategies

In response to the question "What specific things have instructors done when giving feedback on your written assignments that have been helpful for you?", ELL students suggested that it had been useful when instructors had made *specific* comments on their written assignments to help them make connections, delve deeper, rethink or develop ideas. For example, one student stated that she found it useful "when they actually read the entire paper and comment in detail [about] the mistakes I made." Another student stated she had found it useful "when they specify exactly what I need to change Ex: goal, objective, and any misleading information,"; yet another indicated that she found it useful when instructors provided "Feedbacks on how to improve my written assignment for both structure and content wise. I love the fact that professors underline and mark where I need more help". Other ELL students indicated that they found it helpful when instructors provided feedback on different aspects of their writing (e.g. "Instructors tell me what I need to work on, for examples: grammar, sentence structure, etc….") and provided examples for future reference (e.g. "The way she actually suggested some examples to do so really helped me get an idea how to further my lesson plan").

The most common theme that arose was that students found it helpful when instructors provided feedback that was both constructive and encouraging (e.g. “They given me both positive and negative feedback. This way I don't feel like I'm being attacked”). One student’s words sum up ELL students’ responses to this question, in addition to suggesting that college and university instructors have a responsibility to help students improve their academic writing skills by providing feedback that is encouraging, constructive, and specific. The student stated, “It is helpful to have professors not only encourage, but also critique my work, with attention to APA format, grammar, punctuation, sentence formation. I think every student who graduates from college (regardless of college or department) should be able to write a quality paper.”

Suggestions for Improving Instructors’ Feedback

When asked to provide feedback on ways they wished their instructors would change or improve their comments, three main themes arose in the students’ responses. The first theme suggested that instructors should provide comments throughout students’ papers, rather than just assign an overall grade or evaluation at the end of the paper. For example, one student commented, “Sometimes, I don't really know what I did right or wrong. They just give me a grade.” If students are not provided with feedback on areas that they may need to work on, it is not likely that their writing will improve on future assignments.

The second theme was that when instructors do provide comments on students’ assignments, their comments need to be more encouraging and specific instead of just negative, vague or too general. For example, one student commented, “Perhaps telling me what I did right, then tell me what I need to work on and provide ways to improve.” Another student commented, “I wish the instructor would not simply say, ‘vague’ or ‘uncomfortable sentence’ but how and why.” Students also suggested that it would be helpful for instructors to provide them with specific examples to follow (e.g. “Maybe writing more specific comments and putting examples so I could relate much more easily”).

The third theme indicated that some ELL students felt it would be helpful if instructors could provide or explain their feedback to students in person (in addition to the written feedback) because they had a difficult time reading or understanding instructors’ feedback comments. Students shared that at times they either couldn’t read the instructors’ handwriting (e.g., “It would be nice if they printed them [their comments] a little nicer; they are often difficult to read”) or they weren’t sure what the comments meant (e.g., “Take some time to explain in person. Sometimes notes are confusing”). Some students suggested that instructors should meet individually with each student to review their feedback (e.g., “help me one-on-one with correcting my paper and let me know what I am doing wrong”). Other students commented that, although it would be very helpful for instructors to provide students with more individualised feedback on their written assignments, they understood that this might cause undue hardship for instructors who teach classes with large numbers of students.

Responses to Vague Feedback

When asked what they typically did when they didn’t understand instructors’ comments on their written assignments, most ELL students indicated that they would ask the instructor directly for clarification before, during or after class, during office hours, or via email. Some students shared that they would ask a fellow classmate or friend to help them understand or clarify the instructor’s comments. Others commented that they would ignore or “do nothing” about the vague comments. Whether or not students asked for clarification typically depended on the grade they had received

on the assignment (e.g. "[I] look @ my grade – if it's good, I don't ask about it)" or the relative "weight" that the instructor placed on particular aspects of the student's writing (e.g., "Really...nothing because I always care about the grade and usually my grade is not affected by grammar"). Also, if students did not think that they would have to build on the assignment for future assignments, they typically ignored the vague comments. These findings are especially notable as they confirm previous findings emphasising the importance of building revisions into the overall grading scheme.

Lack of Awareness/Use of University Writing Resources

When asked about what university services students were aware of that could help them improve their writing skills, ELL students most often indicated that they did not know or were not sure of such services provided by the university. Those that did provide concrete responses most often cited the university's Learning Assistance Resource Center (LARC), which provides tutoring services and workshops specifically geared towards undergraduate students. Other students listed writing workshops and tutoring services provided through the English department.

The majority of the ELL students (77%) reported that they had never used university resources to improve their writing. The main reasons ELL students provided for not using these resources was that they either were not aware that the university provided them (e.g. "Never heard that universities help you with writing skills" and "I have not because I don't know what the university offers and instructors have not told the class about them"), did not have time to seek such services (e.g. "no time, and semi-embarrassed about problem") or did not feel like they needed such services (e.g. "I just never felt the need to"), especially at the post-baccalaureate level. Students who had used university academic writing services (e.g., the LARC tutoring center) typically had done so as undergraduate students and had found the services useful at the time. One master's student even commented, "I never took my errors seriously. Now I wish I would have gone." It appears that when students have an awareness of the university writing resources available to them and have the time to seek out those resources, they tend to find them very beneficial.

For many post-baccalaureate students who work full-time and have a number of professional and family obligations, finding time to seek writing resources is a challenge. If resources were made more readily available to students who could benefit from them (such as at the college or department level), and students were strongly encouraged to use them, perhaps they would be more likely to take advantage of them to enhance their writing skills.

Recommendations and Conclusions

Based on our findings from the COE student survey data reported in this paper and applicable professional literature (Ferris 2005; Scarcella 2003) on supporting university-level ELL student writers, we recommend the following for faculty members who currently serve linguistically diverse students in their content-area courses:

- Provide students, particularly ELLs, with clear, precise, encouraging and consistent feedback – it is important to make the feedback meaningful, specific and personal.
- Provide feedback on two to three different areas of a student's written assignment when possible (e.g. content, grammar, organisation).
- Provide indirect error correction with instruction on how to attend to the errors highlighted (e.g. cues, notes in margins), rather than directly correcting students' errors.

- Provide opportunities for students to submit revisions (that is, multiple drafts of papers) or "chunk" large assignments into smaller components to allow them to better use feedback and improve future writing.
- Build elements of academic writing into the overall grading scheme of discipline-specific assignments. Clearly delineate expectations for writing and content-area knowledge/skills in a grading rubric [Aminy and Karathanos (2011) give an example of this type of rubric].
- Provide ELL students with information about available writing resources and make the resources accessible to students at the department or college level.

With the growing number of linguistically diverse students attending institutions of higher education, it is imperative that college and university instructors develop expertise in strategies that enhance learning opportunities for English-language learners. This is particularly the case for students in College of Education programs, as many of these students will be modeling or teaching writing for their own K-12 students. Through our research, we have given an important voice to ELL students in the education profession by asking them to share their perspectives on instructional feedback approaches from which they feel they benefit in improving their writing. It is our hope that our project findings will provide important steps for our college, as well as other colleges and universities, in meeting the diverse needs of the growing postsecondary ELL student population enrolled in courses across academic disciplines.

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