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## Everyone Is an Academic English Learner: Interactive Support in Mainstream Classrooms

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# EVERYONE IS AN ACADEMIC ENGLISH LEARNER:

Interactive Support in Mainstream Classrooms

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## ABSTRACT

This article is a report on an English language learner (ELL) teacher’s mainstream class observations, coteaching experiences with a local language arts teacher, and surveying with students for a semester. As Short and Echevarria (2016, p. 2) state, “academic language is a second language for all students,” and every student is an academic English learner. This study examines how teachers bridge the gap between theory and practice by taking on multiple roles in classrooms and providing diverse support (Gottlieb, 2015). The implemented project focused on creating an autobiographical book with students themselves as centerpieces. The main purpose was to provide a grammar lesson on adjectives and adverbs based on communicative language teaching. Since grammatical or linguistic competence is one of the four components of core communicative competence, along with sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence, students need to obtain these four abilities (Canale & Swain, 1980; Savignon, 1976). Through observations, coteaching, and surveying, the findings indicate that teachers play multiple roles and provide students with various support using multimodality and active interaction. Specifically, interactive support helps students achieve academic language standards, which should expand to all students, including English language learners in K–12 education.

## KEYWORDS

academic English learner, interactive support, communicative language teaching, K–12

## LITERATURE REVIEW AND PROJECT BACKGROUND

Students’ interaction with the teacher and/or other students is one of the key issues in learning languages and succeeding academically at school. Through interaction, students can obtain the comprehensible input and produce the output, or their learning can take place in a structured environment such as classrooms. Harper and de Jong (2004) warned that exposure and interaction alone will not guarantee English learning based on cognitive perspective. On the other hand, Vygotsky (1978) and Long (1983, 2015) emphasized meaningful interactions. Mitchell, Myles, and Marsden (2013) highlighted the importance of a teacher’s role from a facilitator to scaffolding collaborator, as well as the impact of

classroom interaction in a sociocultural perspective. It might be crucial how students interact inside and outside of classroom in various contexts. Regarding academic English learning, Short and Echevarria (2016, p. 2) state, “academic language is a second language for all students.” This could be interpreted to mean that every student is an academic English learner, as they need to learn specific contents such as language arts, math, social studies, and science. Learning content language requires students to have academic conversations and interactions in classrooms (Zwiers & Crawford, 2011).

Fillmore (1990, p. 131) noted that “the best kind of content is one integrated across subject area, creatively integrated, and thematically linked.” Further, the context, which is not isolated (Britsch, 2012), should be provided

to teach and learn the content. Based on these theoretical backgrounds, my study examines how two teachers in different communities bridge the gap between theory and practice by taking on multiple roles in classrooms and providing the best content with diverse support, as Gottlieb (2006) emphasized. This could lead to enhanced academic English learning with an authentic purpose that could meet Indiana Academic Standards (Indiana Department of Education, 2014) in language arts for both local and international students.

My project focused on each student creating an autobiographical book with the students themselves as centerpieces. The main purpose of the project with the seventh grade students was to give a grammar lesson on adjectives and adverbs based on communicative language teaching. Since grammatical competence is one of the four components of core communicative competence (along with sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence), students need to obtain these four abilities (Canale & Swain, 1980; Savignon, 1976). Bailey and Butler (2003) discussed how teachers can operationalize academic English teaching to ELL even in mainstream classrooms.

As an ELL teacher, teacher trainer, and ESL researcher, I played additional roles as an observer, teacher, and researcher in the classroom. I observed a mainstream classroom, co-taught with a local language arts teacher, and conducted a survey for students throughout one semester. This article reports how students learn and interact with academic English in a mainstream, junior high school classroom. The analysis presents how teachers are operationalizing academic English teaching using interactive support and how students are learning it in a mainstream classroom.

## METHODOLOGY

### Data Sources and Collection

I used a mixed methods approach in this study, including one semester of class observations, designing and teaching a new lesson, and completing a descriptive and exploratory survey analysis. In class observations, the main focus was placed on the interaction between the teacher and students. I created a grammar lesson that made students think about autobiography as a genre by using a communicative language teaching strategy (Canale & Swain, 1980; Savignon, 1976) to strengthen interactions with students. The content of the lesson on adverbs and adjectives was modified from the resources from the Online Writing Lab at Purdue (OWL, n.d.),

and the advice from a teacher in the junior high school and other colleagues in the GK–12 program at Purdue was applied. To enhance the interaction and provide the hands-on project to students, instructional materials such as a mini whiteboard and a blank booklet were used. A week after the completion of the book project, the survey, consisting of five demographic items and ten interaction items, was administered to students.

### Sites and Participants

The participants were 50 seventh grade students in a language arts classroom at a junior high school in Lafayette, Indiana. Of those 50 students, 26 (53%) were male and 23 (47%) were female. Even though this class is created for mainstream students and no student is attending an ESL language arts class, not all students are native English-speaking students. Based on the survey, 42 (84%) out of 50 students responded that English is their first language. Twenty-three (23) students (46%) said that they do not have any second language, while Spanish ( $n = 14$ , 28%), English ( $n = 8$ , 16%), and others ( $n = 5$ , 10%) were recorded as their second languages. Even though many students only know one language, 33 students (66%) responded that they have a friend from other countries.

## RESULTS

### Pre-Teaching: Observation

The most surprising moment I had at the first observation was active interaction between the teacher and students. The teacher created a friendly classroom atmosphere where students could approach her and talk about both academic and personal issues. Their social language, which Cummins (2008) defined as basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS), resonated with their academic language, which Cummins (2008) defined as cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP). The teacher used multimodality methods such as visual aids, videos, even colored pencils and papers, drawing and coloring pictures, and writing. This worked for students in mainstream classrooms in both elementary and middle school grades (Britsch, 2002). Similarly, the teacher used leveled questions in her lessons to make sure every student understood and followed her. She played dynamic roles in the classroom, as Fillmore and Snow (2000) discussed: Teacher as Communicator (Error Correction), Teacher as Educator (Materials & Activities), Teacher as Evaluator (Assessment), Teacher as Educated Human Being (Basic Information about Language), and Teacher as Agent of Socialization (Cultural Difference).

**Teaching: How to Write Autobiography**

When I co-taught, students were directed to the following Gibbons’s (2014, p. 109) teaching and learning cycle: (1) building the field, (2) modeling and deconstructing genre, (3) joint construction, and (4) independent writing. To write an autobiography, students brainstormed “who they are.” After completing grammatical lessons on adjectives and adverbs that were associated with previous classroom lessons and taught by the teacher, students were asked to write down their “personal” adjectives on the mini whiteboard, hold them up, and discuss them with me. After the prewriting stage, students shared their birthdates, birthplaces, interests, and future goals. They then recalled what they liked to do for fun and how they liked to do these things, and they considered what they would like to do as a dream job. I introduced and shared several direct quotations from two autobiography books, Helen Keller’s (1954), *The Story of my Life*, and Anne Frank’s (2010) diary, *The Diary of a Young Girl*. They looked at the titles, authors, and dedications and analyzed how the authors used adverbs and adjectives in their texts. Some students selected a simplified title, like “My Life,” while others created an amplified one, like “My Crazy and Weird Life,” which contains distinctive adjectives. Students then chose someone to whom they wanted to dedicate their books. Most of them dedicated to their moms, family members, friends, or pets, but two students wanted to dedicate their books to the teacher and me. Students decorated their book covers with their own baby photos, stickers, and their drawings with colored pencils and markers. They wrote their memorable or hilarious stories such as how they got their names, added an ambitious future career dream (ten years later) such as an elementary school teacher, a NBA player, or a hairdresser on the last page of the book, and inserted some drawings or photos.

**Post-Teaching: Survey**

Through my observation and co-teaching experiences, students showed me active interactions. I intended to measure how they seek and acquire academic, social,

and emotional support for their school life from the teacher, other students, and parents on their own, so I conducted a survey after finishing the project. Based on the survey results, all seventh grade participants strongly agreed (74%) or agreed (26%) that “to maintain a high grade” is the most important thing to do in their junior high school life. Relatively fewer students strongly agreed with the importance of “preparing to go to college” (58%) and “making many friends” (38%). On the other hand, 4% students disagreed with these two statements. (See Table 1.)

**Interaction With Others**

Fifty seventh grade students responded that they seek personal help from teachers when they have questions about class (82%) or their grades (96%), whereas they are most likely to ask for help from parents when they are sick (79%). When they are stressed out, they reach out either to parents (56%) or to friends (38%) for help. (See Table 2.)

Most students talk more about their “homework/projects” (56%) or “class/studies” (46%) with their teachers than about their “concerns” (30%) or their “personal life” (8%). On the other hand, students communicate with their classmates more about their “personal life” (32%) or their “homework/projects” (24%) than their “concerns” (20%) or their “studies” (18%). The participants most of the time or always made a new friend at school more often in classrooms (60%) than outside of the classrooms (46%). Students are always or most of the time satisfied with their “social life” (66%), “academic life” (58%), and “computer life” (56%).

**Technology Support**

The students who were given a personal laptop from the school and used it for schoolwork both at school and at home answered in the survey that they maybe want (40%) or want (14%) to have a computer lesson, while other students said no (46%). Most students (78%) responded that they know how to use their laptops well.

**Table 1.** Survey item: My priorities (important things to do) in middle school life are \_\_\_\_\_.

Question	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Agree		Strongly Agree		Total
To prepare to go to college	0.00%	0	4.00%	2	38.00%	19	58.00%	29	50
To maintain a high grade	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	26.00%	13	74.00%	37	50
To make many friends	0.00%	0	4.00%	2	58.00%	29	38.00%	19	50

**Table 2.** Survey item: Who are you most likely to ask for personal help?

Question	Other Students or Friends		Teachers		Parents or Caregivers		Total
	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	
When I have a question about class	14.00%	7	82.00%	41	4.00%	2	50
When I am sick	12.24%	6	8.16%	4	79.59%	39	49
When I have a question about my grades	0.00%	0	95.83%	46	4.17%	2	48
When I am stressed out	37.50%	18	6.25%	3	56.25%	27	48

They used their laptops the most in science class (77%) and the least in math (2%).

**REFLECTION ON COMMUNITY IMPACT**

Observing and teaching a seventh grade mainstream language arts classroom broadened my teaching philosophy and developed my teaching skills. I recognized the important role of the teacher in the classroom and her interaction with students in her teaching practice. A teacher’s scaffolding and active interactions are overlapping factors that bridge these two communities from K–12 to higher education. The skill of having structured interactions with students that is used in the junior school community can be shared with and applied to college-level students, especially freshmen. Since the primary teacher had a heavy workload, future educators could assist the main teacher, learn practical teaching methods, and manage classroom skills.

Additionally, to bridge the gap between the K–12 community and the university, I brought and used the helpful materials adapted from OWL. I also introduced some shared goals of writing; for instance, writing process and rhetorical knowledge from the First-Year Composition Program at Purdue. To deliver “academic English” (Bailey & Butler, 2003; Cummins, 2008; Gibbons, 2009) effectively in the classroom, I used the results of many studies that resonated well with my lesson plan. I realized that the community in higher education has various resources to share with teachers and students in the K–12 school community.

Two teachers in different communities developed lesson plans together and learned from each other, discussed the broader issues related to how to provide better environments to students and how to communicate with parents. For these reasons, I consider this collaboration between two schools as professional development. The macro and micro levels of support for hands-on activities and materials are needed to make lessons more interesting and authentic. As an ELL teacher and oral communication instructor, I will try to connect the current school

system and policies with realistic needs of students and teachers. I learned the power of co-teaching and active interactions, as well as the importance of working among teachers, administrators, and parents to help students succeed in school. On the other hand, this valuable experience inspired me to grow as an educator and researcher in ELL education. This led to a win-win situation for both teachers and students. Two teachers’ regular teamwork in two communities, which offered diverse resources and provided a positive impact on students’ productive outcomes, is recommended. Therefore, through this research, I can create a connection between mainstream and ESL classrooms and between junior high school and university English educational communities.

**REFLECTION ON STUDENT IMPACT**

Despite the influx of international students in K–12 classrooms in Indiana, the junior high school where I worked in Lafayette did not have many ESL students. Yet, it was an unforgettable and rewarding experience to work with seventh grade students for a semester. I was surprised that most students were so interested in Purdue and my background; for instance, my home country of South Korea. However, at the same time, students in mainstream classes (i.e., classes without ESL students) did not have many opportunities to meet international teachers or students. When I shared my personal and professional experience from Korea to the US, they seemed excited and shared their own stories related to Purdue.

In the beginning, I had the impression that most students did not have a lot of experience with students from other countries. However, one student shared her deep interest in Korean pop culture during observation, and some students responded in the survey that they have friends from other countries such as Canada, England, Mexico, Spain, Porto Rico, Chile, and China. It surprised me that English was not the first language for all of the students. This altered my assumptions that mainstream classroom students are all native. It might be worth noting that while a lot of university scholarship emphasizes ESL

**Table 3.** Students' comments on their goals.

<b>Question item: My priorities are ____.</b>
“singing and play basketball” or “sports”
“to learn and respect”
“do well in school,” “to prepare for college”
“passing each grade and class,” “to get good grades”
“to succeed,” “to focus”
“don't get into trouble”

learners as international, K–12 scholarship assumes a wider definition of ELL. Many ESL students are born in the US (or come to the US very young) but do not have English as a first language, or they learned it concurrently with another language (Wright, 2015). Another possible interpretation is that some students may have two or more native languages and may therefore be bilingual, as Rothman and Trsffers-Daller (2014) argued.

Their priorities are focused more on academic than social success, although they were satisfied with their communication with their teacher and academic life. Some students shared their goals at the middle school with their own words and showed their interests and concerns (see Table 3).

Students had an interpersonal and academic conversation with the teacher when I assisted the mainstream teacher during observation. As times went by, students greeted me pleasantly, treated me as another teacher, and asked me academic and personal questions. When I taught, I received helpful feedback on how to manage the classroom and give students an authentic lesson. After a week of the lesson, I evaluated their books and selected the best authors.

I kept in mind Fillmore's (1990) notion that teacher-directed instruction and teacher engagement in classroom activities are crucial for students' language learning. To teach English as a subject to mainstream students, using many strategies for English learners such as meaningful interaction worked well, as it provided “comprehensive input” (Peregoy & Boyle, 2008). Second-language acquisition (Krashen & Terrell, 1983) is different from first-language acquisition (Chomsky, 1959); however, I realized that educators could use the common characteristics of language, specifically academic English, in classroom practices.

From this project—making a book and being an author of their own biography using meaningful interaction—students experienced the diversity and different perspectives and could connect learning to their own lives. Students learned grammar and academic content in language arts integrated writing and engagement. They were implicitly motivated to write their own stories by reflecting on their own lives and learning about the lives of other classmates. Students found a balance through this experience and broadened their spectrum from passive listeners or readers to active speakers and writers.

## CONCLUSION

The findings of the survey indicated that many seventh grade students considered academic goals as the most important and were concerned about their grades, while they were satisfied with their social life. To solve their problems, they are seeking and receiving various types of assistance from other people. Teachers could offer the most academic support while parents could offer more interpersonal, social support. Peers became an import influence on students at this age. Surprisingly, students perceived that they have to start preparing for college during junior high school.

Further, according to the survey, students interacted with parents, teachers, or classmates differently depending on the topic; they discussed academic issues such as homework or classes with teachers, while they talked about personal issues with classmates. Students received socio-emotional support from parents or other friends. Each of these support systems have an important role to play at school and at home. Both ESL and mainstream students need opportunities to experience diverse interactions in order to have a successful life at a junior high school. The classroom is the most important place for students to enhance and operationalize interactions with other students and teachers.

In my project, students had more willingness to communicate (Kassing, 1997) and were more motivated to write their autobiographies under an analog condition by using tangible materials and making a real book. Even though it is unavoidable for students to use digital devices in classrooms in the twenty-first century, I found that this balanced experience could develop students to enjoy their learning and writing process as well as a writing product. Concerning technology support, the results indicated that students need regular or systematic updated technical support, as they responded positively that they could benefit from a lesson on technology and

computer use, despite their claims on their sufficient technical knowledge. Students used laptops as a tool in most subjects including science, social studies, and language arts, but not in math classes. This may be the case because students need to present the process of solving math problems with numbers and signs, whereas they can research and write on laptops in other courses. This also suggests that the school should provide an extra course for effective computer use to teachers as their professional development as well as students.

Through observations, co-teaching, and surveying, the findings indicated that teachers play multiple roles as “communicator, educator, evaluator, educated human being and agent of socialization” (Fillmore & Snow, 2000). Teachers provided the innovative and research-based lesson (Wright, 2015) and communicated with students in mainstream classrooms with various support using multimodality, visual aids for learning, and active interactions. Students then understood processes, learned effectively, and produced the outcomes that other researchers have shown (Britsch, 2012; Coggins, Kravin, Coates, & Carroll, 2007, Long 2015). Through interactions, the teacher and I experienced co-teaching and co-learning with the seventh grade students. This allowed academic English learners to experience the process of writing and being an author of autobiography. Since there are multiple levels in mainstream classes, diverse teaching methods can help both local and international students achieve their academic success. Specifically, interactive support could be mitigated to help students achieve academic standards, which should expand to all students including English language learners in K–12 education.

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