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## **Preparing Teachers of English Learners: How Field Reports Bridge the Gap between Theory and Practice**

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### **Abstract**

Preservice teachers of English learners need practical experience in real classrooms to supplement the rich strategies learned in college methods classes. In classes of preservice teachers in secondary education at California State University Northridge, state course standards require teacher candidates to complete not only classwork but also field observation reports. The field observation reports help teacher candidates bridge theory and practice, making connections between university course strategies and public school classroom applications. With access to the largest number of English learners in any school district in the nation, candidates are able to observe and report on the diverse needs, strategies, challenges, and assessments they encounter. This article describes the features and findings associated with two field reports required by a Teaching English learners course in the secondary teaching credential program.

What are the best practices for preparing teachers of English learners? In classes of preservice teachers in secondary education at California State University Northridge, state course standards require teacher candidates to complete not only classwork but also field observation reports. The rationale is that preservice teachers of English learners need practical experience in classrooms to supplement the rich strategies learned in college methods classes. As a result of the requirement, the English learner (EL) faculty team in our department met to develop the protocol and procedures for the field reports, the framework of guiding questions that defines preservice teacher observations. The team recognized the importance of creating field report observations that are meaningful, practical, and relevant for the teacher candidate working with ELs.

Some 250 students at our university matriculate through the secondary teacher credential program annually. The overall PreK-12 education program vies with another state university for first in the number of teachers credentialed each year, as high as 1700 in some years. The university is designated as an HSI or Hispanic-serving institution, with 29% of students identified as Latino/a. In California, students who want to become teachers typically receive their bachelor's degree first and then go on to a fifth-year teacher credentialing program.

Of the 48 million public school students in the United States, the percentage of students who are English learners is estimated at about 10 percent, or 4.7 million students. Currently, one in four students in California is an English Learner, which means 1.5 million ELs in the state's K-12 schools. Unlike states such as Florida and Arizona that can keep designated ELs in programs up to six years with federal funding assistance, California passed Proposition 227 in 1998. Now

known as Prop 227, the bill changed the way Limited English Proficient students (LEPs) are taught in California.

Prop 227 requires public schools to teach LEPs in sheltered or SDAIE (Special Designed Academic Instruction in English) classes that are nearly all in English, eliminating most bilingual classes; shortens the time most LEPs can stay in sheltered classes, typically one year; and streamlines the process by which LEPs with a good working knowledge of English move from sheltered to general education classes ([http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator\\_ell.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_ell.asp), 2013). For students who want a multicultural education, dual-immersion programs are still available to develop language fluency and academic proficiency in both English and the target language (Jones, 2012, p. 1).

In assessing English learners, the California English Language Development Test (CELDT) is used to evaluate K-12 students identified by parents/guardians on the home survey as speaking another language than English at home. Students are assessed within 30 days of enrollment in listening, speaking, reading, writing, and comprehension in English and are then classified as beginning, early intermediate, intermediate, early advanced, or advanced. Based on the guidelines established by the State Board of Education, students who have previously taken the CELDT and were identified as English Learners must be retested annually between July 1 and October 31.

CELDT is based on the California Department of Education's English Development Standards (ELDs) for grades K-12, which are aligned with the state's new common core standards in English language arts. According to a summary of the ELD standards and descriptors:

The Proficiency Level Descriptors (PLDs) provide an overview of stages of English language development that English learners are expected to progress, as they gain increasing proficiency in English as a new language. The PLDs describe student knowledge, skills, and abilities across a continuum, identifying what ELs know and can do at early stages and at exit from each of three proficiency levels: Emerging, Expanding, and Bridging (<http://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/el/er/documents/sbeoverviewpld.pdf>, 2012).

Once students are considered Fluent English Proficient, they are placed in mainstream classes and do not have to take the CELDT each year. Studies show that statewide, the majority of students or 36% test at the beginning level, with the highest mean scale score for all groups in reading English and the lowest in speaking English (<http://celdt.cde.ca.gov/reports.asp>, 2012).

### **Common Myths About ELs**

We want candidates to be aware of the misperceptions and misunderstandings regarding ELs both nationally and locally, as they make observations and interact in classrooms with EL students and their teachers. Instructors in the Teaching English Learners course prepare teacher candidates to make field observations and alert them to the common myths about English learners:

Myth 1: Many English learners have disabilities, which is why they are frequently found in special education.

Fact: A second language is not a disability. While a disproportionate number of ELs are represented in special education, placement rates vary from state to state and across programs. Current assessments that do not differentiate between disabilities and linguistic differences can lead to misdiagnosis of English learners. ELs with disabilities can learn, and early intervention can prevent academic failure. Inclusive environments that provide challenging rather than remedial instruction will be most effective.

Myth 2: English learners learn a second language quickly and easily.

Fact: A variety of socio-cultural factors affect language learning, as well as challenges in acclimating to a new culture and status that can interfere with learning English. Students should be encouraged to use their native language strategically and will be motivated by student-centered activities. Because English language learning is a recursive process, educators should integrate listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills into instruction at all levels.

Myth 3: Once English learners speak English fluently, they have mastered the language.

Fact: Oral language needs both assessment and support, as listening and speaking often precedes stronger skills in reading and writing.

Myth 4: One size fits all, as all ELs learn English in the same way.

Fact: Prior schooling experiences, socio-economic position, content knowledge, and immigration status create variation in EL language development processes. Some ELs have a strong command of their native language's (L1) grammar structure and vocabulary, while others need improvement in that area. Use of cognates, lexical similarities, and other linguistic features contribute to challenges in building the new language.

Myth 5: Providing accommodations for English learners only benefits that specific population.

Fact: Strategies that work in mainstream classrooms to engage all students and to differentiate for diverse needs make those classrooms more user-friendly to ELs and underserved students.

Myth 6: Academic language for ELs should focus on vocabulary development.

Fact: Academic language is more than vocabulary development. Forms, functions, and complex linguistic features all need to be addressed in building academic language skills. Students need opportunities to express complex meanings, even when their English language proficiency is limited

(<http://www.ncte.org/library/NCTEFiles/Resources/PolicyResearch/ELLResearchBrief.pdf>, 2008, p. 3-4).

## **The Field Observation Report Requirement**

Every secondary teacher candidate must take a 3-unit class on Teaching English Learners in Multiethnic Classrooms, as a co-requisite to their Foundations of Education course, in the first semester of the credential program. In addition to lesson and unit plans, case and ethnographic studies, methods and activities for ELs, and types and elements of assessment, students must prepare two field reports. These field reports are based on two three-hour observations of English learners at local public schools. Visits are arranged by the candidates with the cooperation of the schools and typically occur in the sixth and tenth weeks of the fifteen-week course.

The purpose of the field reports is to provide students with an opportunity to combine their theoretical and methodological studies with the practical application of that learning in a school environment. The field experience is an important aspect of the student's academic program, as the experience not only allows students to apply knowledge learned in the university classroom but also enables them to learn under the supervision of professionals in the field, master teachers.

In the initial six weeks of the Teaching English Learners course leading up to the first field report, students develop strategies, explore EL research, examine state instruments such as CELDT and ELD standards, and receive an overview of what to expect and look for in a classroom of all or some English learners. Students encounter a range of diversity, as some 224 languages have been identified in Los Angeles County, with 92 languages specifically identified among students of the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). The most common languages found in the district are Spanish (spoken by 94% of ELs), English, Korean, Eastern Armenian, Cantonese, Tagalog, Farsi, Vietnamese, and Russian. Schools in LAUSD are the primary location for almost all field reports in the program.

LAUSD is the nation's second-largest school system with more English learners than any other district, about one-third of its 600,000 students. The district's English-Learner Master Plan was overhauled in 2012, after the U.S. Department of Education determined that English learners and African-American students were being denied access to educational opportunities. Nearly 40 percent of English learners in the district failed to achieve proficiency after five years of instruction (Jones, 2012, p. 1).

### **Field Observation Reports 1 and 2: Components**

Field Report One is focused on aspects of particular performance levels of English learners at a public middle or high school. In most sections of the course, reports are shared with the instructor electronically, through google docs. Discussion boards and wikis provide a forum for students to share their observations and reflections with one another as well. Students are given these observation and report guidelines:

**Field Observation Report #1: Observation and Analysis of EL 1, EL 2, EL 3, EL4, and/or SDAIE (sheltered) Classes**

**Task:**

- 1) *Select two* of the four levels from EL 1, EL 2, EL 3, EL 4, or SDAIE (Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English). Conduct a total of three hours of observation across the two levels in a public middle or high school. The observations can be conducted in the same class/school in which you are student teaching, if that is the case.
- 2) You may observe classes that are all English learners, OR classes that have some identified English learners in them, and you choose the subject/content area based on your own teaching field.
- 3) Based on your observations, write a report of 4-5 pages (double-spaced) that addresses these components:

**Guiding Questions**

*For each of the two levels*, please identify the school, the class, and the teacher. Then, respond to the following, consulting with the teacher as needed:

- A. How are students identified for placement in this class? What L1 (first language) and L2 (second language) language skills do students appear to possess (reading, writing, listening, speaking) based on your observation?
- B. Describe the class (number and demographics of students) and the classroom environment.
- C. What language structures and/or features and what English Language Development state standards were addressed in the lesson/s?
- D. What instructional materials were used? What specific challenges did the materials pose for these students?
- E. What teaching approaches and strategies did you observe? What scaffolding or differentiation of instruction or materials? Describe the effectiveness of the strategies for these students and their learning, citing three different theorists, researchers, or experts in English Learners or your subject area.
- F. How was student learning informally assessed during the lesson? Analyze the effectiveness of the assessment(s), and what you or the teacher discovered about students' abilities and their learning as a result.
- G. What evidence of academic language instruction and/or development did you observe in teaching, learning, and related materials?
- H. Discuss the similarities and differences between the two levels you selected, referring to A-G above.

I. What insights about English Language Learners and their learning will you bring from these observations/reflections to your own teaching?

Field Report Two focuses on interaction with ELs through small groups and tutoring:

**Field Observation Report #2: Tutoring an Individual or Small Group from an EL or SDAIE Class**

**Task:**

Tutor an individual student or small group of students from an EL 1, 2, 3, or 4 class or SDAIE content class for at least 3 hours, preferably on three different days. This assignment must be completed at a public middle or high school. For this assignment, you will teach an individual or small group of students, using the classroom teachers' lesson or activities, or your own lesson plans approved by the teacher.

**Questions:**

Based on your tutoring experiences, write a report of about five pages (double-spaced, not including handouts or student work samples) that addresses these components:

1. Separately, for each of the tutoring experiences, please identify the school, the class of the student or students you are tutoring, and the teacher. Then, respond to the following:

A. Describe the pertinent student characteristics of the individual or group you are tutoring, e.g., L1 and L2 capabilities, gender, size of group (if applicable). How was the student placement in the class (EL 1, 2, or 3 or SDAIE) determined?

B. Identify and describe the text selection or other learning materials, including any applied instructional technology. What challenges will the text and materials likely pose for your EL or SDAIE student or group?

C. What are the language structures or features and ELD standard(s) you addressed in your lesson? Identify the specific objective(s) of the tutoring session.

D. Describe the specific learning strategy or strategies you used in the tutoring session, making sure to use at least one specific strategy discussed in the course in one of the sessions. Explain the effectiveness of the strategy or strategies, citing three different theorists, researchers, or experts in Teaching English Learners or your subject area. Be sure to attach any handouts/materials/notes used in your tutoring session.

- E. Describe how you informally assessed student learning in your tutoring. Attach copies of student work samples and explain what they demonstrate about your student's (or students') language strengths, needs, and learning.
- F. What changes would you make to strengthen the lesson and/or the assessment in the future?
- G. Which tutoring session was most successful, and why?
- H. What insights about English Language Learners and their learning will you bring from your tutoring experiences to your own teaching?

### Results of Field Reports

In preparing field reports, the most common challenge faced by students not currently student teaching is securing a school site for observation. Those candidates without a placement work with designated class families and other course contacts to secure an observation site and are provided with a list of available schools for observation visits. Also, not all schools have all levels of ELs, so that candidates must be selective in their choices for purposes of the field reports.

Upon completing both field reports, teacher candidates report their experiences as some of the most rewarding in the Teaching English learners course. A sampling of reflective comments includes these:

Observing Mr. T's eighth grade social studies classroom was a very insightful experience, as I was able to see the differences that exist among EL students. Every student is completely different and acquires language in his or her own way; no two students are alike. As a result, Mr. T had to develop his lesson plans in a way that ensured he was meeting the students where they needed most help. I will never forget Jose's enthusiasm and desire to do well and understand that sometimes all students need is a second chance. Instead of giving up, Jose performed better and passed the quiz on the second time around. Unfortunately, most teachers do not offer that option to their students. Teaching is a very personal profession; you must take your students' success to heart.

Learning 9<sup>th</sup> grade biology can be difficult for English learners, because the basic need to understand the vocabulary is the first step to understanding the biological processes that all students need to know. Of major importance within this subject is the need to frontload vocabulary, especially in this mixed ability group setting. From this observation, I found that I need to emphasize vocabulary and keep as many manipulative and hands-on activities available for each topic. Not only do my English learners and special needs students need hands-on activities, but also students in general benefit greatly from them. Teaching English Learners becomes a juggling act to maintain a pacing plan and keep up with the standards, while making sure to give students with special needs time to learn. There is a strong need to maintain engagement, stress

academic language, and use hand gestures, visuals, and graphic organizers in order to keep the English learners on the right learning track.

Alondra and Jessie are both designated ELs in Mr. B's 7th grade SDAIE mathematics class. There are three additional adult aides in his classroom that are constantly keeping up with students who require assistance. Mr. B started the class with a warm up, by introducing vocabulary that was going to be required for the upcoming chapter, and then reviewed the concept of percentage, profit, income, and expenses. The unit was dealing with how to find percentages and profits. There are a couple other English Learners in the class, but Alondra and Jessie have additional needs, because they are also dyslexic. The class consists of 21 Latino kids, two Anglo-European pupils, and one Asian-American student. The teacher used examples on the projector, a graphic organizer, and direct instruction to assist English Learners. Mr. B. attempts to make his class a friendly, welcoming classroom that accepts a wide array of different cultures, so that ELs and all students feel comfortable.

EL student, Francisco, did not ask for help (even though he desperately needed guidance), was very quiet, and worked alone. Another EL in this 10<sup>th</sup> grade math class, Melissa, was very talkative, asked for help regularly from the teacher, and worked with a partner/friend. Both students benefited from the use of the whiteboards for their work, the Aleks math program on their netbooks, and the examples left on the whiteboard for them to refer back to; however, neither student referred back to their graphic organizer notes sheet for support. I would recommend note cards for the students to refer to, word walls, and vocabulary posters displayed throughout the room. I've learned from this class that I need to make sure I reach out to all my English Learners, especially those that shy away from others and isolate themselves. I also need to acknowledge that just because a student is talkative and working with a partner, does not mean she fully understands the main concept or is even on task. Both my formal and informal assessments must give me a clear picture of all my very different students.

In addition to reflections in the field reports, common threads include candidates commenting that 1) the field reports show them both what to do and what not to do in teaching English learners; 2) some teachers have stronger skills than others in planning, structuring, and scaffolding for learning; 3) the use of bilingual aides and peer tutoring is situational and somewhat infrequent; 4) integration of technology such as Smartboards, Elmo document projectors, multimedia presentations, and students in computer labs is limited by lack of resources and/or teacher training; 5) a range of learners is found in almost all classrooms, with a blend of struggling readers and students with stronger skills; and 6) a welcoming environment along with effective classroom management contributes to learning for ELs and other students. Common threads are shared with students through in-class discussions and on discussion boards, in which students can provide more details and reflection on the choices they made both individually and collectively.

Key word research is applied to both field reports, as keyword research is one of the most valuable and high return activities in the search field. A keyword is any word or phrase that describes a topic, and the more often a word is used in the field reports, the more value the word has. A keyword search of both field reports indicates the most common terms used in the field reports are vocabulary, teacher, student, strategies, instruction, prior knowledge, differentiation, pre-reading, assessment, and examples. These keywords reveal their popularity among ideas related to the field reports, show which terms have the most attraction power in shaping ideas, and indicate which terms are most relevant to the goals of the field report writers.

Upon completion of both field reports, these keywords are shared with students, who discuss both in class and on online discussion boards, the reasons they believe the terms have popularity in their reports, as well as each keyword's relevance to teaching English learners. A word cloud of key terms and other field report vocabulary is also created by the students through [worditout.com](http://worditout.com) or [wordle.net](http://wordle.net), as a visual representation of important field report concepts and integration of academic language.

In student course evaluations, teacher candidates note that the field reports are eye-opening and help them apply practice to theory, in a way that textbook knowledge and course strategies only approximate. One student analogized the field report experience to a medical doctor completing a residency, working with real "patients" and getting hands-on, personal experience with English learners and their teachers. The students also commented in course evaluations that the field reports helped them to prepare for the PACT (Performance Assessment for California Teachers).

## **PACT**

In addition to the Field Reports, almost all candidates are working on PACT, either the preliminary teaching event in their first semester of student teaching or the full teaching event during the second semester of student teaching. Both the preliminary and the full Teaching Event must be passed in our program to be eligible for a teaching credential. Part of the 2008 state legislature requirement for formal teacher assessment and initiated by Stanford University, PACT has been adopted by over 30 universities/colleges in California. A national version known as edTPA (Teacher Performance Assessment) is currently being piloted or implemented in 28 states (<http://edtpa.aacte.org>, 2013).

The structured Teaching Event of PACT is on average a 45-50 page document with one-two video clips that represents approximately one week of student teaching, known as the unified learning segment. PACT is based on four pillars of learning and teaching: planning, instruction, assessment, and reflection, with academic language addressed across all tasks (<http://pacttpa.org>, 2013). The PACT also reflects 13 Teaching Performance Expectations for California teachers, ranging from lesson planning to teaching English learners to continued professional growth.

The PACT is directly applicable to the field reports and conversely, because guiding questions within the PACT framework require candidates to provide details on English learners:

demographics, strategies, assessment, applied theorists, and relevant pedagogy. The PACT is a capstone experience that helps candidates see the big picture of all they have learned and observed, with opportunities to discuss and reflect in-depth about their work with English learners in classrooms. Some of the prompts and questions related to ELs in the PACT include these:

- 1) When describing the proficiency of your English learners, describe what your English learners can and cannot yet do in relation to the language demands of tasks in the learning segment.
- 2) Describe any teaching strategies you have planned for your students who have identified educational needs (e.g., English learners, GATE students, students with IEPs). Explain how these features of your learning and assessment tasks will provide students access to the curriculum and allow them to demonstrate their learning.
- 3) When you consider the content learning of your students and the development of their academic language, what do you think explains the learning or differences in learning that you observed during the learning segment (<http://pacttpa.org>, 2013)?

Performance results of the Teaching Event indicate that teacher candidates are most challenged in the areas of academic language and assessment, both areas our program is working to strengthen in applicable coursework and fieldwork. Candidates learn that academic language is more than vocabulary development, that the language demands of school include linguistic features and genres; specialized terms in a certain field (such as empire, civilization, oligarchy in social studies); subject-specific text types, with materials presented in a variety of ways; skills in participating in and understanding oral discourse; and receptive language skills (listening, reading) and productive language skills (speaking, writing) needed by the student, in order to engage in and complete the task successfully:

For example, a social studies teacher may highly scaffold the process of constructing an argument based on historical evidence, how to communicate a thesis in an essay; or how to debate a political point of view...an elementary mathematics teacher might help students understand the conventions expected for showing their problem-solving work, how to explain alternative solutions to a problem, or how to interpret mathematical symbols (Herr, <http://www.csun.edu/science/ref/language/pact-academic-language.html>, 2012).

Field reports provide an opportunity for teacher candidates to see academic language in action, in both materials and classroom activities. Candidates frequently comment on how important scaffolding is to the process of academic language for ELs in the different disciplines, building from more simplified explanations to the academic language that accurately describes a concept, task, or feature.

### Summary

The field observation reports build an essential connection in our secondary teaching credential program, between theory and practice and between preservice teachers and pupils in

schools. Frontloading of EL myths/facts, strategies, and the language demands of school in coursework helps candidates apply methods and activities to what they observe in classrooms.

Upon completion of the field report, keyword searches, in-class discussions, online discussion boards, common threads, and word clouds help preservice teachers build community around their individual and shared experiences. Using these tools, preservice teachers are provided an opportunity to debrief on their observations and see both the big picture and a delineation of parts. Preservice teachers are able to reflect on their observations and apply them to their own student teaching activities, as they see the commonalities and differences in the various field reports.

Candidates remark in the final course evaluations that the field report observations are the most rewarding of all class activities, even though challenging and somewhat time-consuming for busy students. Candidates note the value in exploring their world beyond the borders of textbooks and course activities, observing the actual practitioners of and participants in English learner strategies. Candidates say that coming face-to-face with the rewards and challenges of teaching ELs helps shape their approaches to future teaching in their own classrooms. Their reactions to what they observe range from pleased and delighted to questioning and critical, as one would expect in observing a range of learners and classrooms.

As a result of the field reports and observation visits, teacher candidates receive first-hand experience with EL strategies, assessments, challenges, and diverse learner needs. Teacher candidates are also exposed to a variety of teachers and teaching methods, sometimes as diverse as the student population being observed. The structure of the two field reports, along with guiding questions as a framework, helps candidates navigate the richness of what they see in classrooms. Candidates can also apply their findings to the PACT questions that specifically focus on ELs. Most importantly, the detailed observations of ELs provides teacher candidates with ideas about how they want their own EL teaching and classrooms to look in the future.

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