Learning about English Learners’ Content Understandings through Teacher Inquiry:

Focus on Writing

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Abstract

Writing is central to academic development, permeates content area coursework, and serves as both vehicle for and display of learning. For English learners (ELs), writing poses challenges, and teachers need preparation in how to understand and respond to these. This study reports five teacher inquiry processes that preservice teachers in one teacher education program used to learn more about their ELs and their writing performances, strengths, learning, preferences, and needs. The inquiry processes provided opportunities to develop knowledge of content and students (Ball, Thames, & Phelps, 2008), a key subdomain of the knowledge base of effective teaching.
Learning about ELs through Inquiry

Learning about English Learners’ Content Understandings through Teacher Inquiry:
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To meet the needs of the burgeoning English learner (EL) population in U.S. schools, educators need support in fostering learning at the intersection of content knowledge and development of English language proficiency. Challenges for teachers include managing ELs’ varied academic and linguistic needs (Gándara, Maxwell-Jolly, & Driscoll, 2005) and linking academic language to content (Schleppegrell, 2004). An additional challenge is balancing high challenge with high support for ELs in curriculum and instruction (Hammond, 2006). However, teachers have reported inadequate preservice preparation and professional development to teach ELs (Darling-Hammond, Chung, & Frelow, 2002; Gándara et al., 2005; NCES, 2002).

In the case of teacher education (TE), programs recently have worked to address this situation, but research on such efforts is in its nascent stage, with relatively little work published and a need for new research in all areas of teacher preparation for teaching ELs (Lucas, 2011; Lucas & Grinberg, 2008). Among areas of need is preparing teachers to support writing development of adolescent ELs. This need becomes even more salient with a national focus on the Common Core Standards, which add new variations and levels of complexity for student writing, K-12 and across the curriculum. We report a study that examined the focal content area of writing. However, we also highlight ways the study informs broader concerns of how early-career teachers can learn to focus on the learning strengths, preferences, and needs of ELs in any content area.

Background

Writing is central to academic development, permeates content area coursework, and serves as both vehicle for and display of learning. For those developing proficiency in a second language (in this case, English), writing poses countless challenges. Writing is loaded with cultural conventions, schooling expectations, and discipline-specific grammars (Schleppegrell, 2004). ELs, in particular, need multiple, repeated, and extended opportunities to learn these expectations and practice the academic and disciplinary codes embedded within writing tasks and genres. Although the Common Core Standards specify that writing instruction should occur across subject areas, the English language arts (ELA) instructor is expected to lead such efforts. Also, in courses such as English Language Development (ELD), English instructors frequently hold responsibility for writing instruction. However, in a recent national study on the teaching of writing, actual writing instruction was infrequent and narrowly conceived; 43% of ELA teachers reported inadequate preparation from their TE programs to teach writing (Kiuhara, Graham, & Hawken 2009). This finding raises particular concerns, given the increasing demands of writing as specified by the Common Core Standards. Given this finding, coupled with teachers’ reports of inadequate preparation to teach ELs, it is likely that an even higher percentage of ELA teachers would report inadequate preparation to teach writing to English learners, despite ELA teachers being expected to do this work in English and many ELD courses. This has broad implications for schools and society. If content area instructors expect all students, including ELs, to write effectively, but many ELA instructors provide little relevant instruction, students can be disadvantaged across the curriculum and beyond graduation.
The situation is complex. Perhaps from lack of preparation, teachers often approach writing in prescriptive and limited ways, and those teaching ELs provide few authentic opportunities to try out genres and experiment with writing (Ortmeier-Hooper & Enright, 2011; Valdés, 1999). The result can take the form of highly controlled composition, where structures are dictated by formula rather than purpose (Valdés, 1999). Teachers of writing with ELs in class may need to find ways to integrate more expansive writing opportunities in a context of accountability pressures of display over writing development, where compliance with rules and forms trumps a focus on real communication (Enright & Gilliland, 2011). Diversifying ELs’ instruction amid pressures of coverage and standardized tests adds complexity to teachers’ efforts (de Oliveira & Athanases, 2007). The problems are great, as limited instructional methods can result in student disengagement and learning of only basic and formulaic approaches to writing. As ELs move on to mainstreamed instructional contexts, work sites, and higher education, lack of experience with more expansive approaches to writing can yield a lack of adequate preparation for academic and workplace expectations of writing.

Despite these challenges, teacher development can help guide teaching of writing for ELs. Previous work has documented use of scaffolding to help ELs work beyond current abilities (Pawan, 2008; Walqui, 2011). Approaches include introducing systemic functional linguistics as a guide to learning how language functions to shape meaning (Brisk & Zisselsberger, 2011) and modeling linguistically responsive actions to gain familiarity with students’ varied linguistic and academic backgrounds (Lucas, Villegas, & Freedson-Gonzalez, 2008). In preservice education, although programs have increased preparation of teachers for student diversity (e.g., Hollins & Guzman, 2005), a linguistic diversity focus is rare (Lucas & Grinberg, 2008; Zeichner, 2009).

Programs that do not necessarily feature teaching writing for ELs have documented innovations in preparing teachers to work with ELs and therefore offer insights. Innovations include courses focused on English learners and linguistic concerns (Lucas & Grinberg, 2008), infusion of attention to ELs in programs (Athanases & de Oliveira, 2011; Coady, Harper, & de Jong, 2011), and an EL-focused licensure program (de Oliveira & Lucas, in press). Efforts also include coursework using direct contact with ELs through tutoring (Walker & Stone, 2011), as well as collaborative efforts between EL experts and methods instructors in infusing academic language into TE coursework (de Oliveira & Shoffner, 2009). Finally, other efforts include performance assessments that may guide student teacher (ST) focus on linguistically sensitive pedagogy (Bunch, Aguirre, & Tellez, 2009) and development of the role of advocate for equitable learning opportunities for ELs in and beyond classrooms (de Oliveira & Athanases, 2007).

Clearly, we need to know more about teacher education initiatives that prepare teachers to learn about and meet the needs of English learners in all areas, and in writing in particular. The study we report responds to this need. We explored the role of teacher inquiry in fostering knowledge of ELs’ learning—and with a specific focus on writing. We asked this research question: In what ways, if any, does teacher inquiry support preservice teachers’ learning about writing processes, performances, and development of adolescent English learners?
Theoretical Framework

Our study is framed by scholarship on teacher knowledge and learning. Because of our focus on knowledge for teaching a particular subject (writing), the domain of content knowledge for teaching is particularly salient for our work. The knowledge base of effective teaching has long included pedagogical content knowledge (PCK), an amalgam of content knowledge and general pedagogical knowledge (Grossman, 1990; Shulman, 1987). PCK includes how to sequence subject area topics logically, how to scaffold learning of challenging curricular concepts, and how to predict and address common subject area difficulties, errors, and misconceptions (Ball, 2000; Shulman, 1987). In addition, heightened attention to teacher knowledge for work with ELs can enable teachers to move beyond general “good teaching” strategies for native English speakers (Harper & de Jong, 2004) to develop PCK regarding linguistic diversity (August & Hakuta, 1997; Adger, Snow, & Christian, 2002).

PCK has at least two subdomains—one focused on content and students, the other on content and teaching (Ball, Thames, & Phelps, 2008). The latter is essential for teacher development and concerns how one’s actions as a teacher impact students’ learning. However, the former—knowledge of content and students—can be difficult for new teachers to develop and is the focus of the present study. As preservice teachers learn to teach content to students, specifically to ELs, they need to learn a great deal first about ELs and their content understandings and performances. In the case of writing, this includes what ELs know about writing, what they know and can do with their writing, where they struggle with writing processes, which writing tasks are particularly engaging and which are challenging, and for which of their English learners.

Teacher inquiry may support development of knowledge of content and students—ELs in particular—because of a focus on asking critical questions about teaching and learning with particular students in classes. Such questioning may help teachers move past a methods fetish in teaching bilingual students, which reduces capacity for in-the-moment responses to student needs (Bartolomé, 1994). With inquiry in a TE program, learning to teach writing to ELs does not occur in abstraction; it is situated in authentic activities in real world contexts and can promote embodied understanding through deep engagements with nuances of particular learning situations (D’All Alba & Sandberg, 2006). Teacher development benefits from such activity linked to site-based teaching and relationships with students (Banks et al., 2005). These provide experiences that allow necessary development for future actions (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989).

In preparing teachers to teach writing to ELs, teacher inquiry holds promise due to its focus on asking questions about learning of actual students in classes, prompted by intentional and systematic work (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) and guided by reflective practice (Schön, 1983). Through inquiry, STs may learn patterns of ELs’ writing and respond effectively with pedagogy. Inquiry can promote understanding of diverse EL writing needs and diverse teaching approaches needed to address them (Lew, 1999; Sowa, 2009). Data gathering, analysis, and reflection can help STs understand and serve linguistic and academic needs of ELs, including those with academic difficulties (Dresser, 2007). Learning to capitalize on ELs’ interpersonal skills and interactions as writing resources can be learned through inquiry that focuses on a
particular child (Dana, Yendol-Hoppey, & Snow-Gerono, 2006). Inquiry into ELs’ development can be supported by tools, peers, and mentors (Merino & Ambrose, 2009) and can transform teachers (Nevarez-LaTorre, 2010). These studies offer early evidence of the potential of teacher inquiry to promote attention to ELs and the development of knowledge of content and students, even in preservice and often focused on writing. However, more research is needed to uncover how inquiry offers potential to focus preservice teachers on ELs’ writing in depth. Our study responds to this need.

**Study Overview and Method**

**Program of Research and Context**

This study is part of a program of research on processes and impact of preservice teacher inquiry. The focal 10-month post-Baccalaureate program yearly credentials 150+ California teachers who also earn a cross-cultural language and academic development credential, essential in a state with rich diversity, where 25% of K-12 students (and 12% at the secondary level) are designated as ELs. The program fostered advocacy for equity for diverse students (Athanases & de Oliveira, 2008), featuring ELs (de Oliveira & Athanases, 2007), and extended into field placements by supervisors (Athanases & Martin, 2006). The program sought to learn how inquiry could support such work. Preservice teachers took two inquiry courses, with a second series offered in an optional follow-up MA year. We focus on a credential-year course, site for a first 10-week inquiry.

In the ELA strand, STs convened in cohorts to explore ELA issues in full and small-group work. Instruction in tools and processes scaffolded inquiry, including a presentation template, inquiry scoring rubrics, and critical feedback to guide revision. Slides and Notes detailed inquiry focus; community, school, and class contexts; research questions; and evidence justifying need for a study focus and action plan. Inquiries also included literature abstracts, a visual of inquiry plan, data collection and analysis methods, detailed results, synthesis of learning through inquiry, and next steps. Scaffolds included workshops on pattern-finding in qualitative and quantitative data, field memos to foster data analysis and aid pattern-finding, and mentoring conferences. Memos helped STs identify next steps and promoted fresh insights and more detailed analyses.

Two studies laid groundwork for the present one. In the first, we developed a rubric of 17 indicators of attention to culturally and linguistically diverse learners, including ELs, to examine the range of ways and extent to which STs attended to diverse students through inquiry (Athanases, Wahleithner, & Bennett, 2012a). STs took varied relevant actions to varying degrees: researching contexts and histories; examining performance at full-class, subgroup, and individual levels; and collecting student data on reasoning and attitudes about learning and other issues. In a second study, we shined light on content by focusing on how inquiry promoted PCK explorations in ELA (Athanases, Wahleithner, & Bennett, 2012b). We found inquiries typically began focused on actions STs might take and how these might impact student performance in ELA. Once in to their inquiries, however, most STs discovered they needed to know more of
what their students actually knew and understood and variations in what students knew and could do. This signaled a need to deepen knowledge of content and students.

In the present study we bring together these previous concerns of diverse learners and content. Given the need for research on preparing teachers for the target content area of writing and for the target student population of ELs, the present study extends our previous work by isolating inquiries focused specifically on writing in high-density EL contexts. We sought to uncover in this target group the writing-related issues that prompted STs’ inquiries and how specific inquiry processes may have supported STs’ learning about EL students and their writing.

Participants and Research Team

From a database of 96 teacher inquiries (collected over seven years, 2004-10), we used a sampling process to isolate inquiries that (a) had primary or secondary focus on writing, and (b) were conducted in classes of 33-100% ELs. Of 96 inquiries, 39 (40.6%) satisfied the writing focus, and just under half satisfied the high-EL population in class. Fifteen of 96 inquiries (15.6%) satisfied both criteria and serve as database for this chapter. The 15 secondary ELA STs who completed those inquiries were five White females, three White males, and seven women of color. Women of color included four Asian Americans of Chinese (two), Korean (one), and Indian (one) ancestries; two Latinas of Mexican origin; and one African American. STs of color (7 of 15) were 47% of participants for this focal study, roughly twice the representation of STs of color in the full 96 (23 STs of color, 24%). Several STs in this focal study were bilingual.

Inquiries were conducted in grades 7-12, with mostly students of color and large numbers living in poverty.

We are three White educators, former K-12 teachers with experience in ELA, TE, and diverse learners. First author of this article was the ELA inquiry instructor, who had published on EL issues in TE. The study fits a TE research tradition of insiders studying programs, courses, and practices within an institution (Grossman, 2005). This approach offered us affordances and challenges (Athanases et al., 2012a). It enabled us to provide rich insider perspectives, collect and archive large amounts of data over time, and produce local and wider knowledge through study of our context. We also ensured data collection, analysis, and review of processes and STs’ work by our second and third authors who were not course insiders at the time of the study “to interrogate findings and challenge the possibilities of self-fulfilling findings” (Clift & Brady, 2005, p. 333).

Data Collection and Analysis

An account of data collection and analysis for the larger study of all 96 inquiries provides context for the present study. We collected 96 inquiries as PowerPoint presentations (with detailed Notes), each ranging 18-35 slides. Other data were data analysis memos completed during inquiry; questionnaires about inquiry processes and products; taped discussions from the inquiry class and individual and group conferences; and annual final-day reflections in taped crosstalk. Other data included field notes of the inquiry class, reflective memos, and taped class events.
In a large database, we entered information on inquiry classroom and site demographics and research questions, as well as coded data on inquiry topics and themes, teaching strategies and assessment modes used in inquiry, and data collected and analyzed. Questionnaire and discourse data were transcribed. Aligned with our framework, we sought evidence of PCK exploration in the full database and coded and analyzed discussion and questionnaire data. We reviewed coded data for fit to categories. We examined inquiry products (PowerPoints, memos, other writings) for evidence of exploring knowledge in PCK subdomains. The constant comparative method (Merriam, 1998) guided analysis in an iterative process of searching for patterns and contrasts.

After analyzing 96 inquiries from our larger database, we uncovered five inquiry processes that provided opportunities for STs to explore and develop their knowledge of content and students (Athanases et al., 2012b). As noted, for the present study we then engaged in a sampling process that isolated 15 inquiries focused on writing with adolescents in classes of 33-100% ELs. We used the five inquiry processes we identified from the larger study as a priori categories, as we examined product and process data from the 15 target inquiries. Analyses now focused on our target area of knowledge of content (writing) and students (ELs). We also considered new, emergent themes and categories. Our focus was not on evaluating STs’ uses of the five inquiry processes but on conducting analyses to reveal ways, if any, the inquiry processes provided opportunities for STs to learn about their ELs as writers. We selected a critical case of each of the five inquiry processes in order to illuminate the inquiry processes through instantiations of the possible (Shulman, 1983).

**Inquiry Processes Supporting Development of Knowledge of Content (Writing) and ELs**

Inquiries on writing and ELs explored varied topics of relevance both to ELA-specific activity and to other content area work. These topics included EL students’ responses to reading and writing connections, such as graphic organizers to help paraphrase content from informational text for use in writing; critical thinking in writing; and organizational tools, such as word webs, writing frames, and formulaic supports. Other topics included examinations of ELs’ developing understandings of genre conventions, such as character development features; graphic novel components; and autobiographical narrative features, including descriptive detail and dialogue. Other writing topics included ELs’ responses to scaffolding for writing tasks that students needed to complete as part of state- or district-mandated testing regimens. Such activity included scaffolding on-demand writing, which included deconstructing writing prompts to clarify expectations and strategies and skills-based support for timed writings.

Table 1 displays information about five inquiry processes and how they provided opportunities for STs to develop knowledge of content (writing) and students (adolescent ELs). The processes interact but we examine how each provided opportunities for STs to explore and develop their knowledge of ways adolescent ELs experienced and learned from writing activity and instruction. Critical cases illustrate how the processes provided these opportunities.
Table 1

_Inquiry Processes Supporting Development of Knowledge of Content (Writing) and Students (Adolescent ELs)_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inquiry process</th>
<th>Purposes, values</th>
<th>Relevant tools</th>
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<tr>
<td>Close analysis of student work</td>
<td>Tease apart components of student products; identify areas of strength and challenge</td>
<td>Rubrics and other analytic guides</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documenting the achievement that is there</td>
<td>Move beyond a deficit lens; learn to see beyond “errors” and surface problems</td>
<td>Data tracking of focal students, reflective memos</td>
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<tr>
<td>Asking and listening beneath the surface</td>
<td>Learn about students’ learning processes, preferences, needs, challenges, interests, concerns, critiques</td>
<td>Questionnaire, survey, interview, observation field notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pattern-finding</td>
<td>Identify recurring successes and challenges within and across students’ performances</td>
<td>Repeated readings, data displays, visual representations of data and themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Predicting students’ responses to learning tasks</td>
<td>Proactive planning that anticipates high engagement and areas in need of particular forms of scaffolding</td>
<td>Data displays and reflective memos</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Close Analysis of Student Work to Learn about ELs’ Writing Development

The foundational inquiry process in support of learning about ELs’ writing development was _close analysis of student work_. This involved methods for turning piles of papers and other work into data, as work samples are merely _potential_ data, dependent on analytic actions (Athanases, 2011). Table 1 shows purposes and values for this process included teasing apart components of student products and learning to identify strengths and challenges for adolescent EL writers. Key tools for this work included rubrics to score student work (also needing analysis for what they could and could not capture), and emerging themes from repeated review. These data analysis processes were evident throughout inquiries conducted on writing with ELs.

Our critical case is an inquiry conducted by Neil, a White male who taught Transitional Writing, an elective designed to help ELs transition to writing requirements of mainstream ELA classes. Enrolled in the course were 33 students from grades 9-12, with a wide range of skill
levels, whose first languages included Vietnamese, Cambodian, Hmong, Spanish, Hindi, Russian, and Korean. For his inquiry, Neil hoped to reduce students’ writing reluctance and anxiety and sought to understand ways to improve the quality of their writing. He introduced three timed-writing assessments, with a focused lesson after each to target areas in which students struggled. Neil’s close analysis of student work enabled him to isolate these target areas.

For his inquiry, Neil used resources provided by the California State University (CSU). The second and third essays students wrote responded to released CSU English Placement Test (EPT) prompts. The prompts ask students to read a one-paragraph passage, summarize the author’s argument, and discuss the extent to which they agree or disagree with the argument. Tasks required by the prompts set the bar high for Neil’s EL students, challenging them to go far beyond tightly controlled composition activities seen in some EL classrooms (Valdés, 1999). In addition, Neil provided high support, modeling how to break down the task and walking students through the process, concerned that his ELs “may find the excerpt difficult to comprehend.”

Neil also used the CSU EPT rubric to score all three essays students wrote. However, he modified the rubric for his ELs. He focused on the first four descriptors (Response to topic; Understanding and use of passage; Quality and clarity of thought; Organization, development, and support) and “set the last two descriptors of writing performance, which deal with syntax, vocabulary, grammar, usage, and mechanics, apart.” He explained that students “got evaluated on the first four descriptors, and the fifth and sixth descriptors only came into effect if they obscured the meaning.” Neil realized students’ knowledge of and ability to use language mechanics correctly would develop over time. While he knew the importance of these skills, he also understood his students needed opportunities to learn how to respond to a prompt with a well-developed argument. Consequently, he focused his assessment on these areas.

To learn where students struggled as writers, Neil engaged in close analysis of student work. For each data collection event, he looked across scores of all students and in depth at writing of three focal ELs. For example, Neil’s second data collection event involved his first introduction of the EPT-style prompt, which was much more rigorous than his first prompt. To analyze student work, he used a bar graph to display overall trends for rubric descriptors in students’ performance on both this and the previous essay. The display clarified that scores dropped from the first essay to the second, even though he had introduced various scaffolds (modeling prompt analysis and allowing students to first create outlines) to try to support the jump in rigor. After noting this theme and speculating on reasons students struggled, Neil analyzed his three focal students’ writing, comparing their progress from the first to the second essay and in comparison with one another. Finally, Neil created a chart that compared the focal students’ scores across the pair of essays. For one student, Neil noted that “I think he rushed through the assignment…he understood the argument completely. He simply forgot to explain it in his response.” For another, Neil commented that, like the first student, “she failed to explain and address [the] argument. She misunderstood the argument and went off on a tangent that did not respond to the prompt.”

By looking closely at student work, central to the systematic inquiry model, Neil learned about trajectories of his ELs as writers. He was initially surprised that scores dropped as they did from the first to the second prompt. Using rubrics as tools and repeated readings of student prose,
Neil examined nuances of the writing. After analyzing where students had difficulties and using that information to guide instruction (including use of model essays as support), he learned that students often struggle to develop a focused argument, especially when writing about sophisticated ideas. He also realized that, with good scaffolds, his EL students could reach goals he set for them.

**Documenting the Achievement That is There in English Learners’ Writing**

A second inquiry process for learning about ELs’ writing development was documenting achievement that is there. By moving from global claims of what students could not do, to specific claims of what students could do, STs developed a foundation to support learning. As Table 1 notes, purposes for this inquiry process included moving beyond a deficit lens and learning to see beyond “errors” and surface problems in EL students’ writing. This is especially important, as new teachers frequently view writing of ELs as deficient and are unable to locate growth and writing progress. If, for example, a teacher is focusing on development of evidence in argumentation, it is essential to learn to locate growth in that focal area and to tease it apart from, say, problems in subject-verb agreement or usage of present vs. past tense, as Neil noted in the previous example.

Priya, of Indian descent, provides a case of this inquiry process. Priya taught Early Intermediate ELD (9th-12th-graders) in a large city. Priya’s 20 students were 13 native Spanish speakers, five Russian speakers, one Vietnamese speaker, and one Hmong speaker. All were newcomers to the US and all qualified for free lunch. Priya sought to prepare students for a district ELD benchmark exam so they might advance to the Intermediate level of ELD coursework. She scaffolded quick-writes to address specific writing requirements of the assessment. Through inquiry, Priya explored ways these scaffolds might enable students to develop as writers and prepare for their exam. Priya knew the exam featured writing an autobiographical incident. There was no prompt, but to pass, writing needed to focus on one topic and include dialogue. With this information, Priya structured her inquiry so students composed autobiographical quick-writes for specific prompts, once or twice weekly for four weeks leading up to the exam. She hoped to learn if these scaffolds would serve as useful prewriting activities and prepare students for the exam.

To study her ELs’ writing development, Priya analyzed work by documenting achievement present in each dataset, then building upon her findings when planning subsequent instruction. For a first dataset, Priya used this prompt: “Write about a time when you helped someone, when someone helped you, or about a time when you were in a dangerous situation.” In inquiry data and memos, Priya included excerpts from five responses and generated themes: (a) All students are writing about a single autobiographical incident; (b) Students are including more detail in their autobiographical writings, though most did not include dialogue for this particular prompt (she states that two did); (c) Students are writing about a wide variety of topics, and some continue to share personal information about their lives. Each theme highlights writing knowledge, process, and skills students are developing, rather than emphasizing how students are struggling or failing.
Priya then built on these successes by designing and implementing a dialogue activity (spoken and written) so students could practice incorporating dialogue into their writing. She analyzed this dataset, with a two-point rubric per criterion (and corresponding graph of results) to check these criteria: inclusion of dialogue for a minimum of six lines, focus on a single topic for all six lines, logical response to previous line dialogue, closure of dialogue, and mastery of mechanics in writing dialogue. Priya found her students remained focused on a single topic for the required six lines, and most demonstrated appropriate uptake and closure. When 10 of 14 students who completed the task scored a one out of two for mechanics on the rubric, she noted, “Most punctuated fairly well considering this was the first time practicing dialogue.” She then added, “They are clearly capable of creating interesting dialogues which lets me know that there is a likelihood that they will try to incorporate authentic and interesting dialogue on their final ELD benchmark exam.” Priya continued to document her students’ achievement in a positive manner as she looked ahead to their summative Benchmark assessments.

Often STs make global claims about what students cannot do, rather than focusing on specific instances of success. When STs focus on achievement, however, they are able to develop a foundation to support student learning and their own deepened understanding of pedagogy relevant for their content and learners (Athanases et al., 2012b). Priya shared, “The study cemented for me the need to scaffold even the seemingly simplest of writing activities, such as quick writes....” Through an inquiry focused on instances of achievement, Priya observed growth in writing and developed her own understanding of the need for scaffolds in all EL writing.

**Asking and Listening Beneath the Surface to Learn about EL Writing Development**

A third inquiry process that promoted knowledge of writing and ELs (Table 1) was *asking and listening beneath the surface* of activity. Relevant data moved an ST from a focus on what students were learning of content to how they were learning and responding to it. As Table 1 notes, tools such as questionnaires and surveys, field notes, ELs’ self-reports of learning successes and challenges, and focal EL interviews supported this process. Those who collected and analyzed several of these forms of data reported uncovering ways students understood writing, areas of writing some students found mystifying, and reasons for students’ disengagement from elements of a specific lesson or writing assignment. This inquiry process enabled STs to learn about EL students’ learning processes, preferences, needs, challenges, interests, concerns, and critiques.

Kerry, a Chinese American woman, provides a critical case of this inquiry process, enabling us to see a range of relevant actions and what they yield. Kerry student taught an early advanced to advanced EL class of 18 in an ethnically diverse high school. Her students included eight Spanish speakers, four Hmong, two Lao, one Vietnamese, one Chinese, and one Arabic speaker from Eritrea. In the semester prior to Kerry’s teaching placement, one-third of the class received a failing grade. Kerry wanted to help students succeed. While they seemed engaged with learning experiences in class, students did not display their learning in written responses:

I would read over their responses to documentaries or song lyrics and I would be surprised at how little they wrote. It seemed they wanted to write more, but they could
only muster “I like” or “children running.” Even after I asked them to elaborate on their responses it was evident that they lacked the tools to do it.

Kerry used inquiry to ask how visual cues, through graphic novels, might engage students with text and then encourage them to write more sophisticated sentences. She scaffolded sentence complexity by teaching use of appositives, subordinating conjunctions, and prepositional phrases.

Kerry used asking and listening beneath the surface to inform decision-making for inquiry design. Observation, a form of asking and listening data collection (Table 1), was key:

In my personal observation notes, I wrote accounts of students circulating Japanese graphic novels. They would thumb through the books and talk enthusiastically about them. Of course, this was during class time so I had to confiscate them. Still, I had the chance to peruse them, and realized the value of intriguing visuals and captions.

By listening beneath the surface, Kerry uncovered a key motivator and tool for helping her students to develop writing skills in a contextualized manner.

After deciding to use graphic novels to help students develop writing skills, Kerry administered a baseline writing assessment and selected the novel Pedro and Me (Winick, 2000), a story of the straight author’s friendship with Pedro Zamora, a gay, Latino, HIV positive, AIDS educator and activist. The text featured cultural bridges and real-life experiences and had high-interest potential for culturally diverse adolescents. Kerry planned lessons on use of appositives, prepositional phrases, and subordinating conjunctions, her targeted skills, and had students include these as they wrote and illustrated blank comic strips about Pedro and Me after each lesson.

Kerry used asking and listening data collection in various ways. After using initial observations as inquiry catalyst, she generated and administered a survey so she could learn about students’ attitudes about writing. She asked: (a) How confident do you feel about your writing? (b) How do you feel about your writing skills? (c) What do you think will help you improve your writing? She tabulated responses, represented them graphically, and used them in next-steps planning. For example, student responses about activities that might promote their writing improvement included talking in groups, reading others’ papers, grammar exercises, writing exercises, and one-to-one time. Kerry incorporated all of these features in her subsequent lessons.

Once Kerry surveyed her class, she targeted four focal students and used another form of asking and listening data: she conducted interviews with the four to probe more deeply about their survey responses, then followed their progress throughout the study. During interviews, Kerry learned that her focal students struggled with both content and mechanics of writing. She said:

Most of the interviewees incessantly alluded to this aspect: punctuation, right word, word choice, getting the words. However, if we take a deeper look at this, it’s not merely the
mechanical part of the sentence which they reference, it’s [taking] an understanding they have about what they want to write in their own minds and getting it to translate on paper.

As Kerry continued to report on data collection events, she displayed detailed samples from focal students and provided broad analyses from the full dataset. Upon completion of her inquiry, Kerry noted that students increased use of both appositives and subordinating conjunctions but did not increase in use of prepositional phrases. She stated, “I followed four students, while monitoring the entire class. I paid attention to any changes in their writing. The outcome of the data indicated that changes in their writing reflected the patterns in the class as a whole.”

Ultimately, asking and listening with varied forms of data collection and analysis helped Kerry understand how students were excelling and where they struggled, and guided her to ways she might structure her teaching to assist. Data also enabled Kerry to look holistically at learning:

The overarching goal was to improve student writing. It just so happened that I chose specific grammatical components to aid my process. However, I also knew that I wanted to monitor whether students were beginning sentences differently and varying length and style. The data I collected showed an affirmative in these areas.

As Kerry asked and listened beneath the surface of activity, she learned ways to engage her ELs in greater writing productivity and learned many strategies for guiding their writing development.

**Pattern-Finding to Learn about EL Students’ Development as Writers**

As Table 1 shows, a key inquiry process for helping STs learn about how their EL students learn to write is pattern-finding, a process not altogether natural to teachers and that must be learned (Korthagen, 2010). The process challenged STs and required ongoing support but was evident throughout inquiries. We found that field memos especially scaffolded this process by calling for analysis of patterns in data. Also, graphical representations such as bar charts and spreadsheets aided pattern-finding. Other pattern-finding scaffolds included data analysis workshops, especially important for teaching the content and process of writing, which is language-focused, not amenable to easy scoring, requiring practice in qualitative data analysis.

To illustrate the inquiry process of pattern-finding, we use the case of Tanya, a White woman who taught an intermediate-level ELD class to 20 6th-8th-graders. The majority of Tanya’s students were Latino/a, though she also had Hmong, Vietnamese, Pacific Islander, and Russian students in class. In her inquiry, Tanya asked: What is the best way to implement a writing workshop with ELs who don’t like to write? She also questioned whether a focus on character development and freedom to choose a topic would help students improve their writing. In her inquiry, Tanya guided students towards writing character analysis paragraphs by scaffolding the writing process. She began by having students list character traits, select one for focus, complete a pyramid graphic organizer on the focal trait, and then use the graphic organizer to write a paragraph. She also asked students to complete a survey reflecting on what they learned at the end of the process. At each step, Tanya collected and analyzed student work as data.
To help her better see and understand patterns of students’ development, Tanya created data tables to display students’ performance in key areas. For her second dataset, Tanya analyzed paragraph outlines written from students’ graphic organizers. She scored students low, medium, or high in seven different areas, including items such as quality of character traits included, role of character in the story, and inclusion of sensory details. Tanya then created a color-coded table that displayed how each student scored in each area. Student names ran down the left side of the table, with areas on which they were scored across the top. Creating this display helped Tanya detect trends in students’ learning as a whole. As she reflected in one of her analytic memos, “The last column caught my attention due to its high average of low scores where sensory detail is concerned.” Displaying her results in this way allowed Tanya to pick up on information about students’ development she might otherwise have missed. She continued to reflect on how she might use this new information if she had additional time: “If I had…these same kids next year, I would choose to focus more on building those skills in these students.” Through this process, Tanya clearly saw the strengths and weaknesses of her students as writers and realized what she as the teacher could do to help her students develop as writers.

Tanya used similar displays to analyze results of each data collection activity. For her final collection event, Tanya used a reflective survey to ask what students learned about developing characters, what tools they learned that they would use in the future, and how they developed as writers. Rather than score and color-code responses, she created a table to list responses side-by-side, allowing her to easily make comparisons across the class: “Having student comments all in (one) place allows me to analyze the remarks for themes.” Trends she noticed included students’ appreciation of the pyramid graphic organizer she had introduced and students’ overall belief that their writing had improved. The careful work Tanya did looking for patterns in her data taught Tanya that her students knew narrative elements they needed to include but that they needed more support in how to incorporate those elements. Tanya also learned the importance of carefully scaffolding her instruction to guide her ELD students through the writing process.

Predicting Student Performance to Guide Instruction

The final inquiry process that fostered knowledge of writing and adolescent ELs was predicting student responses to content. We found STs had a relatively small body of teaching experiences to draw upon for predictions, and potential content problems often did not stand out as significant. However, STs often used what they learned from close analyses of product and process data and from pattern-finding, to then predict and plan for student successes, problems, and resistance. As Table 1 notes, this inquiry process was key in promoting planning that anticipated high engagement writing activity and also elements of writing activity and process in need of particular scaffolding. Various tools supported this process, including field memo writing that prompted reflection on what patterns might suggest for predicting future responses. Predicting writing-related learning patterns and challenges helps focus new teachers so they are not overwhelmed by or unable to cope with a range of student responses (Hammerness et al., 2005).
Frederick’s inquiry illustrates the inquiry process of predicting. Frederick taught a class of 22 Early Intermediate ELD students who spoke seven different primary languages. Frederick did not want students to be confined to controlled structures he knew were commonly used to guide ELs’ writing. He noticed his students struggled to structure their writing, but he wanted to make sure they also had opportunities to be creative. Frederick asked how teaching structured writing techniques would affect students’ performance on formal written compositions. Initially, Frederick had difficulty predicting where students would have difficulty with writing and where they would need more support. Through conducting his inquiry, Frederick learned to predict that students typically struggle to use evidence to support their ideas and to then explain that evidence.

Frederick introduced his students to a series of scaffolds, each of which led to a subsequent writing assignment. As the complexity of the writing assignment increased, so did the complexity of the scaffold to support students’ development. After analyzing each dataset, he used what he learned about his students to predict what scaffolds they would need next and to then plan the next steps of his instruction. For inquiry to be responsive to the context and content, it must be rooted in the students of an ST’s classroom. This was clearly the case in Frederick’s inquiry.

Frederick used knowledge of his students to predict what type of writing contexts they needed next to be successful. This began with topic selection. Frederick noticed his class of ELs enjoyed talking about their lives and immigration experiences, so for each writing assignment, he selected topics that tapped personal experiences. The first scaffold Frederick used asked students to list qualities of their favorite place in one column and descriptions of the qualities in a second. He then asked them to construct a paragraph from information they recorded. Frederick analyzed paragraphs his students wrote using qualities and descriptions they had generated on their charts. From this, he learned that, “the students understood how the information should be transferred between the two pieces of work.” However, he also learned that his students were having “difficulty understanding the process of using an example and then explaining that example.”

Frederick used his findings to speculate that students might not understand how to expand upon examples they had listed. He then predicted what sort of scaffold would help students learn to elaborate on evidence. He designed a three-column graphic organizer, with space to list a main idea, evidence to support main idea, and explanation of that evidence. After analyzing students’ work on the graphic organizer, Frederick learned that, in fact, “many of the students still seemed to be grappling with developing an extended explanation based off a main idea,” which confirmed his prediction that this was a problem area for students. His analysis also indicated that “students may be beginning to grasp the basic concept of developing an expanded explanation based on evidence.” This finding confirms the prediction Frederick made of what kind of scaffold would enable his students to begin to include the explanation or analysis component to support their ideas in writing. He continued to speculate about other ways he could help students develop in this area.

Through the process of analyzing students’ past performance, predicting what types of instruction would best guide students in their development as writers, implementing that instruction, and then analyzing the results, Frederick developed new knowledge not just about
instruction but also about the development of students as writers. It is not unusual for students, EL or English-only, to struggle with how to provide explanation of their evidence. Through the process of his inquiry, Frederick learned this and how to scaffold this process for students.

Discussion

Our study found that a set of teacher inquiry processes helped focus preservice teachers on learning about their ELs and their writing. Discoveries included what these students liked and disliked about language, text, and writing; what they understood and could do with writing without scaffolding; and where they struggled with elements of writing and needed additional support. Teaching writing to adolescents is a difficult process, particularly as genres and tasks increase in challenge through the grades. Teaching writing to adolescent ELs, in both ELA and ELD classes, adds additional challenges, as teachers need to understand which elements of writing to focus on for whom, when, and how. In whatever context, learning to identify achievement in writing of students who are developing English proficiency is key; otherwise, teachers may see only what is lacking in the work, missing the thinking represented in imperfect usage, and making assumptions about learner potential based on such assessments.

Because the inquiry processes we reported involved looking closely at individual learners, STs often moved beyond a deficit perspective to document achievement that was there and learned of students’ writing preferences, anxieties, and needs, and charted patterns to understand ELs’ writing development. In addition, STs tracked varied students’ strengths and needs, rather than assuming uniformity among ELs. These inquiry processes hold promise of guiding STs early in their careers to focus closely on individual ELs and their learning. Although not all STs used each of these processes for each data analysis moment, and not all use was equally developed, our case examples instantiate the possible--demonstrating that, even as preservice teachers face the many demands of learning to teach and manage classes of adolescents, they also can take up these inquiry processes and deepen their knowledge of their English learners’ writing development.

Often in TE, STs have opportunities to learn about working with EL students in general ways through coursework focused on addressing needs of ELs. However, subject area content is often stripped away in these courses. Similarly, methods courses often focus on content without addressing varied needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students. Consequently, STs have little opportunity to develop the knowledge of content and students they need to meet the needs of ELs in their particular content area. Because inquiry as framed in this program asked STs to engage in the processes outlined here, in a content-based cohort structure, it provided a space for deep learning of how ELs develop in a content area--in our case, as writers. Our critical cases helped shine the light on ways these inquiry processes can guide STs to learn about their ELs’ developing understandings, processes that likely would serve STs in other content areas, as well.

Knowledge of content and students, as we have cast it, nonetheless is insufficient to meet the writing needs of ELs. A second subdomain of PCK is knowledge of content and teaching (Ball et al., 2008). Through practice, a teacher learns to tap general pedagogical knowledge to teach specific content. In the case of writing, for example, as STs reflect on their practices, they
may ask: What do I need to know of a writing genre to teach it well? What happens when I do X or Y in class? How do such actions promote, constrain, or impede students’ writing development? How do such practices alert me to writing process elements I need to understand more fully? In this way, beyond learning how to unpack focal content, beyond learning patterns of how different students develop knowledge of that focal content, teachers must learn a great deal about which pedagogical tools, strategies, and scaffolds to use—and when and how—in order to guide a specific student’s development of content. This requires conscious effort from teachers, as well as a disposition to design instruction to meet learners’ strengths, preferences, and needs. The ways teachers choose to use their knowledge of their culturally and linguistically diverse learners when planning instruction depends largely on how they position themselves as teachers of these populations; it is possible to have knowledge of content and students but then choose not to use it when making instructional decisions (Yoon, 2008).

Still, our study suggests that knowledge of content and students can be an entry point. STs in our study learned about their learners and pedagogical efforts followed. Based on things they uncovered, patterns they discerned, STs found specific ways to engage their ELs in writing activity and specific ways to scaffold writing to help ELs move ahead in their writing. In addition, these discoveries through inquiry resisted formulaic approaches and one-size-fits-all instruction, particularly valuable in a time of constrained curricula and increased demands due to the increased rigor articulated by the Common Core Standards. To prepare teachers who can meet the needs of all students, development of PCK may need to be central to TE curricula (e.g., Grossman, Schoenfeld, & Lee, 2005). Developing PCK is an ongoing process, and our study provides evidence that teacher inquiry in the model we described provided opportunities to engage in a set of inquiry processes that can support exploration and development of at least one subdomain of PCK—knowledge of content and students.

Teachers need to learn not only how to teach but also how to learn from teaching (Banks et al., 2005). With a focus on teaching writing to adolescent ELs, our study suggests that systematic inquiry into students and their learning—in our case, ELs engaged in writing—may be a valuable learner-centered focus of inquiry during TE. Such work can help disrupt a tendency for new teachers to focus on self, then curriculum, and then students (Fuller, 1969; Kagan, 1992). The STs whose work and processes we described were learning about pedagogy, but the way in to that learning was through deep engagement with learning about their ELs’ writing processes, developing strengths, likes and dislikes. The study contributes to needed research on ways in which TE can support the development of teachers’ capacity to meet the needs of ELs.
References


Learning about ELs through Inquiry


