

# Case Study: ELL Tutoring Partnership

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This semester during Adolescent Development, my placement occurs at South Burlington High School, tutoring a student who is an English Language Learner. The initial letter that our student wrote us indicated that he needed help with mathematics. On our first visit, W was surprised to have two tutors to help him rather than one. Though I was initially very nervous about the language barrier and not being able to communicate effectively with our ELL student, it was really interesting to observe his English skills during this first session. We jumped right into schoolwork, as he was very focused on it when we first got there and wanted to keep the momentum going. About halfway through our session, we stopped and talked amongst ourselves to get to know each other. W shared that he grew up in a small village in Tibet that had no sense of freedom due to the political issues between Tibet and China. He went to school in India before coming here, then moved to the U.S. almost a year ago. He first went to New York City with his mom, but was overwhelmed by the busy city life, so he then moved to Vermont where he lives with his aunt and uncle now.

This placement has taught me how to co-teach with a partner and how to assist an ELL student. My partner for this placement was Dan, an education and history major who is also great at writing, so between the two of us we are able to cover all subjects W needed help with. I thought it would take a little time to figure out how to best work with a partner, however Dan and I mastered this rather quickly. We spent the first few visits paying particular attention to W's

body language and facial expressions, to try to figure out what he does and does not understand with his schoolwork and with the English language. We very quickly found that he does a great job of following visuals and real-world examples to help him understand a given concept, as suggested in Gerber's theory of linguistic development. In fact, on this first visit, Dan and I were helping him learn how planets exist around one another through gravitational force, and on this very first day Dan and I were standing up spinning around circles to help show W the movement of planets and moons in relation to each other through gravity. This seemed much more effective than our previous explanation to him, simply because English is hard for him to understand sometimes. We found another great method with W is asking him to explain something back to us once he thinks he understands a concept. This has helped us to see how accurately he is interpreting our English and to see how effectively he is grasping the course content.

As we dove into the semester of tutoring W, we began to learn more about who he is and where he is from. We immediately fell in love with his sense of humor, optimism, and dedication to schoolwork. Some of my favorite conversations with W are when we had conversations not related to his homework, where we got to know more about each other. When exchanging brochures, W was especially excited to learn that I have cows and that Dan plays the drums. These two connections are ones we brought up throughout the semester, as well as finding other commonalities. One day we explained to him some popular American holidays, and he taught us about holidays he celebrates in W's, too. He also told us about his favorite music, the things he does outside of school, the animals that are common in W's, and much more. It was truly special to be able to build a personal relationship with W throughout the semester, and it was especially important during the part of the semester where he was having a very tough time.

After the first visit I made it a primary goal to work with W on the language and notation associated with mathematics. Many people see mathematics as a “universal language” and I was excited to see how this may or may not be true. I have found that in some ways it is, however notation varies greatly based on where you are in the world. Within the first few visits I made a list in W’s binder of all the ways we can both say and write each computation. This list helped him to organize his thoughts so he knew which computation each problem was asking him to do. He is great at many math skills, however he cannot always figure out how to express his answer due to the language barrier and lack of prior clarification of mathematics notation.

Another observation I made about his knowledge of mathematics is that he was able to follow the examples his teacher does in class. He did this in such a way where he would recognize the processes used to complete a problem and use then apply the process to complete homework problems, but sometimes he encountered some confusion. Though he was finding a way to get by with this method, he did not understand much about the reasons behind why these rules and processes of these concepts exist. This is something I was very excited to provide instruction for, because I have witnessed math teachers telling their students to write something down and memorize it, without providing any information on the reason why the concept or formula holds or how it is applicable. This is one of my pet peeves because one of my favorite parts about teaching is filling in the “why” a concept holds true, so you are able to help students connect the pieces of the puzzle in their mind. From what I’ve observed, this is when the infamous “lightbulb moment” happens most, because when students are provided with the context of a concept and the reasons it holds, they are able to think deeper about it so they can apply the concept more accurately, rather than just attempt to memorize a fact or formula. This is

very prominent in our sessions with W, as he responded very well to us focusing on his understanding of concepts given that he was already great at memorizing a process.

One day toward the end of our tutoring session, W opened his Facebook to find a video of his friend in critical condition in the hospital. This was his very best friend from back home, who was admitted to a hospital from self-immolation protesting in W's home country. As W watched this video, I could see through the emotion in his face that he was not okay. He showed us this video and explained to us that people set themselves on fire in protest to draw attention to the huge political issues of the lack of freedom in Tibet, which is commonly overlooked. He told us he was feeling very depressed and isolated in America and that he doesn't have any friends here. Dan and I were previously concerned about this feeling of isolation because when he is not after school in the library doing homework, he is always at his job, and because we never witness him interacting with other students. His feeling of alienation was making it much harder for him to deal with such a tragedy, as he was not feeling supported by having peers to talk to. Dan and I were very concerned with his well being, as he is linguistically and culturally isolated in this country, so we knew that we had to do something to show W how much we care for him and support him. Dan and I expressed to him that we are so proud of him for all the hard work he has put into learning English and for his dedication to schoolwork here. On a personal level, we told him that we will be there for him if there is anything he needs, and encouraged him to talk to the guidance department at his school. It is clear that at this time W needed emotional support more than anything else, so my fellow tutor and I regularly checked in with his teacher to make sure he is able to function and getting the support he needs. We thought that this might be a good time to

do a fun activity with him to show him that we truly care for him and to help cheer him up while he is having such a hard time dealing with this devastating news.

It has become evident to us that our role is not only to provide academic support, but must also include emotional support for our student. This is something our professor showed our class first hand. She recognized that we were all very overwhelmed and needed a break, so she brought our class outside where we ate cookies, blew bubbles, made balloon hats, and tried to learn how to double-dutch. This hour was dedicated to maintaining a healthy mind by taking a break to relax and have some fun. Professor Doyle has been emphasizing to our class all semester that as teachers we must care for our students and provide them with unconditional support whenever they need us. The mental health of our students should be the most important thing to us as teachers, as we have the ability to make such a huge impact on youth of our society. As we know from Erikson's theory on emotional development, emotions are unsteady in adolescence, as several aspect of students' lives are changing during this time, and above all else, students need support and someone who they can go to for help. During this class period it became evident to me that it is crucial to be aware of the mental health of our students. I was on the student end of this during class, and my professor recognized that our class needed a break, so she got us outside having fun and bonding with one another. This was not only a wonderful way to help us reset ourselves at such a busy time of the year, but also a great way to create a stronger community of students within our class.

After class, Dan and I realized that this was something we needed to pass along this concept of emotional support to W, especially after he dealt with such a hardship from home. Dan brought his HAPI drum to tutoring and we brought him outside to have fun. As W had

previously indicated to us that he's fascinated that Dan plays the drums, we knew that this would be the perfect thing to do to cheer him up and to foster his interest in taking on a new hobby. During this time where we sat in the grass playing drums and blowing bubbles, it was not only a relaxing time for our student who had such a tough time recently, but it was also a learning opportunity, as Dan taught W how to play the HAPI drum. It was wonderful to spend some time with our student in a context free from traditional academics and get to see him enjoying the experience. We strongly emphasized to him that we recognize he has been through such hardship recently, and that we are so proud of how well he is doing in school. We felt that it was so important for W to understand that we are always there for him and that we care for him. Overall, we had such a wonderful time spent relaxing and learning something new with W. It truly showed us the true importance of caring for the mental health of our students.

This event in W's life, though tragic, helped Dan and me to understand more about his cultural background. The Tibetan Independence Movement is the most prominent issue in Tibet, where they are seeking political freedom from China. Tibetans do not receive the freedom that Americans do, specifically, the basic freedom of human rights. This is why W went to school in India, rather than Tibet. In addition, protesting in Tibet happens often, and our main concern when W's friend self-immolated was that our student would partake in a copycat protest.

Some other ways I have found that this partnership connects to course content in class is through our study of WIDA standards and scaffolding instruction. My initial assessment of W's WIDA Language Level was tricky, given that we had just started this placement. At this time I concluded that he was at level 2, as I had witnessed him describe places and events, ask and write wh- questions regularly, and connect oral descriptions to real-life experiences or content

related examples. He had read aloud to Dan and me, which is something he struggled with much more than when speaking or writing. I wondered about the ways to help him expand his reading abilities, as he seemed to understand the definitions of most words individually, but struggled with how the language fit together to mean something more. I found this difficult to assist him in reading and understanding metaphors and how individual words fit into context together, however Dan was skillful in this area, so he took the lead as I observed. There were only a few times where W wanted to do reading homework with us, as he expressed that math homework was where he struggled most and it was his priority for tutoring.

During our mid-semester check-in with him, we asked how he felt he was doing in his classes and if he felt he was improving or not since we started meeting. This was a great way to assess how Dan and I were doing as tutors, and find areas in which we could improve, in order to help W the best we can. He told us that prior to our tutoring he was doing well in every class except math, and that he has ELL support in every class except his math class. This is why he indicated in his initial letter to us that he wanted help specifically in math. He said that we are helping him to understand the math language, but it's still very hard for him. He did not seem worried at all about any subjects besides math, even though we do work on other subjects together during tutoring sometimes. I'm relieved to know that he does have extra support available to him with his reading class, because I was rather unsure of how I could assist him in his reading skills to help increase his WIDA Language Level.

As previously mentioned, Dan and I found that in working with W is most effective when we give him a visual representation or real world example of the content we are assisting him with. This links into what we have learned in class about scaffolding instruction for different

levels of learners in our classroom, ELL students especially. I applied this concept to tutoring and found success with it, as this was a great way to help W grasp a better understanding of the material.

One way that my student has absolutely fascinated me was with his passion for learning languages. He is fluent in Tibetan, Mandarin, and Hindi, and working hard toward proficiency in English. Recently, he has taken it upon himself to learn Japanese and French just for fun. It amazes me how he is able to pick up vocabulary so quickly and learn the alphabets and pronunciation of words with such grace. He is doing such a remarkable job with becoming fluent in English, especially having such a range of other languages in his mind as well. I love how he has such passion and curiosity to continue to learn new languages and I am amazed at his ability to retain all these different languages. His hard work and diligence inspires me, as he is somebody who genuinely cares about his education in a way I haven't seen in many students.

This placement has helped me to realize how students can tend to take education for granted, and don't value it in such a way that W does. He finds true enjoyment in the moment when a concept makes sense to him and when he is able to explain it to us accurately. One of my favorite things about this placement is sitting back and observing when Dan is teaching W something, because I get to focus on his reactions rather than the content. When W makes the connection between one thing and another, W's face completely lights up with joy and excitement, simply because he is happy to have understood a concept properly. The amount of excitement he radiates in these moments is so wonderful and makes me realize that all this student wants to do was understand and that there was no greater joy than this. Watching the power of education work through W is quite incredible and it helps to brighten my day everytime I see it,



and it makes me realize that learning is such a beautiful thing in this world that should be celebrated and appreciated more. W truly cares so much about learning, which is one thing I truly love about this ELL placement.