Feedback Essentials for **English Learners** During Academic Interactions

Kate Kinsella *offers practical guidance on research-informed and classroom-tested feedback methods for teachers facilitating lesson discussions including English learners*

For English learners to make vital second-language strides, they must participate daily in a range of supported academic interactions with their peers and teachers. Merely providing opportunities to "turn and talk" or "think, pair, share" will not ensure development of English language understandings and skills. When assigned interactive tasks without relevant language support and clearly established objectives, English learners tend to focus more on "friendly discourse" than on producing conceptually competent responses with linguistic accuracy (Foster and Ohta, 2005). Unless English learners spend some dedicated class time consciously applying precise vocabulary and appropriate grammatical forms, they are likely to stall in a linguistic limbo.

Like all young scholars, English learners benefit from planned, intentional, and interactive language instruction aligned with anchor standards and lesson objectives (Norris and Ortega, 2006). However, flexing their academic language muscles during lesson interactions without timely and suitable feedback, English learners risk "practicing their mistakes into permanence" (Hollingsworth and Silva, 2013).

Common sense and research make it abundantly clear that second-language learners require informed feedback to enhance their performance and achievement. After decades of research analysis, Hattie (2008) highlights the unparalleled role of high-quality feedback in academic achievement. But offering appropriate feedback to a neophyte English speaker who is bravely hazarding a discussion contribution requires careful timing, sensitivity, and mindful verbal delivery. Recent lesson observations and coaching sessions have made me acutely aware of the struggles fellow K–12 educators experience when attempting to listen attentively and provide feedback as they field contributions from a range of students including English learners.

A Common ELD Class Discussion Scenario

A memorable lesson observation illustrates common misconceptions and challenges that characterize provision of English learner feedback. In this eighth-grade English language development (ELD) lesson for long-term English learners, the teacher had planned a highly interactive prereading discussion to build background knowledge and language skills. The assigned short story by Toni Cade Bambara, "Raymond's Run," focuses on the ways youths obtain respect from peers such as classmates and siblings by actually demonstrating respect.

The "give one • get one" schema-building lesson discussion ensued as follows. Students were first instructed to write a quick list of ways they try to gain respect from peers, after having received verbal—but not visually displayed—examples such as excelling at a sport or taking the blame for a friend. Once students had brainstormed a few examples, they were directed to stand up, approach a classmate, exchange names and examples, and record their partners' responses. Some students merely copied an example without interacting, while others shared brief phrases like "good grades." Having

interacted with two or more classmates, students returned to their desks for the next lesson phase.

At this juncture, the ELD teacher announced that they would each report an example they had obtained from a partner, using a citation verb. He directed their attention to a poster that listed reporting verbs, with encouragement to utilize more interesting and sophisticated verbs instead of *said* and *told*. The poster included an array of selections: *said, told me, shared with me, pointed out, emphasized, indicated.* The teacher modeled verbally—but again, not in writing—using an example obtained during an exchange with a student: "Name emphasized that she gains respect by having her friend's back, and what she means by that is that she stands up for her friend." He then invited the focal student to share an example she had obtained from a classmate, and the selected classmate proceeded to report an example gleaned from another classmate. This selection and reporting process continued until about ten examples had been compiled.

Initial Teacher and Student Contributions: Give One • Get One Reporting

Student 1: <u>Name</u> *said, told me that to give good influence to her friends.*
Teacher: *Excellent. By giving good influence.*
Student 2: <u>Name</u> *said he'll take blame.*
Teacher: *Yes, he earns respect by taking blame for the friend.*
Student 3: <u>Name</u> *told me that she bes nice.*
Teacher: *She what?*
Student 3: *She's nice.*
Teacher: *OK, by being nice. I appreciate how you are all using these terms.*

This structured give one • get one discussion successfully engaged every student in producing and listening to relevant lesson content. However, the cohort of long-term intermediate English learners struggled to replicate the teacher's adept verbal responses. Their preparation lacked clearly stated objectives and adequate linguistic guidance for the two distinct speaking and listening tasks: 1) discussing and recording ways to obtain respect using a complete sentence; 2) reporting a classmate's example using a complete sentence starting with a formal past-tense citation verb.

The students would have benefited from a sentence frame and highlighted grammatical targets for this advanced reporting task, complemented by a visibly displayed and explained modeled response such as those included in Table 1. In the absence of a visual scaffold, students relied on their auditory processing to deconstruct the modeled response and reconstruct an appropriate utterance. Despite the teacher's affirmations and attempts to intervene with appropriate phrasing, students continued to report briefly, opting for the conversational citation verbs *said* and *told*. Students also persisted in employing incorrect grammar, oblivious to the teacher's covert corrections. Although they completed the activity with a list of examples they could include in their subsequent writing assignment, they had not developed linguistic tools to compose their paragraphs in academic register.

Explicit linguistic tools like those included in the give one • get one note-taking guide (see Table 1) would have promoted more confident and competent interaction and better positioned the students to transport language learning and conceptual understandings to their subsequent formal writing task. This proactive guidance on cor-

rect grammatical forms and precise word choices would have also set the stage for the teacher to coach accurate language usage during the partner exchanges and whole-class reporting.

It is difficult to provide form-focused and qualitative feedback when students are all over the proverbial map in terms of their error production and no focused language instruction has preceded the lesson interaction. Lightbown and Spada (2008) emphasize that instruction that helps English learners take careful notice of specific linguistic elements in lesson content increases the likelihood they will acquire them. Pointing out the grammatical targets in the response frames and precise word-choice options for exchanging and reporting ideas are exemplars of the focused grammatical and lexical precision that advance English learner contributions.

**Table 1: Give One • Get One
Academic Interaction Lesson Support**

(Response Frames, Precise Word Bank, Model Responses)

⑦ **Prompt:** What do you do to earn respect from your peers?

🖍 **Exchange Ideas**
Frame 1) I earn respect from my peers by _____ (never, always) being _____. **(adjective)**
• I earn respect from my peers by always being trustworthy.
• I earn respect from my peers by never being dishonest.

Frame 2) I earn respect from my peers by _____ **(verb + ing)**
• I earn respect from my peers by excelling at basketball.
• I earn respect from my peers by helping them with difficult math homework.

Precise Word Bank

nice (adj.)	honest, fair, considerate, patient, loyal, trustworthy, reliable
doing (verb + ing)	encouraging, supporting, defending, listening, understanding

🖊 **Report**
<u>Name</u> _____ that **(she/he)** earns respect by _____.
(verb+ed: pointed out, emphasized)   **(verb+ing…)**

Conventional Wisdom on Error Feedback Versus Second-Language Research

I witness the preceding lesson scenario frequently, not occasionally, and I feel considerable anxiety and empathy for the teacher and students alike. It does call into serious question the conventional wisdom provided to aspiring educators of English learners. In K–12 teacher credentialing programs and English learner certification coursework throughout the U.S., candidates are likely to receive limited or questionable guidance on how to provide effective feedback to English learners, particularly with regard to verbal production errors.

The most predictable counsel developing teachers of English learners receive is some version of the following: "Verbal production errors are a natural occurrence in the process of learning

a second language. The optimal way to deal with verbal errors is to unceremoniously restate what a student said using correct pronunciation, word choices, and grammar. By conscientiously 'mirroring' back correct language usage, a second-language teacher lowers student performance anxiety and does not inhibit normal language acquisition."

While this pervasive guidance holds intuitive appeal, the unceremonious, indirect correction practice is not widely supported by second-language acquisition studies on the effects of feedback on form-focused errors like those long-term English learners experienced in their give one • get one lesson interactions (Russell and Spada, 2006). The technical term for an implicit lesson correction is a *recast*. The teacher does not preface the indirect correction by pointing out that the student has actually made an error. Instead, the teacher subtly rearticulates or echoes what the student was trying to say with an utterance that includes needed corrections on one or more errors evident in the student's original utterance.

Offering Implicit Recasts: Pros, Cons, and Findings

There are three decided instructional **advantages** to simply providing a recast:

1. A recast requires no lesson preparation. A recast solely necessitates attentive listening on the teacher's part and the ability to skillfully rephrase the student's utterance in the moment.
2. A recast is less likely to interrupt the natural communication flow between the teacher and student or students.
3. A recast may be viewed as an affirmation for a student in need of a minor morale boost during a school day fraught with both content and language obstacles.

Unfortunately, there are decided **drawbacks** to overreliance on implicit recasts as the primary or sole method for providing feedback when an English learner struggles with making a competent verbal contribution:

1. During oral communication exchanges within a lesson, recasts are far less likely to produce "uptake," that is, an utterance by the student indicating an attempt to do something productive with the teacher's feedback (Russell and Spada, 2006).
2. Second-language learners are unlikely to perceive they are actually being corrected (Lyster and Ranta, 1997).
3. Lower-proficiency learners demonstrate negligible benefits from implicit recasts and stronger improvement from prompts, explicit instructional attempts to encourage the student to repair the flawed utterance (Anmar and Spada, 2006).

My extensive experiences supporting long-term English learners in secondary school and college settings have validated these research findings. Conversations with scores of adolescent English learners in my classes or research projects have shed light on additional misperceptions about our well-intentioned efforts to lower their affective filter and delicately rephrase a less-than-adeptly stated contribution.

1. Students infer that the teacher is actually offering validation by restating, not noticing critical distinctions in what the teacher has produced and their original response. Simply stated, they have the impression the teacher is expressing agreement and affirmation.

2. Students assume that the teacher is merely repeating the student's softly uttered response more audibly for the benefit of interested classmates, part of the teacher's second-language mentor job description.
3. Students perceive that the teacher is seeking clarification by restating, in other words, asking, "Is this what you meant to say?"

A More Effective Corrective Feedback Strategy: Explicit Prompts

Providing English learners with feedback on their verbal production is surely not a matter of <u>whether</u> to do it but the <u>best method</u>. During a dedicated course of study or pull-out context where the primary goal is advancing students' English proficiency, more informed and intentional corrective feedback has a vital function (Saunders and Goldenberg, 2010). English language development teachers need to communicate that their aim is to dramatically accelerate their students' second-language proficiency. With this goal in mind, teachers must diplomatically alert their students to the fact that lesson interactions will be strategically and respectfully interrupted to provide individual learners with important feedback to help them improve their language understandings and skills. In an ELD classroom setting, teachers should additionally communicate their intent to listen attentively to the content and form of their students' contributions and offer feedback that advances both language skills and conceptual understandings.

Evidence points to the merits of strategic use of "prompts" to coach error repair in second-language classrooms. Prompts explicitly focus a student's attention on an error produced in a communicative exchange and encourage or require the language learner to attempt to repair the flawed utterance. Lyster and Ranta (1997) studied students' second-language interactions and found that teachers used a number of feedback strategies to respond to oral errors. While recasting was the <u>most common</u> strategy, it was also the <u>least effective</u>, producing only a 31% effect size, particularly with less-proficient students in need of the most rapid advancement. The researchers identified three alternative methods of providing prompts that produced exceptionally high percentages of student uptake, that is, an attempt to do something concrete with the teacher's feedback. In fact, the student uptake ranged from 88% to 100% of the time, a striking contract to the 31% yield achieved through recasts.

Forms of Explicit Prompts to Encourage Response Refinement

1. **Elicitations**: The teacher directly elicits the correct language form from the student.
2. **Metalinguistic feedback**: The teacher provides information or questions related to the student's utterance, without explicitly providing the correct form.
3. **Clarification requests**: The teacher asks the student to restate and/or elaborate to provide the class with a clearer understanding.

In a designated ELD context, it makes absolute sense to capitalize on a challenge one student is experiencing with a more important language form to engage the unified class in a teachable moment. Rather than putting all the pressure and responsibility on the struggling individual for on-the-spot reflection and repair, I strongly advise enlisting the entire class. Particularly when an ELD

teacher has devoted instructional time and attention to a specific grammatical form, expression, or word choice, every student should be instructed to consider the correct application.

Sample Metalinguistic Prompt Script: Engaging the Unified Class

Using the give one • get one lesson scenario, I will offer an application of a metalinguistic prompt and engagement of the unified class in analysis and correct language production. Having provided students with a sentence frame, explicit grammatical guidance, and model responses such as those included in Table 1, the teacher would be in an ideal situation to offer this timely and actionable feedback.

> **Teacher**: Alex, I heard you say this: "I earn respect from my peers by I have their back." Take a look at our frame and model response. We learned that after the preposition *by*, we need a specific verb form. I'd like all of you to take a moment to consider what verb form we need after *by*. Alex said "I have their back." What is the correct form? Partners, put your fine minds together and decide upon the correct form. Pencils up if you are 100% certain. Celia, can you help us out? That is correct. We need to say "by having their back." Let's all practice that statement together: "I earn respect from my peers by having their back." Now… Alex. Please share your response again using your public-speaking voice. Well stated. This is a relevant example and perfect grammar.

Productive Feedback on the Conceptual Integrity of Student Responses

Teachers of English learners have a responsibility to provide productive feedback on <u>what</u> students are saying, not just <u>how</u> they are saying it. English learners navigate the school day having to adjust to new cultural norms, classroom expectations, and curricular anchors in addition to a frequently confounding second language. As their English language mentors, we owe it to them to provide some affective, cognitive, and linguistic support. One way to lower English learner performance anxiety and encourage them to participate more regularly and willingly in class discussions is to provide thoughtful feedback when they do muster up the courage to venture a response.

My lesson observations across K–12 grade levels and subject areas have brought to my attention the often trite or ineffectual feedback many educators tend to offer English learners during lesson interactions. Granted, receiving superficial or limited feedback is not exceptional to English learners. That said, we often have a pretty low bar for English learner expectations in terms of verbal contributions to lesson discussions. If a less-proficient English learner hazards a sotto voce utterance, rarely is the student coached to sit up and repeat the response using an audible public-speaking voice. Having softly mumbled a word or phrase, the tentative contributor is likely to be rewarded with a "thumbs up" hand signal or "Thank you for sharing. Good job." Given the current emphasis on establishing high expectations,

offering a platitude and failing to even ask an English learner to speak loudly enough for classmates to hear falls quite short of fostering a growth mindset.

Every educator has idiosyncratic bad habits when it comes to providing affirmations while facilitating lesson discussions. Mindful of the fragility of many of my English learner scholarly charges, my historic fallback was "excellent," documented in filmed demonstration lessons. When we are in the moment teaching and attending to so many variables, it can indeed be challenging to focus on our verbal delivery and feedback patterns.

Now, however, I am very mindful of my word choices and make a point of refraining from woefully insufficient comments like "very good," "great," or "OK." Ironically, classrooms from coast to coast have walls adorned with "Dead Word Cemeteries" or tombstones labeled "RIP" that enumerate verboten words in formal writing. The visual below is a representative classroom resource.

A quick internet search will offer a plethora of replicable "Dead Word" posters and templates for enthusiastic educators aiming to enhance their students' formal writing lexicons. Yet these are the very words teachers employ with regularity to comment upon students' verbal contributions during standards-based lesson discussions.

WORDS DISCOURAGED IN STUDENT WRITING
(YET REGULARLY USED IN TEACHER FEEDBACK)

Dead Word Tombstone

good
nice
awesome
interesting
great
super
fun
wonderful
excellent

language)(

"Offering appropriate feedback to a neophyte English speaker who is bravely hazarding a discussion contribution requires careful timing, sensitivity, and mindful verbal delivery."

The entertaining counterpart to vacuous one-word affirmations like "awesome" are the endemic cheers, claps, and nonverbal signals used to acknowledge student contributions. When did a stadium cheer ("Yoohoo!") and a cowboy clap (lassoing an arm in a circular motion) preempt thoughtful, actionable feedback aligned with lesson objectives and formative assessment criteria?

On a recent observation of a primary-grades informational text discussion, I witnessed a teacher affirm each and every contribution with a unique cheer or clap, drawing from what appeared to be an infinite repertoire. One young English learner appeared visibly disgruntled and sulky because his example of something he had learned about horses only earned him a "marshmallow squeeze," amounting to his 20 classmates' fingers raised in synch, slowly and deliberately squeezing a virtual marshmallow. The young orators were preoccupied with the nature of the special rewards they would receive after contributing and far less interested in the text evidence classmates were pointing out.

If a teacher wants to add a bit of levity to a lesson discussion with an entertaining special clap or cheer, he or she should at least wait until the final student has reported and acknowledge all the courageous and competent contributors. During the course of an important lesson discussion, focus on the content and form of their contributions, not simply whether they have contributed. Further, it does offer students mixed messages about the importance of scholarly demeanor and discourse in our K–12 college- and career-readiness initiatives when we trivialize our standards-aligned interactions with infectious cheers and spectator claps.

Ways to Modify Verbal Delivery When Providing Feedback on Contributions

I have two concrete recommendations to assist fellow educators in modifying our verbal delivery when commenting upon English learners' lesson contributions and those of their native-English-speaking classmates. First, take into consideration the kind of contribution they are making, for example, an example, an opinion, a solution, or an interpretation. Substitute precise terms for generic terms like *idea* and *answer* when soliciting student responses. Instead of posing a general question like "Name, what is your **idea**?" ask "Name, what is your **example** of a nonrenewable resource?"

Table 2: Precise Alternatives to "Share Your Idea"
Who would like to ___ (offer, contribute, share) a different ___?

response	point of view	example
interpretation	perspective	explanation
analysis	solution	reaction
reason	conclusion	process

If we put careful thought into identifying the nature of the contribution we are anticipating from students, we can more appropriately offer productive, relevant feedback. If, for example, students are offering perspectives on a character's motives, we shouldn't merely respond "great job" or engage the class in a collective silent high five. Instead, we can opt for more suitable phrasing like the following: "Your perspective is both unique and thoughtful. I can see from your text citation why you might consider her actions a bit selfish." In a designated ELD classroom setting, we can additionally comment upon students' English language use: "Your reasons for viewing graffiti as an art form are very convincing, and I appreciated the precise unit-word choices you used to justify your opinion."

To prevent myself and research partners from relying upon default lesson affirmations like "very nice" when tired, distracted, or pressed for time, I have found it immensely useful to paste a large sticky note on my lesson plan including more thoughtful remarks. Another practical tip is to post a visual in the back of the room containing a precise and respectful array of adjectives to draw from when commenting on lesson contributions.

Interestingly, I have happily noted students availing themselves of the phrasing when building upon or responding to their classmates' responses, particularly when the definitions are included, as illustrated in Table 3.

Moreover, students value having their teachers point out that we are striving to treat them as young scholars with immense potential and laudable aspirations by providing meaningful feedback rather than simple one-word affirmations or riotous classroom cheers. They absolutely comprehend when we point out that no team of university medical researchers at Columbia, Stanford, or Johns Hopkins would consider responding with a firecracker cheer or a "good job" affirmation when a colleague makes a breakthrough in cancer or diabetes treatment.

Table 3: Sample Precise Adjectives—Providing Feedback
Your response was ___ (quite, very, particularly) ___ (adjective).

Adjectives	Meanings
original	new and different
unique	special, not like anything else
thoughtful	showing careful thinking
creative	showing imaginative thinking
insightful	showing deep understanding
well-stated	said very clearly
articulate	using precise, well-chosen vocabulary
detailed	including many facts

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Interactions: Tools and Techniques to Engage Every Learner.

"Given the current emphasis on establishing high expectations, offering a platitude and failing to even ask an English learner to speak loudly enough for classmates to hear falls quite short of fostering a growth mindset."

Concluding Thoughts

English learners must work twice as diligently as their native-English-speaking classmates to engage in rigorous standards-aligned lessons and make noteworthy contributions. By providing English learners with linguistic support for priority lesson discussions and respectful, actionable feedback, we can bolster their confidence and help classmates take note of their many cultural and cognitive assets.

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