The Effects of After-School Tutoring on an Individual ESL Student
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Submitted June 2002

Introduction
It was a chilly morning in February when Yeimis¹, one of my tenth-grade students, approached me after class and announced, “Ms. Donahue, I don’t think I’m going to come back to school next year. Can we talk about it after school?”

After six months of teaching at Bell Multicultural High School, a public high school in Washington, D.C., I was not completely surprised by this announcement. As a tenth grader now, she would be expected to finish high school in two years, which means she would need to graduate with only five years of education in English. As Freeman & Freeman explain,

Research by Collier (1989) has shown that for older learners...chances of school success are poor...students in her study who entered U.S. schools at the high school level with limited English proficiency could not reach the fiftieth percentile on standardized tests in content areas in the time remaining before high school graduation because reaching the norm takes seven to ten years. As a result, many older second language students drop out before completing school.

I had already seen five of my tenth grade students drop out of school over the course of my first year of teaching. And like many of those students, Yeimis was barely passing my English course. She and six of her peers had already been chosen as the subjects of a research project I was conducting through George Mason University’s Language Minority Teacher Induction Project (LMTIP), as I looked at the effect of praise on the school success of students with low motivation and poor grades. By recognizing even small successes these students made in class each day, I hoped to help them to feel better about themselves as students and inspire them to make more progress in school.

Focusing in on My (True) Research Question
When I met with Yeimis that day after school, I realized I was not at all prepared for what she was going to say. While she was in fact thinking of dropping out of school, this was not the problem she had actually wanted to discuss. Instead, she confessed that she had been dealing with a much larger problem since she had arrived in the US from El Salvador to join her parents five years earlier—her dad was physically abusing her mom, brother, and sister. Her mother had tried numerous times to take her children and leave, but each time, her dad found them and brought them back. Her dad had recently thrown her

¹ name changed
baby sister across the room, and attempted to burn her mom with hot oil from a frying pan. I arranged for Yeimis to meet with the school social worker the following day, and we agreed to talk after school once again. That day sparked what became five months of after school tutoring, as Yeimis began to come see me almost every day after school. While we had started out by discussing her problem at home that day, our after-school meetings became a place for Yeimis to receive individual help on her schoolwork, with the freedom to bring up personal problems as well. Although I still believed in the value of my original research question, which had focused on the effect of positive reinforcement in motivating students who were failing my class, I started to see how tutoring could also potentially assist such students. Thus I narrowed down my research question to focus on just one of the original six students, as I looked more closely at the benefits of tutoring on her academic success.

Methods
For this study, I spent approximately forty minutes tutoring Yeimis after school, three to four days a week over the course of five months. During these tutoring sessions, we worked together on homework assignments for her tenth-grade English class. This is a class made up of limited-English proficient (LEP) students, which focuses on developing students’ reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills. A heavy emphasis is given to reading and writing, as students read a class novel (at a high-elementary/low middle-school level) in each nine-week advisory, respond through journals, and practice narrative, persuasive, response to literature, and report writing.

In addition to our tutoring sessions, I tried to make an effort to pay more attention to Yeimis in class, calling on her in large-group discussions and checking in with her during small-group work. I also kept a journal recording what went on during our tutoring sessions. I wrote in the journal approximately three times a week, immediately following our work together or the following morning. I tried to include quotes of comments Yeimis had made when we were together, my interpretation of her comments and behavior, questions I had about anything that had happened, and notes to remind myself of steps I wanted to take to help Yeimis to succeed.

Findings
One of the first things I discovered through our conversations after school was that Yeimis had minimal education in her first language, with three years of interrupted schooling. One day, I discovered that she had only attended school for three years in El Salvador, from the ages of seven to ten years old. She also explained that she had been living with her grandmother at the time, and had decided to stop going to school. When she came to the U.S. three years later to join her mom, dad, and brother, she re-entered school as an eighth grader. Thus she was in all-English classes with only three years of education in Spanish, while some of her classmates had up to nine years of education in English.

Echevarria and Graves explain,
Researchers suggest that the level of first language development significantly influences second language development. Students who have had solid schooling in their native language are more efficient acquiring a new language. Those who achieve full cognitive development in both languages will gain cognitive benefits, whereas when development of the first language is discontinued, there may actually be negative consequences (Echevarria & Graves, 1988 p. 47).

Therefore it is clear that Yeimis’ educational history was clearly a factor hindering her current academic performance.

Her minimal education in her first language coupled with her low literacy in English seemed to lead to a lack of understanding of basic concepts and practices of essential for success in English class. For example, when we were working together on figuring out the meaning of a poem we’d read in class, she needed to look up a few words in the dictionary. However, it took her a long time to find the words, as she seemed to lack a strategy for finding them, showing that she hadn’t had much practice using this tool. Having the time to work one-on-one with Yeimis allowed me to see that I needed to teach her some of the basic practices I had assumed she was already familiar with.

On another occasion, she asked me to help her with her homework but when I asked her what the assignment was, she wasn’t sure. She had copied down the assignment I had written on the board in class, yet I realized that she didn’t understand the directions. Her assignment book read, “Re-write emotions poem with three stanzas, check for spelling mistakes.” I described the situation that day in my journal, “I asked her if she knew what re-write meant, and she didn’t. Then I asked her what stanza meant, and she also didn’t know.” We had been discussing poems in class for a few weeks, and I realized during another session that week that she also didn’t clearly understand what a poem was. It was clear that her limited education in her first language was affecting her ability to understand concepts in English class. In Between worlds, Access to second language acquisition, Freeman and Freeman (1994) describe a young boy named Juan with similar circumstances. They explain, “Despite a positive school context, factors beyond the school will probably spell academic failure for Juan. He speaks little English. He has not received education consistently in his primary language, so he has not developed the content area knowledge required for school success.” (p. 20). If I hadn’t had the opportunity to sit down with Yeimis and go over the assignment as we did that day, I wouldn’t have realized that she wasn’t understanding some of the basic concepts we were covering in class that I had expected everyone to comprehend.

Exacerbating the problems created by her low literacy level and lack of understanding of concepts covered in class were the problems she was dealing with outside of school. She received homework every night in English class, which I expected to take approximately one hour for students to complete. These assignments typically involved reading chapters from the class novel and writing summaries and reactions in a journal, or writing different parts of an essay.
we were working on in class. How could Yeimis concentrate on any of these tasks in a place where she feared for the safety of her family? Although she didn’t talk much about her dad after the first few times we met, she also didn’t say if things at home were getting any better. Her grades showed that she was not completing her homework, as her homework average was only 48% over the first advisory of school. During the second advisory, she did a better job turning in shorter assignments but failed to complete four out of five required journal entries. These entries presented a great challenge for her, as they required her to understand and react to books that were filled with vocabulary she was unfamiliar with. It made more sense to me that she was unable to complete these assignments once I understood both her lack of schooling in her first language and the difficult situation she was facing at home.

As if these problems were not enough, I also discovered through our tutoring sessions that Yeimis was dealing with yet another factor that interfered with her school success, which was her lack of sleep due to an intense work schedule each night. She explained that she did not like to leave her mother alone, and worked with her cleaning buildings each night from 5:00 to 10:00 pm, occasionally working from 5:00 until midnight. She woke up to arrive at school around 8:00, completing her homework during the forty-five minutes before the school day began. We could only sit together to do her homework each day until 4:00, as she had to leave to go home and get ready for work each afternoon. Although it is possible that she would have mentioned her heavy work load during class, I am doubtful that I would have had the chance to really examine all of the factors put together that were making it difficult for Yeimis to succeed in school if we had not met each day for tutoring.

While I had assumed that our tutoring sessions would be supportive for Yeimis, I never imagined how beneficial those sessions would be for me as her teacher. One of the clearest benefits of our time together after school was the opportunity to attain a fuller picture of the factors that were interfering with Yeimis’ success in school. In addition to helping me to better understand Yeimis' background and its effect on her schoolwork, tutoring also helped me to reflect on my own teaching practices. I realized, in looking over my journal, that I had many good intentions with respect to helping Yeimis and other students, yet often I did not follow through with these intentions. For example, I wrote one day, “I want to talk to her (Yeimis’) teachers to see how she’s doing. She just seems like she doesn’t have time to do the homework…” On another occasion I wrote, “I need to go back to the music poem with her (Yeimis), talk about how it’s a poem together, what it has in common with the love poem.” However, I never followed through with either of these ideas. I now realize that I simply didn’t have enough time, meeting with Yeimis and other students after school, correcting papers and planning lessons during my free period, and doing more correcting and planning at home.

Working with Yeimis after school and keeping a journal about it also helped me to reflect upon the way I had designed tasks for students to complete. Going over how to approach a homework assignment with Yeimis often involved going back to what we had done in class, giving both of us a chance to look at a
task a second time. For example, in attempting to write a poem using similes and involving emotions, I had asked students to fill in a structure that began like this:

    Anger feels like ____________
    It smells like ____________
    It tastes like _____________

I realized, in going over the poem with Yeimis, that it involved a certain amount of abstract thinking that I had never considered before. As Freeman and Freeman (1994) explain, "Vygotsky differentiated between spontaneous and scientific concepts. Spontaneous concepts, like ‘brother’, are acquired in the normal process of living. Scientific concepts, such as ‘brotherhood’, are learned at school…Often, teachers are not aware that they operate at these abstract levels" (p. 58). Similes and metaphors involved in poetry were clearly scientific concepts, and yet I had not really understood this before I witnessed Yeimis’ difficulty dealing with such concepts.

Going over this assignment and others also helped me to see that the way I was explaining assignments was not always effective for all students. With this particular assignment, I realized that I had not broken it down into manageable steps the way I had planned to. As I wrote in my journal, “What worked for Yeimis was to ask her, ‘Is anger a good or bad feeling?’ and then to say, ‘What tastes bad to you?’ We worked on the poem and she completed it just before it was time to go.” Thus I had the opportunity to break down the task after school. I also realized, through working with Yeimis, that she didn’t understand how to interpret the rubrics I was using to grade writing assignments. When I asked her to go back to the rubric to explain to me what made her work good, she was unable to do so and didn’t know where to look. I wrote in my journal that day, “I think the whole thing is kind of confusing for students. Maybe another way to present it graphically? I’m not sure…” Without the tutoring sessions, I may not have taken advantage of the opportunity to reflect and reconsider the way I was structuring assignments, explaining tasks, or evaluating students.

Benefits for the Student

While there were clearly many unexpected benefits for me as a teacher, the focus of my study was on the benefits for Yeimis as a student. One of the clearest benefits for her was the way that tutoring lead to a better understanding of practices that help a student to be successful. Going back to the example of the time I saw that she didn’t understand the homework assignment she’d written down, I can see that it was also important for her to recognize that just writing down the assignment was not enough. She needed to see that it was more important to understand what she had written, so that she would be able to complete the assignment at home. We also worked together after school on organizing her class binder, punching holes in papers and putting them in order, taking out papers from other classes so she would not get confused. We also spent time using the dictionary, as mentioned before. I bought her a
Spanish/English dictionary to use when I recognized that she didn’t understand the definitions most of the time in English, and I have seen her using the dictionary in class and after school since that first time we worked on using it together. Finally, she has started to see how doing homework can directly affect her understanding of what is happening in class the next day. There have been days when I have not been able to meet her after school, and she has either found a classmate to help her, come in early the next morning, or tried to do the assignment on her own at home, so that she makes sure to get it done on time. She has improved her grade in this way but has also shown that she recognizes the need to get her homework done each night, even when it is a difficult assignment.

Tutoring also provided Yeimis with an opportunity to make connections and clarify her understanding of basic concepts covered in class. When we first started meeting together, she was unsure of some basic terms, such as “grammar”. When I would ask her to check over her work for grammar, she wasn’t always sure what I meant. I wrote in my journal, “I wanted to check the grammar together, and she said, ‘You mean look if I put the points (periods)’ and I said yes, and other things too like capital letters.” Thus she was able to check if her own understanding was correct and also extend that understanding by asking a follow-up question and listening to my response. The clearest example of Yeimis making connections occurred one afternoon during our poetry unit. I wrote in my journal, “Yeimis said something so funny today! We were reading over a poem we’d read in class, and she hadn’t understood it so I was going over vocabulary with her and kind of explaining the meaning of the poem. Jose (another student) was there and was kind of listening along, when all of a sudden Yeimis said, ‘Es como un poema’ (‘It’s like a poem’) I was shocked! Jose laughed, too. We’d been studying poetry for the past four days but it was only today that she realized!” It was almost as if she had this epiphany before our eyes that day, where something clicked and she finally announced with a smile on her face, “I got it!” We all laughed together because it was simply a happy moment for her, and everyone realized she’d figured something out for herself. I asked her later if she’d studied poetry last year and she said she had, but it wasn’t until she saw it again this year that it made sense. It is possible that Yeimis would have made this connection later on in class, but I think that the chance to go through the poem one-on-one led to her discovery.

Finally, it is important to note that through the tutoring sessions Yeimis had a chance to get some help with the problem she was having at home. Although I do not know the end result of the situation with her dad, I was able to put her in contact with the school social worker, who met with her and has seen similar cases in the past. Hopefully, knowing that there is someone at school who is trained to deal with such cases and has experience will be helpful to Yeimis, and she will feel comfortable to go to this person to seek out help in the future if she needs it.
Conclusion

It is clear that tutoring was mutually beneficial for both Yeimis and myself. One of the greatest benefits for each of us was the opportunity it provided for scaffolding, as each of us pushed the other to grow in our respective roles as teacher and student. As Echevarria and Graves (1998) explain, “Vygotsky calls language a vehicle of intellectual development, and he suggests that a great deal of development is ‘scaffolded’ by a more competent person” (Echevarria & Graves, 1998, p. 159). Yeimis acted as the more “competent” person when she asked questions about assignments, forcing me to reconsider how well I had anticipated the possible problems students would have when designing tasks and planning explanations. She forced me to look at what I was asking students to do through a student’s eyes, a step I sometimes forgot to take on my own but which I have always considered to be critical to designing challenges in a way in which students can reach them. At the same time, I was also able to act as the more “competent“ person, pushing Yeimis to finish writing an essay, complete a journal entry, or interpret a poem. I broke the task down into more manageable steps, explained it in a different way, or asked questions to get her started during our after-school sessions. Vygotsky referred to this process as “mediation,” as Freeman and Freeman (1994) explain, “A teacher (or other adult or more capable peer) mediates experience by helping the learner make sense out of it. The teacher asks questions or points out certain aspects of a situation” (Freeman & Freeman, 1994, p. 57). Through mediation, Yeimis was able to accomplish things she hadn’t been able to accomplish on her own. While I have become a better teacher, I believe that she has become a better student. Her grades improved during the time we spent together, as she moved from a grade of D- during her first two grading periods to a C- during the third grading period when we worked together.

Her development in understanding some of the concepts central to English class, including terms like “poetry” and “grammar” show that she is developing her cognitive academic language proficiency, which Cummins’ stresses as quite different from social interactive language skills. Academic language proficiency can take from five to seven years to acquire (Chamot & O’Malley, 1994, p. 7) but the tutoring sessions have helped push Yeimis in her development of such language. She has also started to improve some of her own habits to become a better student in the long run. Hopefully, she will continue to keep an organized binder next year, will ask her teacher when she doesn’t understand the homework directions, will use her Spanish-English dictionary, and will try to use all possible resources to complete assignments.

In looking at the opportunity for growth for both teacher and student and examining benefits of our sessions, I have come to the conclusion that our time together could be more accurately described as mentoring. As Ascher (1988) explains in her definition of mentoring, it involves:

A supportive relationship between a youth or young adult and someone more senior in age and experience, who offers support, guidance, and
concrete assistance as the younger partner goes through a difficult period, enters a new area of experience, takes on an important task, or corrects an earlier problem. During mentoring, mentees identify with their mentors; as a result, they become more able to do for themselves what their mentors have done for them (Ascher, 1988, p. 1).

This definition puts into words what Yeimis and I have experienced over the course of the five months we have been working together after school. As a person who is more senior in age and has had more experience with the practices of school and reading and writing in English, I was also able to offer support, guidance, and concrete assistance to Yeimis as she went through a difficult period at home, worked on new tasks in school, and attempted to change some of her school habits. The last piece, concerning the ability of the mentees to do for themselves what their mentor has done for them, is something that I hope will be an outcome in the future for Yeimis. There are many things that Yeimis needs time to work on that will affect her progress in school, including her lack of knowledge of vocabulary in English, her low literacy level, and her lack of time to devote to her schoolwork. Mentoring USA, a non-profit corporation that runs mentoring programs for youth, explains on its web site that improvement in school performance is one of the expected outcomes of mentoring. Hopefully, Yeimis will continue asking her teachers for help, doing her best to complete her homework, and keeping herself organized next year, as these are practices that can help her to succeed in school.

Overall, this project has been encouraging as far as the benefits of after-school tutoring, or mentoring, are concerned. Although it did take up time for me after school to meet with Yeimis and I am not sure how well she performed in her other classes, I feel that as far as her success in my class was concerned, the benefits far outweighed any drawbacks. However, I still have some questions that are important to consider. I would like to know if our mentoring time has in fact had a significant effect on Yeimis’ well being and on how she feels about her success in English class. Does she see the benefits in the same way I see them? Does she plan to spend time with her English teacher after school next year? Can I continue to mentor her even if she is no longer my student? Will it be as effective?

I also want to know if I have been able to take any of the insights gained from mentoring Yeimis to improve my classroom teaching practices in general. If I can take what I have learned from working so closely with one student and use that knowledge to design instructional tasks more effectively and reconsider the way I am explaining assignments, hopefully it will be beneficial for all students. Most importantly, this one-on-one time with Yeimis has given me the opportunity to get to know a student as a whole person, understanding her background and the circumstances that come together to make her the person she is and therefore the student that she is. Our work together after school provided a forum for discussion that can be difficult to attain in a classroom filled with other students. However, it may be possible to create more opportunities in the
classroom itself to help me to gain a fuller picture of my students and the circumstances that are helping or hindering their success.

References