

Currently I am working at a transfer school on the upper west side of Manhattan. At my school we serve seventeen through twenty-one-year-old students. The majority of our students have had a difficult time in their high school careers and have missed significant schooling. We have a lot of bilingual students as most of our students come from Harlem or the Bronx and have a Latin background. The population of English Language Learners is numerous though the school does not have a lot of students. We have around one hundred students out of a maximum of one hundred and eighty. There is a significant issue with attendance which was a problem before the COVID pandemic and has gotten worse as we returned to in school learning.

Most of our English Language Learners have very passable oral communicative skills but struggle with their grammar and writing. This is not limited to our English Language Learners but more of a symptom of the entire school. The level of writing is not at a level that would be appropriate for high schoolers and certainly not at a college level. I find that students are not focusing on their writing with the goal of accuracy. There are often mistakes and errors, run on sentences, and thoughts that are never completed. The English classes that are offered do not often have time in their curriculums to focus on the necessary grammar lessons that are needed by both the English Language Learners and the rest of the student body. We have two full time English Language Learner instructors here and they serve the second language learners.

The student that I have chosen for my case study is David. He was not my first choice for this study but the other English Language Learners that I had chosen earlier have missed significant stretches of school and were attending only once or twice a week, if at all. There may be students that require more work than David but they were, unfortunately, not available to work with. David is one of the few English Language Learners that is not Hispanic. He is half white and half Japanese. David lives in Japan during the summers and speaks fluent Japanese.

He lives here in New York City with his father during the school year. David works as a waiter at a Japanese restaurant in New York City where he generally speaks in Japanese. His English skills are coming along well as he splits time between the United States and Japan. He is able to critically think about many topics and can offer well reasoned explanations for his claims but his writing is an area of struggle. David often gets lost in his writing. He struggles to use proper syntax when writing and this makes his sentences clunky and difficult to read. This is more than likely an issue stemming from his understanding of English grammar as he can articulate complex ideas verbally though there are also syntactic problems there. David is a good candidate for my case study because he is a bilingual student who is primarily a Japanese speaker, he attends school regularly, and he seems eager to try to improve his abilities in English.

I have found through working with David prior to this case study that he would do well to re-read and edit his writing. He often will write without thinking and this causes him to go off on tangents and asides without resolution. He also has significant issues with matching plural nouns with the correct verbs. He will use “is” in place of “are” when writing about a plural subject. For example, he correctly wrote in an assignment about Mortgages and Taxes, “Interest *is* a percentage of a mortgage”. He follows that with an incorrect use, writing, “Taxes *is* the money

What is interest? Interest is a percentage of a mortgage.

Taxes: Taxes is the money we give to the government in order for them to fund our public needs / services such as schools etc;

that we give the government...”.

In the first example his use of “*is*” is correct but in the second he neglects that “taxes” is plural

and uses “is” incorrectly. David often struggles with subject and verb agreement. This is a common mistake and one that will need to be rectified. If left unaddressed, this issue will negatively impact his goals of being successful in college. There are often inconsistencies with

his grammar use. He will use grammar accurately and then make mistakes when attempting a similar sentence. Another example of these syntactic mistakes are when his sentences stray from his point. An example from that same Mortgages and Taxes assignment is the following (copied exactly as it was written), “The advantages of getting a mortgage is that it will help you get what you want because you don’t have enough money, for example if you want to get a house and you can’t afford it,you can always get a mortgage and it will help you”. In this instance he has a significant run on sentences with no periods and only commas. This makes his writing clunky and hard to follow. He repeats himself in this example which is common for his writing. He starts with a vague statement and follows it with a more specific example when just the example was needed. Again in this excerpt, “advantages” is followed by the singular “is”, a repeated

### Advantages of getting a mortgage

The advantages of getting a mortgage is that it will help you get what you want because you don't have enough money, for example if you want to get a house and you can't afford it,you can always get a mortgage and it will help you

problem with his writing. While David is a smart young man and can think critically about the subjects in front of him, his writing leaves much to be desired and fails to accurately represent his thoughts. He needs to work on these aspects of his writing.

I first began working with David this year. I saw that he had good ideas but when he would try to write them down they would become lost in translation. In the beginning I noticed that he would try to answer questions, verbally, very quickly. He did not spend a lot of time doing any thinking but would try to blurt out the first answer he thought was correct. I believe that this relates to his issues with writing. He will write out his first thoughts without taking time to think them over. I worked with him to take a pause when answering my questions so that he would think about his answers before sharing them. Since he is bilingual that added time could

have allowed him to find the correct words he wanted to use. As I encouraged him to take that thinking time, his responses got slightly better. He would still struggle with keeping his answers specific and cohesive but there was an improvement.

Another issue that David has, like many English Language Learners, is that he struggles with proper syntax when writing and speaking. He makes common ELL mistakes when speaking, like using the phrases “...making it *more* easier...” and “...I can get a *full* better understanding...”. He knows that he wants to let the audience understand that things are easier so he adds the word “more”. We know that this is a mistake and that he just needs to use the word “easier”. Similarly he misuses the word “full” in the second example. He repeats the same idea by using full and better. He does not always speak accurately and purposefully. His control of the English language is pretty good despite these issues. The ideas that are being expressed make sense but they are not grammatically correct. David has the cognitive ability to build complex ideas but seems to lack the grammar knowledge to express those ideas appropriately.

David’s knowledge of the Japanese language does occasionally come out in his speaking voice. He does not speak with a significant accent but the way he pronounces some words can be awkward sounding. However, this does not affect his ability to be understood. When speaking in English, David can communicate very well. I have observed him code switching with one of our new students who is also of Japanese descent. This was rather interesting. I was able to watch him and the other student speak excitedly in their home language. He has also taught some other students rudimentary phrases in Japanese. David is very confident in his abilities to speak and has expressed that he enjoys speaking with others. He said that his job as a waiter has prepared him to speak with a wide range of people. When I was speaking with him concerning this case study and that I would have to record him he seemed excited. He told me that he really enjoys

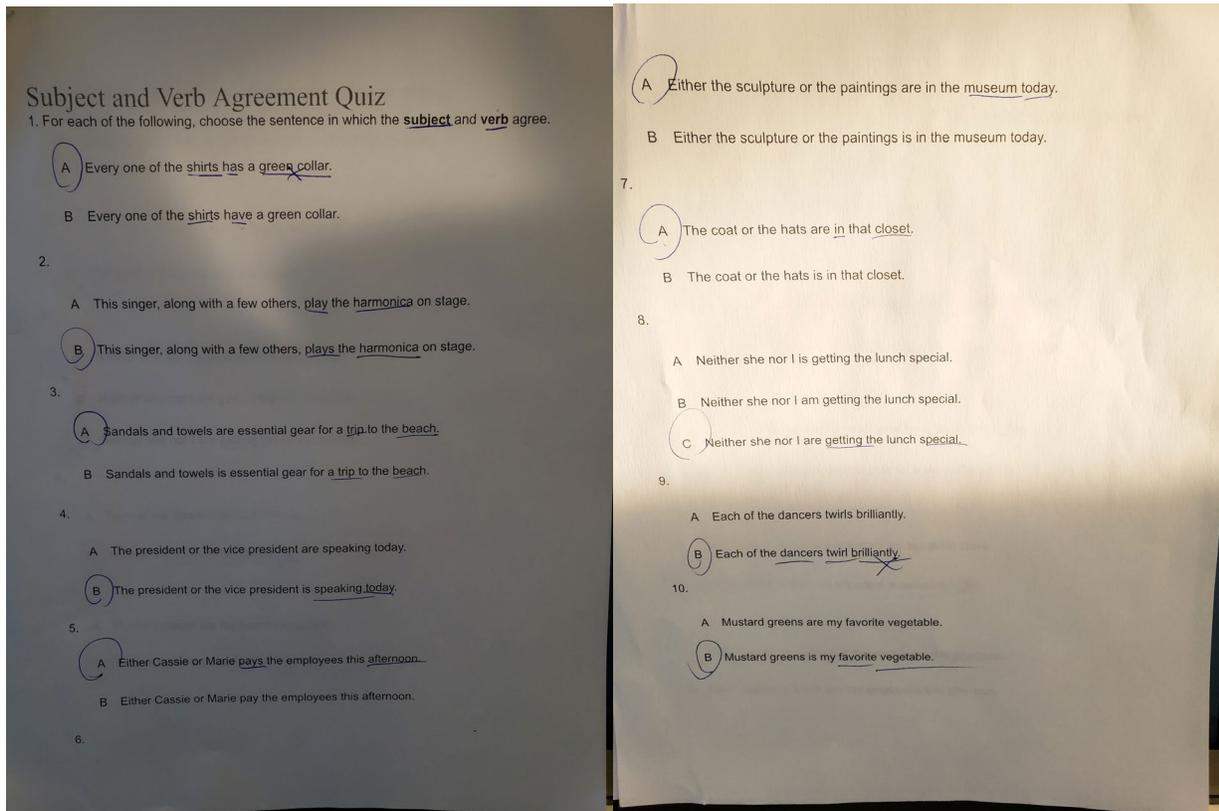
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speaking and giving presentations. I think that, even though he has some struggles with grammar and expression, he has a great attitude towards improvement.

David was a very strong candidate for this case study for many of the reasons that I have outlined already. I find that the most frequent issue that David has is using subject verb agreement. This will be, hopefully, an easy way to improve his writing and bring it closer to his cognitive ability. I have put together an activity that will drill the subject verb agreement rules. When I give this activity to David we will go over the rules that govern subject verb agreement in a kind of mini lesson. I aim to explain that when the subject is singular the verb must be as well. If the subject is plural, they or we, then the verb must also be plural. Then I am going to give him a worksheet with ten different subject verb agreement examples. He will have to select the correct one.

During the implementation process of the subject verb activity I had to wait a day for David to come in and have free time. As many of the students will often do, he tried to negotiate some extra credit out of this work. David is a good student academically and is easily passing all of his courses. I offered him a homework grade, which was negligible to his average but made him more enthusiastic about doing extra work. We sat in another area of the classroom and went over the mini lesson. David insisted that he already knew these rules but simply forgets them when writing. This is a common response from David. He does not want to be seen as someone who did not know something. I agreed that it could be a possibility he just forgot the rules but I told him that this is why we were going to drill the rules thus making them second nature. Oftentimes taking a direct instruction route with grammar rules is necessary and effective. Drilling rules is not the only way but it can work well.

We sat down in his Core English class that I push into and we got to work. I asked David to underline the subject and the verb in the question first so that I could make sure that he was able to identify it in the sentence. He had quite a bit of trouble with this and was not able to identify the subject in sentences except for some of the examples. An example of the mistakes he would make are the following, “(A) Either Cassie or Marie pays the employees this afternoon. (B) Either Cassie or Marie pay the employees this afternoon”. In this example he was very unsure of what to choose. He underlined the word afternoon as the subject. He underlined many of the nouns at the end of the sentences instead of the subjects.



He was able to identify the verbs in a few of the examples though the majority he failed to identify correctly. He could find verbs in the sentence but did not underline the driving verb. While he was unable to correctly mark the subject and verbs in the sentences, David was able to find the correct sentence nine out of ten times. The only question that he got incorrect was a little

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difficult. The subject in that sentence, example ten, was “Mustard greens” and he chose the verb “is” over “are”. I explained to David that mustard greens are plural even though it is a single vegetable and that they are a non-count noun.

Throughout this exercise I found that David has a good instinct but needs to pay more attention to the details of a sentence. As he got nearly all of the subjects and verbs wrong but almost all of the questions were correct, it is strange. I asked him about this and he said that when he says the sentences out loud he can hear which one is correct. He has a good grasp on what sounds right and wrong and can figure out the answer that way. When it comes to the details of what is the subject in a sentence, David could find nouns but not the subject. At the beginning he asked about what the subject is and seemingly latched onto the fact that the subject of a sentence is a noun. He did not make the connection that the subject and verb must have. When I explained after that the subject is the noun that is performing the action of the sentence he nodded. I will continue with small activities to try to build this knowledge and help David remember this rule. As for the verbs, David was a little all over the place. In some examples he correctly identified the verb that is driving the action in the sentence. In others he chose a gerund like in question eight, “Neither she nor I are getting the lunch special”. In some examples he chose a preposition, seen in example seven, “The coat or the hats are in that closet”. He also chose completely wrong words such as question 10, “Mustard greens is my favorite vegetable”. I asked about this one and he simply laughed and told me he did not know why he chose those. David needs to focus on his schooling more so he does not make these simple mistakes. He has a tendency to lose focus and get distracted by other students. When this happens David answers without much thinking. This exacerbates his language deficiencies. To be successful, David must

find the ability to drown out these distractions. His lack of attention to detail is hurting his writing, which could be a strength of his.

My findings from this activity reinforce what I had already known or thought about David's abilities. I knew that he was intelligent and had a good idea of what was right and wrong but paid little attention to the reasons they are that way. David has a good understanding of some concepts and ideas and can generally articulate those ideas but the little details often escape him. I think that he would do well to focus his energy on the minute details of communication for a bit. He got nearly all of the answers correct but was unable to identify the parts of the sentence. This could be detrimental to his progress through high school and into college.

When we were debriefing after the activity, David told me that even if you do not use proper grammar people will still understand you. This told me that he does not find grammar to be an important skill to have. He finds that communication should just be about understanding. I agreed with his overall point that you can be understood with poor grammar but insisted that when writing people will notice incorrect grammar. I told him that in college this level of writing would not be considered acceptable and would prevent people from taking his ideas seriously, no matter how valid they may be. This seemed to resonate with him. To David, being understood and having your ideas considered by others is incredibly important. I hope that this will help motivate him to take the next round of grammar lessons seriously. David is a smart young man and his writing needs to be lifted to meet his potential.

When creating my recording of David in order to find any issues with his phonology, I had him present a project he did on the components of an everyday item and its relationship with the global supply chain. This was a presentation that he had given to the class in Economics. David was happy to oblige as he stated that he loves talking and giving presentations. He

referenced his job as a waiter in relation to this. David said that he has a lot of practice speaking to strangers through this job. He works at a Japanese restaurant and speaks both languages there.

We went to an available room and recorded five minutes of his presentation with some questions from me. I added some questions so that he would respond spontaneously and not just read off his slides. I wanted to get some examples of his authentic voice and ideas. When reading off of a slide one may speak in a robotic way and I wanted him to think more about what he wanted to say instead of trying to speak properly.

As he spoke I recorded him with my phone, and permission, so I could refer to it later. I did not take notes at that time because I wanted him to focus on the task at hand and not what I was doing. If he got self-conscious about speaking, then my data would be skewed. He read off a few of the slides about the Iphone and its components while answering my questions about his project.

From the recording I was able to identify a few phonological mistakes that David made. I listened for mistakes that were repeated and not one offs. This way I knew it was not the recording or a mistake made due to something in the moment. One of the repeated mistakes that David made was a sound when saying the word really. The ending of that word, /-lly/, in English should have the sound of /lee/ but came out with a /w/ sound in the beginning. He would say the word like “realwee”. I noticed this with headphones on because the sound was fairly subtle. David also had an issue with certain vowel combinations. I heard him pronounce the word “valuable” as “valuble” (val-lu-ble). He did not enunciate the vowel sounds clearly. It may be the subtle sound of the /a/ in that word and the speed that he was speaking but it was clear that he missed that sound in the word.

The most common mistake that David made during the recording of this presentation was the /th/ sound. When saying words like thing, think, thorough, without, and everything, he would make a /f/ sound in place of the /th/ sound. So, phonetically, he would say fing, fink, forough, wiffout, and everyfing. This was the most obvious and frequent error that he made during our five minute recording. As this issue kept coming up I looked towards it to focus on when David and I met again.

I did some research into how to make and teach the phoneme /th/ and found a Chicago based speech therapist named Karen George's website. She advises that you first teach the mouth movements and tongue placement for that sound. She writes that you place your tongue in between your teeth and breathe out. This will make an "unvoiced /th/ sound". When David and I met to work on this, I had him do this exercise (George, 2012). Since we are required to wear masks, I separated myself from him to show him what I meant by placing one's tongue in between their teeth. He did the same when practicing. David made fun of me, in good humor, during this portion of our activity. He remarked that this was silly which I agreed but pointed out how the sounds we were making were correct for the words that I had pointed out. Moving on we practiced making the unvoiced sounds and I integrated my vocal chords to begin forming words, per Karen George's website (George, 2012). We practiced together trying to make the /th/ sound in the words "the" and "then". David was able to make this sound at first but would lose focus and start just breathing through his teeth. I moved on when he lost interest in that phoneme and we worked on making the /th/ sound in the word "think". Again he was able after a few tries to make this sound.

We did this practice in the morning during a class I teach with David as there were no other students in yet. I wanted to leave it there and observe his speech throughout the day in

other classes we share. I was able to really listen to him speaking at the end of the day in a core ELA class we have together but David had reverted to making the /f/ sound instead of the /th/. I gently reminded him of our practice from the morning and he told me that he remembered but did not make the connection while sight reading. We spoke about how, through practice, his pronunciation would improve. David, always honest, told me that he did not think it was that important and that he had a job already and I “knew what he meant”. I agreed but insisted that proper pronunciation can influence the first impression that he makes on people. This may have helped but we will see if he internalizes this information and applies it to his speaking.

David is a bright young man who shows a willingness to improve. He can lose his focus and that often causes him to lack an attention to detail. Improving his speaking and the above mentioned phonological errors will take dedicated practice. I aim to continue trying to correct some of these mistakes as we work through content in class. I hope that David makes a genuine attempt at correction because he certainly has the ability.

David’s abilities in the English language are progressing well. While he makes a few errors with his writing, his points are well understood. The issues with his writing do not impede his ability to communicate ideas with others. David is an eager and enthusiastic learner who definitely works hard. He has to work diligently to improve his writing and raise it to a college level. With more practice David should become a much stronger speaker and writer of the English language.

### **Works Cited**

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