Transcription of Scene 3: Allyship at the Sentence Level

Voiceover: Scene 3: Allyship at the Sentence Level. In “Allyship at the Sentence Level,” we explore one of the most common challenges and assumptions when tutoring multilingual writers: GRAMMAR. Multilingual writers often ask us for help with “grammar,” perhaps because they don’t yet have the knowledge and vocabulary to talk about other writing concerns, or they really are struggling with generating sentences, or because they’ve been told that their grammar “isn’t good enough.” As tutors, this request can make us feel backed into a corner when we can see more important, global problems in a writer’s work. Niko is a Chinese student in the film program who is writing a proposal for a documentary project. He’s planning a film about Chinese students who are studying abroad. Niko opens the session by expressing concerns about his grammar and asking for help. We encourage our tutors to honor writers’ requests for help, whether or not we find that request to be the most pressing issue in the draft. But helping writers with grammar (or spelling or punctuation or usage) doesn’t have to be a choice between working to strengthen the sentence and working on global issues in the text. Watch how Niko’s tutor, Sage, acts as an ally by addressing multiple sentence-level issues while also working with him to make sure he’s met the broader genre conventions of a proposal and a documentary.

N: Hi, I’m Nico.

S: I’m Sage. [they shake hands]

N: Yeah, I come to writing center for my grammar issue because this class is about documentary classes. I will write about some Chinese students who study abroad--my documentary proposal, yeah. It’s my biggest ideas.

S: So, before we dive into this, your goals for the session, can you repeat those for me? Did you have special intentions for this particular session?

N: Yeah.

S: Okay, what would you like to do?

N: Yeah, I would like first the grammar issues, is big one. Second, I would like...could you give me some ideas about this paper?

S: Sure, okay. Got it.

N: Thanks.
S: No problem. So, you don’t have an assignment sheet with you, any guidelines on the ins and outs of how you would write a documentary proposal? Is that what...?

N: I don’t have right now.
S: Okay, okay. So, let’s talk about first what you think would be in, like, a documentary proposal in itself. So, you mentioned a second ago the experience of international students?

N: Yes.

S: So, before we dive in, can you verbally tell me some of the things that you wanted to talk about?

N: Yeah, yeah. First, like, I want to describe the Chinese student who study in America, how their lives and how have some hard time for the different culture and language, and also how they prepare the everyday life in the Chinese [shakes his head no] and in the American life, and also how to deal with a problem like some, because we have different law in different countries. So when we come to here we learn some [unclear] and laws, and something, everything, life stories.

S: Okay, okay. We’ll go from there. So usually what I do is have my clients do is read their work out loud. Is that something you’re comfortable with?

N: Yeah, I can do that, totally.

S: Okay, great. And I see just two pages here. So, we’ll go.

N: [begins reading] “My documentary topic is about the experience of studying abroad in United States, and Chinese students who study in the US, in different country.”

S: OK. So, I’m seeing this [first] phrase: “Trying to understand how they get through some hard times” Okay, so, your attempt, this is your intention with the documentary?

N: Yeah.

S: So, this is an incomplete sentence at this point. So, you would need to have a subject. So “I...”

N: “I want to try”

S: Great. And you can fix that on your own. That’s great.

N: [writes out the changes]

S: [she reads the whole first sentence quietly] “I want to try to understand how they get through some hard times or how they find happiness in a different country.” Great.

N: [starts reading again] “Also use their experience to compare my own. This is my motivation for why I pick this topic for my documentary.”

S: Okay, so my suggestion, content-wise, is orienting how you would get this information. So, in a proposal, you kind of have to have the logistics, right? So, you can say something along the
lines of like, “I want to try to understand how other students get through some of these issues, so I plan to interview them.” Or something along those lines. Do you do that later on? Like, do you explicitly say “I plan on organizing interviews”?

N: Yeah, have it later.

S: Okay, that’s fine. When we hit it, maybe we could incorporate it earlier so that it’s more organized and you address it earlier on since you bring it up. Okay. Keep going.

N: “Before my documentary, this are a number of steps that should be prepared. First, I want to determine which group of people to focus on. This is very important thing because many of different international students study in US and they are from different country or culture, is not possible to documentary about those people. That is why I decided to only focus on Chinese…, students from China who study in US and have the same class with me. This way helps me easily to find my resources and easily to interview or to communication with them, as it is easier to compare with my experience. “

S: [quietly scans aloud what Nico just read] Okay, good. Demographic—you address that. [still scanning] This is very important. So the word “thing” not “thinking,” [spells out loud] t-h-i-n-g. Right? And then, “because many different international students studying in the US” —this is the wrong verb tense.

N: Okay, “study.” [makes the change]

S: Good. [reading from Nico’s paper] “And they’re from different country or cultures.” So, since here you are referring to multiple people, it’ll be...

N: “Countries.”

S: You got it. Great. You don’t even need me! [they both laugh]

N: [makes changes]

S: [reads quietly] “It is not possible”…so, “documentary” in this sentence—it is not possible to documentary—that would be a noun, so the film is a documentary, but

N: So, this need a verb?

S: Yes, so you document.

N: Document? Okay. [makes change]

S: [reads from Nico’s paper] “That is why I decided to not only, to only focused”…so, maybe just “focus,” not “focused.”
N: “Focus,” okay.

S: [reads from paper] “On students from China who study in the US and have the same classes with me.” Okay, so your peers?

N: Yeah.

S: Great, great. Minimal errors, very nice.

N: Yeah.

S: So, we’ve come to the end of your paper, but I just want to know if you have any more questions. Or if you’re feeling comfortable and confident with this process?

N: Yeah, it’s pretty good. But I think I pretty found out on what next paper I should be work[ing] on, like you point out the subject or the [unclear] issues. This mostly important for me right now, don’t you think?

S: Yeah, I think so too. So, what I’m going to do is I’ll make a list, for future reference when you’re writing other papers. [Sage writes on the back of his last page] Complete sentences. So, if that means orienting it with the pronoun “I,” especially in a proposal, right? “I plan to” or “I wish to…”

N: Should I use future tense? Like, “I will?” Because in the future?

S: That’s fine too. That will show potential since it is a proposal; it’s something you haven’t done yet. That’s good recognition. Yeah.

N: Okay, okay.

S: The one thing that popped up a couple times. The…you transition active verbs into the noun form of the verb. So, “help me acquisition” into “acquire.” Help me to acquire.” And then, “have to comparison;” instead of “comparison,” which is the noun form, “I have to compare.” So…[adds to list] “Active verb tense.” And my suggestion—you know how I asked you at the beginning of the session to read the work out loud? I find that when I’m editing my own papers or, like I said, I ask a lot of clients to do that, they find the mistakes quickly, when they recognize that if they’re doing it multiple times. So, on your own time and in future papers, that’s something that you could get incorporated into your process.

N: You mean, in future, if the writing center schedule full, when I by myself I can, like, it this way? Pronouncing it out? I can do it in my paper again, again? I can find some of these…. Because, at this moment, when I reading my sentence, I can adding some, I can fix it. I think this
is a very good way to, like, self-fix the grammar issues. When I can’t—when sometimes I can’t get the schedule for the writing center....

S: On your own time.

N: Yeah that’s great suggestion.

S: Okay, is there anything else I can help you with? Are you feeling confident, ready to go, turn it in, make the edits?

N: Yeah, I think pretty much. Thank you very much.

S: No problem. [they shake hands]

N: For your help. Yeah.

[Reflection]
Voiceover: After the scene, we asked Sage to describe her tutoring process when she’s working with a writer at the sentence level. We also asked Niko what he had learned through the session.

S: Usually, what I traditionally do with, like, any student that comes in, I ask them to read their paper out loud, and so that orients some sort of comfort and a speaking voice. And then once we get into the meat and potatoes of the paper, it’s uh, I try to do more hands on—actual omission of passive voice or frivolous articles, and then I’ll, like, scribble it out and give an explanation as to why that verb tense isn’t the right one. And then if that issue arises again in the paper, and it’s not recognized as a flaw or as an issue by the client first, then I’ll re-orient and say “hey, this is what you did here, in this instance, and it’s happened again, so as we continue, we should keep an eye out for it,” and usually, by the second or third time, there’s, like, recognition of that, of that issue. So that’s good. That’s a good way to do it, I think. Positive affirmations are incredibly important, ‘cause it’s like, it’s all about building up that comfort between you and the client, but also recognizing that it is really challenging to write in English, in general. And it’s not a matter of, like, not having the ideas, but just working, and sewing it all together.

N: Yeah, I think she’s a very—very good tutor for the writing center because I like [how] she let me read out because this is a way to help me, to find some mistakes by myself. This next different way to learn about writing the paper, and there are other ways—she just directly points out what I missed or something wrong. And in this second learning way to help me to finish the paper. Also, I think that she did a good job. And, for example, sometimes I’m just nervous about my grammar skills, but Sage always gives me encourage. I love this way to work with she. Yeah.