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who inspired this project and generously
shared their experiences with us.

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Introduction

Since its publication in 2004, *ESL Writers* has had a successful run. It won the International Writing Centers Association Outstanding Scholarship Award for Best Book of 2004, and it received positive reviews in academic journals. More important, tutors liked it. We heard from tutors and directors that the book spent more time on their desks than on their bookshelves. They said it was interesting, meaningful, practical minded, and clearly written.

Thanks to the feedback we received from readers, the second edition of *ESL Writers* is even better. It contains many new and expanded chapters, a new design, and a clearer focus. The new edition does a better job of reflecting the diversity among writers and tutors; today in the United States, writers and tutors may be English as a second language (ESL), bilingual, Generation 1.5, permanent residents, or immigrants. This is important to remember because the diversity of students in colleges and universities across the United States is reflected in today's writing centers. They are visited by students from all walks of life and all corners of the world.

The second edition of *ESL Writers*

- expands the definition of students and tutors with respect to their linguistic backgrounds
- focuses greater attention on the diversity of cultural and literacy identities among students and tutors
- addresses the most common questions we hear from tutors when it comes to helping ESL writers with English grammar.

Chapter 1 is one of five that are new to the second edition. It describes some of the more common linguistic backgrounds of ESL college students and the implications for tutoring in the writing center. Ilona Leki, author of the first well-known book on ESL writing in 1992, *Understanding ESL Writers*, is the author of this chapter.

Another new chapter in the second edition (Chapter 8) focuses on the experiences of a Generation 1.5 student. So-called because they are usually familiar with U.S. culture and schools, these students—and their number is quite large—nonetheless have learning needs different from other English language learners. Jennifer J. Ritter and Trygve Sandvik are the coauthors of this chapter.

Often the smallest words in English—like the articles *a*, *an*, and *the*—seem to cause the most difficulty for ESL writers. In the new Chapter 9, Sharon K. Deckert, an applied linguist, helps put articles in perspective and offers good advice for helping tutors understand the grammar of English articles so that they can better explain these troublesome words to students.

Also new to the second edition is Chapter 11 on online tutoring, written by Lee-Ann Kastman Breuch and Linda Clemens. They describe a successful hybrid model of online tutoring developed in their writing center at the University of Minnesota. New as well is Chapter 16, written collaboratively by a group of tutors and directors who embarked on a student exchange program focused on writing centers. They encourage tutors to study abroad and offer good advice for those who are ready to explore writing centers that operate in very different contexts from their own.

Reasons to Use This Book

ESL Writers is a companion for tutors who work with nonnative English-speaking writers at the college or university level. We believe it is best used as part of a tutor-training program in the context of a campus writing center. We hope readers will reach for it.

To Gain a Better Understanding of Important Concepts and Best Practices

ESL Writers helps introduce readers to key words in the field of second language learning so that tutors can have more intelligent discussions with one another in staff meetings and between sessions. It introduces concepts without jargon but also doesn't try to dumb them down. Each chapter also contains suggestions that reflect the best and most current practices.

To Get Ideas for Dealing with a Specific Challenge

Each chapter in *ESL Writers* is focused on a theme or challenge that most tutors can relate to. When tutors need a starting point or frame of reference for dealing with a challenge they have encountered in a tutoring session, *ESL Writers* is an excellent place to begin thinking about how to overcome this challenge next time it occurs.

To Stimulate Thinking and Discussion

Directors can refer tutors to *ESL Writers* as preparation or follow-up for a staff meeting. Most chapters are advanced enough that even experienced tutors will find them interesting and thought provoking.

To Discover Sources for Further Reading

Graduate students in Composition Studies and related fields will find excellent documentation and current sources. Undergraduates who want to delve into a topic can easily find additional readings.

Organization of the Book

ESL Writers is organized in three parts. Part 1, “Becoming Oriented to Second Language Learners,” provides a backdrop to important cultural and cognitive concepts. These chapters help set the stage for the chapters that follow because taken together they show why learning to write in a second language is both a social and cognitive endeavor.

Part 2, “The ESL Tutoring Session,” takes tutors straight away into the work they do every day. These chapters address aspects of tutoring that occur with amazing regularity and continue to challenge even the most experienced tutors. Part 2 is the longest section of the book because these chapters face the front lines of tutoring in the writing center—reading, writing, talking, and thinking together. Part 2 balances theory and practice, including frequent citations to the most respected published research in the field and realistic examples that help tutors connect theory and practice. In this section of the book, tutors will find ideas and suggestions for

- beginning the tutoring session
- reading an ESL writer’s paper
- avoiding taking over the writer’s paper
- helping writers say what they want to say (and not what some readers might *assume* they want to say)
- seeing the paper as a whole (and not as an endless series of error-filled sentences)
- understanding Generation 1.5 students
- dealing with common grammatical problems
- editing line by line
- tutoring online
- addressing cases of possible plagiarism
- promoting creative writing.

Part 3, “A Broader View,” takes readers outside the writing center and then back in again. It is a fitting ending for a book whose ideas carry on. It invites readers to consider the following:

- What kinds of experiences with writing do ESL students have in their own countries before coming to the United States?

- What does it feel like to be a “linguistic foreigner”? What can tutors learn by visiting writing centers abroad?
- Is English really so hard to learn?
- What do ESL writers say about their writing center experiences?

There is an urgent need for trained tutors to work with ESL writers, both in the United States and around the world. This book can be an important part of the training process because it has proven effective in writing centers in the United States and abroad. *ESL Writers* speaks directly to tutors, giving readers plenty to think about, try out, and investigate.

1

Before the Conversation

A Sketch of Some Possible Backgrounds, Experiences, and Attitudes Among ESL Students Visiting a Writing Center*

Ilona Leki

I didn't learn anything from the [ESL writing] class. I learned from [a tutor] in the WC. We had like a big conversation. . . . We talk about, he's like more getting into content. You gotta make discussion . . . it's like an interview. He's asking like all these questions. You gotta like explain. Later, like he corrects the paper. So . . . it was good, I mean. . . . You had to fight for your ideas on the paper.¹
—Comments of a student from Poland on his experiences in a writing center

Writing centers may be the ideal learning environment for students whose first or strongest language is not English: one-on-one, context rich, highly focused on a specific current writing need, and offering the possibility of negotiation of meaning (i.e., conversational back-and-forth that is thought to promote second language acquisition). That bilingual and multilingual writers recognize the benefits of writing center support is clear from the increasing numbers of second language (L2) students who take advantage of it.

But it is no secret that writing center tutors may feel less confident of their own ability to respond to the writing of L2 students than they feel in their dealings with domestic students, whose strongest language is English and with whom they likely share more of their cultural, educational, linguistic, and literacy background. Unsure of what they may in fact share with bi- and multilingual visitors to the writing center, tutors may not know enough about these students to avoid viewing them as all of a piece. One goal of this book

* I am deeply appreciative to Kirsten Benson and Carol Severino for their generous help with this text.

is to help writing center tutors feel more confident in tutoring L2 students, and the purpose of this chapter is to support that goal by “helping tutors see these people not as an undifferentiated group (people who don’t speak English) but as individuals who, like all of us, share sets of identities.”²²

Diverse Backgrounds

Like any collection of individuals, multilingual or English as a second language (ESL) students present a wide range of interests, experiences, and characteristics, making it exceedingly difficult, even dangerous, to discuss them as a group or even groups. In fact, the internal variation of this group is so great that perhaps the only characteristic linking them is the fact that they can function, to a greater or lesser degree, in a language other than English. An L2 student may be eighteen or sixty years old, may have lived a life of wealth and privilege or of relative poverty and limitation, may have traveled widely internationally or be experiencing a first venture from a rural village to a foreign country, may have little experience in writing or may be a published author, may come from a country whose population and/or leaders consider the United States an ally or an enemy. L2 students may vary in emotional response to their first language (L1), emotional response to English or to U.S. culture, sense of self as an insider or outsider in the United States, sense of self as novice or accomplished writer or intellect, reception by the target culture, and so on for many more levels of categories. It is also the case that visible minorities among these writers may provoke stereotypical assumptions about them or simply automatic characterization of them as likely to be and to behave in particular ways in line with their “master status” as, say, an Asian (-looking) woman.

Yet at least some of these multilingual university students do share certain traits, and examining some of their interests, experiences, and characteristics may encourage a more nuanced, more differentiated, more complicated and three-dimensional view of them than as simply ESL students, foreigners, or people who don’t speak English.

Perhaps my first comment should be to clarify the phrase “people who don’t speak English.” The multilingual students who seek help at a college or university writing center are doing college in English, a language that they probably did not grow up with. They are reading college-level textbooks, listening to university-level lectures delivered to an intended or envisioned audience of people who did grow up with English, and for the most part writing the same papers and exams as domestic students. They can hardly be regarded as people who don’t speak English. But it is sometimes difficult for monolingual English speakers to fully grasp the enormous amount of language a speaker or writer must command to be able to carry out these advanced literacy activities, and it is easy to over-react to grammatical or lexical errors or to an unfamiliar accent.

On the other hand, it is also important to recognize, in regard to the readers of this book, that writing center tutors themselves come in different varieties with respect to their contact with multilinguals and their own language proficiency beyond their first language. Some with less contact may experience greater difficulty with variations from their language expectations than do those familiar with a variety of accents both oral and textual.

Some Characteristics of Multilinguals

To make discussion of this broad population, with its blurry boundaries, manageable, the group needs to be somehow divided. But by what? Gender, home culture, first language, experience with the second language, experience writing in the first or second language, academic discipline (“hard” sciences versus other disciplines), likely need to write in university settings? Any of these categories would yield different discussions with legitimate and potentially interesting and fruitful different emphases. Because it is impossible to talk about all the individual characteristics of any given multilingual person, I have somewhat arbitrarily attempted to break up the larger group of multilinguals that might visit a university writing center into three smaller categories that are likely to share at least some characteristics:

- undergraduate students who graduated from U.S. high schools
- international or visa undergraduate students who expect to return to their home countries after completing their education
- international graduate students or professionals

I describe these categories of people in broad strokes in order to give readers a sense of the range of experiences and reactions/attitudes that may be encountered among individuals within these groups. These characterizations should not be taken to be representative of any individuals, however, or even of the group as a whole, only to provide a sense of the wide and dynamic range of linguistic, psychological, and emotional configurations of certain writing center patrons.

Multilinguals from U.S. High Schools

Many undergraduate ESL students immigrated to the United States from countries where English is not a dominant language, graduated from a U.S. high school, and now find themselves facing a new set of challenges in college. Although the writing of undergraduate multilinguals who attended or graduated from U.S. high schools may exhibit a variety of the kinds of surface-level problems (e.g., grammatical errors) that often take students to

writing centers, these students may have become quite proficient in speaking and listening and may sound much like domestic students in their language register (i.e., how formally or informally they speak), vocabulary, and ability to recognize cultural references. They often come to share many of the values of teenage domestic students, including one in which a respect for an interest in education and the life of the intellect for its own sake may, or even must, remain covert. One reason they come to sound and think in this way is that, as some of these immigrant teenagers report, they experience a great deal of pressure to do everything possible as soon as possible to look and act like their domestic peers. This need to conform may even present itself as rejection or avoidance of people (including other newcomer immigrant students) and customs that might serve to link them to their first or previous culture. Immigrant parents of these teens observe with dismay as their Chinese daughter or son, for example, begins to refuse to eat Chinese food or use chopsticks even at home.³ Sometimes such students do not appreciate a first response to them by tutors or others that positions them as people who come from somewhere else.

On the other hand, in communities with a large immigrant population from a similar background, multilingual high school students who have felt rejection from members of the host culture or who experience pressure to become completely indistinguishable from domestic students and yet know that this may in fact be impossible for them may react by rejecting the host culture and pressing compatriot peers to stay away from domestic people, their culture, their language, and their academic concerns. Furthermore, the literature on immigrant high school students reports multiple examples of these teenagers being isolated from (and sometimes shunned by) their domestic peers as a result of their placement into what has been called the “ESL ghetto” in high school, a stigmatizing, boring, soul-deadening, self-perpetuating space where immigrant students take all their high school classes together all day, mostly nonacademically oriented classes focused on the minutia of worksheets on sentence-level English grammar.⁴ Some research indicates little literacy development between eighth grade and first year of tertiary education for certain immigrant students.⁵ And, of course, many of these young people are essentially unwilling immigrants in that the decision to leave the home country was probably not theirs but that of their parents.

In terms of their written work, their high school writing teachers may have followed current ideas about the importance of content over errors and encouraged fluency and an emphasis on content over grammatical accuracy. While many would applaud this focus, not all accept the potential results. In one such case, the student arrived in college confident of his good writing skills because of the encouragement that he had received from his high school teachers’ feedback on his writing. Unfortunately, he found that his new writing environment in college was not as willing as his high school to accept the errors in his writing, resulting in his not passing out of the ESL track after a term of work there.⁶

Recasting Model Students

In yet other cases reported in the literature, the multilingual high school students have been held up to their domestic peers as model students, sometimes mostly because they were quiet, obedient, and hard working.⁷ This characterization could conceivably have created resentment of them on the part of their peers, but it also constructed a positive institutional identity that was then crushed in the students' encounter with college. Suddenly, instead of being viewed as low-demand, and for this reason excellent, high school students, as they entered college they were recast as ESL students, the Other, foreigners, and placed in separate first-year writing classes, despite having spent several years in mainstream classes with domestic peers and considering themselves American. One such student, asked in her ESL writing class in college to compare shopping in the United States to shopping in her home country, was forced to fabricate the fabled home country because she had no real memory of much of anything from her "home country"; the only home country she knew was the United States.⁸

In terms of their writing, because their oral and informal language may be quite well developed and, if so, will have been the key vehicle of their integration into high school life, they may have some difficulty in shifting to the more formal, academic styles demanded of them in college and may have less familiarity with and a smaller range of registers and genres than many domestic students. Furthermore, in the context-poor medium of writing, the many extralinguistic cues (e.g., body language, facial expressions) that these students use to communicate their meanings orally are less available to them. At the same time, in writing the demand is greater for absolute accuracy in regard to, for example, articles or prepositions (see Chapter 9 for more on helping ESL students with articles), features of language that can often be fudged in oral communication without much confusion or loss of meaning; or the confusion or loss of meaning can be eliminated through immediate negotiation that is not really available in writing. The missed article that a listener may not have even noticed in speech may become confusing in writing or at the least flag the writing as "nonnative." As will be discussed in other chapters in this book, appeals to intuition about how a phrase should sound may not be effective for writers who have not needed to develop those intuitions.

Literacy Skills of Generation 1.5 Students

Most of this description appears to have little to do with the central concern of a writing center, developing students' literacy skills, but in fact these emotional and cultural pressures, the perhaps fragile new identities that these students are forming, and the need to construct a comfortable public image of themselves, perhaps especially vis-à-vis their domestic peers, all influence how much students like this are able and/or willing to benefit from their work in a writing center. They might have learned in high school more or less the

same things about writing that domestic students did, although the texts of these Generation 1.5 students may exhibit sentence level features that deviate from the expected. But they may also carry the additional burden of an unclear and sometimes unhappy relationship to either or both the home culture/language and the target culture/language/people. At a time of life when identity formation and peer approval is paramount, these students may have experienced intense social isolation and may not be secure in who they are in an even more profound and conflicted way than is the usual case for this age group.

In terms of their visits to the writing center, these immigrant students are likely to have the oral fluency and back channeling proficiency (i.e., responding to statements with “uh huh” or “I get it” in ways that seem natural) of their domestic peers, making their linguistic and paralinguistic behaviors (e.g., body language, clothing) seem familiar. They are likely to face many of the same struggles as domestic students: understanding and addressing their assignments fully, leading into quotes, paraphrasing without plagiarizing, formulating and following through on an argument, analyzing rather than summarizing, and overly idiomatic or oral register phrasing. Because they share so much with their domestic peers, writing center tutors may find these students easier to work with than international or visa students.

However, these multilingual students may face additional difficulties that their domestic peers do not. For example, they may cling to writing strategies they learned in high school, even if they don't seem to be working,⁹ partly because the strategies worked well enough in high school to get them to college and partly because they have limited other options to draw on. They may also be surprisingly slow to shift the structure of the English they use in the direction of target norms (i.e., the usual and natural language of native speakers). The reason for this difficulty in restructuring their version of English is at least in part psycholinguistic: The language they use has filled their communicative needs, and they may not really perceive (or be able to remember) the difference between what they produce and the target forms or correct language expected of them in writing. This slowness to respond to corrective feedback combined with their verbal fluency combined almost certainly with having missed full and deep development of academic knowledge in high school because they couldn't quite completely understand the content of their history, science, or social science classes may have the devastating and unfair consequence of making some of these students seem intellectually behind where they should be. (For more on tutoring this kind of student, see Chapter 8.)

International/Visa Students

International students, or foreign students, as they were once referred to, travel from countries around the world to study in the United States (or another

country) with the official permission of the government in the form of a student visa. In many ways, undergraduate visa or international students have an easier lot in college than do immigrant high school graduates and may be the ones most likely to benefit most quickly from writing center interactions. Most of the time, students who have completed high school in a non-English-speaking country and go to study in an English-speaking country do not report feeling threats to their identities of the same kinds or with the same intensity as U.S. high school multilingual students report. They may miss their homes and families intensely, but usually, unlike the U.S. high school graduates, they themselves have chosen and are proud and excited to be studying abroad. Their relationship with their first languages seems less complicated; interviews with international students show them to be quick to claim allegiance to those languages and proud of their ability to flexibly access and manipulate their first languages smoothly and easily, a facility that they may not feel in their second language either orally or in text form.¹⁰

Despite their lack of the familiarity with slang or popular culture that U.S. high school graduates usually develop, international students nevertheless are often very successful academically (purportedly more so than their U.S. high school graduate counterparts), carry the reputation among disciplinary professors of having an impressive work ethic, and may display an overt interest in the life of the mind, sometimes viewing themselves as the intellectual elite of their countries. Although this may seem counterintuitive, it appears that the longer L2 students experience high school in their first languages, the better they do in college in their second languages.¹¹ The academic knowledge they build in their high schools at home helps compensate for potential lack of L2 proficiency. Furthermore, for the most part, by the time they go abroad to study, they have already formed the foundations of stable identities and are eager for new cross-cultural experiences with domestic students, contacts that are sometimes more difficult to establish than might be expected. In other words, international students may be more eager to penetrate domestic student friendship networks than domestic students are willing to incorporate them into their already established groups of friends.

Effects of a Reading Emphasis

The writing of international students is likely to show the effects of formal study of English in language classes in the home country and of an emphasis on reading. In other words, many are quite at home with traditional grammar terminology (including terms and grammatical categories that monolingual English speakers may not feel fully in control of themselves, like present perfect verbs or adverbial clauses). Tutors who are familiar with grammar terminology may be able to take advantage of this shared language in their explanations or discussion of such students' work. The emphasis on reading often translates into initial greater facility with reading than with speaking, writing,

or understanding oral language. But that facility usually does not come close to matching the reading fluency of domestic students, at least not at first; international students take longer to process texts and may need to reread several times in order to understand what domestic students can grasp in a single read. A highly successful Japanese undergraduate student in social work, for example, reported having to read articles in her field as many as five times to feel that she really understood them, and material from the popular press, which was quite easy and relaxing for her domestic peers to read, was especially difficult for her because of the informal vocabulary and unfamiliar macrostructure, or organization, of the journalistic texts.¹² On the other hand, international students may be particularly adept at learning through memorization and may use this approach to try to develop more extensive academic vocabularies. They are also likely to have developed a strong sense of how to study well. At the same time, international students are likely to be fully, even painfully, aware of how much effort it takes to succeed in an English-speaking environment where the bar is set by students who have been using English in academic settings all their lives; they may translate this awareness into what often seems to university personnel as amazing devotion to study and willingness to work as hard as necessary to succeed academically.

But this devotion to study varies. Students from exam cultures, where students' futures are dependent on a series of academic exams, may in fact be perceived as unduly focused on doing well on exams. A great deal of what they can expect in terms of material rewards in their future lives in their home countries may hinge on passing important exams, and the orientation toward succeeding at them may be carried over to completing a degree in the United States. On the other hand, some international students regard their enrollment in a United States university primarily as an opportunity to experience a foreign culture. What they are directed to learn in classes and how well they do in their courses are less important to them than being able to travel in the host country, for example, and these students may not at all demonstrate the single-mindedness of purpose that keeps the others at the library on weekend nights.

Learning an Overly Structured Writing Style

Although the formal teaching of writing at the tertiary level is pervasive in the United States, this is not necessarily the case worldwide. Nevertheless, in many countries that send students to the United States to study, more attention than ever before has been focused on writing, both in the first language and in English. (See, for example, the intense discussions on the role of writing instruction and writing centers in universities in Europe in the publications and presentations of the European Association of Teachers of Academic Writing and the recently instituted writing exams as part of college entrance and exit exams in Korea, China, and Japan.)¹³ Still, some international students (especially those from countries like Taiwan, China, and Japan, where so-called

English essay writing style is widely taught)¹⁴ become impatient with what they regard as the overly structured and scripted style of writing they learned to produce in English classes at home or in the United States.¹⁵ They describe English essays as extremely lockstep: introduction of two to three sentences ending with a thesis statement, body paragraph(s) of two to three points (depending on how many words the writing prompt requires) or reasons for position taken, and concluding paragraph repeating the main idea.¹⁶ These students, and others from Europe where English writing is less of a focus, may perceive writing in their first language as not structured (though of course it is, if differently) and feel that any structure imposed on what they experience as the free flow of their thoughts, opinions, and feelings is distorting and unnecessarily constraining, even when the results of that free flow reads like disorganization to a domestic reader. The free-flow style of expression combined with lack of English-writing experience, vocabulary, and fluency may cause these students to have a hard time making their point clearly to a U.S. academic reader.

Despite the impatience that some students feel with what they see as rigid writing prescriptions in English, for a variety of reasons, they may be reluctant to exhibit negative responses to L2 writing, L2 academic culture, or the United States generally. Students like Luc from Viet Nam may feel that it is inappropriate to criticize the school or culture that hosts them, that they don't know enough about the host environment to criticize it publicly, or simply that it is impolite to criticize.¹⁷ As a result, teachers and writing center tutors may develop the erroneous impression that these students do what they are told without objection, complaint, or criticism, but they are of course not privy to the private (negative) observations that these students most definitely do make about their host environment. At the other side of the spectrum, the academic cultures of some international students from Europe and the Middle East encourage vociferous debate and a highly critical stance as a mark of intellectuality. These students may come off as excessively aggressive and resistant to, for example, suggestions for altering work they might bring to the writing center. Yet, again, what might be perceived as passivity or aggressiveness may simply represent unexpected interactional styles that can be worked around.¹⁸

Those students whose home cultures emphasize essay writing for exams are also likely to be most concerned about grammatical accuracy in their texts because this accuracy is often sought in the exams. Depending on the professors they encounter in the United States and how accustomed these professors are to having international students in their classes (which in turn may depend to some degree on where in the country the institution is located and the particular discipline involved), concern for grammatical correctness may be fired up or dampened. If the students realize that their professors are relaxed about grammatical perfection and do not penalize L2 students for errors, the students respond by focusing less on those features of their writing. If they experience the opposite, they ratchet up their own fretting over accuracy, often to the detriment of the substance of their writing.¹⁹

One area where writing center tutors may be able to make good inroads is in promoting audience awareness. Partly because previous writing instruction in their school systems may have neglected audience concerns and partly because international/visa students may have so often experienced writing primarily as writing for exams, some international students do not automatically consider audience issues, viewing the only possible audience as an evaluator of some kind, with the purpose of writing being only to display proficiency in English. These writers may be especially receptive to an emphasis on audience awareness and may benefit dramatically from pointers on developing sensitivity to their academic audience. Furthermore, international students may be quite unfamiliar with a host of writing conventions in English academic writing such as finding and integrating source material (at all, let alone effectively). Interventions in these areas are likely to have a substantial impact on these students' writing quality, particularly because, of the three groups (perhaps artificially) described in this chapter, international undergraduates may be the most eager to learn the broadest range of language and writing skills.

International Graduate Students

Unlike most undergraduate students, international graduate students' advanced disciplinary knowledge may far exceed their ability to express that knowledge in writing in their second language, as they are often intensely aware.²⁰ Because these graduate students have a high degree of disciplinary knowledge and must typically write within norms particular to given disciplines, writing center tutors with more generalized training may feel less well positioned to offer writing help. Depending on the type of writing center available, graduate students may also be less likely to turn up at writing centers than undergraduates because graduate students report expecting to rely on the advisors and project directors they work with to help shape their writing.²¹ But there is evidence that L2 graduate students crave more feedback on their written work than their professors and/or advisors are able or willing to give.²² Their professors may in fact be unaware of this greater desire for writing support and, looking to make life easier on the L2 students, may require fewer revisions of papers than they do from domestic students, thereby depriving these writers of the opportunity to engage in a cycle of drafts and revisions.²³

High Stakes

Furthermore, the level of writing skill required of graduate students is typically greater than that demanded of undergraduates and yet in many instances, L2 graduate students are expected to develop these skills with the aid of only the most basic and generalized L2 writing instruction, not focused on their disciplinary literacy needs but rather on generic essay writing typical of, for example, undergraduate essay exams or certain types of first-year writing

courses. Thus, as a result of such less than ideal circumstances, these students may find themselves in the anomalous situation of completing course work in their disciplines but without much opportunity for multiple drafting and with less feedback on their writing than they would have liked and yet then being expected to plunge directly into such high-stakes writing as theses, dissertations, and even articles for publication.²⁴

International graduate students may also exhibit less L2 proficiency (particularly oral proficiency) than international undergraduates and experience greater difficulty developing it. For some graduate students, their last formal instruction in English may have taken place several years before they decided (or were sent) to study in the United States; they may have lost some of the proficiency they once commanded. In addition, usually being older than typical undergraduates, they may be slower at or have somewhat more psycholinguistic difficulty with developing greater L2 proficiency than younger L2 users. Also, many undergraduates can assume that they have four years to function in their second language in completing their undergraduate degrees; some graduate students are sent abroad with the expectation of staying a considerably shorter length of time. Furthermore, in terms of sociolinguistic development, graduate students are more likely to bring their families abroad with them, in which case they do not experience as great a need as undergraduates might to turn to domestic peers to fill their social and emotional needs. This lesser need combined with the heavy work schedules of graduate students, including lab and research duties, often makes it difficult for them to find time for the very kind of socializing that would advance their familiarity with informal language and with L2 cultural norms. As a whole, they are probably more instrumentally, or pragmatically, oriented than their undergraduate counterparts and perhaps somewhat less motivated by the cultural experience of living abroad.²⁵ It is also likely that more is at stake for these international graduate students than for L2 undergraduates. Although some come abroad with their families, it is also not unusual for these students to leave families (i.e., not their parents but their children and spouses) behind, sometimes for years. In addition, they may be giving up important jobs to pursue degrees abroad.

When Roles Reverse

As might be expected, however, there is a fairly wide range of disciplinary experience represented in the L2 graduate student population, from beginning master's students to students who may already have completed course work in their majors. Some still see themselves essentially as students and need to learn the types of literacy practices typical to their disciplines. Others, however, not only come with experience writing in their disciplines in their first language but also read a great deal professionally and often in English. They are likely to be quite sophisticated about such features of disciplinary writing

as deploying the textual means of positioning themselves appropriately in their writing in relation to their professional audiences.²⁶ In fact, international graduate students and professionals writing in their second language often write better in English in their technical areas than they do in their first language either because, functioning professionally only in their second language, they develop their professional vocabulary and genre familiarity in the second language rather than in the first language or because the same technical terms or concerns do not exist in their first languages.

Many international graduate students arrive in graduate school in the United States as already highly respected and established professionals in their home countries, with thriving careers as published authors, researchers, professors or other high-ranking academics, or successful business managers. Studying in graduate school in a second language may entail a considerable loss of social, professional, and even familial status.²⁷ Although these adults do not usually have the identity formation issues that teenage immigrant students may have, leaving positions of authority and prestige to study abroad in a language they may not fully control may be experienced as humiliating. Identity building is likely not at stake but gaining acknowledgment and recognition of professional status may be.²⁸ Roles may feel uncomfortably reversed to the L2 graduate student who is a university professor in Argentina and who finds herself working with a tutor at the writing center who could be that professor's undergraduate student at home. The constraints that restricted language proficiency puts on L2 graduate students' abilities to present themselves as they are used to being seen through interactions in their first languages can cause embarrassment and frustration.

Appropriate Words and Sign Posts

Whether or not a given writing center is positioned to do this, L2 graduate students may hope for help in such areas as communicating with their advisors (e.g., even knowing—or knowing how to find out—just how much they can impose on an advisor's time and office hours), getting feedback from their advisors on their writing, determining how much they can/should rely on peers for help, writing for an audience who may not know the jargon of their field, formulating an argument instead of just writing to inform (as in merely reporting the results of an experiment instead of making the significance of the experiment clear), knowing and using the appropriate words and phrases to establish the right amount of hedging or forwarding of claims, and of course, using appropriate idiomatic phrasing, tenses, articles, and prepositions.

Although these L2 graduate students are likely to have developed a sensitivity to basic macrostructures in the writing in their disciplines, they often express the need for disciplinary signposting phrases such as "In light of the previous" or "Taken together." Some collect these (and longer stretches of language) from publications they read and reuse them²⁹ to such an extent that

L2 writing researchers have suggested that a different standard for “plagiarism” needs to be used in the sciences (where most of these students work) and in the humanities.³⁰

It is also not unusual for advisors of these graduate students to approve of the science, the thinking, and the content exhibited in their writing but be exasperated by language issues they do not want to have to deal with. Because the students get less of this kind and other mentoring than they crave, they may turn to the writing center (if they know about its services) for help but are likely to feel that the only help the writing center can give is language help,³¹ which may in fact be the case. Although they may have excellent technical reading skills and technical vocabularies, they may lack the kinds of semi- or subtechnical phrasings or vocabulary items such as “parameter, discrete, comprise, hypothesis, preliminary, corroborate, projected, issue” that might be required for their writing to make sense and read smoothly.³² Yet, focused as they often are on the demanding writing required of them, they may be the least interested of the three groups in learning general language or writing.

Conclusion

To varying degrees, it is important to humans that others know who they are. The essential means that humans have of making themselves known to others is through language. When an individual does not fully control language, this person may be unable to make himself or herself seen by others as the individual would wish to be seen. There is also a tendency among humans to see their own social and cultural group as highly nuanced and differentiated but to be less able to fully grasp that all social and cultural groups are equally nuanced and differentiated. It is in the hope of helping those who work with multilingual students in writing centers to better see these people as nuanced and differentiated that this certainly overly simplistic attempt has been made to point out a few features of some of the subgroups encompassed under the rubric of “ESL student.” But the most effective way for writing center tutors to experience these nuances firsthand is to take advantage of the visits of these multilingual, multicultural individuals to the writing center and show interest in their home language, country, or culture by engaging them in the kind of small talk that usually accompanies tutoring sessions, and so get to know them one by one.

Notes

1. Leki (2007).
2. Shanti Bruce, personal communication, August 11, 2007.
3. Leki (2007).
4. Valdes (2001).
5. Blanton (2005); Hartman and Tarone (1999); Tarone et al. (1993); Valdes and Sanders (1998).

6. Frodensen and Starna (1999).
7. Harklau (2000).
8. Harklau (2000).
9. Hamp-Lyons (1997).
10. Leki (2008); Silva (1992); Silva et al. (2003).
11. Boshier and Rowenkamp (1992); Cummins (2001); Muchinsky and Tangren (1999).
12. Leki (2007).
13. The European Association of Teachers of Academic Writing can be reached through their website, www.eataw.org, or their list server, EATAW-CONF@LISTSERV.HUM.KU.DK.
14. You (2004).
15. Hyland (1998).
16. Hamp-Lyons and Zhang (2001); Leki (2008).
17. Johns (1991).
18. And, as with any student, they may simply not have enough writing or language proficiency to know how to implement or even entirely understand revision suggestions.
19. Leki (2007).
20. Hirvela and Belcher (2001); Ivanic and Camps (2001); Schneider and Fujishima (1995); Silva (1992).
21. Leki (2006).
22. Dong (1998); Leki (2006).
23. Dong (1998).
24. Leki (2006).
25. This discussion of L2 graduate students focuses on graduate students in all disciplinary fields except TESOL (i.e., those who come to study English and education in order to become English teachers.) The many graduate students who are English teachers and professors in their home countries, or plan to be, are typically much more concerned about general language and cultural issues than their counterparts in other disciplines.
26. Hirvela and Belcher (2001); Tardy (2005).
27. Fox (1994); Hirvela and Belcher (2001).
28. Hirvela and Belcher (2001).
29. Pecorari (2003).
30. Flowerdew and Li (2007).
31. Radecki and Swales (1988).
32. Pearson, 387.

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12

Responding Online

Ben Rafoth

About 3.5 million students, or 20 percent of all students in higher education in the United States, are enrolled in at least one online course, according to the most recent survey available.¹ We do not know how many of these students are nonnative speakers of English, but we do know that online education is most firmly established at large public institutions that serve many immigrant, international, and Generation 1.5 students and that large numbers from this population seek help in writing centers. This trend is sure to grow, and writing centers that offer some form of online tutoring—whether it is based on instant messaging, discussion groups, bulletin boards, white boards, informational websites, or email with attachments—are adapting to new media for instruction. For writing centers that have been involved in online tutoring, fundamental questions remain: When the writer is not present to answer questions, how should tutors respond? What does experience tell us works best? Although there are no easy answers, experience can be a good teacher. The tutors at my university learned a few lessons as we developed our online service:

1. Less is more when it comes to writing comments.
2. Focus and consistency are paramount.
3. Direct but polite feedback is regarded as most helpful.
4. How tutors read a writer's paper affects the responses they write.

This last point is significant because tutors bring to each tutorial their own ways of reading, and so responding effectively begins with an awareness of the many different ways one can read a paper. By looking closely at what tutors do and how writers respond to their feedback, we can learn a lot.² This chapter closely explores a short sample of ESL writing in order to illustrate some of the lessons we learned from our online experience.³

Below is a key paragraph from one paper an English as a second language (ESL) writer submitted to our online writing center as an email attachment (we do not know his native language). Before sending the paper, the writer asked for help with grammar and organization but offered little additional direction. As you will see, it is possible to infer most of what the writer is trying to say in this paragraph, but doing so is a struggle, and most readers would find it difficult to read the entire paper. The writer of this paper could definitely benefit from a tutor who understood what he was trying to say and could help him make the meaning clearer and the style more readable. Where should the tutor begin? The paragraph consists of only sixty-seven words but poses a number of challenges that are made especially difficult when the author is not available to clarify his intentions or guide the tutor's attention. Let's take a look at the paragraph the writer wrote:

India and Nigeria are not democracy that share internal conflicts between diverse ethnics and religion groups. Two countries faced the same path of colonialism and created parliamentary democracy. At a time of independence, they were not ready to control over the country, since then they faced several difficulties to maintain the democracy. Their positions as democracy are not stable, moreover, the possibility to fail is likely today.

What exactly is this writer trying to say about India and Nigeria? Does he want to explain why he believes the history of both countries is responsible for their unstable governments today, or does he want to talk about their future and the possibility that their governments could fail? How would a passage like this be handled if the writer and tutor were face-to-face? Since they are not face to face, what should the tutor look for when she reads this paragraph in order to be most helpful to the writer?

Reading Papers, Reading Responses

Like most writing centers that use asynchronous tutoring (in our case, an email message with the paper attached), students on our campus were asked to respond to a few questions when they submitted their papers:

1. Please tell us your name, course, instructor, and due date for the paper.
2. What is the assignment?
3. Tell us one or two areas you would like a tutor to help you with and try to be as specific as you can.

At the time we conducted this study, we logged the incoming requests and forwarded them to tutors working at home or in the writing center. They wrote their responses directly in the file and sent them back to the students as attachments. As the writing center director, I received a copy of each response and used it to give feedback to the tutors and to assess the program. We also asked most students to complete a brief survey and to participate in a follow-up interview. We

interviewed four ESL writers and used their comments along with those of our native English speakers to learn more and to improve the tutors' responses.

Initially, the biggest challenges tutors faced were responding to ESL students' papers that contained lots of language problems, papers that were long, and papers in which the writer offered little guidance about the assignment. Instead of focusing their feedback on one aspect of the paper, the tutors tended to insert lots of comments into the text, especially when students gave vague or incomplete requests for help.⁴ The tutors' comments were far ranging; they asked questions about the author's intended meaning, suggested ways to relate the thesis statement to the rest of the paper, and gave punctuation rules or links to further explanations and examples. The tutors tried hard to be helpful, but there was little focus to their feedback. The many comments inserted throughout the paper showed that they were reading closely, but to what end was not always clear.⁵

In addition, we could see that the feedback did not have the feel of the open-ended and collaborative sessions we conducted face-to-face every day in our writing center. In the online environment, tutors began with a greeting and a self-introduction ("Hi _____, I'm Marie, a tutor at the writing center, and I'll be reading your paper today.") and then delved into the paper. The outcome for many of these sessions was a mix of questions, comments, suggestions, and corrections inserted into lines and paragraphs, usually in bold or italics. Upon examining this feedback, one could see that it was rich in detail but weak in focus. Sometimes comments shifted between lower- and higher-order concerns even within the same sentence. Given this, where should the writer begin? What was the tutor's most important comment? The answers to these questions were hard to find in the tutors' feedback.

As we eventually learned in our staff meetings, tutors responded in these ways because most of the ESL students' papers presented frequent opportunities to give this type of feedback; in other words, the writers usually asked for word- and sentence-level assistance when they submitted their papers, and these problems were not hard to spot. Besides, tutors believed that lots of feedback is helpful. They reasoned this way: In place of the assistance they were accustomed to giving in face-to-face meetings—carrying on conversations, reading carefully, smiling, nodding, questioning, affirming, and so on—they felt that being helpful in online sessions meant making lots of comments. Their sense of responsibility in this case was shaped by the online environment. As one tutor remarked, "I wanted to show them I worked on their paper." Without the writer to speak to, tutors went out of their way to demonstrate their diligence. For them, it was a natural and conscientious thing to do.

Tutors inserted comments directly into the writer's text. To illustrate, here is the writer's paragraph again, but this time with a tutor's comments, in brackets and italics.⁶

India and Nigeria are not democracy [*do you mean democracies? democratic countries?*] that share internal conflicts between [*due to? I'm a little confused here*] diverse ethnics [*ethnic is an adjective and doesn't take an*

s] and religion [*the adjective form of religion is religious, and that's what you want to use before the noun groups*] groups. [*You need to begin this sentence with the article the here*] Two countries faced [*need the here, too*] same path of colonialism and created parliamentary democracy. [*I'm not that familiar with this part of history, so maybe I'm missing something, but . . . are you saying that colonialism created parliamentary democracy? If so, then you might want to explain how colonialism brought this form of government about. Just a thought.*] At a time of independence, they [*who was not ready?*] were not ready to control over [*you could omit the word over, or you could say they were not ready to exercise control over*] the country, [*you probably want to end the sentence here.*] since then they faced [*it's interesting to read about the link between present-day problems and past history—could you say more about this?*] several difficulties to maintain [*it's better to say in maintaining*] the democracy. Their positions as democracy [*the plural form is democracies*] are not stable, moreover, the possibility to fail is likely today.

Many writers might consider this to be a helpful response, as most of our tutors did. It appears to give the student the help with grammar and organization he asked for, reflects an inquiring tone, provides explanations, encourages the writer, shows frankness, and demonstrates a close and careful reading. Comments are embedded in the text because tutors found it cumbersome to point to specific parts of the paper and impossible to read more than one screenful at a time. Still, the number of inserted comments is daunting. The tutor gives no indication of priorities for what is most and least important, and the isolated comments make it hard for readers to discern the tutor's tone.

This approach is not as helpful as it might seem because responses that provide lots of feedback to students run the risk of being *too* helpful. Too much help can involve “demotivating” ESL writers as Andy Curtis and Tim Roskams discovered,⁷ appropriating the student's text as Carol Severino discusses in Chapter 5, or overtaking the session and overwhelming the writer as Molly Wingate writes about.⁸ We discovered that the problem wasn't exactly too much help but not the right kind of help. What eventually put tutors on the right track, after studying the feedback that we received from writers and modifying our training, was not merely writing less but writing more selectively. This in turn depended on how tutors read the papers to begin with.

Within a few weeks, tutors began to change the ways they responded to papers submitted by ESL and native English-speaking (NES) students alike. They did this not by simply changing what they wrote in their feedback but by reading the papers from a new perspective. In Chapter 4, Paul Kei Matsuda and Michelle Cox describe three approaches readers can take to ESL texts:

Assimilationist: When we apply this notion to tutors reading an ESL student's paper, we can see that with an assimilationist stance, the tutor reads the ESL writer's text with an eye toward some ideal form of native-like writing and defines her task as one of making the flawed text conform to the flawless ideal.

Accommodationist: With an accommodationist stance, the tutor is more accepting of differences between NES and ESL texts and tries to let the writer decide how native-like he wants his text to become.

Separatist: With the separatist stance, the tutor reads differences sympathetically and tries to help the ESL writer express her ideas clearly without dwelling on the rules and conventions of standardized English.

These three approaches form a continuum of acceptance of differences, with the assimilationist approach being the least accepting, the separatist being the most, and the accommodationist falling somewhere in the middle.

The tutor's response above probably reflects an assimilationist stance toward language differences, and this competed with her attempts to read for meaning. In terms of language, the tutor read the text against a type of ideal text that she thought a native speaker might write. Although it is hard to know exactly what ideal the tutor had in mind—and this is one of the problems with reading a text in this way—we can suppose it was something like the following, a paragraph that most college-level instructors would consider generally clear, logical, and error free.

India and Nigeria are not entirely democratic countries; they also share similar internal conflicts due to their diverse ethnic and religious groups. The two countries faced a history of colonialism, which eventually led to the parliamentary democracies that govern these countries today. When the two states became independent of their colonial rulers, however, they were not ready to control their own countries. Ever since then, they have faced difficulties in maintaining democratic elements in their systems of government. As a result, their status today as democracies is not stable, and there is the likely possibility of failure.

When we compare this "ideal" text to the writer's original, the contrast is so great that the ideal seems rather preposterous. It is likely that no amount of diligence on the part of the ESL writer would produce this ideal text and no amount of expert tutoring could prepare him to write in this manner because the two texts emanate from such different sources, culturally and stylistically. Moreover, we cannot even be sure this is the meaning that the writer intended for the paragraph. For these reasons, it is fruitless to read this ESL writer's own text against an ideal, and any response based on such a reading cannot be helpful. Instead, it can only distract the writer from building on his own abilities (see Tseng's discussion of Vygotsky's concept of zone of proximal development in Chapter 2).

A Revised Example

One can imagine, for example, how the feedback might have looked if the tutor's response had attended to grammatical problems but refrained from comments pertaining to superficial surface forms. In the case of the ideal text, for instance, surface forms like the inclusion of definite articles serve more to improve smoothness and signal a polished academic register than to carry the burden of meaning (see Chapter 9). In other words, we can imagine a reading of the text that leaves surface problems alone while focusing on the writer's intended meaning.⁹ This reflects an accommodationist or perhaps even a separatist stance on the part of the tutor, as the following example illustrates. Though the response still has some problems, as we will see, it says less but achieves more focus.

India and Nigeria are not democracy that share internal conflicts between [*due to? I'm a little confused here*] diverse ethnics and religion groups. Two countries faced same path of colonialism and created parliamentary democracy. [*I'm not that familiar with this part of history, so maybe I'm missing something, but . . . are you saying that colonialism created parliamentary democracy? If so, then you might want to explain how colonialism brought this form of government about. Just a thought.*] At a time of independence, they [*who was not ready?*] were not ready to control over the country, since then they faced [*it's interesting to read about the link between present-day problems and past history—could you say more about this?*] several difficulties to maintain the democracy. Their position as democracy are not stable, moreover, the possibility to fail is likely today.

When comments about superficial forms unrelated to meaning are taken out, as in this example, what remains are two requests for clarification and elaboration of ideas: *I'm not that . . .* and *it's interesting to read . . .* and two comments about grammar and form:

1. Choice of preposition: *due to?*
2. Pronoun reference: *who was not ready?*

The point is that one way to honor an ESL writer's request for feedback on grammar or language problems is to focus on problems that involve unclear meaning.¹⁰ This approach stops short of trying to make the style flawless, an unrealistic goal for most of us anyway.

Consider what would happen if we were to remove the comments about prepositions, pronouns, and sentence boundaries from the ESL student's paragraph. Would this enhance or diminish the effectiveness of the tutor's feedback? Look at the following:

India and Nigeria are not democracy that share internal conflicts between diverse ethnics and religion groups. Two countries faced same path of colo-

nialism and created parliamentary democracy. [*I'm not that familiar with this part of history, so maybe I'm missing something, but . . . are you saying that colonialism created parliamentary democracy? You might want to explain how colonialism brought this form of government about. Just a thought.*] At a time of independence, they were not ready to control over the country, since then they faced [*it's interesting to read about the link between present-day problems and past history—could you say more about this?*] several difficulties to maintain the democracy. Their position as democracy are not stable, moreover, the possibility to fail is likely today.

An interesting thing about this version is that both comments make the same point. They both refer to the connection the writer seems to be trying to make between India's and Nigeria's colonial governments of the past and their parliamentary democracies of the present. With only these two comments in the paragraph, their common message stands out. Now imagine the paragraph once more, this time with just one comment at the end:

India and Nigeria are not democracy that share internal conflicts between diverse ethnics and religion groups. Two countries faced the same path of colonialism and created parliamentary democracy. At a time of independence, they were not ready to control over the country, since then they faced several difficulties to maintain the democracy. Their position as democracy are not stable today, moreover, the possibility to fail is likely. [*It sounds like you are trying to make an important point about the link between present-day problems and past history. If so, I think it is important for you to include more facts and examples about the past and present because this point needs more support in your paper.*]

With this comment, the tutor shows that she recognizes the writer is attempting to make a point and tries to confirm what it is. But the comment does something else, too. It helps the writer see that communicating his main idea is the most important thing to attend to in this paragraph. To reach this point, however, the tutor has to ignore the many other opportunities for comments that she sees and concentrate on helping the writer get his main idea across. Similarly, the writer must ignore for the time being language edits that are not essential. For tutors, learning to respond in this way means that they must read the student's paper more for meaning than for errors, and they must respond in ways that enhance the clear expression of ideas. This is one of the lessons we learned from our online tutoring experience. I would like to conclude this chapter with a few others and some advice for online tutors who face challenges similar to our own.

Lessons Learned from the Online Experience

The following are based on our experiences tutoring online for both ESL and NES writers.¹¹

1. Writing lots of feedback in online responses is often ineffective. We discovered that tutors who responded in this way called attention to more points than writers actually followed through on when they revised. In our follow-up interviews, writers explained that they appreciated the detailed feedback that tutors provided but often did not follow through and revise the areas their tutors raised questions about. When asked why he made only a couple of changes and did not address the rest, one writer felt he should have done so but said he didn't get around to it before the paper was due. Another said she did not agree with the tutor's comments. Comments like these warrant further research.

The advice to tutors working online, then, is to streamline comments. Good feedback is time-consuming to write, challenging to prioritize, and easy to ignore. Although writers appreciate the effort a tutor makes, they are not always prepared to follow through on all of them. Writers, ESL or not, get better little by little, and frequent tutorial sessions that focus on small changes are probably better than one or two sessions that try to cover many at once.

2. Writers who receive detailed feedback, with suggestions ranging from minor editing to global revision, often make the editing changes but not the global revisions. In follow-up interviews, some students did not see a distinction between a suggestion to change a word or phrase and a suggestion to develop an idea or revise a thesis. This is consistent with the findings of Nancy Sommers, who wrote, "On every occasion when I asked students why they hadn't made any more changes, they essentially replied, 'I knew something larger was wrong, but I didn't think it would help to move words around.'"¹²

Although it sometimes seems as though writers are interested only in word- or phrase-level revisions because these are the easiest to make, beginning writers may in fact be focused on this level because they see it as the *only* level, as Sommers observed. Moreover, feedback that mixes comments directed at occasional surface errors with comments about larger rhetorical matters such as organization, focus, and the development of ideas may lead writers to assume they can mitigate rhetorical problems by correcting surface problems or by simply moving words around. But if they cannot see how moving words around makes any difference, then they may assume the rhetorical problem cannot be fixed, at least not by them.

The advice to tutors, then, is to keep comments about rhetorical matters distinct from other comments. Unless a word, phrase, or sentence is clearly preventing the writer from conveying a key point, let it go and focus on those places where key points are getting lost. Identify confusing areas of the text that need to be worked on. When a paper contains many places where key points are unclear, then pick one or two and focus on them, leaving the rest alone. If you believe it is necessary to comment about a word or phrase when no key point is at stake, then tell the author

what the relative priority of this comment is. Carol Severino (Chapter 5) adds this important qualification:

The assignment, focus, argument, development, and organization are usually more important than expression unless some language clarifications and corrections are needed simply to understand whether the student has followed the assignment and to understand her points. In the case of language completely obscuring argument, the level of language would be considered a higher-order and global concern. Otherwise, there is no point in working carefully and slowly to reformulate language that should not or probably will not appear in the next draft because the student needs to refocus or revise her entire argument.

3. Writers assess their tutors' trustworthiness. We tend to take for granted that students value the feedback they receive from tutors, and most do. At the same time, they view feedback with a consumer's eye, mindful that the quality of advice they receive depends on their tutor's knowledge and skills. Our follow-up interviews indicate that tutors who acknowledge unfamiliarity with a topic sow seeds of doubts in some writers' minds. Tutors who indicate frankly that they don't know much about the topic—as the tutor did in one response when she wrote “I'm not familiar with this history, so maybe I'm missing something . . .”—may cause some writers to doubt the value of the tutor's comments on other aspects of their writing and make them hesitant to make revisions. Writers sometimes read tentativeness as wishy-washy, we found, as when tutors wrote statements like “You might want to think about changing . . .” or “I wonder if some readers might think this means . . .” Because the tutor seemed unsure about her own idea, they reasoned, they would leave that part of the paper alone.¹³

The advice here is that honesty is essential. Tutors should disclose their limitations when they feel it is necessary. At the same time, when tutors do have something constructive to offer the writer, they should say it plainly and confidently and explain why. Writers hear tentativeness or hesitation in phrases like “you might want to think about . . .” or “I wonder if . . .” We might think we sound polite and nondirective, but writers might hear wishy-washy.

4. Finally, writers often avoid revisions because they do not hear a consistent message. We found that writers perceived inconsistencies in their tutors' message. At the beginning of one paper, the tutor had written the following:

I really enjoyed reading your paper, Jo. You picked an interesting topic to write about. As you can see, I just made a few comments for you. I hope they make sense. These changes shouldn't be too hard to make, so don't cancel your plans for the weekend. Good luck with this assignment!

When Jo read the tutor's comments, however, she saw that they involved making global revisions that would indeed take time. But the tutor had said they shouldn't be too hard to make, Jo reported in a follow-up interview, and so she decided to make a few edits and that's all. In other words, the writer responded more to the tutor's attempt to be reassuring and comforting than to the real need for revisions the tutor had identified.

Another time, there was inconsistency between the tutor's advice and the instructor's. In this paper, following the greeting, the tutor identified a paragraph near the end that did not seem to fit with the overall flow of ideas. When asked in the follow-up interview why he had decided not to make any changes to that paragraph before he handed it in, the writer replied that his instructor had said this was a particularly good paragraph in a previous draft of the paper, and so he did not want to change it. In this writer's mind, a good paragraph is a good paragraph, and because the tutor's advice seemed to conflict with his instructor's, he followed the instructor's advice.

The advice here is to make suggestions clear to the writer and don't try to sugarcoat them. More important, deliver a consistent message and reinforce it throughout the paper so that the writer can see how important it is.

In the end, our tutors learned to improve their responses to all papers submitted online in much the same way we all learn to write, by drafting their responses, giving and listening to feedback, and improving their work as they went along. It is a process that can improve all tutoring with ESL or NES writers, face-to-face or online.

Notes

1. Allen and Seaman (2007).
2. For an account of tutors' experiences with face-to-face versus online conferencing, see Carlson and Apperson-Williams (2000).
3. We began online tutoring in January, 1999, thanks to the assistance of Jennifer Ritter, Dennis Ausel, and a grant from the Indiana University of Pennsylvania Faculty Professional Development Council. After grant funding ended, we continued to conduct online tutoring on an occasional basis with one or two classes each year.
4. Although some students provided assignment details and a clear sense of direction for tutors to work with, most did not. They tended to write requests like "Please look over my paper. Any help you can give me with grammar or whatever you see would be appreciated." or "I need help with organizing my thoughts, and punctuation."

5. For a good discussion of protocols for inserting comments into a paper, see Bell (2006); Cooper, Bui, and Riker (2005); and Monroe (1998).
6. The tutor's comments in this paragraph reflect a composite of responses we developed for training, after studying many students' papers and tutors' responses.
7. Curtis and Roskams (2000).
8. Wingate (2005).
9. See Ritter (2005).
10. The question of how to go about helping ESL writers correct grammar is discussed in Leki, Chapter 10.
11. For another list of valuable lessons learned from online conferencing with English language learners, see Hewett and Lynn (2007).
12. Sommers (1980).
13. The mixed messages that nondirective feedback can create are confirmed by Ferris and Hedgcock, 144–45.

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