Tutors as Teachers: Assisting ESL/EFL Students in the Writing Center

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In "The Idea of a Writing Center," Stephen M. North takes to task his colleagues in university English departments for their unenlightened views: "For them, a writing center is to illiteracy what a cross between Lourdes and a hospice would be to serious illness..."(435). In the nineties when multiculturalism is all the rage and American universities attract larger and larger numbers of international students, North and his kind may need to take on a different Goliath. Now that we've overcome the idea of writing centers as the "proofreading-shop[s]-in-the basement" (North 444), we may need to battle the idea of writing centers as "sentence-scrubbers-for-foreign-students" as my colleague Ray Smith says. But if the writing center does not exist merely "to serve, supplement, back up, complement, reinforce, or otherwise be defined by any external curriculum" (North 440), how is it ever to become a place where non-native writers can receive remediation and guidance? What changes will have to be made in the philosophy of the writing center and in the job descriptions of tutors?

Anyone who has worked in a college writing center for any length of time will know the plight of international students who have demonstrated some level of English proficiency by achieving a requisite score on a discrete-item grammar and vocabulary test such as the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language). However, "satisfactory scores" (enough to get in the door) do not always translate into satisfactory academic writing (enough to leave with a diploma in hand). As undergraduates, these students join

remedial composition classes; as graduate students, they are expected to write impeccable theses and dissertations though often without formal instruction in writing. Although some enlightened institutions offer intensive ESL programs followed by special training in academic reading and writing, others ignore the needs of non-native speakers due to ignorance, or fiscal or philosophical constraints.

What does this mean for the writing center staff? As non-native speakers of English are placed in classes with native speakers, anxiety overcomes them; they realize the grammar their ESL teachers have focused on isn't idiomatic enough to make the grade. Instructors panic and send their problem students to the writing center with a list of items to work on. The staff is expected to effect a miracle in ten weeks. This is the sad reality encountered at institutions without multi-level, in-depth courses in ESL composition. Whether as a long- or short-term solution to the non-native writing problem, writing centers must fill the gap somehow.

Even if untutored in English as a second language, writing center staff can educate themselves to deal skillfully with non-native writers' concerns. By becoming aware of the role of English in the world today, the expectations of the academic audience, and some current trends and techniques in ESL writing pedagogy, they can do much to ease the tensions and frustrations both students and tutors face in the writing center.

World Englishes

English, through no merit of its own, has in recent years become *the* international language with an estimated two billion users (Crystal 9). "Native" English-speaking monolinguals are now outnumbered by English-as-a-second-language and English-as-a-foreign-language users. Settling on a more conservative figure of 900 million, Kachru notes that 400 million are non-native speakers, some from the "outer circle" (ESL countries such as India, Nigeria and Singapore) and others from the "extending circle" (EFL countries such as Europe, China and Japan) (204). English-speaking monolinguals from the "inner circle" of the U.S., Britain, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand now find themselves a minority, as the majority of English speakers are bi- and multilinguals using the language for both intra- and international communication. As a result, the distinction between "native" and "non-native" is fast becoming blurred (Kachru 222). English is certainly not monolithic, and it diversifies as it grows in prestige. What constitutes "standard" English is now debatable, especially when research suggests that differences among even native inner circle varieties go beyond surface features to the discourse level (Leki, "Twenty-five Years" 130). Add to this diversity the distinctive features of outer circle non-native English*es*, and the issue of standards becomes a complex one indeed.

ESL/EFL Writing in Higher Education

The tendency in American ESL instruction, unfortunately, has been to relegate all second-language/foreign speakers (and writers) to a single category, even though "there is no such thing as a generalized ESL student" (Raimes 420). Each arrives with a different motivation for learning English and with different plans for using the language in the future. The one generalization that might be made is that international students are caught unawares by a new set of expectations (Gungle and Taylor 235).

For example, the speaking ability of ESL students is not a necessary predictor of writing proficiency as "acquisition of language and literacy are not one and the same thing" (Eisterhold 94). Despite their communicative ability in oral English, such students may find they lack adequate control of grammar, vocabulary, register, and style in American English writing (Mitchell 76). This evaluation of proficiency is not limited to foreign students. In a study of Korean-American college students, Scarcella and Lee found that even those who had completed junior and senior high school in the U.S. were "prevented from obtaining academic success because of English language [writing] difficulties" (139).

If academic writing in the American mold is difficult for ESL speakers, it is a "Herculean task" for EFL (extending circle) students (Kroll, "Time" 140). Most have practiced writing merely as a reinforcement for grammar instruction or oral activities in English classes. Indeed, "few young people in other cultures are explicitly taught how to write in school" (Leki, "Twenty-five Years" 130), and first-language (L1) literacy skills may actually hinder acquisition of competency in second-language (L2) writing (Kroll, *Second Language Writing* 2). Given these obstacles, it is astounding that EFL/ESL writers manage to produce the quality of work they do.

If instructors must cope with a variety of student abilities, students must deal with multiple messages as to what constitutes acceptable academic writing. There is no shared standard of quality; the reader, not only the writer, is responsible for much error (Hamp-Lyons 81). Numerous studies have demonstrated the differing criteria employed by native vs. non-native evaluators (Kobayashi 93); ESL vs. English instructors (Brown 587); ESL vs. content-area teachers (Leki, "Coaching" 61); and humanities/social science vs. physical science professors (Kobayashi 84). According to Kroll, not even ESL instructors can come to a common understanding of how to respond to students' writing in order to guide them in producing "the ideal written product" ("Time" 141). Teachers say they comment on organization and content while students perceive they comment on grammar and mechanics (Cohen and Cavalcanti 172). This perception is, more often than not, accurate as "the correction of surface structures is less time-consuming for

ESL instructors than judging the semantic appropriateness of sentences"
(Kobayashi 86). It should be no surprise to tutors that non-native speakers
arrive at the writing center confused and frustrated.

What match-ups between instructor expectations and evaluation actu-
ally produce successful academic writing? Answers to this question have
given rise to several traditions in ESL writing pedagogy. Although "no single,
comprehensive theory of ESL composition can be developed on which all
agree" (Johns 33) and the theoretical underpinnings for some approaches are
sketchy at best (Santos 713), the writing center tutor may find useful insights
in these traditions. The four most popular approaches, according to Silva, are
controlled composition, current-traditional rhetoric, the process approach,
and English for academic purposes (12). Raimes provides a similar list,
commenting that the four approaches "are all widely used and by no means
discrete and sequential" (412). For the purposes of this article, I have
collapsed Silva's and Raimes' four categories into three: (1) focus on form
(controlled composition and contrastive rhetoric); (2) focus on the writer
(negotiation of meaning and the process approach); and (3) focus on the
reader (English for academic purposes and the academic discourse commu-
nity). Understanding these three approaches and the ESL tutoring tech-
niques they engender may go a long way towards making the writing center
a place where non-native writers can receive assistance, regardless of what
instruction they are receiving or not receiving. On the way, tutors' job
descriptions will be expanded, but the stretching should prove relatively
painless.

Focus on Form

EFL/ESL, like its parent fields of applied linguistics and education, has
been subject to the whims of fashion in the past few decades. Whereas
textbooks of the sixties and seventies focused primarily on writing as a subset
of grammar instruction, later materials emphasized the introduction of
controlled vocabulary in readings and drills prior to its use in writing.
Specialized EFL/ESL dictionaries were developed such as *The Oxford Ad-
vanced Learner's* (Hornby) and *The Collins COBUILD* (Sinclair et al.). Based
on current spoken and written corpora, they provided not only definitions
but multiple examples of language in context. The quest for more idiomatic
writing also led to emphases on discourse analysis and pragmatics.

These are not the sole keys to effective communication, however.
Consider the following expository essay, an English version of a column in
the Tokyo daily *Asahi Shimbun*.

We use "waribashi" (half-split throw away chopsticks) to eat. After use, they are thrown away. What happens to them after they are thrown away? Is it merely the stinginess of those who lived through the war to feel that it is a waste?

According to the owner of one restaurant, his restaurant uses and throws away 10,000 pairs of chopsticks every three days. In Japan as a whole, about 10,000 million pairs of wooden chopsticks are used each year. That much wood is used just once and thrown away. We have never heard about wooden chopsticks being collected and reused as raw material to make paper. Is it because it would not be a paying proposition since collecting the chopsticks would cost too much money?

The so-called "chopsticks culture" sphere includes China, the Korean Peninsula, Vietnam and Japan. But all these other countries use spoons as well as chopsticks. Japanese cooking which is based on chopsticks is a very special thing.

Before the war, "waribashi" were Japanese cedar chopsticks from Yoshino. When you pick up a pair of chopsticks made of red Japanese cedar from Yoshino, you can smell the fresh odor of the cedar. They are light and smooth to the touch. They are straightgrained and look good to the eye. We feel that the aesthetic feelings of the Japanese are concentrated in a pair of Japanese cedar chopsticks.

On the mornings of those days on which he was expecting visitors, the tea ceremony master Rikyu got out some red Japanese cedar wood and whittled just enough pairs of chopsticks for the expected number of visitors. He then presented the guests with the odor of freshly-cut Japanese cedar. This is the origin of the "Rikyu-bashi" (Rikyu chopsticks). The Japanese demanded freshness and purity in their chopsticks.

It is not just out of fastidiousness that the Japanese do not like others to use their chopsticks and also do not like to use the chopsticks of others. In ancient times, people believed that the spirit of the person resided in the chopsticks that he used and it is said that this is why people hated to have their chopsticks used by others. (Hashi no Hon—Book on Chopsticks—by Soichiro Honda.)

> It is now the heyday of "waribashi" made from the silver firs, birches and Japanese lindens of Hokkaido. These "waribashi" made from Hokkaido wood began to be produced in large quantities after the age of high economic growth started. Half the "waribashi" used now are produced in Hokkaido.
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> We have no intention of condemning the use-and-throw-away system in connection with "waribashi." But it is very wasteful when trees amounting to 10,000 million pairs of wooden chopsticks disappear each year. (Hinds 147-150)

If we examined this essay sentence by sentence, we would discover few errors but still find the composition "foreign," even "illogical." The writer apparently knows enough about English to avoid the SOV (subject-object-verb) word order of his native Japanese, but the essay still doesn't read like the English of a native writer.

Although the writer would probably ace the TOEFL, there's something unnatural about the way he puts the sentences of this article together. Indeed, we cannot expect the untutored writer to conform to our expectations of form because logic and rhetoric are culture-specific, not universal (Kaplan 294). The essay sounds "accented" because it employs the Japanese rhetorical style *ki-shoo-ten-ketsu*: "First, begin one's argument. Next, develop that. At the point where this development is finished, turn the idea to a subtheme where there is a connection, but not a directly connected association [with the major theme]. Last, bring all of this together and reach a conclusion" (Hinds 150). The *ki-shoo-ten-ketsu* form deviates from western argumentation in that the *ten* subtheme departs from the topic, while the thesis, hinted at in introductory questions, is withheld until the final paragraph. In addition, the Japanese writer avoids using transitions because he thinks it is the responsibility of the reader to make connections between various essay parts (Hinds 146).

As tutors, we might praise the writer's excellent use of detail. He obviously knows a lot about chopsticks and is sensitive to their beauty. However, we might then need to point out that the essay reads more like a descriptive than a persuasive essay to our "American ear." He has not convinced us to use fewer *waribashi*. It would be helpful to introduce him to the English model for argumentative discourse (claim + justification + conclusion) (Choi 129) and mention that due to the heterogeneity of our culture, arguing is not "superfluous" (Costello 68), but highly prized.

In contrast, Arabic-speaking writers bring an entirely different constellation of features to their English compositions. Although their reliance on

active independent clauses and coordination has been observed in beginning ESL/EFL writers from a variety of backgrounds (Bardovi-Harlig 393), Arabic writers have one additional motivation for overusing coordinate constructions. Coming from an oral culture which emphasizes a "balanced" sound, they prefer symmetry to variety (Ostler, "English in Parallels" 175). For this reason, rather than directing our Arabic-speaking students to "compose aloud," tutors might instead introduce a variety of written sentence patterns, encouraging the use of subordinate clauses and introductory phrases. In addition, we should look out for elaborate introductions and comparatively weak conclusions (Ostler, "Study" 246A) and monitor these important parts of the composition for clarity and directness. The latter quality, in particular, is especially difficult for EFL/ESL writers to emulate. As one of Winer's advanced writing students despaired, "All of the skills I was so proud to have developed in paraphrasing and decorating my style in Spanish are now useless and dangerous in front of the conciseness of English" (62). Indeed, individual expression has no meaning outside of a specific cultural and rhetorical context, of which American English is only one. As tutors, we can encourage students to "get to the point" without denigrating the more "flowery" styles transferred from their native tongues.

Developed in an attempt to describe the logical strategies EFL/ESL students use in their first and second languages, the field of contrastive rhetoric has come under fire for being overly prescriptive (Leki, "Twenty-five Years" 123). Nevertheless, there is no denying that a first language is "a major determining factor in how ideas in speech and writing are approached" (Bar-Lev 237), and students are intensely aware of this fact. By using contrastive rhetoric as a "consciousness-raising device" for ourselves and our clients, we can ensure a more idiomatic American English style in the final product.

Focus on the Writer

Because of the problems of transfer between the first language and English, the conventional wisdom has been to forbid ESL/EFL writers to use their native languages since both syntax and organizational structure can be "translated" (Reid, "Responding" 206). Recent research, however, supports some use of the writer's mother tongue in the composing process (Raimes 418), particularly if the student has good control of academic writing in his/her first language (Cook 2567A). In his study of twenty eight Chinese-speaking writers, Friedlander found that the use of translation in planning and drafting may actually improve the final draft, especially when the topic is related to the student's first language or culture (124).

Even though they are ignorant of a client's native tongue, tutors might overcome an impasse in communication by asking, "How would you write that idea in your native language?" Together, the client and tutor can then work out the wrinkles in the translation. In this sense, teaching and tutoring techniques recommended for native speakers also apply to their non-native peers: "Many of the problems faced by our students stem not so much from the syntactic difficulties of the English language itself, as from the difficulty of creating meaning in the writing task that has been set" (Taylor 145). Thus, this second strand of ESL/EFL pedagogy resembles the emphases of the process approach with which most writing center tutors are so familiar. According to Kobayashi, writing within the process approach has a twofold goal:

> To have ESL learners create a final product that is logical, persuasive, and error-free, and to train them to be good negotiators with their own ideas. Demanding of ESL learners only the first goal will engender frustration and even the loss of confidence, just as does demanding perfect nativelike English pronunciation. (107)

For this reason, the rule of drawing attention to grammar and mechanics after organization and development is equally valid with native and non-native writers even though surface errors may seem to overwhelm the tutor on first reading. Once the essay structure is in place and meaning has been negotiated, the client may often be able to isolate grammar and diction problems and self-correct. The essential point to remember is that the student must initiate; the act of conferencing itself does not automatically lead to negotiation of meaning. In a study by Goldstein and Conrad, students who did not actively participate in negotiation produced revisions with slight sentence-level improvements but no substantive changes (443). Negotiation of meaning through peer, instructor, and tutor comments interspersed with multiple revisions and interaction between first language and English places the responsibility for communication on writers and helps them draw on all of their internal and external resources in the writing process.

As each culture establishes different rules of interaction for teacher-student dyads and as patterns students have learned in American classrooms conflict with those of the individual conferences, we may need to spend what seems an inordinate amount of time establishing relationships with our international clients. In my own experience, I have taken perhaps thirty minutes of each initial session with students asking what they see as the

problems to be dealt with as well as explaining what my role as a tutor is and what I expect them to have ready before each session. From the very beginning, I try to encourage students to negotiate the meaning of the *interaction* hoping that in the future they will be able to negotiate meaning in the *composition*. In the second session, I try to interpret instructor comments and encourage clients to ask their teachers directly for clarification of red ink although they may view such communication with an authority figure as inappropriate or self-defeating. In most cases, this process approach to interaction in the writing conference has avoided situations like some I have witnessed: the frustrated ESL student and equally frustrated tutor square off against one another, both under pressure to meet an unrealistic deadline. The student says, "I want her to check my grammar, but she won't"; the tutor says, "It's against my ethics to proofread." As tutors, we cannot allow such misunderstandings to wreck either the teacher-student or the tutor-student communication that is so essential to productive revision.

Focus on the Reader

ESL/EFL writing research has shown the varying expectations placed on readers in different languages and how these might influence the content and style of a composition. For example, Arabic speakers believe writing to be a skill "only the gifted possess"; therefore, the reader has a significant role to play in drawing conclusions (Reid, "English" 223). In Japanese and other topic-prominent languages, a sympathetic audience who reads between the lines is required (Hinds 152); the writer does not insult the reader by making connections too explicit. In contrast, the English-speaking reader has little patience with implicit detail, transitions, and conclusions; he/she wants, in the words of one EFL writer, more than everything. Instructors (and tutors) can awaken students' "culturally-based group-orientation to help them understand the value of audience awareness in writing" (Canilao 147A).

The audience, in this case, is the academic community. One of the most important expectations of this group to be transmitted to the EFL/ESL student is that academic writing combines knowledge gained through reading with ideas original to the writer. Surprisingly, many international students arrive at an American university never having done what we consider "research" or having written anything reflective of their personal thoughts. The tutor must often be the person who introduces these concepts: "Writing instructors working with nonnative speakers need to emphasize that source material is most often used as background and support for their own written ideas" (Campbell 226).

Although studies of native speakers of English suggest that better readers make better writers and vice-versa, studies of non-native speakers indicate that overall exposure to either reading or writing in a first language does not immediately transfer to a second (Eisterhold 98). Instruction does promote transfer of skills, but even an apparently simple task such as summarizing is a complex reading-writing activity that "can impose an overwhelming cognitive load on students" (Kirkland and Saunders 105). Tutors can break down skills of summary writing, quoting, paraphrasing, and documenting to their smallest steps; teaching students set phrases such as "according to the author" may ease the way. Helping students to improve the form and style of their own language so that source material can be more successfully integrated will certainly reduce irritation to the reader (Campbell 224).

English for academic purposes (EAP) classes for particular disciplines have become popular in advanced stages of multi-level ESL courses; however, many international students beginning content-area study at U.S. institutions lack this training. In short, we as tutors cannot simply assume ESL/EFL writers know the ropes. One of our roles is to introduce them to the variety of styles, conventions, and habits of the different academic disciplines (i.e., lab reports for the sciences, essays for the humanities) as well as to style sheets most often used for research papers (Campbell 225). Here, the experience gained in writing-across-the-curriculum programs in place at many colleges and universities will prove invaluable.

International students have a great deal in common with basic writers in that they are outsiders to the academic discourse community (Johns 28). Tutors can help their clients feel more like insiders by encouraging them to "present themselves (ie., their texts) as *already* part of the discourse community they are addressing" (Leki, "Twenty-five Years" 136). If they are successful, their instructors should view small errors as "little more than extraneous noise . . . if the writing fulfills their expectations in terms of content and general form" (Reid, "English" 221).

We as tutors cannot ignore the growing number of international clients with specific, urgent needs who come to our writing centers, even though few of us have received specific training in ESL. It is important, however, to understand the challenges even advanced non-native speakers face in writing English and put this understanding to work in our conferences.

Notes

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