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To Correct or Not to Correct: The Ethics of Addressing Grammar in Writing Center Tutorials

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To Correct or Not to Correct: The Ethics of Addressing Grammar in Writing Center Tutorials

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ECWCA 2015
Factor 1: Allowances and Prohibitions


“Online tutors should be careful not just to correct mistakes but also to explain how writers can identify and correct future sentence-level errors . . . avoid editing the paper.” (p. 51)

“Try not to focus only on the mechanical and grammatical errors in the paper [of an L2 writer].” (p. 69)
Factor 1: Allowances and Prohibitions

• L2 and Tutoring Literature—Harris and Silva (1993), p. 531.

“Tutors should be firm about dealing with **rhetorical matters** before linguistic ones.”

“Tutors are supposed **to be educators**, not **personal editors**.”

“Tutors need to **resist their impulse** to help as much as ESL students need to resist their desire to have every grammatical error corrected.”
Factor 1: Allowances and Prohibitions


“A tutor is not a grammar teacher.”

“Research has shown that college-level ESL students can and do learn to become proficient editors of their own texts when given the necessary instruction.”
Factor 1: Allowances and Prohibitions


“[As a writing center director] the only aspect of tutors’ work about which I’ve consistently stressed what not to do is this one of working with writers on grammar and mechanics.”
Factor 1: Allowances and Prohibitions

• Writing Center Mandates on Websites

_Purdue_—We _won’t proofread or edit_ your documents for you. In other words, we _won’t fix your mistakes_, but we _can address sentence-level_ concerns such as grammar and punctuation.

_U of Michigan_—While consultants are _happy to work with writers on their sentence-level concerns_, we _avoid proofreading or "correcting" papers._

_U of Notre Dame_—Tutors _do not write or edit_ papers for students.
Factor 1: Allowances and Prohibitions

• Writing Center paperwork listing topics that can be addressed in a tutorial:

  ✓ 4 of 7 schools have such a list.
  ✓ 100% of those who have such a list include “Grammar” as a legitimate focus for a tutorial.
Factor 1 Summary

Prohibitions
Tutors...
• Do not proofread
• Are not grammar teachers
• Do not prioritize grammar

Allowances
• Tutors can address grammar
• Writers need to learn grammar
• Grammar is a legitimate request
Factor 2: Tutor Interpretation/Use of Training

Tutors say L2 writers ask mainly for grammar help.

→ “No proofreading” morphs into “no grammar help.”

→ Tutors express angst about proofreading too much when they help with grammar.
Tutoring Continuum

**NO**
- Proofread
- Edit

**Grammar??**

**YES**
- Organization
- Content
What Really Happens in Tutorials?

- Both NSs and NNSs ask for grammar help.
- Tutors take writers’ requests for grammar help at face value.
- Tutors state agendas prioritizing rhetorical issues, BUT
- Tutor modus operandi prioritizes grammar.
- Line-by-line editing is the most common method used.
What do we do about this?

Or, how do we ethically address grammar in the writing center?
Revised Tutoring Continuum

**NO**
- Tutor controls
- Tutor rewrites
  (could include organization/content)

**YES**
- Writer engaged
- Writer rewrites
  (could include grammar)
Educate Writers

• “You can’t be too early, but you can be too late.”
  —Park, a graduate tutor

• Prioritize based on which draft.
Educate Tutors

• Avoid the automatic proofread that accompanies reading a draft straight through.
• Address grammar—usefully.
Educate Instructors

• The realities of Second Language Acquisition
• The realities of students learning discipline-specific language and conventions
• Best practices for assessing writing
• Options for addressing grammar in writing assignments
EDITS: A Mnemonic for Addressing Grammar

Evaluate errors
Decide on a method
Involve the writer
Teach proofreading strategies
Specify further work
References


Writing Lab Policies Websites

https://owl.english.purdue.edu/writinglab/policies

http://www.lsa.umich.edu/sweetland/undergraduate/inpersonwritingsupport/peerwritingcenterguidelines

http://writingcenter.nd.edu/about-the-center/
Thank You

Questions?

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Pilot Study Data: N = 16

Classification
2 Freshmen
2 Sophomores
3 Juniors
4 Seniors
3 Graduate students
2 Post-docs

Language
7 Native Speakers
9 Non-Native Speakers
Comparison between what is asked for and what is given

- C writes = C Says
- C says = T does
- T says = T does
- C says = Paper needs
- T does = Paper needs

Legend:
- NO
- YES
- Yes but Different order
What writers wanted compared to what tutors provided

- Same Order, Same Topics
- Same Order, Fewer Topics
- Same Order, More Topics
- Different Order, More Topics
- Different Topics