"I Had to Discard Initial Assumptions": Equipping Writing Center Tutors With Expertise in Second Language Writing

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“I had to discard initial assumptions”

Equipping Writing Center Tutors with Expertise in Second Language Writing

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ESL Specialist, Purdue University Writing Lab
SSLW, October 2016
Overview

• Why Writing Center tutors need L2 writing expertise
  ✓ Background
  ✓ Need

• How to equip them with what they need
  ✓ Homegrown training program
  ✓ Results
International Students at Purdue

- University Enrollment
- WC Usage


Enrollment Trends:
- University Enrollment has a steady increase from 1995 to 2015.
- WC Usage shows a more fluctuating pattern but generally increases as well.

Sources:
- www.purdue.edu/datadigest/datadigest2001_02/pages/students/stu_int.htm
- www.purdue.edu/datadigest/Diversity/WLEnrlnternationl.htm
- https://owl.english.purdue.edu/writinglab/annualreports
The Need—Writers

Writers ask for:
• Grammar
• To sound like a native speaker
• Zero grammar errors

Writers also need:
• Cultural knowledge
• Vocabulary
• Realistic expectations
• Writing help common to all inexperienced writers
# The Need—Tutors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Graduate Tutors</th>
<th>Undergraduate Tutors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1st yr. of tutoring</strong></td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Yrs. of experience w/international students</strong></td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2-5 years experience</strong></td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>up to 80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lack knowledge of cultural issues</strong></td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>up to 30%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• “I had to discard initial assumptions about their abilities.”

• “I assumed that writing processes . . . were fundamentally the same.”

• “It was challenging to differentiate between writing concerns and language issues.”

• “I find it difficult to explain grammatical rules to students, which are easier for me to do "instinctively" rather than explain.”

• “I would like more training on how to overcome language barriers during conferences.”

• “I was worried about pretty much everything.”
Context Constraints & Goals

Context Constraints

• Mixed Disciplines (WC & SLW)
• Funding & Time
• Topics
• Methods

Goals

• Theoretical conversation
• Strategies and skills
• Self-reflection
Discourse Analysis--A Closer Look at Tutor Talk
This module will ask you to look closely at tutor talk and how it
This module will most likely take you 5-6 weeks of training time early in the semester.

Attitudes and Assumptions

Cross-Cultural Communication

Cultural Impacts on Writing

Grammar and Proofreading

Grammar Requests--What They Might Mean
This module explores what it means when a writer asks for help really knows what a paper needs.

Plagiarism

Second Language Acquisition

Tutoring

Vocabulary and Sentences
Creating Interactive Content

• Observation: Identify areas of need
• Research: Identify relevant theoretical material
• Thought: Identify (& create) interactive content
• Test newly developed materials
Creating Interactive Content: Observations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observations</th>
<th>R</th>
<th>T</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Client comments on own ability in language or writing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Client requests grammar/vocabulary/sentence help</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Client requests other help (HOCs)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Client finds own errors while (R)eading or while (T)tutor reads</td>
<td>(^{(R)})</td>
<td>(^{(T)})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Client corrects own errors when tutor points them out</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Client challenges or disagrees with tutor’s suggestion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tutor interrupts reading to talk about grammar/vocabulary/sentences</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tutor interrupts reading to talk about other concerns</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.....</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# Creating Interactive Content: Observations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agenda-Setting</th>
<th>Client Mentions</th>
<th>They Talk about</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Client</td>
<td>Tutor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Understanding the assignment
- Generating ideas
- Thesis statement
- Argument
- ...
## Creating Interactive Content: Observations

### Sample Chart

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Turn length in seconds</th>
<th>Tutor Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tutor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>X (the tutor spoke)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>X (the writer spoke)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>X (the tutor spoke)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Calculations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tutor</th>
<th>Writer</th>
<th>Silence</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- **Number of turns**
- **Length of speaking time in seconds**
- **Average turn length** (length of speaking time divided by number of turns)
- **Number of turns for back-channeling** (remember to count the rows when the person was NOT the main speaker)
- **Length of time spent reading**
- **Number of Known Answer questions**
- **Number of Authentic questions**
Creating Interactive Content: Sample Papers

• Collect sample documents from writers
• Use a permission form
• Potential methods include
  ✓ L2 and presumed-L1 comparison
  ✓ Error marking method tryout and comparison
  ✓ Mark a draft then compare to the video-recorded tutorial of that draft
Putting It All Together

• Training should allow tutors to
  ✓ Join the theoretical conversation
  ✓ Practice skills
  ✓ Become aware of their own assumptions

• Any module should include
  ✓ Relevant background reading and theory
  ✓ Activities for practicing skills
  ✓ Reflection guided by questions
• “I make far less assumptions and view [L2 writers] more individually.”

• “The tutorial checklist helped me see the common issues . . .”

• “I have been able to see more clearly how some assignment guidelines are culturally bound.”

• “The interview . . . was a great reminder of the difficulty of writing academic papers as an ESL student.”

• “Clients seem more comfortable as a result of my knowing more about their needs.”

• “These exercises have helped me identify both patterns of error and my own assumptions about the writers.”
Questions?

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