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ESL Training for Writing Center Tutors

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Abstract

The changing demographics of universities have resulted in changing demographics among writing center clientele; however, tutors are often underprepared to meet the language needs of students writing in a second language. Although many agree that ESL-specific training for tutors is needed, little has been written to describe that training. This paper explores the issues related to ESL training and details the intensive ESL-specific training for tutors conducted in the Purdue Writing Lab during the spring of 2013.

Introduction

The changing demographics of universities over the last decade have resulted in a concomitant change in writing center clientele, with increasing numbers of international students seeking writing help. Unfortunately, the philosophies of writing centers, which are often based on work with native speakers, do not always meet the needs of ESL writers. Difficulties arise when writing center theory's historic aversion to sentence-level help and writing consultants' lack of knowledge about second language (L2) acquisition are confronted on a daily or even hourly basis by ESL writers who require—and seek—sentence-level language help. While recent research has called for rethinking writing center practice in light of the changes in clientele, there is a corresponding need to reformulate the training received by tutors to enable this shift in practice. The need to design new tutor training has been important for the Purdue Writing Lab, where increased international enrollment led to a dramatic increase in international clients between the 2006-2007 academic year, when 25 percent of clients were international students, and six years later when that number was 72 percent. To prepare tutors for the necessary shift in practice, I created a one-semester, intensive training program that focused exclusively on working with international students. This paper first discusses the issues related to ESL-specific tutor training and then describes and evaluates the program piloted in the Purdue Writing Lab during the Spring of 2013.

Rationale

The need to rethink writing center practice as it relates to international clients is not new. Powers (1993) notes that tutors are informants as well as collaborators, that native speakers and non-native speakers bring different knowledge and skills to the writing conference, and that “successful assistance to ESL writers may involve more intervention . . . than we consider appropriate with native speaking writers” (p. 44). Bell and Youmans (2006) highlight the

misunderstandings that can result when tutors and ESL clients possess different politeness norms. Thonus (1993, 2004) calls for ESL pedagogy to be applied to tutoring and explicates the differences in behavior and interaction between native speaker and non-native speaker tutorials. Blau and Hall (2002) enumerate cultural differences that affect writing and may need to be addressed during tutorials. Research such as this highlights the disconnect between writing center theory, with its focus on the so-called *higher order concerns* of content and organization, and the needs of non-native speakers, for whom language difficulties contribute to problems in all aspects of writing. Given the de facto status of many writing centers as the sole *language* center on university campuses, these explications, redefinitions, and calls for change serve a necessary function in encouraging writing centers to redesign services for international clients to include the *lower or later order concerns* of sentence structure, vocabulary, and grammar. When a plethora of wrong word choices or incorrect parts of speech result in reader confusion, the vocabulary or grammar problems cease to be *lower order* and fall squarely within the purview of the writing center.

Such widening of what is acceptable in tutorials necessitates a corresponding expansion of training for consultants who must work within the new parameters. Harris and Silva (1993) point out that often tutors

are not adequately equipped to deal with . . . the unfamiliar grammatical errors, the sometimes bewilderingly different rhetorical patterns and conventions of other languages, and the expectations that accompany ESL writers when they come to the writing center (p. 525).

Although tutor training is a common topic in writing center literature, the focus is seldom on ESL-specific concerns. Researchers tout methods for general training as varied as video (Catalano, 2003; Devet, Cinense, Rogers, & Snyder, 2009), journals (Hall and Kennedy, 2007; Munger, Rubenstein, & Burow, 1996), tape transcription (Blau, Hall, Davis, & Gravitz, 2001), and scenario card games (Smith, 2005); and topics range from emotional intelligence (Lape, 2008) to visual tools for working with non-native speakers (Ganguly, 2004) and cultural differences (Blau & Hall, 2002). What is missing is a discussion of the practicalities of providing intensive tutor training that will enable consultants to successfully work with international clients.[1] For instance, how should *ESL* training be conducted in a setting in which every tutor possesses differing levels of knowledge and amounts of previous experience with L2 writers? How can *ongoing* training take place despite high levels of turn-over among tutoring staff as individuals graduate and move on? More importantly, what topics should be covered and what skills taught in order to enable tutors to most successfully meet the needs of international clients?

These questions have had particular relevance at the Purdue University Writing Lab as our numbers of international clients have grown. In the 2012-2013 academic year, the Writing Lab hired 17 Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) and 17 Undergraduate Teaching Assistants (UTAs) and Business Writing Consultants (BWCs) combined, for a total of 34 tutors. Among the GTAs, 77 percent possessed up to five years of experience working with international students *in any capacity*. This included a mandatory year of teaching First Year Composition (FYC) before working in the Writing Lab. In any FYC class at Purdue, between one and eight students are likely to be international; thus, most GTAs will have had “experience” working with non-native

speakers prior to tutoring. The quantity of this experience, however, varies quite a bit, with some having worked as tutors or ESL instructors in other locations in addition to the FYC experience. In contrast to the GTAs, among the UTA/BWCs, 40 percent were in their first year of experience working with internationals. Not surprisingly, for any one topic relevant to working with international students, the number of consultants lacking prior knowledge ranged from one or two among GTAs (ten percent) to four to ten among UTA/BWCs (up to half). In other words, experience level and background knowledge were inconsistent both across and within the two groups of tutors. A one-size-fits-all training approach would not, therefore, seem particularly useful.

Prior to spring 2013, tutor training in Purdue's Writing Lab consisted mainly of a course for undergraduates and a practicum for graduate students, with some additional training held during regular staff meetings throughout the semester. Since this training had to cover all aspects of working in a writing center, relatively little of it focused specifically on ESL clients. Our Spring Intensive ESL training was designed to remedy this lack.

Format

In creating a training program of this type, the initial questions center around format. With a large number of participants, all of whom are students, and with a goal of providing instruction to meet different levels of experience, group meetings or workshops are not effective long-term options. In recent years, several researchers have investigated ways to overcome these difficulties. Estes and Martina (2010) developed "online self-guided training modules on various tutoring-related topics" (p. 2), and Nowacki (2012) explored using Moodle for a self-paced program that would include "advanced instruction in assisting ESL writers" (p. 2). Since the Purdue Lab had funding for one hour of ESL training per week per tutor, we planned a pilot program using the ideas of training modules and self-guided programming. Our intensive ESL training was arranged as a series of one-hour "assignments" completed by each tutor individually at scheduled times. Despite the goal of individualized training, the pilot program contained only two separate options: graduate or undergraduate. All GTAs completed the same assignments; all UTA/BWCs completed assignments that had some overlap with the GTAs. In general, the training for the GTAs tended to have additional theoretical material supplementing the practical skills which comprised UTA/BWC training.

In order to incorporate the ESL training as smoothly as possible, it was arranged to mimic the current Lab practice of having the reception staff hand tutors their clients' folders when clients arrived, thus signaling to tutors that they had appointments. Similarly, at the beginning of a tutor's scheduled training hour, he or she was given a manila folder by the reception staff, signaling the start of training. The folder contained all previous work, any individual materials needed for the current assignment (e.g., observation forms, reflection sheets), and directions for that assignment. Materials to be shared by all tutors (e.g., books, articles, DVDs) were located in a central spot in the Writing Lab. The tutoring schedule allowed training to be adequately spaced over the week so that no two tutors were training during the same hour.

Materials

In choosing materials and assignments, I sought “to introduce tutors to the professional conversation [of L2 acquisition] without excluding them from it” (Litman, 2008). The training needed to enable tutors to self-reflect—in particular, on the effectiveness of their interactions with international students—while allowing them to engage with the new material rather than merely following the dictated practices of someone else’s research. In short, as Munger, Rubenstein, and Burow (1996) note, good tutor training “must include observation, interaction, and reflection”; thus, good ESL training must allow tutors a means to acquire ideas and information (input) and to express their understanding of and thoughts about the same (output).

Because the pilot run of the ESL intensive training had to benefit tutors with a range of background experience and because it was necessarily limited in scope due to the time frame of a single semester (16 1-hour segments), the assignments covered a breadth of topics without offering a chance, yet, for depth. The segments introduced tutors to culture as it plays out in higher education, L2 acquisition, conferencing with L2 writers, the cultural aspects of assignments, the attempts by the writing center community to address the influx of L2 writers, general language issues, writing templates, academic writing, grammar, syntax, vocabulary, and proofreading. The topics fall roughly into three categories: the impact of culture in seemingly inexplicable places, the language and writing issues that accompany writing in an L2, and the attempts of academia to address the first two.

In order to appeal to a range of learning styles and preferences, I varied the input and output materials from week to week. The input included short videos, journal articles, book chapters, tutorial observation sessions, webpages, sample student papers, brief sections of books such as sample templates or short grammar lessons, and research into specific topics using the tutor’s preferred method (e.g., web, personal interview, journal articles). The output included written reflections shared with a small group via email, observation checklists, small group discussion, lists (e.g., tips for tutoring, grammar problems), notes for a brief presentation, mental exercises, the creation of grammar and proofreading handouts to use with clients, and written grammar exercises. Each input/output module focused on a specific topic, offered some information on the topic and the potential for tutoring problems related to the topic, and asked the tutor to think about and respond to the information. Tutors received feedback on their work in a number of ways: email from me and/or fellow tutors, direct discussion of their thoughts in a small group, or brief written comments from me on non-electronic, asynchronous written work. Occasionally, an individual tutor would share thoughts on an informal basis or ask questions or express concerns related to the training. This contact took place as casual, in-person conversations or as email.

Results

Because of the nature of this pilot program—in-house training rather than an official research project—the majority of our evaluation is informal and anecdotal. As might be expected with a program that allows for only two levels of experience (graduate and undergraduate), some individuals found the training more useful than others. Those with less previous experience

found more aspects of the training useful; those with more previous experience found only some parts useful. Among the latter group, the parts deemed most useful were scattered over all of the assignments, indicating that, to be entirely successful, ESL training in a writing center needs to be as individualized as possible.

In addition to the differing perceptions of usefulness, tutors also varied in their enjoyment of the individual modules and in their ability to complete assignments in the time provided. Some tutors found that their reading speed was too slow to allow them to adequately process and reflect on the new information in one hour. These results suggest the benefit of offering individualized programs that allow tutors to choose topics of interest and to work at their own pace, while tracking progress over the course of potentially multiple years as a tutor. Despite the limitations of the pilot program, tutors generally commented favorably, noting that they used the new skills in their tutoring sessions and felt more comfortable working with international students as a result of the new knowledge.

Conclusion

A subsequent iteration of this training will address these limitations by transferring the existing program to a course management system, in this case Blackboard Learn. The software will allow tutors to work at their own speed, with assignments easily carried over to a following week. This alleviates the problem of tutors attempting to read and reflect in too little time for their processing speed. Additionally, the software allows me to rearrange and expand the existing training materials to provide a greater range of topics and a more in-depth consideration of each. After an initial general introduction to ESL tutoring, each tutor will complete material that fills gaps in his or her existing knowledge. Because the software can be set to allow an extended timeframe, tutors who return to work in the Writing Lab can track their progress across semesters rather than starting over each semester.

It seems appropriate to end with a word of caution. In the same way that each tutor in our Lab benefits from individualized ESL training, so too will individual writing centers benefit from an attention to their own specific conditions and needs. The ratio of native to non-native speaking clients, the ESL background experience of consultants, the time available for training—these are but a few of the factors that determine the usefulness of any training model for a particular institution. While it seems clear that some form of specialized training is necessary at institutions with high percentages of international students, the nature of that training remains open to debate. Rather than accepting wholesale another center's program, including this one, writing center administrators should consider the questions I posed initially: how should training be conducted given the knowledge and experience of these tutors, how can it be ongoing given the staffing constraints of this particular center, and what topics and skills are lacking for these consultants?

Endnotes

[1] The excellent book edited by Bruce and Rafoth (2009) offers practical advice on the issues faced in tutoring international students; however, it does not address training per se. While it is useful for training purposes, it does not itself answer the questions I pose.

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