“I worried about pretty much everything”: Training tutors to work with L2 writers
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[Notes to accompany presentation slides]

Slide 2:
My goal is to share information about creating a homegrown ESL tutor training program. Due to increases in international enrollment at Purdue, with resulting increases in international traffic in our writing center, I’ve spent a significant portion of time over the last 4 years developing an intensive program that our tutors participate in every spring. In our center (and likely in yours), tutors seldom possess second language writing expertise when they arrive.

When asked, tutors may focus on their own lack of comfort with “grammar” as being the significant problem when tutoring international students. But as my title quote from one of our tutors demonstrates—tutors can and do worry about pretty much everything to do with tutoring L2 writers. Things can go awry in a tutorial very easily when the writer is an international student and the tutor is a Native English speaker. For instance, in some cultures, tutor=teacher, and writers may be acting on that understanding regardless of how we train our tutors. In addition, writers often focus on correctness or “sounding like a NS” to the exclusion of addressing other significant areas of the document such as content development or organization. And, along with grammar and more global concerns, these writers may also need help with the cultural aspects of assignments, of writing, and of interactions with instructors and classmates. Tutors who are worrying about “pretty much everything” have a wide range of options to choose from, which is why fitting a training program to a local context is so important.

On the slide you can see the plan for this talk—I’ll briefly discuss how to get started creating such a program, talk about how to create interactive, hands-on content (as opposed to simply throwing reading assignments or discussions at tutors), provide some insights into putting all the pieces together into a coherent program, and then share some tutor opinions of our program from the last few years.

One note about terminology before I begin. There are a large number of terms used to describe second language writers. In the interests of simplicity, I will refer to “ESL training” simply because that is how our tutors know our training program, to “international students” because at Purdue we have more visa students than recent immigrants in attendance, and to “L2 writers” because that is one of the more accepted terms in the field currently.

Slide 3:
A first step in developing a training program might be a needs assessment. In our case, this was actually a later step—the need was obvious: ~73% of clients are international students; tutors are seldom Second Language Writing (SLW) experts. So it was rather a sink-or-swim situation. The needs assessment questions you see on the chart became part of a post-semester evaluation that I then used to revise the training for future years.

We can see from this data that, for our center, there tends to be wide variation in both tutoring experience generally (15% to 57% of tutors in their first year of tutoring) and in years of experience working with international students in any capacity (20% to 40% in their first year of experience). If we
consider that there is always some amount of tutor turnover from year to year (sometimes as many as 75% of our tutors are new for any given year), the training needs to not only allow for variety of previous experience but also occur on a regular basis (i.e., yearly).

In addition, there is wide variation in knowledge of cultural issues (33% up to 88% claimed this lack) and L2 grammar problems (17% up to 49% claimed a lack). “Cultural issues” in this case included the role of culture in assessing L2 writing, in the global concerns of L2 writing such as organizational patterns, and in conferencing with L2 writers.

In summary, our needs assessment tells us the following:

- Training needs to occur on a regular basis
- Training needs to account for variety of personal experience with L2 writers
- Training needs to account for variety of personal knowledge about L2 writing

Our solution: an online course using Blackboard, in which tutors can choose modules of relevance to them and can work at their own pace. (I should note that this is supplemented by me occasionally commandeering a regular staff meeting for a group discussion of related topics and issues.)

**Slide 4:**

When I began work on this project, the single most problematic aspect of developing a curriculum was that it involved crossing disciplinary boundaries. There is a LOT of research into training writing center tutors. There is a LOT of research into second language writing. There is even research on tutoring second language writers. But there is very little specific, detailed, nitty-gritty, here’s-how-to-do-it material on how to TRAIN tutors to **work with L2 writers**. As you look into creating material for your center, remember to look widely across disciplines and then adjust things to fit the context—in our case, mostly L1 tutors with mostly L2 writers.

Other context constraints include funding, time, topics, methods, and goals.

For our center, funding dictated time: the International Students & Scholars office funds 2 graduate tutor lines in our writing center; given our numbers it did not make sense to have specialist tutors, so instead we divided up the extra tutoring hours those 2 lines provide us (2 tutors x 9 hours per week=18 hours per week) and determined that we could use those hours to train everyone—1 hour per week per tutor every spring semester. In effect, ISS is paying for the ESL training of our tutors, which allowed us the luxury of extremely in-depth, intensive training.

Before looking at topics and methods, let me say a few things about goals. On the surface, the goal of training is to improve tutors’ abilities to help L2 writers, whatever that means. However, because there is not one agreed-upon understanding of Second Language Acquisition or Second Language Writing, it is important that the training do 2 things right up front:

- Introduce tutors to the theoretical conversation and allow them to participate in it using their tutoring experiences
- Provide strategies to immediately apply in tutorial situations (including improving skills that might be weak)
Note that these two goals point toward potential method: the inclusion of both theory (e.g., readings) and strategies (e.g., practical materials).

In addition, because there isn’t one “right way” to do things and because cultural assumptions can be invisible yet pack a wallop in terms of effect, it is important that tutors learn to always be self-reflective when tutoring and to pay attention to what they are doing, why they are doing it, and what they are assuming as they do it. So one of the goals of ESL training becomes uncovering self-assumptions—which also points toward a potential method: the inclusion of self-reflective moments.

Slide 5:

Topics & Methods:

Our ESL training course has evolved over the last 4 years. The first year, it was paper-based and everyone did the same lessons every week. (Remember that this was our sink-or-swim, we’ve-got-to-do-something-to-train-our-tutors-now-year.) Feedback at the end of the year exposed two problems with that method: processing and working speed variation meant it was hard for some people to finish an assignment in the allotted time; variation in background experience and knowledge meant that any given lesson was irrelevant to at least some of the tutors.

What you see on the screen now is a screen-shot of part of the Blackboard course that replaced the paper-based course. This is a list of the topic choices that GRADUATE tutors have AFTER they have completed an introductory module. The introductory module insures that everyone starts with the same basic information. The free choice thereafter insures that everyone works with information that seems relevant to them at that time. You can see the range here—assumptions, grammar, tutoring, cultural impacts, plagiarism, etc. In addition to these modules, there are some semester-long options only available to 2nd year tutors—these involve research into a specific topic and producing some sort of material.

The undergraduate tutors have a separate course with more focus on the practical and less on the theoretical, but they also have some choice after they’ve completed introductory material.

The online method allows tutors to work at their own pace and also to work on material that is relevant to their needs at the time. The research modules meet the needs of tutors who have spent more years on training or who come into the job with more previous experience in L2 writing. In any given semester, we usually have 1 or 2 tutors working in each free choice module at any one time, and 1 tutor working on a semester-long option.

So, to summarize methods and topics: Because the funding & timing constraints dictated 1 hour per week per tutor (and it had to be during their scheduled working hours, of course, since it was paid time), and because tutor experience and background varied so widely, this required a work-at-your-own-pace self-study method. Hence—a Blackboard course site.

Because the goals dictate theoretical knowledge, practical skills, and self-awareness of assumptions, the lessons are a mix of reading published material in the WC and/or SLW fields, of working with actual L2 writers’ documents, of observations, and of written, guided reflections.
Slide 6:
For the next few slides I want to focus on how to create interactive content. If we are talking about interaction in a tutorial setting, there are 3 basic options for interaction: tutor, writer, document. Any of these can cause problems in a tutorial with an L2 writer; thus, all of them are useful areas of focus for training. In a minute, I’ll show some examples of interactive content based around the tutor and the document, but first I want to consider briefly HOW these materials were developed.

When I looked into tutor training methods, I found articles that said “videos that can be observed after the fact are good because then you can talk about what the tutors notice.” Which was not too helpful….so…

My general path for developing a new module looks like this:

• Perform lots of observation of tutorials and/or talk to tutors → identify an area of need (What are tutors struggling with, whether they realize it is a struggle or not?)

• Research the topic by reading current literature and/or talking to staff (at our own or other institutions) → identify important theoretical materials on which to base activities (What does the larger field say about this area of struggle? Remember that “larger field” includes both SLS and WC work, in addition, perhaps to other areas—education?).

• Give lots of thought to how to practically, in a hands-on activity-based manner, get tutors to see/understand/realize/etc. the problem → identify the type of interactive content to develop

• Put it all together—provide access to readings, create whatever materials are needed for the activity to be successful, organize the readings and activities in a way that makes sense, include opportunity for reflection (develop guiding questions, determine where in the course of the module to include this, etc.)

Three important points to note:

1. Whatever you create should be based on a desired outcome; for instance, tutors are not simply observing; they are observing X in particular (who talks the most, the type of questions the tutor uses, the body language of both parties, etc.)

2. Be sure to test whatever you create prior to using it more widely. This allows you to check that the activity or process is actually do-able but also to see whether or not it leads to the desired outcome.

3. Even as you are seeking to increase tutor awareness of their own assumptions, this process requires that you see what people might be assuming and also how to make that assumption visible to them.

So, let’s look at some sample observation activities. You’ll find more detailed versions of these in the handout packet.
Slide 7:
This long list of items asks the observer to notice the types of interaction between tutor and client and to track how often each occurs. The items on the list are a combination of customary practices in tutorials (e.g., the client reads the paper aloud), practices which research has found lacking in L2 tutorials as compared to L1 tutorials (e.g., shared laughter), and practices that I have observed many times in tutorials with L2 writers (e.g., the writer comments on poor English ability).

The tutors are asked to observe and track one L1 tutorial and one L2 tutorial and then later to reflect on the experience. For some tutorial pairings, the disparity in types of interactions between tutor and client is startling; for others, there is less distinction between the two. In either case, the observer notices particular items on the list and considers his or her own experiences with those items.

A similar activity asks tutors to observe a tutorial and track non-verbal interaction—smiling, gesturing, leaning forward or backward, pointing, etc. Tutors track the type of interaction, the person using it, and whether or not the other person mirrors it back.

Slide 8:
This next observation form (also available in the handout) asks tutors to track the order of events rather than the quantity of events. Our tutors use this form with a video-recorded tutorial. Each column on the form will be numbered individually. If the client asks for help with grammar first and then with thesis statements, the grammar row of the client-agenda-setting column would be labeled “1” and the thesis statement row would be labeled “2”. If the tutor renegotiates the order during the agenda-setting, the tutor-agenda-setting column would have a “1” for thesis statements and a “2” for grammar.

I used this chart for some research in our writing lab and found that no matter what tutors prioritized in the agenda-setting phase of the tutorial, when they started reading a document straight through they defaulted to grammar first. So an observation activity like this one can help tutors learn to see their own assumptions—first, that they are setting an agenda and sticking to it and second, that they are prioritizing global concerns over local, neither of which may actually be true.

Slide 9:
One of our newest observation activities asks tutor to perform a discourse analysis and track things like turn-taking and back channeling. These forms are also in the handout. The chart on the left shows how to code a tutorial for turn lengths, types of questions, and back-channel commentary. The tutor then observes either an actual tutorial or a video-recorded actual tutorial and records times in each column. After observing, the tutor informally notes how effective or ineffective the tutorial appeared to be (not based on anything in particular—a gut feeling, if you will). The right-hand document shows how to tally the observation coding. What often comes to light is that the tutor might be speaking a LOT more than the writer in terms of both turns and length of time. This is often especially true in L2 tutorials. If the tutor has previously informally labeled a tutorial as effective or ineffective, comparing these results to that label can prove very interesting. For this particular module, tutors observe and code multiple video-recorded tutorials and then record a tutorial of their own and code it.
Now, I want to talk a little bit about working with sample papers for training activities. For some tutors, especially very new ones, the “worry about pretty much everything” is due purely to lack of experience. That is to say, they know just enough about international writers to see the potential problems—lots of grammar errors, and think “I’m not very good with grammar myself”—and not enough to realize that something may not be a problem in actual fact with any particular writer or that it may not be the priority in any given tutorial. Exposing tutors to actual student writing of the sort they may see in a tutorial can prove extremely useful. In addition, sample papers in training can allow tutors to practice skills and strategies without the pressure of having a writer sitting at the table with them.

In our Writing Lab, we routinely collect sample documents along with permission forms allowing us to use those documents in a wide range of ways: training, conference presentations, journal articles, in OWL resources, etc., so documents are readily available whenever we need them.

As with other forms of activity, keep in mind the outcome you are hoping for as you create a sample paper activity. For instance, if you are hoping to help tutors overcome the tendency to immediately focus on surface errors in L2 writing, you might try this: Take an L2 paper with plenty of surface errors. Correct those errors so that the paper looks superficially more like an L1 paper. Ask tutors to read the presumed-L1 paper, identify who the author is (Native Speaker vs. Non-Native Speaker, advanced vs. beginning writer, etc.—this helps to get at their assumptions), and list all of the things that could be worked on in the tutorial. Have them rank those in order of importance. Then (and preferably after a week has elapsed) ask them to do the same thing with a “new” paper (really the original L2 version of the document they already worked with). Then ask them to compare and reflect on the experience. Many tutors notice immediately their own tendency to get stuck on the language in the original document even though it has all the same global concerns as the presumed-L1 document.

Additional uses for sample papers include using them to teach tutors various methods for marking errors—this allows them to practice identifying error types and patterns of error as well as make some judgement calls about how many errors make sense to focus on and which ones. There are a number of different objectives that can be achieved with multiple-method error marking activities—which one you focus on will depend on the error-marking method used and the type of reflection that accompanies the activity.

And, for a last example, tutors can be asked to mark a draft for things that could or should be focused on in a tutorial and then to view a video-recording of the tutorial for that particular draft, comparing what the paper needed in their opinion with what the writer asked for and what the tutor chose to focus on at the moment. This can allow tutors to consider who gets precedence in a tutorial when there is disparity between the document, the writer’s wishes, and the tutor’s opinions. With L2 writers, this disparity often occurs between global concerns in a document vs. grammar or sentence level concerns expressed by the writer.
Slide 11:
The final step in putting together a training program is organizing things in a way that makes sense. This means topic-based modules, if you have the funding and time for an ongoing program. Keep in mind the overall goals as you put everything together: theory, practical skills, and awareness of one’s own assumptions. Any module should therefore include relevant background reading (the key word here is RELEVANT), along with activities, and **guided** reflection. Offer tutors questions to reflect on.

Slide 12:
From an administrative viewpoint, the **FINAL** final step is to evaluate the program and tweak it to make it better.

We do an end-of-semester Qualtrics evaluation survey each year to find out what tutors thought of the various modules, activities, etc. I’ve put a few quotes up for you—these all focus on how activities have sharpened tutor awareness, but there were many other comments about how various topics were of use in tutorials. And there were also general “this training has been very useful” types of comments.

Sample questions include other topics tutors would like to see included in training, the usefulness of various readings and activities, the efficacy of the training in improving the ability to successfully tutor L2 writers, and the training’s effects on confidence and attitude toward tutoring L2 writers.

Probably the hardest part is finding time to go through the useful comments and suggestions and turn them into new materials!