Training Tutors to Work with L2 Writers: Methods & Materials, Principles & Practices

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[Notes to accompany workshop presentation slides.]

Slide 1:
Good morning. I’m guessing that you are here because your writing center works with second language (L2) writers, and you are hoping to learn something useful about training tutors to work with this population. Our goal today is to provide information about creating a homegrown training program. Along the way, we’ll give you lots of time to try out potential activities that might be used in such a program, and we’ll reserve a bit of time at the end to open up a cross-institutional dialogue about best practices for developing theory-infused practical training activities.

Slide 2:
All of the material presented today will be drawn from the semester-long, intensive ESL training program that our tutors participate in every year. I have developed this program over the course of the last 4 years, and Amy, one of our graduate tutors, has participated in a wide variety of the training options in this program. So she can speak about it from the tutors’ perspective.

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” 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.

On the slide you can see the plan for this talk— I’ll briefly provide some background about our program and how I went about creating it. Amy will say a few words, as well, about her experiences with the training. Then we will give you time to explore 3 types of activities—15 minutes each—in small groups. We’ll close with a large group discussion about how to develop such activities and how to tailor them to your individual contexts.

Let me set out a few assumptions before we get started:
- L2 writers want writing help and will show up in writing centers looking for it
- Tutors seldom possess L2 writing expertise when they arrive
- Tutors worry about pretty much everything to do with tutoring L2 writers (grammar, understanding each other, knowing “enough”, etc.)
- L2 writers are not a homogeneous group, so there is no one-size-fits-all approach
Slide 3:
So—how to create a homegrown ESL training program.... It helps to start with an understanding of your context constraints and goals.

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 available research about training writing center tutors. There is a LOT of research about L2 writing. There is even research on tutoring L2 writers. But I found 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, L1 tutors with 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 that ~75% of writers are L2 and few tutors are L2 writing experts, 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. However, because there is not always agreement on how L2s are acquired or how L2 writing develops, 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 theoretical and 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 4:
Let’s go back to topics & methods. Over the course of our 4 years of building this program, my decisions about both topics & methods were heavily informed by needs assessments conducted as part of our end-of-program evaluation each spring. Ideally, this would come first, but our initial year was a sink-or-swim situation with a rather obvious need: 73% of clients are international students; tutors are seldom second language writing experts.

We can see from this data that, for our center, there tends to be wide variation in both tutoring experience generally (15% to 71% of tutors are in their first year of tutoring) and in years of experience working with international students in any capacity (20% to 40% are 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 that 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, I found wide variation in knowledge of cultural issues (from 33% up to 88% claimed this lack) and L2 grammar problems (from 17% up to 56% claimed a lack). “Cultural issues” in this case included the role of culture in 3 areas: 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 related to L2 writing

Based on this information, our method has been an online course using Blackboard, in which tutors can choose modules of relevance to them and can work at their own pace.

Slide 5:
What you see on the screen now is a screen-shot of part of the training 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 tutors work 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, such as L2 writing resources for faculty or the history of error correction.

Because the goals dictate theoretical knowledge, practical skills, and self-awareness of assumptions, the lessons are a mix of reading published material in the writing center and/or second language writing fields, of working with actual L2 writers’ documents, of observations, and of written, guided reflections.
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.

Slide 6:
Before I let Amy share a tutor’s perspective, I want to talk briefly about how I create interactive content. 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.

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 research 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 second language studies and writing center work, in addition, perhaps, to other areas, e.g., 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

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. If you chat with Amy later, she can tell you all about the craziness she’s experienced while testing some of my new materials.
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.

Slide 7:
Amy’s going to take a few minutes to share what all this training is like as a tutor.

AMY:
Generally, the training helps tutors to be more metacognitive—to think about what they are doing with writers rather than just reacting to what writers say or do.
Turn lengths: When working with international students, how long each person talks can vary based on cultural and gender norms as well as how comfortable the client feels with English. Our practice is that it is very important for the client’s voice to be heard. Over the course of one recent semester, I engaged in a discourse activity using taped and live tutorials (including taping one of my own tutorials) with international students to monitor how long each person (tutor and writer) spoke. It’s taught me to be much more aware of voice during the tutorial and of making sure clients who are more reticent to speak up take ownership of their writing. It’s important in all tutorials to be aware of this balance, but the training has heightened my consciousness when working with international students.

Authentic vs. Known Answer: By tracking the kinds of questions tutors ask, I’ve learned to adjust my phrasing to ask authentic questions to empower the writer. I’ve changed my strategies in particular with L2 speakers who seek sentence level help. Instead of asking a known-answer question like “what’s missing here,” I instead will ask them, “can you tell me a little bit about what you’re trying to say here?” or more directly “I’m a little confused. How do these sentences go together?” These types of questions prompt more discussion about the writing process and the ideas that the writer is communicating.

Domestic vs. International and grammar vs. HOC: Several of the training projects we work on help tutors to recognize their implicit bias when working with L2 vs native speakers. Because there are often (but not always) more grammar mistakes indicative of an L2 writer (preposition misuse, articles missing), it’s tempting to focus on those mistakes (particularly when writers ask for that help) rather than on structure or argument. Sometimes clients don’t have the vocabulary to ask for the help they need and so resort to “grammar.” With L2 clients, sometimes we’re more inclined to help with grammar to begin with. The training helps us refocus on HOCs, looking at language usage only when it really is an HOC.

We also can’t fix everything in 30 minutes. Some of the reflections on activities about prioritizing global work help the tutors realize that. Strategies and teaching tools to send writers away with can be one way to help clients grow. Creating agendas can help too if they choose to come back.

Slide 8:
The first two types of activities will allow you to try out a small number of the activities in our training program. The final activity, the scenarios, will put you back in the role of the director trying to determine what sort of training to create. As we go through these activities, please remember that we are NOT trying to train you; we are exposing you to TYPES of training. Everything we do today will be greatly abbreviated versions of what tutors would actually do as part of their training.

Slide 9:
15 minutes
Part 1: Error correction
For our first document-based activity, we will work with the single paragraph found on page 3 in order to look specifically at grammar errors only. Half of each group will work with the top paragraph on the page and will use the highlighters to color code the errors using the chart on p. 1. The other half will work with the bottom paragraph and will correct errors directly—make actual changes. It is important to note that you should only be marking things that are actually grammatically wrong—so ignore everything else. If you are stuck on the color coding, think about how you would correct the sentence and that can help you determine what sort of error it is. (e.g., if you would change the verb, chances are it is a verb tense or form error).

Part 2: Things that can be covered in a tutorial
For the 2nd activity, we’ll use the full-page documents on pages 5 & 6. Half the group should work with document A on page 5 and half with document B on page 6. These are first-year composition interview papers. Students interviewed an expert in the topic they are using for a final research paper. For this activity, you will read through the paper fairly quickly and simply mark or list everything that COULD BE covered in a tutorial session, not just grammar. You do not need to write things as if you were writing them for the writer to understand—these are just notes for yourself. If you have time, go ahead and rank order your list of things—what is 1st, 2nd, etc. in terms of importance for helping this writer.

Discussion:
Take a couple minutes to compare the A and B lists. How similar or different were they? What do you know about the writer as a result of these lists?

[The big reveal: they are the same paper. A is the original writer; B is that paper cleaned up grammatically to look more like an L1 paper.]

What’s the point?
Tutors often struggle with how to work with grammar, and they often struggle with how to ignore grammar to prioritize global concerns in early drafts. Working with sample papers can be one way to help them see their own biases toward grammatical correctness at the expense of other work a paper might benefit from. Trying out different types of error correction can help with learning to see patterns of error (the color coding, for instance) or learning to see that grammar isn’t always cut and dried, one always-right answer. A tutor who completes both the A and B versions of the longer paper, separated by at least a week, might confront their own biases about the writer and what a paper needs—grammar vs. global concerns.

Slide 10:
15 minutes
Video 1: Checklist
Find the Tutorial Observation Checklist in your packet. The long form (page 7) is what we normally use in training, but for the sake of time you will use the shorter version on page 8. As you watch/listen to the video clip, place an X or other mark in the appropriate box EACH TIME the event occurs during the tutorial. Your goal is to track the number of times each event
occurs during this tutorial. In a training setting, the tutor would be observing more than one live tutorial and comparing them.

**Take 1 minute to familiarize yourself with the list of events you will be tracking.**

[play 106 video with subtitles]

**Video 2: Body Language**
Find the mirroring observation form in your packet. The long form (page 9) is what we normally use, but for today you’ll use the partially-filled-out shorter version on page 10. **Because you will be looking at body language, we will play this video with no sound.** As you watch the video clips, mark W for writer, T for tutor, or B for both in the appropriate box EACH TIME the action occurs. If there is a significant time lag between when they both perform the same action, then mark each separately. Use the extra lines to insert body language that is not already listed. When the clip is over, use the total columns to tally the numbers of times each person did each action. **There will be three short clips separated by blue screens. Take a few seconds to familiarize yourself with the actions listed on the form.**

[play Junior video with NO subtitles and NO sound]

Normally, activities such as these would be followed by reflection (often reflecting on the differences between two observations with different populations). Take a few minutes in your groups to discuss things you found interesting about the two activities. How did having checklists help to focus your attention? Page 11 in your packet offers some sample reflection questions that our tutors might use for the various activities we’ve done today.

**Slide 11:**

**15 minutes**

Now we will take a break from experiencing training activities to considering how to create them. Find page 12 in your packet. At the top of the page are 4 discussion questions to use with each scenario.

You are a writing center director who wants to train your tutors to work with L2 writers. Read each scenario and discuss the questions with your group. Your goal is to determine for each situation what sort of training might be useful. Think not only about what knowledge or skills might be lacking but also about what activities you might create to help tutors acquire the knowledge or skills necessary.

There are 3 scenarios, so spend no more than 5 minutes on each one.

**Slide 12:**

These are just to get you started—do not feel the need to stick with this if there are other things you want to discuss.