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Shall We Talk to Them in “English”: The Contributions of Sociolinguistics to Training Writing Center Personnel

Jay Jacoby

Jay Jacoby is Director of the Writing Resources Center at UNC-Charlotte, where he also serves as Director of Composition. He is a Fellow of the Brooklyn College Institute for the Training of Peer Tutors. Among a number of scholarly interests, he is exploring further uses of ethnographic techniques in the writing center.

In a paper presented at the 1982 Conference on College Composition and Communication, I suggested that the success of peer tutors in writing centers is contingent not so much on what peer tutors are but rather on what they are not. Because they are not professional writers, peer tutors are less intimidating and more easily seen as genuine collaborators in a learning effort. Because they are not teachers—and are therefore not part of any grade-giving power structure—peer tutors can instruct their clients in many matters which ordinarily resist assimilation. Perhaps most importantly, because they are not English teachers—and thus are not predisposed by genes and training to approach writing in ways that tutees perceive as bizarre—peer tutors can be trusted. Unlike English teachers, they are normal, “real people,” peers.

What all of this implies to those of us who train peer tutors is that we must encourage them to take full advantage of their peer-ness and make the most out of what they are not. We must help them to realize that their greatest strength may lie in their vulnerability, their non-professional, non-authoritarian status. And we must help them to resist whatever urges they might have to pose as writing experts or as English teachers. Accomplishing these tutor-training objectives is no easy task. It simply is not enough to warn peer tutors not to become miniature professors. Cautioning someone not to do something never is enough. And this is especially true when it comes to peer tutors.
One reason why we have difficulty convincing our tutors to maintain their peer status is that we have given them responsibilities which somehow compromise that status. Many new peer tutors undergo a minor crisis in identity: they are no longer everyday students, but they are not teachers either. Uncomfortable in this limbo, they frequently align themselves more on the side of teachers than students. And, in identifying with teachers, peer tutors often adopt what they perceive to be the language of teachers, hoping that this will lend credibility to their new roles. Peter Trudgill notes:

Language can be a very important factor in group identification, group solidarity, and the signalling of difference, and when a group is under attack from outside [e.g. from tutees who may be questioning peer tutors' qualifications] signals of difference may become more important and are therefore exaggerated.¹

I am sure some of you have noticed how new tutors sound like first-year med school students out to test their identities by trying out all the new jargon. Writing center dialogues might go something like this:

Tutor A: Don't talk to me! I'm exhausted! I just spent an hour with a guy who couldn't invent. He couldn't generate an idea to save his soul.

Tutor B: On, a real heuristical basket-case, huh? Did you try Macrorie and Elbow?

Tutor A: Of course I did. What do you think, I'm stupid? Not only did we try freewriting and looping, but also cubing, pentads, classical topoi, and tagmemic invention. Nothing worked!

Tutor B: Well, I've got my own problems. I just worked with a junior psych major who's got an L.F. of 61%!

L.F., for those of you who don't know, is Richard Lanham's abbreviation for Lard Factor, the amount of fat one can squeeze from wordy prose. Like med school students, new tutors also seem to fall victim to a variety of writing maladies that they never even knew existed before they joined the writing center staff: "You know, I never realized it, but all these years I've been suffering from 'top-down block,'" or "No matter how hard I try, I always end up with a 'bifurcated proposition.'" (For naming these writing disorders, tutors are indebted to Linda Flower and Ken Bruffee respectively.)

Of course, it is difficult for peer tutors, uncertain about how to act in their new roles, not to imitate their teachers. After all, they have been listening to us and reading our comments for years. Next to the language of Madison Avenue, teacher talk is the jargon our students know best. So it is only natural for peer tutors to speak the language of
frags and awks. I discovered this the first time I asked my freshmen to write evaluative responses to each others' papers. What I received were twenty wholly unintentional parodies of the comments I had been writing. The difference, of course, was that I was absolutely, positively sincere when I wrote "vague" or "trite" in the margin.

Whether they are responding to a student's prose or making suggestions about how to go about writing it, peer tutors need to realize that replicating teacher behavior is not always the best idea. Writing centers were established to serve as alternatives to, not extensions of, traditional classrooms. Many clients come to these centers because they cannot function well in English classes or in conferencing situations in which student-to-teacher relationships are observed. Therefore, it becomes imperative for peer tutors who imitate teachers to see how they may be modelling their behavior on behaviors that have alienated and frustrated many learners, automatically disengaging them from the writing process. Tutors need to become aware of when they are talking like teachers and what the possible counter-productive effects of that talk may be.

One way to create that awareness is by introducing into our tutor-training curricula more work in interpersonal communication and sociolinguistics, in how language functions beyond the communication of information to establish and maintain social relationships. Given our other concerns, we have probably neglected this dimension of tutor training more than any other.

Letters of recommendation and personal interviews attest to the reliability, dedication, and congeniality of the tutors who staff our centers. Transcripts and diagnostic test scores reveal their mastery of basic pedagogical and grammatical concepts and terminology. Writing samples demonstrate our tutors' abilities to initiate, elaborate, and articulate ideas. But, as we all know, none of these measures guarantees the effectiveness of these students as tutors. None of these measures adequately reveals the extent of the prospective tutors' knowledge of language with reference to social context and function. In fact, I have discovered that many tutors are less sensitive to these dimensions of language than are the clients with whom they work. Most writing center clientele are keenly sensitive to language, particularly to how language can operate, wittingly or otherwise, to discriminate against them. Clearly, those who staff writing centers must be equally sensitive.

Much of our current tutor training does not adequately address sociolinguistic issues. As Lil Brannon has noted, "we often feel we can provide tutors with resources for learning to teach writing, but we have
trouble giving them insight into interpersonal communication."

That is, as a result of our current training, our tutors may become more proficient in providing tutees with invention strategies, or methods of sorting and displaying information, or ways of increasing syntactical sophistication. And our current training programs may provide some groundwork for understanding the affective dimensions of the tutorial: that tutor and tutee should sit side-by-side rather than across from one another; that tutors need to extend to clients a sense of themselves as peers; that tutors should understand their role, how they function, how they see themselves, how others see them, and how all that affects what happens in a tutoring session. But, even with all this enlightenment, there is still a need to make knowledge about sociolinguistic rules a part of tutor training. It is necessary to engage tutors in a detailed description of classroom talk in order to help them adjust their use of language to instructional goals. As Shirley Heath points out,

Perhaps the most important benefit of analyzing discourse in the classroom is the recognition of those nonadaptive features that may have negative value.

Alternatives to unconscious use of teacher talk can come only when teachers are made aware of the structural and functional features of their own language.

In order to help peer tutors acquire this awareness, I think we should require, as part of their training, additional coursework in interpersonal communication or sociolinguistics. I am now recommending that our peer tutors take as a pre- or co-requisite to our Composition Practicum either a course offered by our school of education entitled "Communications Skills and Processes" (HDL 270), or our English Department's course, "Language and Culture" (ENG 465), which is described in our course listings as follows:

LANGUAGE AND CULTURE (Davis-MWF 11:00-11:50) You are literate: what if you weren't? What if you spoke or wrote a language that society deemed inappropriate? How does your culture talk about time, money, death, love? Can you talk without saying anything? We ask questions; we learn how to do field work. Topics for investigation include: Bureaucracy, Jargon, and Mish-Mash; the agency and literacy expectations; setting language policy in the classroom. Varieties of English will include Appalachian, Black, Chicano/Tex-Mex, founding fathers and mothers, Redneck, Subdivisions, Walter Cronkite, and Watergate. Texts: Hall's Silent Language, H.L. Mecken's American Language, and your experiences.

In terms of preparation for working in our writing center, I find the training students receive in such courses commensurate with, if not bet-
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ter than, that which they get in courses in the History of the English Language or Traditional and Modern English Grammar, or Advanced Rhetoric.

If additional coursework is out of the question, either because of time or personnel constraints, we can include in our tutor training a good deal more reading and discussion of that part of linguistics which is concerned with language as a social and cultural phenomenon. In the past, readings in my tutor training course were drawn from such required and recommended texts as Elbow's *Writing Without Teachers*, Bruffee's *A Short Course in Writing*, Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations*, and Tate and Corbett's *The Writing Teacher's Sourcebook*. Now, as a supplement to those works, I am including a number of reading assignments drawn from other less rhetoric-and-composition oriented texts (see the selected list of resources at the conclusion of this article).

In addition to reading about rhetorical invention or sentence combining, tutors now read about kinesics (body movement), proxemics (personal space), and haptics (touching). In addition to reading Halsted, Bartholomae, and Shaughnessy on identifying and analyzing patterns of error, they read Heath, Flanders, and Bellack on identifying and analyzing patterns of teacher-talk, both verbal and non-verbal. Alongside Richard Braddock's "The Frequency and Placement of Topic Sentences in Expository Prose" and Frank D'Angelo's "A Generative Rhetoric of the Paragraph," they study Geneva Smitherman's "White English in Blackface, or Who Do I Be?" and J. Mitchell Morse's "The Shuffling Speech of Slavery: Black English." The objective of these and other assigned readings is to help tutors consider the social implications of putting what they've learned into practice.

Consider, for example, how a study of sociolinguistics can help tutors who work with international students. Over forty per cent of our writing center's clientele are ESL students who present unique problems for our tutors. Frequent difficulties center on issues of the effects of cultural differences on communication ("No matter how pleasant and polite I am when I first meet foreign students, they behave very coolly, and keep me at a distance"), and on writing problems that seem to extend beyond mere second-language interference ("Even after we've cleaned up all the surface errors, Abdul's paper still makes no sense. He doesn't have the vaguest notion of what constitutes logical organization"). We usually dealt with such problems by offering readings in and discussions of the problems of acquiring a second language, and by contrastive analyses of certain grammatical and syn-
tactical features. Recently, however, the discovery of two articles which are largely sociolinguistic in focus has offered my tutors considerably more direction in understanding the problems of ESL students.

One article is based on research conducted at the University of Pennsylvania by Nessa Wolfson and Joan Manes. Entitled "Compliments in Cross-cultural Perspective," this study is based on the premise that languages differ greatly in patterns and norms of interaction. A seemingly innocuous compliment such as "You look nice today," can easily be misconstrued by a non-native speaker who understands the words, but not the rules for interpreting them (i.e. the speaker, in saying the addressee looks unusually well, implies that the reverse is usually the case). Tutors who are having problems initiating dialogue with foreign students need to become more sensitive to the ways their friendly opening gambits may be misinterpreted. As Wolfson points out, "Comments are often heard from non-native speakers that Americans do an excessive amount of complimenting. People from other cultures which are less open in expressions of approval are often extremely embarrassed by this."

A second article, by Robert Kaplan, has done much to increase our tutors' abilities to deal with the structures of papers written by ESL students. Kaplan studied writing samples of over 600 foreign college students in order to demonstrate the degree to which logic and rhetoric evolve out of particular cultures and should not be expected to conform to any universal pattern. Kaplan observed that what many untrained readers view as a lack of coherent organization results from their failure to recognize the non-linear sequence of thought that may inform some ESL papers. Kaplan's point is that "Each language and culture has a paragraph order unique to itself...[and] paragraph developments other than those normally regarded as desirable in English do exist."

As a result of reading Kaplan, we are now beginning to develop tutorial instruction based not only on contrastive grammars but also on contrastive rhetorics. In initial surveys of our ESL students, for example, we have discovered that Arabic writers do not use transitional devices because they would be insulting to readers, and that Arabic shares with oriental languages a principle of indirection. As one Arabic student wrote, "The more you make the paper clear does not mean the more grades you will get....Go indirectly to your purpose; never use the direct way to tell people what you want." (It seems as though many of my native freshmen operate under the same assumptions as this foreign writer.)

In addition to reading and discussing such works as those by Wolfson
and Kaplan, our peer tutors are now asked to write more about their perceptions of the social functions of language and how that impinges upon their work in the writing center. This writing sometimes takes the form of journal entries in response to questionnaires about language attitudes. Particularly effective here is Lou Kelly's "The Question of Standards," which asks us to agree, disagree, or express uncertainty on such statements as, "Nonstandard dialects are socially stigmatized because they are illogical. They cannot be used to talk or write about abstract or logically complex ideas or processes." Or I may call for journal entries on such provocative statements as this one by James Sledd: "The basics to which we are exhorted to go back are often no more than the linguistic prejudices, unreasoned and unreasonable, of WASPs like me." I also ask students to record and reflect in their journals on their own language prejudices. This latter assignment can generate a good deal of personal insight as well as rich material for classroom discussion. One student, for example, discovered some distinctively selective patterns in her discrimination against foreign students. She wrote:

I realize now that I have an even greater language prejudice toward students from other countries. [Greater than the one she had discovered towards speakers of Black English.] Not only do I feel differently when I work with these students, I think I look at the languages themselves differently. For example, I find it much easier to work with students from Greece than those from the Middle East. I don't know why I do this...because George's accent from Greece is just as foreign to me as Bashar's accent from Iraq. But I find myself working harder and being more tolerant with George. Interestingly, once this student realized, on her own, the nature of her prejudice, her attitude toward Bashar changed, and, in later journal entries, she apologized for whatever doubts she once had about him. In addition to requiring a number of these kinds of informal journal entries, I also ask for at least one more formal paper based on research and observation of some social or affective dimension of tutoring. Originally, students enrolled in our Composition Practicum were required to write papers only on such issues as the use of prose models in teaching expository writing, dealing with sentence boundary problems, methods for teaching coherence, and how to spot and improve spelling difficulties.

More important than any of the readings, discussions, or formal and informal writing assignments that we ask our tutors to engage in is the involvement we require of them in systematic descriptive analysis of language in the classroom and the tutorial. As was suggested earlier,
this is done in an effort to help tutors identify specific features of
teacher talk and the effects of that talk on learners. We start out by
having students observe what goes on in classrooms (composition,
literature, other subjects; college, high school, elementary), always, of
course, with the permission of those observed. Observations are based
on methods proposed by Ned Flanders in *Analyzing Teaching
Behavior*. Students begin by recording information on such items as
teacher's physical movement, non-verbal communication used by
teacher, teacher's voice inflection, number of questions teacher asks
(and of that number how many require single word versus longer an-
swers). Tutors also record student behaviors: how they enter the room
and interact with the teacher, their non-verbal actions, how many
students interact with the teacher, how many interact with other students,
how many initiate questions, etc.

Though tutors have been observing these behaviors since they first
entered school, they remain remarkably unaware of their implications.
When results of observations are shared, a number of conclusions are
drawn about the role played by verbal and non-verbal language in con-
vveying information about speakers and their attitudes. Once students
have had some experience in doing such observations, they engage in
more complex descriptive activities such as the Flanders' Interaction
Inventory. This observation requires that tutors make a tally of a
variety of teacher and student behaviors (e.g. how often does the
teacher praise or encourage, ask questions, justify material, etc.? how
often do students respond to teacher questions, state opinions, etc.?).
Of course, tutors do not restrict their observations to the classroom.
They engage in similar kinds of analyses in the writing center or by
listening to tapes of tutoring sessions.

Another excellent activity for raising consciousness about language is
"Incidental Learnings," which comes from a fine text entitled
*Discovering Your Teaching Self* written by Richard Curwin and Bar-
bara Fuhrmann. Incidental learnings are those messages which are sent
unintentionally. Curwin and Fuhrmann's exercise supplies students
with several examples of ten different varieties of teacher talk, each of
which would probably promote some kind of incidental learning.
Tutors are to examine each teacher's behavior and predict the kind of
learning and response that behavior elicits. For example:

Teacher 8: Frequently (if not always) phrases questions as if students were
doing her a personal favor by answering.

Examples of teacher talk:

"Who can tell me who discovered America?"
"Who would like to read the next page for me?"
"Who can give me the answer to number four?"
"Sally, put your answer on the board for me, please."

I would learn ....................................................... 13

The above form of verbal behavior is representative of the kind of routine politeness formulae adopted by many instructors. On the surface, such formulae seem innocuous, appropriately polite. But the chronic repetition of such formulae may also carry another message, namely that there is no inherent reward in a student performing for himself; his performance is always done to please another. A variation of this behavior would be prefacing all requests with "Please," and following their responses with "Thank you."

From the exercise in incidental learning, tutors can move on to another, "Responses to Student Responses," also drawn from Curwin and Fuhrmann. And from that exercise, which can be applied to tutor behavior in small group sessions, tutors can spend some time responding to Thom Hawkins' fine "Personal Checklist of Tutoring Skills," which appears in the Appendix of Muriel Harris's Tutoring Writing. In this inventory, Hawkins asks tutors to review the degree to which they practice effective listening and explaining techniques. A sample item would be: "While the student is talking, I am thinking chiefly about what he/she is saying, not reveling in my own thoughts on the topic or planning my next brilliant statement." 14

The purpose of all these inventories and exercises is to increase tutor awareness of the pedagogical effects of what they say and how they say it. Tutors who engage in a number of these activities become keenly sensitive to how language operates in educational settings, especially to how certain features of teacher talk, even though well-intended, can actually inhibit productive exchanges in the writing center.

One measure of that sensitivity comes when I present tutors with a hypothetical tutorial problem and ask them to comment on the possible effects of each response to that problem:

Sonya comes into the Writing Center for help with a paper. It is her first visit. She got a D – on her first paper in ENGLISH 101, a course that is not one of her favorites. She informs you that English was her worst subject in high school, and that her ENG 101 instructor is a real nit-picking turkey (in this respect, Sonya is not at all unlike the vast majority of Writing Center clientele).

Sonya’s paper, which is about discrimination against women athletes in college, has good ideas, many of them reasonably well-expressed. But
the paper does have some serious problems with unity (she digresses on her reasons for attending school and on the history of women's softball) and organization (her writing rambles from paragraphs on how well male athletes are treated, to explanations on the rigors of training, to instances of discrimination against female athletes, etc.).

After a customary exchange of Writing Center amenities, you have Sonya read her paper to you. Then, while she's filling out some forms, you re-read it and gather your thoughts about how to begin your session. What will you say to Sonya after you have done some stroking (i.e. pointed to what you see as the paper's strengths)? Below are some possible opening gambits. What is your estimation of the effectiveness of each? Which contain language that is likely to be counterproductive? Would you choose any one of these as your opener? If not, how would you begin?

1. "I see two major problems here. You seem to stick in several ideas that don't belong in the paper and you don't organize your material very well. Why didn't you make an outline before writing?"
2. "This paper is lacking in what we call unity and coherence. Some ideas are extraneous to your thesis and there is no controlling pattern of organization manifest. Narrowing your focus and preparing an outline might help to improve this, don't you agree?"
3. "I think readers are probably expecting more direction about your subject and how it is developed than this paper gives them. Would making an outline help?"
4. "When I read this, I got lost a couple of times. I wasn't sure whether you wanted to air a personal gripe about your own case, or whether you wanted to gripe in general about sexist discrimination against women athletes. What are some ways you can get this more focused and organized?"
5. "Well, Sonya, it's your paper. What problems do you see with it?"

Having read about and participated in the analysis of various teacher behaviors and their consequences, tutors have no trouble identifying features of teacher-talk that appear in this exercise. The first response is severely judgmental, practically accusatory. As most students are only too painfully aware, teacher talk is frequently evaluative, with judgment often directed at the student rather than his product. All this is bound to create non-productive defensiveness or an overwhelming sense of failure.

The second response wisely redirects the criticism to the paper rather than the student. But like so much teacher talk, this response is laced with jargon. And many writing center clients believe that teachers use jargon as a weapon to intimidate those who are unfamiliar with it, to keep them in their place. (This notion is probably further reinforced by the use of the phrase "lacking in what we call unity...," which
suggests a kind of elitist us versus non-educated you relationship.) The terminology in this response may be apt, but it could serve as a red flag which would again increase defensiveness or turn a student away. Response Two also includes another feature of teacher talk, the tag-question. The words "don’t you agree?" are not uttered with the expectation of a reply. They are simply intended to take some of the prescriptive edge off the tutor’s remark.

Response Three has eliminated the jargon, and it has a less judgmental tone: the evaluation is moving in the direction of being reader-based rather than criterion-based. It is not a bad response, but few students would be taken in by the question at the end. I doubt that any would be promoted by it to enter into a discussion of the merits of making an outline. This is another distinctive feature of teacher talk: the question-as-directive. Students would interpret it as: Make an outline! Teachers delude themselves into thinking that such questions neutralize any imperative intent.

Despite its longwindedness—another feature of the language of teachers—Response Four may be the best. But only if the question at the end is genuine, if the asker doesn’t have a single answer in mind. If the tutee suspects that there is only one answer, chances are he or she won’t venture a guess. The askers of such questions are the ones who supply the clues here. If they wholeheartedly congratulate a response that they’re looking for, they give a signal that their questions are not as open-minded as they appeared. Other signals are failure to wait for answers or supplying answers themselves.

Response Five, which throws responsibility for assessing the paper back on the tutee, may also be a very acceptable approach. But, if a tutee is unsure of a tutor’s qualifications to offer help, this approach doesn’t do much to instill confidence. Especially in initial tutorial sessions, tutors must establish their credibility. And, in some instances, tutors must be cautioned about trying too hard not to sound like teachers. This is particularly pertinent to tutors who work with international students. I remember one Malaysian student who was totally perplexed by her tutor’s well-meaning circumlocutions and finally asked “Are you trying to supply me with a list of modal auxiliaries?”

As noted earlier, most tutees are very aware of the conventions of teacher talk—they even expect their teachers to observe them. But they don’t expect their peers to, and they may resent those tutors who, consciously or otherwise, appropriate those conventions. They may resent them for what they perceive as pretentiousness. And they may resent them for violating the promise held out that the writing center would
offer an alternative, pressure-free mode of instruction.

In this paper, I have suggested that one way of preventing such resentment would be to significantly raise the tutor's awareness of the social dimensions of language, to get them to consider carefully the consequences of their verbal and non-verbal behaviors. Naturally, my point is not to make tutors so acutely aware of these dimensions as to render them mute. But it is to make them aware that how they speak has a definite impact on their tutoring effectiveness. Shirley Heath has written,

The more we attempt to understand how our messages are structured, how they function, and how they are received, the greater our chances of communicating with students from different environments and cultures. The real test of meaning lies in our ability to be aware of what we have intended in our messages and how we have been understood.15 Contributing to that ability should be a central objective of those who train and supervise writing center personnel.

Notes

1The title of that paper was "What A Peer Tutor Is Not." It is scheduled to appear in a forthcoming issue of the Writing Lab Newsletter.
7"Cultural Thought Patterns in Inter-Cultural Education," Language Learning, 16 (1966), 14. I am indebted to my colleague, Maria Derrick-Mescua, for bringing both this and the article by Kaplan to my attention.
8Student response to a survey conducted by Maria Derrick-Mescua in her ENG 100 class.
9English Journal, 65 (1976), 19.
11Journal entry of Lisa Jones, a student in my ENG 400, Practicum in Teaching Composition, class.
13Ibid., pp. 204-206.
14Tutoring Writing, pp. 286-288.
15Heath, p. 22.
Introducing Writing Center Personnel to Concepts of Sociolinguistics and Interpersonal Communication: A Selected List of Resources


Kaplan, Robert B. "Cultural Thought Patterns in Inter-Cultural Education." *Language Learning*, 16 (1966), 1-20.
MacKillop, James and Donna Woolfolf Cross, eds. *Speaking of Words: A Language Reader*. 2nd Ed. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1982. (See especially all of Section I: "But the Registrar Said I Have to Take This Course": Language in the Classroom.)