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Exploring the Tutor/Client Conversation: 
A Linguistic Analysis

Susan R. Blau, John Hall, and Tracy Strauss

Background

"What is the ideal tutoring relationship?" is one of the most interesting questions in writing center practice. The usual answer is "a collaboration," but collaboration, as a model for tutoring in writing centers, is more complicated than it might seem. Since 1984, when Ken Bruffee wrote in "Peer Tutoring and the 'Conversation of Mankind'" that the ideal writing center tutorial was a "conversation" among "... a community of knowledgeable peers"(9), writing center practitioners have been exploring the idea of collaboration to see how it applies to writing center work.

Many, most notably Alice Gillam, have "... noted disjunctions between [collaborative learning] theory and [writing center] practice" (40) and questioned whether it is possible to level the traditional academic hierarchy in the tutorial relationship. John Trimbur in his aptly titled article "Peer Tutoring: A Contradiction in Terms?" suggests that the very nature of the dynamic, with one person being a tutor and the other a client, disallows true collaboration (23). Irene Lurkis Clark supports that view. She writes that "... true collaboration can occur only when collaborators are members of the same community" (10). Andrea Lunsford cautions us that "collaboration often masquerades as democracy when it in fact practices the same old authoritarian control" (3-4).

Perhaps there is an historical explanation for the seeming contradiction between the ideal of collaboration in writing center theory and these cautionary notes sounded by practitioners. In 1984 when Bruffee wrote his landmark article, writing centers were relatively young and
many of the early centers were, in fact, informal places where undergraduates who were good writers were hired to help less able peers with their papers. Centers were places where peers met and conversed about writing. Bruffee himself recognized and disavowed this model. He called for well-trained tutors, listing the pitfalls of untrained peer-tutoring as "conformity, anti-intellectualism, intimidation, and the leveling of quality" (14). One could argue, as Muriel Harris does, that the more skillful tutors become, the further they get from being peers in a collaborative relationship (379). Ironically, Bruffee's call for tutors who were well-trained in collaborative principles may have been the first step in moving tutors away from the peer relationship necessary for "true" collaboration to flourish.

Problem

With these issues in mind, we set out to discover the nature of the relationships tutors create with their clients in our writing center. Some basic information about our tutors and clients will help provide context and perspective for our study.

Our writing center is staffed by ten graduate student tutors (writing fellows). During the period of this study, all of the tutors were native-English speakers. Candidates apply over the summer by submitting writing samples, taking a brief editing test, and undergoing interviews in order for us to assess their writing, editing, and interpersonal skills. We have a full-day training session before the semester begins, a mentoring program for the first week of each term, and meetings twice a month. We evaluate tutors at mid-term, and tutors write a self-assessment after they transcribe one of their tutoring sessions.

Our clients are both graduate and undergraduate students, all of whom come voluntarily to the center. We typically tutor around 350 students each semester for a total of approximately 1000 sessions. About half of our clients are ESL students.

Mindful that each tutorial and each client present a different dynamic, that tutors must be flexible and assess each client's needs, we were curious how much true collaboration took place and whether or not collaboration led to more satisfying sessions for the tutor and the client.

Focus on Linguistic Analysis

Bruffee's use of the word "conversation" in his definition of collaboration provided the lens through which we focused our thinking. The heart of what we do in our writing centers is in the conversation, the
talk about the writing, rather than in the writing itself. Since the words we use are central to the tutoring process and to the relationships built between tutor and client, we focused our research on an analysis of the language in tutorial conversations.

Studies on rhetorical analyses have been done in a number of writing centers (Davis; Reigstad; Jacoby). Closest to our work is Carol Severino's "Rhetorically Analyzing Collaboration(s)." Interestingly, Severino lists eighteen "features for rhetorically analyzing collaboration(s)," only two of which are conversation-based: "Length of contributions to discussion (number of words and number of sentences each speaks)" and "Rhetorical functions of contributions to discussion (leading questions, open-ended questions, complaints, appeals)" (56). The other features provide sociological information (age, gender, ethnic background), psychological information (attitude, status, experience, motivation), or procedural information (how agenda is decided, knowledge of topic, level of discourse addressed). Her final feature is "body language, positioning, and style of dialoguing," key components in communication.

In order to discover how language reveals the dynamics of the tutoring relationship, we kept our focus on the linguistic elements of the tutorials. Of course, in our analysis we take into account the social context of the tutorial. Eventually we may integrate the sociological and paralinguistic (body language, gesture, expression) elements into our study for a more in-depth and holistic analysis. However, for this first stage of the study we set for ourselves the task of uncovering the linguistic cues that reveal insights about the nature of the client/tutor relationships created in our writing center.

Methods

To begin researching the nature of the tutor/client relationship, each tutor recorded and transcribed one tutorial session each semester for three consecutive semesters. (This is an ongoing project, so we will be adding ten transcriptions to our data base each semester.) Each of the tutors selected a tutorial at random during a prescribed period of time. After each recorded session, both the tutor and the client filled out a five-point affective questionnaire assessing the level of comfort and satisfaction each felt about the tutorial. (See Appendices A and B.)

After the tutors transcribed the session, they wrote an analysis of their perceptions of their strengths and weaknesses as reflected by the conversations. They also discussed their perceptions of their own tutoring styles, whether they lean more towards a directive or non-directive, collaborative or hierarchical approach.
Rhetorical Strategies

Focusing on language in the tutorial allowed us to analyze the power relationships reflected in actual conversations between tutors and clients. Ede and Lunsford use the terms “hierarchical” and “dialogic” to suggest the two poles of the relational continuum, terms that we can connect to “directive” and “non-directive” tutoring styles. Sociolinguists use the terms “power” and “solidarity” in a similar way to define interpersonal dynamics in social contexts (Hodge and Kress 39).

For the purpose of our study, we will use “collaboration” to suggest the emphasis on creating solidarity in relationships, often between two people who feel equal in status, usually reflected by a non-directive tutoring style. Hierarchy, on the other hand, suggests a relationship based on one person having more power than the other, and is often coupled with a directive tutoring style. It is, of course, in the gradations between these two extremes—and the variations possible—where we expected to find most tutoring relationships occurring.

After analyzing the transcripts, the questionnaires, and the self-assessments, we identified three recurring rhetorical strategies that led to insights about the nature of the tutor/client relationship. The strategies we chose are:

1. **Questions.** Both tutors and clients used questions to move the session forward, but the nature and function of the questions varied, depending on who asked the question and whether the question was open-ended, closed, or rhetorical in nature.

2. **Echoing.** We noted that the client or tutor frequently used conversational fillers, expressions that have no real linguistic content, such as “okay” or “yeah.” Often, the client or tutor picked up the expression and echoed it back.

3. **Qualifiers.** We were struck by how often tutors used qualifying phrases such as “I don’t know,” “maybe,” or “sometimes,” as they responded to clients.

### Section 1: Questions

One of the ways tutors kept conversations moving and established their roles in tutorials was through asking questions. We theorized that by counting how many questions the client asked and how many the tutor
asked, as Severino suggests, we could get an initial read on who was
directing the session. By charting the number of open-ended and the
number of closed questions that the tutor asked, we could also gain some
insight into how collaborative or how hierarchical the tutor’s style was.
We set up three categories as we analyzed the transcripts:

- **Who asks the question?**
  - Client
  - Tutor

- **What was the type of question?**
  - Open-ended (invites discussion)
  - Closed (invites the correct response)
  - Rhetorical (gives information in the guise of a question)

- **What was the purpose of the question?**
  1. Moving the session forward (e.g., “What do you want
to work on?”)
  2. Finding out information (e.g., “Who is the main character?”)
  3. Eliciting student response on content or on writing
     issues (e.g., “Can you think of a way to make a transition
     sentence?”)
  4. Couching statements in a question form (e.g., “How do
     you feel about starting with this sentence?”)

**Transcript Analyses of Questions**

This tutorial occurred between two graduate students, the tutor a
male graduate student and the client a male ESL graduate student. The
session was extremely collaborative. Both graduate students, they spoke
as peers. The tutor had the greater knowledge about English and the
writing process, and the client had the greater knowledge about the
content, Hegel’s philosophy. (See Appendix C for full transcript. Note:
We are providing this one transcript in its entirety to give a sample of a
complete tutorial. The other transcripts are excerpts.)

Although the tutor asks more questions than the client (20 to 9),
most of his questions are open-ended questions, questions that elicit
thinking and help the client to come to his own conclusions about clarity
and wording. Twice the tutor asks a leading question, seemingly closed,
looking for a yes or no answer, and the client answers with a question that
shows he has understood the direction the tutor is suggesting.
Example:

TUTOR: Do you say that anywhere? Do you say that both the weak and the evil find their identity through violence?

CLIENT: Maybe I have to be more specific here?

The question could have been answered "yes" or "no," but the client shows that he understands the tutor's suggestion and takes control of finding a solution.

Again the tutor asks:

TUTOR: Do you want to assume that everyone will understand your reference?

CLIENT: Maybe I shouldn't?

The response shows that, once again, the leading question prompts thinking and the client takes control of the writing. The client is a mature and sophisticated student who seems to need little or no direction once a problem is identified. His own questions reflect this self-assurance. He asks 9 questions, all closed, all checking to see if he has understood the tutor's suggestions and made appropriate corrections.

On the affective questionnaire, the client ranked all statements about comfort and satisfaction with the session as "5, strongly agree." The tutor, however, was more critical of the session. He strongly agreed that the client set the agenda, agreed that the client felt comfortable and improved his paper, but he was less sure that the client had a better understanding of how to improve his writing, ranking it a 3. The lowest ranking he gave was a 2 to the statement "I feel comfortable with the client." We can gain some insight into why the tutor felt uncomfortable from his notes. He wrote, "Got off to slightly awkward start when I misread, and, as a result, did not understand the client's opening paragraph. He seemed in a bit of a rush and not real patient." The tutor seems to feel out of control of the session, faulting himself for misreading and the client for rushing.

Even more central to his sense of discomfort, however, might be the leveling of power. Given the collaborative nature of the session and the client's strong opinions and ability to take responsibility for finding solutions to his writing problems, it's worth speculating whether this kind of collaborative session (with the tutor not being an expert in the content area) might create a less comfortable environment for the tutor, but create a comfortable, even preferable, dynamic for a mature student.

A second transcript, between a female graduate tutor and a native-
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English-speaking male undergraduate client, revealed a very different dynamic. The client had brought in an editorial promoting the distribution of condoms in public schools as a way to curb teen pregnancies and the spread of STDs.

The tutor begins the session in a collaborative fashion, asking many open-ended questions, such as “So what do you want to focus on?”, “All right, so how does it sound?”, and “I don’t know, what do you think of that?” In this interaction, it is clear that the tutor is attempting to set a collaborative tone by this series of questions, but is still firmly in control of the session. This kind of “imposed” collaborative tone reminds us of Lunsford’s warning about collaboration “masquerading as democracy.”

Early in the tutorial, the session gets hung up on a detail about the use of the term “Board of Education”:

CLIENT: ... they would kind of need some link, you know what I’m saying?

TUTOR: Yeah, I just haven’t heard of the Board of Education. I’m wondering if it’s the Department of Education, the U.S. Department of Education, or if it’s boards of education together across the U.S. I don’t know.

CLIENT: Yeah, I wasn’t sure, when I found that, I was like . . .

TUTOR: Where’d you find it? Nexis or someplace?

CLIENT: Yeah.

TUTOR: Did you print it out?

CLIENT: I don’t remember if I printed it out now or not.

TUTOR: Well, you might double check. Not a big deal.

CLIENT: But now for, because, when I had read this, I thought, like, my school had a board of education that consisted of teachers, parents, that kind of stuff, so that’s what I thought they meant by that . . .

TUTOR: So like the National Education Association or something like that?

CLIENT: Yeah.

TUTOR: It’s possible.

CLIENT: Okay.

TUTOR: You could write around it. You could say, “A national study involving four hundred and thirty schools nationwide showed . . .” but only if you want to. It’s your choice (laughs). If I was the teacher, though, I would say, “What board of education?”

CLIENT: Right.
In this exchange, the tutor begins with a non-directive questioning of the term “Board of Education” with the words “I’m wondering . . . .” Her next two questions, “Where did you find it?” and “Nexis or someplace?”, though they sound like closed questions asking for a response, actually function like rhetorical questions, especially since the second question (“Nexis or someplace?”) in effect answers the first (“Where did you find it?”). Similarly “Did you print it out?”, although it elicits the response “I don’t remember,” in effect is code for the tutor telling the client to check his source.

By the end of this exchange, the tutor is clearly frustrated with the client not taking her advice to check the accuracy of the term and goes as far as to create a hypothetical teacher to take on the burden of the direct question “What board of education?”. This is a creative way to skirt the issue of being too directive in the session. While maintaining the role of non-directive collaborator, this tutor invents a sternier and more directive persona (teacher) to ask the direct question that she feels is outside her role.

The tutor continues the session with process-focused, open-ended questions about transitions (“Now, how can we make a transition from . . . and this example? Can you think of a way to make a transition sentence?”), continuing her earlier collaborative style. However, after another long exchange about whether Cambridge is a city or a suburb of Boston and yet another about smoothing out some wording and transitions, the tutor becomes frustrated and lets out a groan. (In her transcription, the tutor wrote, “TUTOR: Urhhhhh [frustrated].”) After this, the tutor’s questions become a series of closed questions. The first question narrows the client’s response through an either/or choice: “Are you trying to say that, that, this, this reason why this does so well is because we have this perfect person to promote it, or are you saying that these are great and we can do even better if we have this person promoting it?”

From this point on, the tutor gets more and more directive, asking fewer questions, or posing many direct statements in the form of questions, such as “Okay, but I think that some of the ideas are repeated a little bit.” At one point, the tutor asks a classic rhetorical question, one that doesn’t require an answer because it’s clear that its purpose is to give direction. She asks, “How do you feel about starting with “There are very few schools across the nation that provide condoms to students?””. What she means, of course, is, “Start here.”

Unfortunately, the client filled out the questionnaire in front of the tutor and handed it to the tutor instead of filling it out anonymously and dropping it in a closed box, so the validity of the positive response (5 on all statements) can be questioned. However, the tutor strongly agreed that the client felt comfortable, that the client improved his paper, and that the tutor herself felt comfortable. The tutor was less satisfied with the
result of the conference, ranking it a 4. The 3 that she gave to “The client has a better understanding of how to improve his/her writing” gives some insight into why she might have felt less satisfied with the conference and may reflect her frustration in communicating her ideas successfully to her client. In fact, in her self-analysis the tutor wrote, “I did a good job of asking the client a lot of questions throughout the session to keep him involved in the process. But after reviewing the transcript, I feel that I failed to help the student as much as I could have.”

The tutor’s dissatisfaction might stem from her well-intentioned but misguided attempt to be non-directive when the situation called out for some direction. In trying to hold on to her collaborative style, particularly as revealed by the questions starting out as open-ended and, after the groan of frustration, becoming closed and ultimately rhetorical, the tutor may have inadvertently wasted time and upped the level of frustration. It might have been more productive for the tutor to give direction at a number of points. For example, the direct statements that “The board of education is only a local, not a national organization,” or “Cambridge is a city, not a suburb,” would have saved a great deal of time and energy.

Section 2: Echoing

Our everyday conversations are rife with hesitations, fillers, conversational tags such as “okay” or “right” or “you know.” Used in this fashion, these words have no inherent meaning but function to mark time or put an idiosyncratic stamp on a conversation.

We noted that often in the informal tutorial conversations tutors or clients picked up on the other’s speech patterns and integrated them into their own. We theorized that this echoing could give us some insight into the collaborative nature of the tutoring relationship. Just as we inadvertently pick up the speech patterns of those we admire or connect to, we wondered if in the short span of a tutorial, tutors and clients who created a sense of solidarity would make this subconscious connection and reveal it linguistically.

Our transcripts showed that the echoing of non-content words occurs frequently during tutoring sessions. The echoing we analyzed fell into three categories:

- **Echoing of non-content words or phrases**, such as “okay,” “right,” “you know,” as noted above.
- **Echoing of syntactic patterns**, for example, the alternation of subject/verb declarative sentences or subordinate clauses.
- **Echoing language playfully**, a dynamic that seemed to occur when the client and tutor created an easy rapport.
Transcript Analyses of Echoing

In a tutoring session between a female graduate tutor and a native-English-speaking female undergraduate client, we saw a good example of the first kind of echoing. The client had brought in an essay that explained why she wanted to work in advertising. The tutor’s and client’s speech patterns begin to merge at the outset of the session:

TUTOR: *Okay, um*, what types of things did you want to work on? What brought you in here?
CLIENT: *Um*, well, I guess it’s basically my grammar, and if my content flows, and makes sense.
TUTOR: *Okay*, good. *Um, yeah*, it’s, it’s hard, the structure, I think.
CLIENT: *Yeah.*
TUTOR: *Um*, but it seems like you’ve satisfied all the categories that they’re asking for.

In the first part of the session, the tutor’s linguistic filler—"okay"—is established. Shortly after, the client establishes her filler—"right"—and the tutor picks up on it and repeats it:

TUTOR: It’s not easy . . . I mean, I’ve read a few of these . . .
CLIENT: *Right.*
TUTOR: . . . and it’s just not an easy structure to tackle.
CLIENT: *Right.* And also I have this marked up a bit. I know this isn’t a transition at all, but I don’t know how to do that, like.
TUTOR: *Right.*
CLIENT: I go from statistics to “I have experiences in . . .”
TUTOR: *Right.* I mean that certainly seems like the most difficult part . . .
CLIENT: *Right.*

The tutor habitually says “okay” while the client says “right.” Later in the session the client begins to use the tutor's word:

CLIENT: *Okay . . .
TUTOR: You know how we talked about how it’s such a weird structure to talk about advertising and your personal experiences. I think it will blend more.
CLIENT: Okay.
TUTOR: Um . . . [reads some] I like how you talk about dealing with teachers and administrators versus representing the students which is directly applicable to . . .
CLIENT: Okay, dealing with . . .
TUTOR: Yeah, you’re kind of, as an account administrator, you’re caught between creative services and the client almost?
CLIENT: Okay.
TUTOR: And that’s really interesting. What about the conclusion?
CLIENT: I know it’s not strong. It’s not long enough, I don’t think.
TUTOR: Not long enough, okay . . . [reads some] I like that you take a step back and say, “I will have an influence on today’s society.”
CLIENT: Okay.
TUTOR: Very inspiring. Is there something else we can get at that? I like it because you don’t just summarize what you’ve said.
CLIENT: Right.
TUTOR: . . . you take it a step further . . .
CLIENT: But should I summarize some of what I’ve already said? Or no.
TUTOR: What else can we put in there?
CLIENT: Hmm. I guess we could put something else about advertising in there.
TUTOR: Hmm. I wouldn’t be too repetitive.
CLIENT: Right, okay.

The client begins to use the tutor’s habitual “okay,” finally, in the last sentence, combining it with her own “right.”

On the post-conference questionnaire, the tutor noted that she strongly agreed (rating of 5) that her client was comfortable during the conference, and that she (the tutor) felt comfortable as well. She also agreed (rating of 4) that the client set the agenda, and that the client had a better understanding of how to improve her writing by the end of the session. Unfortunately, the client did not fill out a questionnaire, so we were unable to see if the client’s sense of satisfaction matched the tutor’s high satisfaction rating. But it does seem clear from the content as well as the non-content echoing of this session that the client and tutor worked together harmoniously.
We saw the second kind of echoing, the mirroring of syntax, in only a few tutoring sessions, but we thought it was an intriguing variation for our study. Both of the examples come from sessions with ESL students, and it makes sense that students learning a new language would echo back the sentence patterns of the native speakers. Certainly, this kind of echoing is an effective strategy to build linguistic competence in a new language.

For example, in the following session we see a quick echoing of phrasing between a female graduate tutor and an ESL female undergraduate client as they work on the client’s news story on a debate concerning the death penalty and euthanasia:

TUTOR: What do you want to work on in particular on your news story?
CLIENT: Grammar and organization.
TUTOR: All right, why don’t you read it out loud.
CLIENT: What do you think about my title?

This mirroring of syntax, particularly at the beginning of the sentence, is also evident in the middle of the session, when the tutor echoes the client’s “you + verb” syntactical pattern:

CLIENT: You think I should add something?
TUTOR: You might want to say, “Both sides presented such strong cases that . . . .”

At the conclusion of the session, the client again echoes the tutor’s phrasing:

TUTOR: Can you think of another way to say it? Um . . .
CLIENT: Can I just say that “they were both about people’s death?”

One other example of this kind of echoing occurred in a session between a female undergraduate ESL client and a female graduate tutor. In this case, the tutor’s linguistic quirk was to put “so” before many of her sentences and then proceed to use a simple subject + verb sentence pattern. At various times, she says, “So, you already have . . . .,” “So, you could just show . . . .,” and “So, you were going to ask me a question . . . .” Toward the middle of the session, the client begins to pick up on this pattern and first says, “So, I want to make it,” then says, “So, do you think I should . . . .,” and finally, “So, you think, it’s . . . .” and “So Act III should start here . . . .”
Another variation of echoing occurred in a session between a female graduate tutor and a Russian (ESL) male graduate client in which the client was working on a cover letter. In this case the echoing takes on a playful tone. Both the tutor and the client seem to share a heightened level of energy in their conversation as they discuss the letter’s purpose: to apply for a job at a television network in Russia. In this example, the echoing of “yeah” precedes the playful return of the client’s question, “I can keep this, yeah?”:

**TUTOR:** Yeah, does that make sense to you?
**CLIENT:** Yeah, here in my ear—lovely.
**TUTOR:** Okay, good.
**CLIENT:** (reads some)
**TUTOR:** Contribute TO or will be useful FOR?
**CLIENT:** Contribute to. I can keep this, yeah?
**TUTOR:** You can keep that, yeah.

As the session continues, the client and tutor continue to echo each other with the verbal tags “okay” and “yeah” and the tutor’s playful repetition of “yeah, yeah”:

**TUTOR:** Okay, you work AT a place and you work WITH people. So—
**CLIENT:** Okay, I—(reads some)
**TUTOR:** I like what you say there, that you want to be a member of the NTV family, so maybe you want to leave that in, rather than—
**CLIENT:** Yeah, yeah, okay. (Reads some)
**TUTOR:** Yeah, yeah.
**CLIENT:** So, we will cross it out or—
**TUTOR:** You can leave it in or take it out. I’m just saying that I like the way you stated it.
**CLIENT:** Oh, okay. (Reads some). I leave it in.

Once more before the session ends, the tutor picks up on the client’s phrase “it’s hard” and tosses it back to him:

**CLIENT:** That’s why it’s so hard—the same meaning, the—
**TUTOR:** There are different shades of meaning, right, right.
CLIENT: It's hard.
TUTOR: It's hard.

The repetition, or “tossing back,” of phrases occurs frequently in this session; note that, in this case, it is the client who makes a statement and the tutor who repeats it. The tutor is, in a sense, affirming the client’s ideas by repeating his words. This particular example of echoing can be seen as part of the tutor’s style, a way to create a friendly rapport, a sense of comfort and understanding in the tutorial. Although this session was recorded before we added the questionnaire to the study—so we have no post-conference evaluation of the level of satisfaction—the closing lines suggest a satisfactory session for both:

CLIENT: Okay, thank you very much!
TUTOR: Okay, good job!

This study of echoing is not meant to suggest a conscious technique for successful tutoring sessions, but rather to observe its frequent presence in tutor/client sessions. Echoing seems to reflect—or create—an affirmation of understanding between a tutor and a client. In all the examples that we examined, echoing occurred in sessions where the client and tutor seemed to be on the same wavelength, working together in an easy camaraderie.

Section 3: Qualifiers

A third rhetorical cue that we have studied in the transcripts is the use of qualifiers. Qualifiers occurred predominantly in the tutors’ language. Tutors would couch their advice, either consciously or unconsciously, in qualifying language, using terms like “maybe” or “sometimes” or “I don’t know.” We found qualifying language used in two ways in tutoring sessions:

1. Suggestions stated in the form of questions.

As we discussed earlier, tutors can use questions in a variety of ways in a tutoring session. One form is a question that masks a direct statement. In this case, the question itself becomes a kind of qualifier. For example, in one question we analyzed, the tutor said to her client, “But maybe you just wanna, um, tighten it a little bit, so you’re not devoting two whole paragraphs to it?” Instead of just telling her client to make his writing more concise,
she qualifies the suggestion by phrasing it as a question. (Interestingly, within the question itself, she also adds some hedging words and phrases, such as “maybe” and “a little,” that further qualify her point.)

2. Comments modified by qualifying phrases or words.

These comments tended to fall into first-person, second-person, or objective voice.

• First-person qualifiers, such as “I don’t know” and “I guess.”
• Second-person qualifiers, such as “you could” and “you might.”
• Objective voice qualifiers, such as “a little,” “kind of,” “sort of,” and “maybe.”

Transcript Analyses of Qualifiers

Close examination of some sample transcripts revealed how qualifying language arose within tutoring sessions and what this language might signify. Two transcripts were particularly interesting in this regard.

In the first transcript, a male graduate tutor and a female ESL client (the tutor did not record if she was a graduate or an undergraduate student) were working on an analysis of an essay on Shakespeare by Jorge Luis Borges. The client was struggling to come up with a clear thesis for her analysis. As the session goes on and they discuss possible theses, the client becomes frustrated because the tutor refuses to read Borges’ essay. Note the qualifiers (which we’ve underlined) that crop up in the tutor’s comments as the tension rises toward the end of the session:

CLIENT: ... I mean, I don’t even know how you understand this without reading, because it’s so complicated.

TUTOR: Yet I feel that for our purposes, we have to look at structuring an essay, as opposed to my helping you analyze the work. It’s just two different things, and analyzing the work isn’t what we’re here to do. Um, so, as far as structuring an essay, my sense is that you could pretty much keep to your thesis, or you could make your thesis that Shakespeare himself is an actor, and here are the ways in which he’s an actor.

CLIENT: That he’s an actor in pursuit of his own role?

TUTOR: Or understanding his role? I don’t know, but I think that
the difficulty here is that you have to analyze this as best as you can and maybe we’re at too early a stage to work on brainstorming until you’ve kind of collected . . .

Neither the tutor nor the client filled out an affective questionnaire after this session—perhaps a reflection of the unsatisfactory nature of the session—but we can see the overt tension in this conversation. The tutor tries to stick to the dictum of discussing “process, not content.” The client is clearly disappointed by the tutor’s continuing refusal to read the essay, as she says, “I mean, I don’t even know how you understand this without reading, because it’s so complicated.”

What’s especially interesting is how qualifiers reflect the tutor’s growing frustration. The tutor’s language becomes cluttered with qualifiers as he continues to resist the client’s attempts to get him to read the original essay. Notice how in the tutor’s first speech he begins with a strong first-person qualifier “I feel” but, as he continues, retreats with the more passive “my sense” and ends by shifting responsibility to the client with the second-person “you could.”

His resistance leads to indecisive advice on what thesis to use (particularly in “my sense is that you could pretty much”). When he backs off from telling her which thesis to use, he uses even more qualifiers (four in the last sentence). He then concludes by saying in so many words that he’s done as much as he can. Ironically, if he had been more alert and directive, he might have told the student to use the excellent thesis she proposed at the end (“That he’s an actor in pursuit of his own role”). If he had, the session might have been more successful. But his reluctance to tell the client what to do seems to have led to a lost opportunity and an inconclusive session.

An additional irony is that this tutor normally used a very directive approach. We wondered if, in the presence of the tape recorder, he may have altered his style and tried to be more non-directive. Perhaps the tutor, knowing that he was being taped, may have tried to use a non-directive approach to create collaboration, when his client would have been better served by the tutor’s normally directive style. The whole issue of the intrusiveness of recording devices—how they affect the dynamics of a session—is certainly a direction for further study.

Another transcript also provided some insight into qualifiers and what they signify. In this session, which we also analyzed in the echoing section, a female graduate tutor was working with a female ESL undergraduate on a news story about debates on the death penalty and euthanasia. This session lacked the tension evident in the preceding sample transcript. But qualifiers did arise in different ways that are equally instructive.

Early on in the session, the tutor and client discuss an unclear
passage in the news story:

TUTOR: . . . The next sentence is confusing.
CLIENT: The judgment on the death penalty.
TUTOR: We don’t know which debate necessarily was first. You might want to say, “The death penalty proponents—or opponents—won.” What happened in the death penalty debate?
CLIENT: There wasn’t a winner.
TUTOR: There wasn’t.
CLIENT: Two pros and two cons.
TUTOR: Oh. The judge, the judge . . . . How does it work? You might want to explain that. The judges . . . . How many debaters?
CLIENT: Five debaters.
TUTOR: Five on each side. Okay. So two judges went for the pros and two judges went for the cons. Okay. You might want to make a statement about that. You know, um . . . “The debate was so . . . .” That isn’t what I want to say. I’m just thinking off the top of my head.
CLIENT: You think I should add something?
TUTOR: You might want to say, “Both sides presented such strong cases that the result was a tie in the death penalty case, whereas, the cons won hands down in the euthanasia discussion . . . .” or something like that. Do you see what I’m saying?
CLIENT: Okay.
TUTOR: I mean, try to make it shorter than what I just said. But basically . . .
CLIENT: Like this . . . (she writes a sentence)
TUTOR: Yeah. Right. I wouldn’t say the cons won “by 4-0.” I would just say “the cons won hands down” or, you know, . . . and talk about what the discussion is in the later euthanasia debate.
CLIENT: Okay. That’s better.

In this excerpt, the tutor and client clarify some of the facts covered in the client’s news story. The tutor uses a fairly directive approach, telling the client additional facts to include and suggesting possible language to use. But the tutor repeatedly uses the second-person
Second-person qualifiers make suggestions sound more non-directive, like possibilities or alternatives rather than imperatives. In this case, saying "you might" may be a conscious approach to soften the suggestions both to create a less pedantic tone and to make sure that the client doesn’t use the tutor’s suggestions word for word. Qualifiers also leave room for more participation from the client. In this case, the client responds by writing a sentence to address the tutor’s concerns, showing that collaboration does result from this discussion (though the tutor does suggest further wording changes). On her questionnaire, the tutor noted, “The client is very soft spoken. She often writes down her thoughts as opposed to verbalizing them.”

Qualifiers, however, may not always indicate an intention to be evasive, as in the preceding transcript, or non-directive, as in this one. Sometimes, tutors can be as inarticulate or halting as their clients in expressing their points. The qualifiers may act as “space fillers”—words that allow the tutor time to think through his or her reaction out loud. Qualifiers may also indicate when the tutor is trying to be kind to the client, using qualifiers to soften criticism.

This same session provides a good example of a tutor struggling to express her opinions, a struggle reflected by the qualifiers she uses. Even tutors who are normally articulate (as this tutor was in the previous excerpt) sometimes temporarily lose their ability to express their ideas, or need a few seconds to figure out what they feel about a piece of writing. For instance, near the end of the session, the tutor tries to provide some advice on the last paragraph of the client’s news story:

TUTOR: Okay, this last paragraph is a little . . .
CLIENT: Is the quote okay?
TUTOR: No, no, the quote’s okay. But this sentence is a little . . .
I think you need a little more meat in here. It’s a little bit . . .
I mean, you have students saying it was great and then out of the blue you have this professor saying . . .
CLIENT: How about “The professor also evaluated . . .”?
TUTOR: No. I think you need a couple more sentences in here, like . . . . Think about concluding your story.
CLIENT: Maybe I need to add more to this paragraph about the five students and four judges.
TUTOR: Right.

The tutor clearly hesitates as she tries to suggest how to improve the last paragraph. She repeatedly uses the qualifier “a little” as she tries
to express what she believes is wrong with the paragraph. The tutor also uses "I think" twice, which lessens the power of her remarks (compare "I think you need..." with "You need...".). One possible interpretation of these qualifiers is that the tutor is at first unsure what the client should do—the qualifiers give her time to think out loud.

But this hedging may also reflect the tutor's desire to be kind and to keep the discussion collaborative. Tutors generally don't want to sound overly critical—for fear of breaking their rapport with their clients—so they sometimes use qualifiers to soften the impact of their suggestions. Here, the tutor may be using qualifiers to say politely that the writing at the end of the client's news story doesn't flow well and needs further development. The tutor may be shying away from making firm suggestions to maintain a sense of friendly collaboration. Still, whatever interpretation we make of the tutor's motivations for her hesitation, it does produce results. At the end of their discussion, the client suggests adding more to a paragraph to answer the tutor's concerns, a solution with which the tutor agrees.

Overall, the client and tutor both seemed satisfied with the session, according to the questionnaires they filled out. The client gave four 5's, along with two 4's on the statements about working on issues she wanted to address and having a better understanding of how to improve her writing. She also wrote that the tutor's "suggestions were very helpful." The tutor was slightly less satisfied, marking one 5 on the statement about feeling comfortable with the client, and 4's on the rest, except for a 3 on the statement that the client set the agenda. This lower rating reflects the tutor's chief criticism of the session, that "I really dominated the conversation" because "I was trying to overcompensate for [the client's] quiet nature."

Qualifiers certainly do serve to make tutors' suggestions sound less directive, but it's unclear whether this "less directive" stance serves the clients well. Sometimes tutors' use of qualifiers may give clients more leeway and responsibility for making their own choices. At other times, though, using a less directive approach can backfire. Too many qualifiers may make the tutor sound indecisive or inarticulate, and may, in fact, frustrate the client.

**Conclusion**

We set out in this study to examine the tutorial relationship through the lens of linguistic analysis, to let the language in a sampling of tutorials reveal the assumptions and interactions of those tutorials' dynamics. Asking open-ended questions, echoing each other's speech, and using qualifiers are a few of the ways in which we noted tutors in our
writing center working toward collaboration—sometimes successfully, sometimes not. The transcript analyses were useful in and of themselves. They allowed us to understand more fully the nature of the conversations and the work accomplished in our center and for our tutors to gain insight into their own practices.

More problematical was our sense that in a number of cases that we examined, an undue—or misdirected—emphasis on the collaborative approach resulted in tutorials that seemed to waste time and lack clear direction. This is not to suggest that collaboration should be discarded as a goal of tutorial relationships. But collaboration, like any other teaching/learning mode, has to be used judiciously and appropriately.

An informed flexibility has always been the hallmark of good teaching and tutoring, and we advocate it as the most useful model for writing center practice. For example, it makes sense to use a non-directive approach for dealing with ideas, structure and voice, to help students figure out for themselves what they are trying to say and how best to say it. But it also makes sense to instruct when necessary, particularly on formal rules of grammar and mechanics. We saw too many examples of tutors dancing around a direct question, when they clearly knew the answer, wasting the already too-short time they had to spend with their clients. Generally speaking, a directive approach seems better suited for content, non-directive for process.

Our study also made us question whether the writing centers of the nineties have moved so far away from the original peer tutoring centers that “true” collaboration (a “conversation” among “... a community of knowledgeable peers”) is no longer achievable. It is a given in 1998 that tutors are trained in some fashion—through courses, meetings, practica, mentoring, or some combination of these methods. John Trimbur’s warning in 1987 “… to resist the temptation to professionalize peer tutors by treating them as apprentices and by designing courses as introductions to the field of teaching writing” and to “… treat peer tutors as students, not as paraprofessionals or preprofessionals” (27) reveals a path not taken.

The numbers of books, journals, newsletters, conferences, OWLs, and web sites that have proliferated in the last fifteen years are evidence of the professionalization of the field. One could argue that this professionalization of tutoring has recreated the “old authoritarian control,” moving tutors further away from their roles as peer collaborators. One could also argue that tutors are learning how to walk the fine line between teacher and peer, hierarchy and collaboration, creating a new, more flexible model for writing center tutoring.
Future Directions

As we worked through our data and analyses, we noted a number of directions for further study. Certainly, identifying other linguistic trends in conversations would be instructive. We saw a few examples of what we termed "modification," for example, where the client and tutor built on each other's ideas until they formulated a concept that was satisfactory to both. Examining this trend might lead to a more in-depth view of the nature of collaboration in tutorial conversations.

We also were curious about aspects of the tutorial that were outside the scope of our study. An analysis focusing specifically on the effect of gender or age or ethnicity on the tutorial dynamic, revealed through a rhetorical analysis, might be interesting. Adding a videotape and a field observer to record gestures, body movement, eye contact, and physical space would add another dimension to this kind of study.

We encourage other writing centers to join us and build on our work on the linguistic analysis of tutorial conversations. We see our study as a way to continue looking at writing center practice with a scholarly eye, to build theories in our field from what we actually do in our writing centers.

Acknowledgement: We have greatly benefited from the good work and fine insights of our cadres of writing fellows who have helped us collect the data and analyze the results over the last three years. We would like to thank all of them and give particular recognition to three former students whose work was particularly valuable: Sean Baker, Mark Feldman, and David Metzler.
APPENDIX A

Conference Questionnaire
Client

Tutor: ____________________________________________________________
Date: ___________________________________________________________
Time: ___________________________________________________________

Please take a minute to fill out this questionnaire. Circle the number on the scale that best represents your response to that question.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neither Disagree nor Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
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<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. I feel comfortable at the Writing Center. 1 2 3 4 5
2. We worked on issues I wanted to address. 1 2 3 4 5
3. I have a better understanding of how to improve my writing. 1 2 3 4 5
4. I have improved my paper. 1 2 3 4 5
5. I feel comfortable with the tutor. 1 2 3 4 5
6. I am satisfied with the result of this conference. 1 2 3 4 5

If you wish to add any comments that would give us more insight into the conference, from your point of view, please feel free to write them here.
APPENDIX B

Conference Questionnaire
Tutor

Tutor: ____________________________________________________________
Date: ____________________________________________________________
Time: ____________________________________________________________

Please take a minute to fill out this questionnaire. Circle the number on the
scale that best represents your response to that question.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th></th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th></th>
<th>Neither Disagree nor Agree</th>
<th></th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

1. My client felt comfortable during the conference.  

2. The client set the agenda.  

3. The client has a better understanding of how to improve his/her writing.  

4. The client has improved his/her paper.  

5. I feel comfortable with the client.  

6. I am satisfied with the result of this conference.  

If you wish to add any comments that would give us more insight into the conference, from your point of view, please feel free to write them here.
APPENDIX C

Complete transcript from session recorded in Fall Semester 1997

Male Graduate Tutor
ESL Male Graduate Client

TUTOR: What are you concerned about, what do you want to focus on (in this paper)?
CLIENT: I am concerned about the spelling and the idioms. Not the content. Also the way I express myself.
TUTOR: Very good.

(Client begins to read his paper out loud.)

TUTOR: Let’s just stop for one second and look at this first paragraph. (Reads excerpt). Let me just ask you what the . . . I know you said you didn’t want to focus on content . . . but I am, I must say, just a little bit confused about the idea here. I mean, this I understand. The idea of being in war and struggling to find meaning. (Rereads the paragraph). Is Sperber the author of the book?
CLIENT: Yes, he is.
TUTOR: . . . No. This makes sense. Maybe that was the problem, that I didn’t realize that he was the author. So basically what you are saying here is that the book is about searching for identity.
CLIENT: That is what the course is about.
TUTOR: Alright. This part of the sentence is redundant.
CLIENT: So maybe just delete the phrase?

(Client continues to read.)

TUTOR: Just a small thing: sacrosanct is spelled “sanct.” And “legitimate” should really be “legitimize.”

(Client continues to read.)

CLIENT: Can I say “the blood appeals to blood?”
TUTOR: Mmmmm. No. I don’t think you really need the article. “Blood appeals to blood” or “blood attracts blood” are perhaps better.
(Client continues to read.)

TUTOR: Just a moment. I would like to look at this paragraph. It has no grammatical problems. I am only ... I am only wondering how it fits into the idea of identity.

CLIENT: It is just to break the cycle of evil. Everybody found their identity in this evil cycle. But I think at the end you will understand. If not, we can go back to it.

TUTOR: Okay.

(Client continues to read.)

CLIENT: “Have reach?”
TUTOR: “Have reached.”

(Client finishes reading.)

CLIENT: Is this clear to you?
TUTOR: Hmmmm... Well... I don’t think... Here’s the thing: I would probably want to read this one more time. Really what you are discussing here is philosophy, and philosophy you usually do not understand on the first reading!

(Client and Tutor both laugh.)

TUTOR: So I’m close to understanding what you are saying, and if I read the paper quickly again it would become clear. Okay. So in this paragraph we are talking about if you hurt a human being, you are also hurting the Creator. And what about here?

CLIENT: The idea is that evil people find their identity by asserting their power over the weak.
TUTOR: Okay.
CLIENT: And he (the novel’s protagonist) is breaking the evil cycle.
TUTOR: Okay. Ummm. Do you say that anywhere? Do you say that both the weak and the evil find their identity through violence?

CLIENT: Maybe I can have one more specific here?
TUTOR: Yeah. It’s probably just one sentence ... ummm ... at the beginning ... I don’t think that it would have to be anything too long. Just a fairly simple idea that you can express easily. Alright. Both find identity, the weak and the strong, through violence towards others. Okay. Then maybe it’s ... ummm ... (long pause as the tutor rereads some sections) ... Alright. This works. And you mentioned it before, but you don’t really
say it here. You make a nice transition from this one para-
graph to the next, but it’s worth writing that here is one
example of a person who breaks the cycle.
CLIENT: Uh huh. “Benoise is someone who . . .”
TUTOR: Yes. I’m sure you can figure it out.
CLIENT: “. . . someone who breaks through the cycle of violence.”
TUTOR: Yes. I think that is a good way of putting it, the “cycle of
violence.” Umm. Let’s see. Say “a universe in which” rather
than “where.” What is the importance of this? Why do you
have to say that rather than “a young boy remembers”?
CLIENT: To specify that though he is sixteen, he is really 3,000 years
old.
TUTOR: That’s what I thought. I just wanted to check.
CLIENT: He represents an ancient tradition.
TUTOR: I see. The Jewish tradition?
CLIENT: Yes.
TUTOR: Okay, this is good. Good. “. . . truth is going out of the mouth.”
“Truth is going out of the mouth.”
CLIENT: “Of this child?”
TUTOR: Well, what do you mean by truth going out of his mouth?
CLIENT: It’s a French expression that we use. The truth that goes out
of the mouth of a child. What the child says about life through
the innocence of his eyes.
TUTOR: Okay. So because of their innocence, children are often able
to speak the truth that adults cannot see or understand?
CLIENT: Yes.
TUTOR: Okay. And how does that connect to Hegel?
CLIENT: Because he is sixteen years old and he is already reading
Hegel.
TUTOR: Okay.
CLIENT: He is living in a world of temptation.
TUTOR: The temptation to commit violence?
CLIENT: To commit everything.
TUTOR: Uh huh. Okay. Alright. As long as you feel comfortable that
this is related to it.

(Client and Tutor speak over one another.)

CLIENT: . . . transition here and transition here. Hegel’s ideas are not
just words. They mean something to him.
TUTOR: Now I understand what you are saying. Okay. So this phrase,
truth coming out of his mouth. I don’t think you can success-
fully translate that literally.
CLIENT: “Through his innocence . . .”
TUTOR: Yes, that’s fine. That is the simplest way to say it.
CLIENT: “The innocence of one who reads Hegel . . .”?
TUTOR: Or maybe “Through the innocence and youth of Benoise, who reads Hegel’s *Phenomenology of the Mind* . . .” It seems like you have two ideas here. You speak about his youth and innocence that reveals a wisdom. And the second idea is that he is reading Hegel. And the words have meaning for him, and he is applying these words to his life. These are two rather complex thoughts and I think it would be difficult to successfully combine both into one sentence. So you know what you want say, and I’m confident you can write it well, but I just want you to break it into two sentences.

*(Tutor rereads excerpts from the paper.)*

TUTOR: So does he take any wisdom from the boy?
CLIENT: He is the boy.
TUTOR: Oh, I see. Benoise is the boy? He is the rabbit?
CLIENT: Yes.
TUTOR: And the “Little Prince” is also the boy.
CLIENT: No. It is a reference to the story of the Little Prince.
TUTOR: Alright. A work I’m not familiar with. Do you want to assume that everyone will understand your reference?
CLIENT: Maybe I shouldn’t?
TUTOR: It’s just a thought. It might be helpful to mention the name of the book or story and its author in the same sentence.

*(Tutor continues to read from the paper.)*

TUTOR: “. . . through Benoise’s thoughts, Sperber incites us . . .” Maybe a better word is “inspires.” Incites usually means to provoke.
CLIENT: Yes. Okay.
TUTOR: “. . . have been human . . .” “Of being human” is better.
CLIENT: Okay.
TUTOR: What is “the one”?
CLIENT: A human being.
TUTOR: I see. Then maybe you want to say “not building power over other human beings but over ourselves” rather than “the one.”
CLIENT: Alright.
TUTOR: When you are talking about power. It’s just a little bit vague
what you mean. I understand what you mean by building power over other people. The idea of committing violence toward other people, subjugating them, whatever you want to call it. But the idea of building power over ourselves, is that going back to Hegel?

CLIENT: Yes. In order to break the circle of violence.
TUTOR: Alright. I'll tell you what. It works, but it might be worth thinking about making this just a little more clear. If I think hard about it, I can go back and see the connection between "building power over ourselves" and Hegel's resisting temptation. But it is slightly awkward. It's not an easy idea to communicate, I know. All I would suggest is that you give that one phrase a little bit of thought, and maybe you can come up with a clearer way of expressing it. It would help. It's not bad; it just could be a little bit better. That's all.

CLIENT: Easier to . . . ?
TUTOR: Easier to grasp. I would not suggest that you quote yourself from above.

CLIENT: No, no, no. Of course not.
TUTOR: Okay. Good. Was there anything else you wanted to ask?
CLIENT: No that's all. I always need another point of view.
TUTOR: Well, I hope I've been helpful.
CLIENT: Yes, very.
Works Cited


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