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ESL Student Participation in Writing Center Sessions

by Jane Cogie

“I don’t know if I should have proofread [Yoko’s] paper a little more. She has a few problems with proper English. I focused on the bigger picture instead of details though.” (Phillipa)

“Takayuki specifically wanted to go over introductions and conclusions; however, I had difficulty communicating, and we did not have time to cover much else. I felt I could have done more, but time and communication restraints prevailed.” (Tyson)

The uncertainty expressed here by Phillipa and Tyson about their work with Yoko and Takayuki is familiar to anyone who has tutored English as a Second Language (ESL) students. Since 1991, when Judith Powers first asserted the value of using a directive approach with ESL students (41), research on ESL writing center sessions has increased, as has the number of publications offering guidelines to help tutors understand the role they may need to play with ESL writers, particularly when dealing with cultural, rhetorical, and linguistic issues that these writers have no way of knowing on their own. What has not been as fully explored is the other side of the student-tutor equation: the role played by the ESL students themselves in determining the productivity of their sessions. In this article, I will discuss writing center research and Second Language Acquisition theories that address the value of the ESL learner’s participation and will then turn to analyze tutor-student interactions in ESL sessions from my own study of writing center work. In this discussion, I will focus not only on the student’s participation but also on communication problems that can block that participation.

About the Author

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Recent Research on ESL Tutoring

In “Guilt-free Tutoring: Rethinking How We Tutor Non-Native English Speaking Students,” an article appearing nine years after Power’s endorsement of a “more direct, more didactic” approach (41), Blau and Hall offer guidelines that affirm flexible priorities and the role of direct tutoring strategies. In the sessions analyzed in their study, directness proved helpful to meeting the ESL students’ need for cultural information and for avoiding the related tendency for Socratic questioning to deteriorate into “trolling for the right answer” (33). Another notable finding was that line-by-line sentence-level tutoring tended to lead beyond surface-level errors to discussions of meaning and thus to the resolution of the frequently noted conflict between the agendas of ESL learners, eager for error correction (35; see also Harris and Silva 530-531) and the agendas of tutors, who are typically trained to focus first on whole-essay concerns. From these findings, Blau and Hall conclude that tutors should “be comfortable with the directive approach, especially with local concerns such as grammar, punctuation, idioms, and word usage,” and with “working line-by-line” (42). They emphasize that their guidelines are not rules (43) and that tutors who find themselves “editing” have gone too far with the directive approach (41). However, they also suggest the unlikelihood that teachers and tutors would fall into the role of editor: “No good writing teacher would correct students’ errors for them or appropriate their texts. Perhaps the true distinction here is between editing and teaching, rather than between directive and non-directive” (24-25).

Their affirmation of the flexibility to teach, whether the teaching is directive or non-directive, is valuable since it privileges learning over a non-directive ideal that may not always be suited to its goal. One question Blau and Hall do not tackle, however, when noting the limits of the directive approach, is how to distinguish teaching from editing. This distinction is more difficult to make when only the tutor’s role is considered (“no good teacher would...”) since, without the student’s involvement, a tutor’s quite genuine intention to teach has the potential to turn into editing, such as when a tutor underestimates the student’s English language skills—perhaps mistaking a culturally-based reticence for insufficient knowledge—and thus intervenes more than the student requires. I should add, however, that Blau and Hall seem tacitly to affirm the value of the student’s participation through both their emphasis on the two-way nature of cultural informing (31) and their focus on passages in which the ESL students are actively involved, whether the tutoring is directive or non-directive.
A number of scholars who discuss ESL conferencing—such as Conrad and Goldstein, Ritter, Severino, and Williams—argue more explicitly the value of ESL student participation. Conrad and Goldstein, in particular, point out the link between unintentional domination of the student by the teacher in student-teacher conferences and an unsuccessful conference outcome. Their data show that the conferences of Marigrace, the subject with the least successful subsequent revisions, were “characterized by the teacher generating most of the input and doing most of the conversational work” (455) whereas, when revisions were negotiated more equally between teacher and student, “the ensuing revisions were almost always successful” (452). In suggesting that the teacher’s perception of Marigrace as the least assertive subject may have been responsible for her lack of interaction (455), Conrad and Goldstein’s study highlights the importance of testing each student’s potential to be involved.

In arguing the benefits of teaching language rather than documenting errors, Sharon Myers agrees that student involvement in language learning is crucial: “The central insight in foreign language pedagogy in the last thirty years is that, in fact, language acquisition emerges from learners wrestling with meaning in acts of communicating or trying to communicate” (64). After making this point, however, Myers focuses only implicitly on the student’s role in acts of communicating—emphasizing instead the tutor’s role as a “language informant” who, in providing directive guidance, links any new language knowledge to the learner’s current knowledge (56, 64). Her lack of explicit attention to the student’s role may stem from her recognition that “a great deal of language learning is receptive” (57). This point is valuable for alerting tutors to the variety of ways non-native speakers learn a new language. However, for both tutors and tutor trainers, it is important to balance recognition of passive learning with recognition of the potential benefits of the ESL student’s interaction, as demonstrated in Goldstein and Conrad’s study among others (Patthey-Chavez and Ferris; Williams). As Rod Ellis suggests, the passive reception model of L2 learning seems unproductive when compared to interactionist approaches, which require the learner’s participation. Ellis acknowledges that further research on interactionist theories is needed and that “theories do not have inherent validity but only relative validity” (30). Yet he endorses interactionist theories because, unlike the passive receptionist model, they provide “insights that are translatable into pedagogical proposals” (31). If tutors assume that ESL students learn as effectively by remaining passive as they do by being active, then the distinctive potential of writing center sessions for individualized interaction seems likely to be compromised.
Examples of ESL Student Participation

To further explore issues related to ESL student participation and the challenges involved, I will discuss excerpts from several of the taped sessions I gathered during my study of a writing center in a Midwestern liberal arts college. My analysis will focus not only on the ESL students’ participation but also on actions by the tutors that seem to affect the students’ ability to participate. My aim, then, is not to cite models for tutor and ESL student participation but rather, to use Thonus’ term, to look at “what is” so as to better understand the nature of ESL student participation in the sessions analyzed and the tensions and conflicting demands that can hinder that participation (“What Are the Differences” 228).

The two tutors whose sessions I sample, a native-English-speaking (NES) female and a NES male, participated in pre-semester training workshops run collaboratively by the center's director and experienced tutors. Most tutors begin their work at this center during their first year and continue until they graduate. Central to their on-going training are sessions in which one tutor tutors another. Although aspects of the training seemed to favor whole-essay priorities and a non-directive, talk-based approach, the overriding emphasis is on the development of tutoring philosophies by individual tutors. The tutors’ responsibility in their own training is reinforced by the conference summary form completed following each visit (see Appendix A). In completing the form, not shared with the student's instructor, tutors check adjectives that best characterize the session: “talk-focused” or “draft-based”; “consultant-directed,” “client-directed” or “mutually collaborative”; “satisfactory,” “unsatisfactory,” or “equivocal/ambiguous.” With this form, no simple model for a session is established; clearly it can be consultant-directed and still be talk-focused and satisfactory, or it can be student-directed and talk-focused and still potentially be unsatisfactory.

In analyzing the excerpts of a taped session by each of the two tutors, I will draw on several interactionist theories, which maintain that participation by the learner can play a significant role in L2 learning: the Interaction Hypothesis and the sociocultural theory of L2 learning. Discussed by a number of researchers including Ellis, Goldstein and Conrad, Long, Ritter, and Williams, the Interaction Hypothesis (IH) refers to the negotiation of meaning, in which a non-native English speaker and a native English speaker in conversation “seek to prevent a communication impasse... or to remedy an actual impasse that has arisen” (Ellis 3). As Ellis notes, the IH as posited by Long maintains that negotiation facilitates “the kinds of conscious ‘noticing’ that [Richard] Schmidt ... has argued is required in order for learners to process input for ‘intake’” (8). Intake, “that portion of the L2
which is assimilated and fed into the interlanguage system" of the learner (Ellis qtd in Glew, 84), follows the learner's act of noticing a linguistic form as a result of comprehensible input by a native speaker.

For the purposes of the analysis to follow, it is important to note that the native speaker's input can supply either positive evidence, that is, "models of what is grammatical and acceptable" (Long qtd in Ellis, 8), or negative evidence, that is, feedback on the learner's own production of the target language that indicates, whether directly or indirectly, what is grammatical (Ellis 9). Along with negative evidence comes the opportunity for modified output by the learner. Both Long and Pica maintain that modified output "contributes significantly to acquisition" (Ellis 13). Williams confirms this conclusion when citing research (Lyster and Ranta; Pica, Holliday, Lewis, and Morganthaler) that demonstrates that "learners are more likely to correct their own errors when they are pushed to make their own contributions clearer" ("Undergraduate" 82). She confirms it as well through citing the results of her own study of revisions in ESL student texts following writing center sessions. These results show that no revision resulted when ESL tutees were only minimally involved, such as when they responded to their tutor through backchanneling alone. One reason offered for this minimal involvement is the ESL students' failure to fully understand the tutors' feedback ("Tutoring and Revision" 188-89).

The sociocultural theory of learning, also useful in framing the analysis of sessions from my study, is defined by Williams in terms familiar to writing center scholars: "Dialogue is a way for the novice to stretch current knowledge, as initial reliance on the expert yields to internalization of new knowledge by the novice and subsequent self-regulation" ("Undergraduate" 84). The learner's movement from other-regulation to self-regulation is dependent on the mediator—in writing center work, the tutor—providing scaffolding that bridges the learner's current knowledge with knowledge otherwise beyond the learner's grasp, much like the language informant role of the tutor endorsed by Myers (56, 64). As Williams points out, then, the issue in sociocultural theory is not a matter of being "more or less directive for second language writers in a group; rather, it is a matter of providing the level of directedness that is appropriate for each learner" ("Undergraduate" 86). As Ellis notes, both IH and sociocultural theory involve the learner in interaction, yet the interactions posited differ in significant ways (21). On the one hand, IH focuses on one type of interaction, the negotiation of meaning, which is thought not to cause acquisition but to facilitate it by "helping to meet learners' data needs" (Ellis 4, 21). Sociocultural theory, on the other hand, focuses on the broader social interaction of the language learner with a mediator scaffolding the learning (Ellis 21;
Block 100-101). And it “provides a much broader and richer account of the role of interaction in language acquisition” (Ellis 21). Indeed, from a sociocultural perspective, “interaction is the actual site of learning” (Ellis 21). However, both theories, different though they are, can help tutors understand the value of supporting the level of involvement possible for each ESL student, despite the often challenging nature of negotiation between ESL tutees and their tutors.

In the first session I examine, the IH proves the most helpful theory for framing the tutor-student interaction. In this session, the tutor, Phillipa, a sophomore chemistry and biology major, and the student, Yoko, a female first-year international student from Japan, discuss Yoko's sociology paper on the opposition between reality and façade as played out in two quite different contexts: the context of girls unaware of the implications of dressing like women and the context of American families believing they can protect their families by owning a gun. On the conference form, Phillipa defines the session as “draft-focused,” “consultant-directed,” and “satisfactory.” And under the conference form heading “assistance requested,” she notes that Yoko, who was visiting the Center for the first time, wanted help with “anything/everything.”

During this session, which, like many studied by Blau and Hall, focuses on an interweaving of local and global concerns (Blau and Hall 36), most of the negotiation between Yoko and Phillipa centers on word choice, a common topic in ESL sessions. (For instance, in Cumming and So's research, word choice was the focus for 35% of the transactions between tutors and ESL students when the sessions were conducted in English [212].) Yoko’s negotiation of meaning with Phillipa resembles the type of negotiation at work in the teacher-student interaction in Goldstein and Conrad’s study, in which the tutor and student participate more or less equally and come to a “mutual understanding” of specific words and passages (Williams, “Undergraduate” 82-83). An example of this latter type of negotiation comes in the following section that focuses on Yoko’s second illustration of façade versus reality in her essay: the American belief that guns provide protection. (See Appendix B for a listing of symbols used in the session excerpts.)

**Phillipa:** Um. (reading) “Most people who have a gun say it is important to keep their family- # Keep their family and their lives”- um- it’s missing something. To keep – “it’s important to have, uh, to keep their family and their lives /down.”/ # |

**Yoko:** Oh. # /It's/ important to- # -keep it, um. (3) Keep their families and keep their lives. Keep is- (2) protect? #

**Phillipa:** Um, no.
Yoko: No?

Phillipa: Um, to- Uh, if you want. # you can put protect there. # Um, keep is just “to have”—

Yoko: Oh.

Phillipa: —to have something. I could keep a dog or I can-

Yoko: Oh.

Phillipa: - I can keep my seat. [(laughs)] To own? (uc)

Yoko: (laughs) To own? (uc)

Phillipa: /It is./ Um. (reading) “Most people who have guns say a gun is important to protect their family.”

Through her comment “it is missing something” in her first turn quoted above, Phillipa provides Yoko with negative feedback concerning Yoko’s use of the word “keep.” This input by Phillipa leads Yoko to notice her use of this word and inquire about its meaning: “‘Keep’ is- (2) ‘protect’?” After her response to this question: “uh, no,” Phillipa, in her third turn, suggests that Yoko can instead use the word “protect,” just cited by Yoko in her flawed definition of “keep.” Phillipa in her next two turns elaborates on the correct meaning of “keep,” thus providing further feedback for Yoko on this word. This feedback, in turn, leads Yoko to try out another synonym for “keep”: “to own.”1

From the perspective of the IH, then, Phillipa in this section helps to meet Yoko’s data needs (Ellis 4, 21) through supplying negative evidence on Yoko’s use of “keep” and through giving her the opportunity to try out modified output. From the perspective of writing center pedagogy, Phillipa’s input takes directive form—for instance, with her unqualified “no” in response to Yoko’s definition of “keep” and her clear, if qualified, instruction: “Uh, if you want, # you can put protect there.” Between the categories of teaching and editing, her role falls more into the category of teaching, not simply because she explains the meaning of the incorrect word but also because, in response to Phillipa’s input, Yoko notices, questions, and alters her own usage. And, when Phillipa uses humor to provide further evidence concerning the word “keep” (“I could keep a dog or I can...keep my seat”), she evokes a laugh from Yoko, which, according to Thonus, occurs less often in ESL sessions than in sessions with native English speakers (“What Are the Differences” 235). In this exchange, then, Phillipa and Yoko seem to fulfill not only the IH, which is
thought to facilitate language learning, but also David Block's model of language
learning as “more than acquisition of linguistic forms”: “[I]t is about learners
actively developing and engaging in ways of mediating themselves and their rela-
tionships to others in communities of practice” (109).

A longer section of this tutoring session (quoted below, in five segments, for
identification purposes) provides further examples of the types of interaction and
challenges that can be involved as ESL students and their tutors wrestle with mean-
ing. In this section, Yoko and Phillipa discuss a passage from Yoko's essay contain-
ing her first illustration of reality versus façade: the unrealistic view of adult life
held by adolescent girls. Their discussion focuses on Yoko's choice of the word
“attack” to describe the response by a group of boys upon seeing girls dressed in
the provocative clothing.

Segment 1

**Phillipa:** Okay. (3) Um. (10) So, um, do you think that by, by, um, that, women
dressing, um, to attract men that they, that all, they are going to be attacked? Do
you think? Are, what kind of attack are you talking about?

**Yoko:** Oh. Mmm. Attack? (2) Mm. (3) Mm. (uc) So boys come up to the girls and
they/say something/ and, also-uhh, I think... (uc) I think....

Segment 2

**Phillipa:** Um. So, are you...when the, when the boys come to the girls to say
something is it, um...say something about appearance? Are they saying, um, some-
thing mean? Or, or how? What, what kind of, um, voice are they using. um the
meaning of their speaking?

**Yoko:** Huh? (uc) What the meaning of their speaking? There is boys.

**Phillipa:** Uh huh.

**Yoko:** (uc) Boys speaking.

Segment 3

**Phillipa:** Um, when they speak to girls, um. You said, uh # that it is possible they
are attacked at any time. Is this, um...how, what kind of attack?

**Yoko:** Uh. (3) Mm. **Attack?** Might be not correct.
Segment 4

**Phillipa:** I'm, I'm just- Try to explain what you, what you mean when- in the sentence. *What, what are you trying to say?*

**Yoko:** Uh. Mm. *(6)* /Mainly/* it's always put in a bad situation- um- from the boys. Each day the girls makes, um, /themselves/* more attractive. The boys interested in girls.

**Phillipa:** Mm hmm.

**Yoko:** And. # Mm. # Mm. # They- # Boys want to contact these girls. /More closer./ Uhh

Segment 5

**Phillipa:** Okay. Um. *(3)* The way it is in here it seems like you're talking, um, that women are, are- Adult women are being attacked by the way they dress. But, um, I think from what you are trying to- what you said, that you're saying that, um, that when the girls, um, dress more attractively then, um, they are harassed by boys. “Harassed” means, um, the boys say, um, not so nice things and make girls feel bad....

**Yoko:** Ah, yeah. Okay.

**Phillipa:** Um. So, um. *

**Yoko:** And also this that, um. /Husband?/

**Phillipa:** Yes.

**Yoko:** Lead to more, uh, bad situation. *(2)*

**Phillipa:** Um. Yes. The- *(3)* The, it can lead to more, um, more adult things that are not good for children to do, like, like young people. Um. The boys to pressure the girls to, to do sexual things?

**Yoko:** Yeah.

In segments 1, 3, and 4 above, Yoko makes her meaning progressively clearer. In response to essentially the same open-ended question from Phillipa (see the underlined portions of Phillipa's turns quoted above)—"What kind of attack?" "What are you trying to say?"—Yoko very gradually negotiates the meaning intended in her use of the English word “attack.” For example, in segment 1, she replies to Phillipa's question, “What kind of attack?": “Attack? So boys come up to the girls and they
say something.” True to Long’s findings on the characteristics of native speech most helpful to non-native listeners (133), the brevity of Phillipa’s open-ended questions, though preceded by unproductive “yes/no” questions, helps make Phillipa’s negative feedback comprehensible and appears to foster Yoko’s progressive elaboration of meaning and her “noticing,” in segment 3, that the English word “attack” may not accurately describe the boys’ response to the girls: “Attack? Might not be correct.” In facilitating Yoko’s negotiation of meaning in these three excerpts, Phillipa uses other modifications discussed by Long, including a willingness to move at a slow pace and to repeat her questions (133-138).

A moment in which communication between Yoko and Phillipa potentially complicates rather than advances Yoko’s learning occurs in segment 2 as Yoko responds to one set of questions from Phillipa, meant to help her define more precisely her intended meaning for the word “attack.” In this segment, an oddly non-standard question from Phillipa serves, for better or for worse, as a model for Yoko’s output, providing an example of how the tutor’s role as language informant can go awry. To Phillipa’s question: “What, what kind of, um, voice are they using, um, the meaning of their speaking?” Yoko responds, echoing Phillipa’s non-standard use: “What the meaning of their speaking? There is boys.” It is difficult to say what causes Phillipa to speak in this way. The construction may be evidence of the tension involved for Phillipa as she tries to determine Yoko’s intended meaning, or an attempt by Phillipa at a shorthand to speed up the slow-moving session.

This complication seems related to a larger problem in this discussion of Yoko’s use of the word “attack,” the extended duration of Phillipa’s uncertainty about Yoko’s intended meaning and to a second, related problem: the degree to which her uncertainty seems at times to compromise the straightforwardness with which she is able to offer Yoko feedback. These phenomena are perhaps most clear in the above excerpt in Phillipa’s first turn in segment 5, in which Phillipa elaborates on her negative evidence concerning the word “attack” with a tentatively articulated paraphrase of what she takes to be Yoko’s meaning: “But, um, I think from what you are trying to- what you said, that you’re saying that, um, that when the girls, um, dress more attractively then, um, they are harassed by boys.” When, at the very end of this same turn, she defines for Yoko the word “harass” (“Harassed means, um, the boys say, um, not so nice things and make the girls feel bad...”), it is difficult to tell from Yoko’s reply (“Ah, yeah. Okay.”) if Yoko has taken in and agrees with the meaning of the new word Phillipa suggests or if Yoko’s affirmative stems more from politeness. (Leki 56). However, later in the session when Phillipa repeats her use of the word “harass,” Yoko seems ready to take in this word as an alternative to
“attack” and asks, “Harassed. Harassed is verb?” With the positive evidence from Phillipa that “harassed” is a verb, Yoko asserts, “Let’s change harass.” Thus, Phillipa’s willingness to proceed at a pace that works for Yoko, despite the seeming pressure of her uncertainty about Yoko’s meaning, allows Yoko to continue to negotiate her meaning and ultimately resolve their communication impasse.

From these segments, it is clear why, on her writing center’s conference form, Phillipa characterizes her session with Yoko as “draft-focused” and “consultant-directed.” Phillipa dominates the session in the number of questions asked (for instance, in the above set of five excerpts, Phillipa asks ten questions to Yoko’s five) and in her influence on the agenda; after all, Phillipa is the one to begin the lengthy discussions about the meaning of the words “keep” and “attack.” And overall this session fits with the finding reported by Thonus, that tutors have consistently longer turn lengths as compared to the turn length of their ESL tutees (“How To Communicate Politely” 264). Despite Phillipa’s overall dominance, however, Yoko in some sections (for instance, in segments #1, 3, and 4 above) comes close to parity in the number of words spoken and goes well beyond backchanneling responses. And by negotiating meaning slowly in response to Yoko’s level of proficiency and to her own level of uncertainty concerning Yoko’s meaning, Phillipa seems able not only to help Yoko notice her errors but also to provide her with the opportunity for modified output and the opportunity for learning (Ellis 13).

Yet, whatever the benefits of such negotiation, it might still be argued that the time spent by Yoko and Phillipa wrestling with the meaning of two of Yoko’s words—”keep” and “attack”—is excessive. Indeed, the patience demanded on both sides for such an extensive discussion can be great, and the degree of progress, difficult to determine. In any assessment of such sessions, however, it is important to recognize that L2 writers such as Yoko need a great deal of time problem-solving and knowledge-building to acquire the target language. As Ann Raimes points out, unskilled L2 writers need “more of everything: more time, more opportunity to talk, listen, read, and write in order to marshal the vocabulary they need to make their own background knowledge accessible to them in their L2” (55). What might be seen as inefficiencies in this session—for instance, Phillipa’s backtracking to repeat a question or a potential alternative wording—can also be seen as providing Yoko with the time and opportunity she may need to respond to negative evidence from a native speaker. However, it seems from Phillipa’s assessment of this session in her comment quoted at the outset of this article (“I don’t know if I should have proofread [Yoko’s] paper a little more”) that her focus is more on the downside of the inefficiencies than on the potential for learning such a use of time can provide.
A particular challenge in L1 – L2 sessions that can further increase the time needed to promote comprehension and learning in tutor-tutee interactions is the conflict that can arise between the brevity of speech that ESL students often need to comprehend native-English speakers (noted earlier with Phillipa’s successful use of brief questions) and the extended cultural information that they can also need to write for audiences in their target language. This conflict is one of the factors that hinder the productivity of a session in my study between Tyson, a sophomore Political Science major, and his tutee, Takayuki, a first-year student from Japan. From the perspective of sociocultural theory, Tyson’s attempts at scaffolding Takayuki’s learning at some points tends to block Takayuki’s participation and at other points helps to facilitate it.

For instance, in excerpt 1 from their session (cited below), the cultural information Tyson offers on introductions to academic essays in the U.S., a topic Takayuki has asked to discuss, is somewhat long and complicated, particularly since Tyson attempts to define them by contrasting them to two other elements of essay writing: body paragraphs and outlines. The result is that Takayuki extracts the wrong meaning from Tyson’s information on the expected form:

Excerpt 1

Tyson: Well, the introduction should- # I mean, the body of your paper is where you go into specifics, so the introduction should sort of be a summary of what is to come. Like, kind of like your outline of what you’re going to talk about.

Takayuki: Oh. Right. (2) It’s better to write down specific? Specific? Specific you think?

Tyson: In the body. That’s what the body is for.

Takayuki’s misunderstanding of Tyson’s summary of the role of introductions is evident in his questioning response: “Oh, right. It’s better to write down specific?” Takayuki appears to have a similar problem with the length of the cultural information Tyson offers in excerpt 2, in which Tyson tries to scaffold the process of invention for Takayuki so that he can use it to develop and organize the essay’s introduction.

Excerpt 2

Tyson: (5) If you just kind of- just briefly sketch [the who, what, when, where, why, how of your topic] in the introduction- And then you can go to the body and you don’t have to spend as much time covering /those/- you can go on to more # impor-
tant things, or what you experienced and how that affected you as well. (8) So, we’re
talking about the introduction, why don’t you just go ahead and sketch out-

_Takayuki:_ Hm?

_Tyson:_ Just, like- # so, uh- /for your/ title you (uc) that you went to Galena.

_Takayuki:_ Mm hm.

_Tyson:_ Illinois.

_Takayuki:_ Okay.

To the information Tyson offers above about the usefulness of journalists’ ques-
tions, Takayuki’s only responses within his three turns come in the form of
backchannels: “Hm?” “Mm hm,” and “Okay.” These responses, which seem to indi-
cate the incomprehensibility of Tyson’s input for Takayuki, confirm the finding in the
studies cited by Williams, that backchanneling in ESL sessions was found not to
lead to meaningful revision (“Tutoring and Revision” 188-89).

However, in excerpt 3, when Tyson switches to briefer statements and questions
(underlined below), which at once model and scaffold the invention technique he
had previously tried unsuccessfully to explain, Takayuki’s responses become more
substantial:

_Excerpt 3_

_Tyson:_ And, uh, _who went with you?_

_Takayuki:_ Um, all, all ESL students and # ESL teachers.

_Tyson:_ Okay. # Um. (2) _Was this, this was a cultural trip?_ Something to get you-
you know, to, uh, /learn the/ different variety of American culture? # _Was that- I’m
kind of curious as to what the purpose of the trip was?_

_Takayuki:_ Mm. (3) Before, before going, going to Galena I- (2) We, uh, we stud-
ied, studied about Kalona (uc). (2) We arrived and clothing and # housing and (uc).
So, actually I went to there to, to see, to see with my, with my, with our eyes.

In response to Tyson’s brief questions, “who went with you?” and “was this a cul-
tural trip?...I’m kind of curious as to what the purpose of the trip was?” Takayuki is
able to generate his first substantive responses and thus begin to participate in
focusing his introduction. The value of brevity, cited by Long as promoting com-
prehension in ESL speakers (133), is affirmed in this passage as it leads to mean-
ingful interaction between Takayuki and Tyson. However, a problem seems to
remain in this section of their dialogue since, although Takayuki is ultimately able, through Tyson's scaffolding, to generate material for his introduction, he likely leaves the session with a less than full awareness of the cultural information Tyson attempts to communicate, on the characteristics of an introduction shaped to the expectations of U.S. academic audiences.

Tyson's attempts, then, to scaffold Takayuki's knowledge and foster his participation reveal the difficult-to-solve conflict that can arise between an ESL student's need for cultural information, at times necessarily lengthy, and the ESL student's need for brief input so as to comprehend that information. Another significant, though more-solvable, problem relates to the fact that Tyson himself seems to complete the session without registering the likely source of his degree of success in helping Takayuki. Through the greater brevity and focus of his latter turns quoted above, Tyson hits upon the level of support Takayuki seems to need to develop material for his introduction, material he has been unable to develop on his own. Yet, in Tyson's response to this session, "I felt I could have done more, but time and communication restraints prevailed," cited at the outset of this article, he makes clear that, although he is well aware of the session's "communication restraints," like Takayuki, he may be unaware of how to duplicate the success he is able to achieve—unaware, that is, of the role his questions' brevity likely plays in the breakthroughs he and Takayuki make toward the session's end.

ESL tutees and their tutors can clearly confront significant challenges in their sessions—such as the conflict Tyson and Takayuki face between Takayuki's need for brief comprehensible input and his need for extended cultural information and such as the extensive effort Yoko and Phillipa must each exert to negotiate Yoko's meaning and resolve their communication impasse. These challenges also face any tutor trainer who shares Blau and Hall's goal of limiting the frustration and guilt tutors can experience in ESL sessions and who wants to help tutors recognize the significant degree of success they often achieve. While guidelines can lessen the frustration and guilt experienced by tutors, the value of providing guidance on the role of the student, as well as the role of the tutor, is clear. And, since, as Williams notes in her remarks on sociocultural theory, learning "is a matter of providing the level of directedness that is appropriate to the learner" ("Undergraduate" 84), no hard and fast rules on the extent of the student's—or tutor's—involvement seem possible. Instead, tutors can gain an understanding of their role in ESL sessions, in particular of the need to test the individual ESL student's potential for interaction, through reflecting on and discussing "what is" in actual ESL tutoring sessions, including their own (Thonus, "What Are the Differences?" 240). The IH and the
sociocultural theories of L2 learning, outlined above, provide several lenses through which this sort of reflection can take place.

Through such reflection, tutors can more readily recognize both the benefits of the student's participation and the potential blocks to that participation. Armed with greater awareness, tutors may be more able to balance conflicting demands such as between the students' need for the cultural information and their need for brevity to comprehend that information—and, as Thonus's research reveals, between the students' need for directness and their own need as tutors to be polite to remain in line with their training and with general cultural norms ("How to Communicate"). And finally they may be more ready to see such conflicts and slow progress as a normal part of ESL tutoring rather than as some flaw in decisions made during the session and thus be more able to avoid the degree of self-doubt registered in Phillipa's and Tyson's comments on their sessions. This awareness is unlike-ly to eliminate the struggle experienced by tutors and students such as Phillipa and Yoko and Tyson and Takayuki. Yet, by realizing that the struggle itself can be part of the process of learning, tutors can find ways to embrace that process and help students trust its value as well.

NOTES

1 Although error analysis is not part of the focus of this article, a possible factor contributing to Yoko's error in using 'keep' as a syn-onym for 'protect' seems worth noting since it provides an example of the way first language issues can add another layer to the communi-cation problems in ESL tutoring sessions. As one of the reviewers of this article pointed out, Yoko's error in assuming that the English word 'keep' means 'protect' may have stemmed from the fact that the Japanese word for 'keep' ('mamoru') can also mean 'protect' (Harper Collins Shuban English-Japanese Dictionary 276, 398). If the relationship between the two words in Japanese indeed contributed to Yoko's error and if Phillipa had been aware of a possible first-language cause for the error, she might have been in a better position to ask Yoko to serve as a cultural informant on Japanese usage and to herself serve as cultural informant for Yoko on the degree of overlap that can exist between 'keep' and 'protect' in English, depending on the wording of the con-text and on the dictionary consulted. (In Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, the 11th edition, one of the second meanings of 'keep' is "to watch over and defend [us from harm]" [682], whereas in the 1997 edition of the Random House Webster's College Dictionary, the definition of 'keep' that is closest to 'protect' is meaning number 12, "to have the care, charge, or custody of" [716].)

2 Again, a possible first language cause for Yoko's error in choosing the word 'attack' for this context seems worth noting. Yoko's choice of the word 'attack' may have been caused by a confusion on Yoko's part between the English word 'attack' and 'atakku', a Japanese loan word used in teenage online discussions and online advertisements (Kim). According to one source, a teacher of Japanese at Southern Illinois University, the Japanese form, 'atakku-suru,' not included in most Japanese-English dictionaries, means to "go after something," "to challenge," or "defy": "A person attempts 'atakku' against something that appears almost impossible to acquire or to achieve" (Kim). And, according to another source, a graduate stu-dent from Japan studying at Southern Illinois University, 'atakku suru,' if used to describe an interaction between boys and girls, means "confessing or declaring one's love to someone with the possibility of being turned down (thus, it is challenging)" (Arima). Thus, 'atakku' indeed does not seem to have the connotation of vio-
lence and intended harm that accompanies most definitions of the English word "attack" (Random House Webster's 85) and seems to fit Yoko's description of the "Boys speaking" (in segment 2 above). While this analysis of Yoko's error, if correct, would help explain the extended length of Yoko and Phillipa's discussion of this word, as with the confusion between "keep" and "protect," it is impossible to know for certain that the analysis is, in fact, valid.

WORKS CITED


Kim, Alan. "Re: Online data." E-mail to author. 23 Jan. 2006.


Appendix A — Writing Center Conference Summary Form

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writing Center Conference Summary</th>
<th>Consultant: ____________________________</th>
<th>(Last name only) ______________________</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Student's last name, first name)</td>
<td>(Instructor's last name, first name)</td>
<td>(Date: Mo/Day/Yr) ______________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ F-Y Seminar</td>
<td>□ RWW</td>
<td>□ Sem/Wtg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Topics</td>
<td>□ Personal</td>
<td>□ Reading Lit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Personal</td>
<td>□ Studio</td>
<td>□ Fict/Poet Workshop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Other:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Description of Assignment)

- **Written Draft of Paper:**
  - □ No Draft (X)

- **Draft:**
  - □ Satisfied (S)
  - □ Neutral (N)
  - □ Dissatisfied (D)

- **Assistance Requested:**
  - □ None (N)
  - □ Understand Assignment (U)
  - □ Any/Everything (A)
  - □ Macro Revising (R)
  - □ Brainstorm/Discuss (B)

- **Primary Focus:**
  - □ Underclassman Assignment (U)
  - □ Brainstorm (B)
  - □ Expand/Develop Draft (E)
  - □ Idea Clarification (I)

- **Comments by Teacher (C):**
  - □ Global Structure/Organization (G)
  - □ Proofreading (P)
  - □ Other (O)

- **Secondary Focus:**
  - □ Comments by Teacher (C)
  - □ Other (O)

- **Student Motivation:**
  - □ Personal needs/expression (E)
  - □ Subject/content/ideas (S)
  - □ Audience/context (A)
  - □ Text/document (T)

- **Conference Evaluation:**
  - □ Draft-Focused (1)
  - □ Under 20*
  - □ Consultant-Directed (C)
  - □ Satisfactory (S)

  - □ Talk-Focused (2)
  - □ 20-40*
  - □ Writer-Directed (W)
  - □ Equivocal/Ambivalent (E)

  - □ Over 40*
  - □ Mutual Collaboration (M)
  - □ Unsatisfactory (U)

**Commentary:**

________________________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________________________

(Use back of form for further commentary)
Appendix B--Transcription Symbols

(These symbols have been adapted from Laurel Johnson Black's "Transcription Notations" in Appendix B of *Between Talk and Teaching*.)

# = a pause of about one second.

(3) = a pause of about three seconds.

-- (double hyphen) = an interruption

- (a hyphen) = sudden cessation of speech

[ = overlapping speech

() = a commentary by the transcriber

(Uc) indicates that the speaker's words are unclear and have been omitted if they are totally unintelligible.

// = words enclosed by slashes are difficult to understand on the tape and may be inaccurately transcribed

*italics* = reference to a word as a word. For example: *The this in the second sentence does not have a clear antecedent.*

*" (double quotation marks) indicate student's text being read aloud.