Review: Tutoring Second Language Writers

Yelin Zhao
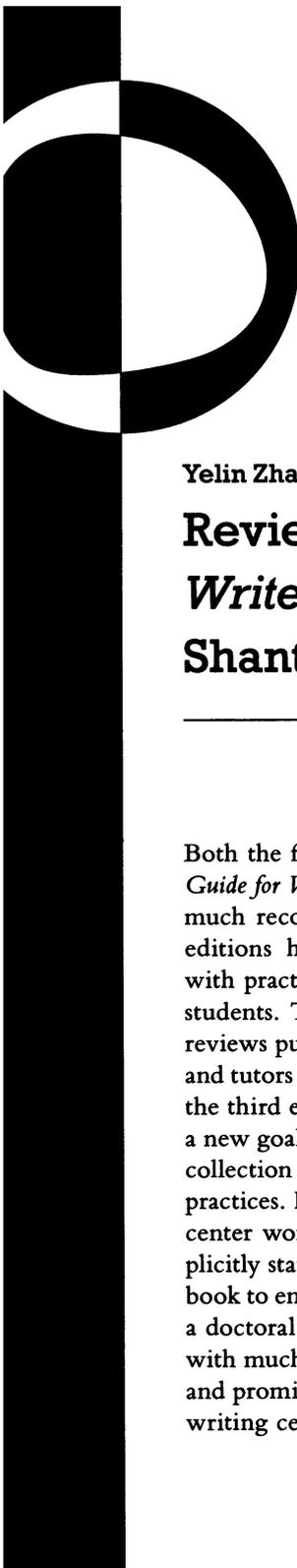
Yelin Zhao

Review: *Tutoring Second Language Writers*
Shanti Bruce & Ben Rafoth (Eds.)

Both the first (2004) and the second edition (2009) of *ESL Writers: A Guide for Writing Center Tutors* by Shanti Bruce & Ben Rafoth received much recognition in the writing center discourse community. Both editions have successfully achieved their goal of providing tutors with practical, prescriptive suggestions on how to effectively serve L2 students. The success of these editions is evidenced in many positive reviews published in journals as well as by the fact that many directors and tutors use them on a daily basis. In 2016, Bruce & Rafoth published the third edition with a new title, *Tutoring Second Language Writers*, and a new goal. As Carol Severino states in the Foreword, this third edited collection shied away from offering prescriptive "how to" steps based on practices. Instead, it aims to advance the field by "connect[ing] writing center words to the world of research" (p. viii). This goal is also explicitly stated in Bruce & Rafoth's Introduction, "Readers can use this book to enliven their curiosity and advance tutor-led research" (p. 3). As a doctoral student, writing center tutor, and writing center researcher with much interest in L2 research, I find this new orientation inspiring and promising as I believe research is of paramount importance for the writing center field to flourish. Overall, this collection will be greatly

beneficial to tutors, especially when it is used as a complement to other writing center resources, such as the second edition of *ESL Writers: A Guide for Writing Center Tutors.*

As mentioned in the introduction, one of the most inspiring changes of this volume is its focus on involving tutors in research. For instance, among a total of four parts, the entire Part 2, titled "Research Opportunities," is devoted to discussing many key elements essential for tutors to learn in order to conduct research successfully. These elements range from daily writing center encounters that might trigger tutors' desire to explore a certain topic, such as code-switching between and/or within L2 writers and L2 tutors (Chapter 5); an overview of methods that are specifically suitable to writing center research, such as conversation analysis, interviews, and grounded theory (Chapter 7); to the adoption of two specific methods, i.e., video recording and analysis, to advance tutor training (Chapter 6). Some chapters in the remaining three parts also include much useful information about research. For example, in Chapter 8, which is listed under Part 3, Elizabeth Witherite describes in detail how her passion for social justice has helped her formulate research questions, which eventually lead to her M.A. thesis. She also discusses how to use research methods such as interviews and concept mapping to explore tutors' perceptions of social justice issues that may occur in writing center tutoring sessions.

Not only is the above-mentioned content a key factor to pique tutors' interest in research, but the book's clear and consistent organization within each chapter is very likely to guide tutors' discussion about writing center research. The editors open each of the book's four parts with some prevalent myths, which the contributors then dispel. Towards the end of each chapter, the editors also present a number of thought-provocative questions and recommend some relevant readings, both of which can be easily adopted or adapted for discussion in meetings and among tutors.

Another positive change of this collection is its true reflection of the diversity of the writing center population. To be more specific, in this collection, L2 tutors gained recognition, which was not the case in the first two editions. In fact, L2 tutors have been largely neglected in the writing center literature. Many tutoring guides, including the first two editions of this book, along with dissertations and even published research articles, have either predominately addressed L1 tutors or have been written with the assumption that writing center tutors are L1 speakers. To the best of my knowledge, *Tutoring Second Language Writers* is one of the very first works that addresses this gap. Their attention to L2 tutors is manifested throughout the book. For instance, in

Chapter 5, Kevin Dvorak delves into the complicated question whether code-switching, mixing, and meshing should be avoided between L2 tutors and L2 students who share the same linguistic background (in this chapter, Spanish as their L1 and English as L2 or an additional language). He concludes by stating that having the ability to speak, write, and even teach in multiple languages is indeed a unique advantage that L2 tutors possess. The inclusion of L2 tutors in the writing center field is also evidenced by the fact that several chapters are authored by second language writers and tutors (Chapters 10, 11, and 14). Hearing the perspectives of L2 tutors can not only help other L2 tutors (both within and outside the U.S.) gain more confident about their ability to effectively tutor L2 students, but also help L1 tutors understand the learning process of L2 writers, thus better serving them in the future.

Despite many strengths, this edition does have some shortcomings. First, this collection covers fewer topics than those discussed in the second edition. This volume seems to narrow the focus to issues that are germane to identity and social justice. While these two are undeniably important topics, this narrow focus excludes discussion of other useful information such as the ones included in the second edition: tutoring ESL students online (Chapters 11, 12), issues about plagiarism (Chapter 13), and grammar tips (Chapters 9, 10). For this reason, perhaps this book will be more beneficial to tutors if used as a complement, not a replacement, to other existing writing center resources, such as training guides and peer-reviewed articles. I should also note that this book seems to be particularly suited to experienced tutors who have at least some knowledge about theories and practices in tutoring L2 students. Novice tutors or untrained tutors who are already overwhelmed by the linguistic and cultural gap between L2 students and themselves in practice may be more terrified after reading this book, as they may find many theoretical aspects even more challenging.

It is also important to note that although this edited volume is more research-oriented than the other two editions, some advice discussed in this book still lacks empirical evidence to support. For example, in Chapter 3, Michelle Cox discusses in detail the linguistic terms that are often used to describe L2 students' identity; key terms include *international students*, *permanent-resident L2 students*, *English as a second language*, *second language*, *native English speaker/nonnative English speaker*, and *limited English proficient/English-language learner*. Cox then focuses on comparing two groups of students: international students and permanent-resident L2 students. She argues that international students "are typically not embarrassed by grammatical errors but see them as a natural part of language learning" (p. 62) while permanent-resident L2 students may

be "sensitive about errors in their writing, so the tutor may want to use care when addressing issues of grammar and usage, the same care that would be used with an English L1 student" (p. 62). Such an assertion is problematic because it implies that the embarrassment students may feel about making grammatical errors, largely, if not entirely, depends on their language status. In fact, I have encountered many international students who are easily embarrassed when committing grammatical errors. By contrast, there are a great number of permanent-resident L2 students who are very receptive to suggestions on grammar. I was notably surprised by the lack of empirical evidence supporting such a bold claim.

I should also note that even though some advice offered in this book is based on the existing literature of L2 acquisition, caution should be exercised to ensure readers do not fall into the trap of viewing one particular suggestion as the best practice and thus adopting it in all situations in practice. Readers should take these suggestions with a grain of salt, use them to reflect critically on their own practices, and appropriately adapt them when necessary. For example, in the last chapter, Pimyupa Praphan & Guiboke Seong discuss the findings of implicit and explicit approaches to error corrections, which is a well-researched area in the field of L2 acquisition. They report that L2 researchers have found that compared to explicit approaches to error correction (e.g. explicit correction), implicit approaches (e.g. metalinguistic feedback and repetition) have more advantages in that they help learners explore their own errors and propose their own solutions, which is more likely to facilitate learning. While using the implicit approach can be effective in many situations, viewing it as the best practice in all situations can be dangerous. For example, insisting on asking implicit questions when working with an L2 student who simply has not possessed the knowledge that is being discussed would only embarrass the student. Additionally, the majority of the studies on error correction has been conducted in the L2 classroom setting; the findings of such studies may not necessarily be transferrable to the writing center one-to-one tutoring context. We need to conduct empirical studies in the writing center to investigate the effectiveness of different kinds of approaches to error correction.

Nevertheless, this collection is a useful resource for writing center directors and tutors, especially the experienced ones who seek to learn how to conduct research to advance L2 tutoring pedagogy. I would also recommend this book to novice tutors, but I suggest that they discuss daunting theories and advice offered in this book with more experienced tutors, directors, and ESL professionals.

About the Author

Yelin Zhao is currently a Ph.D. student and graduate teaching associate in the English Department at Oklahoma State University. There, she studies TESL and linguistics. She also teaches research writing and English grammar. Her research interests include second language writing, discourse analysis, and writing center studies, specifically with regard to multilingual tutors and multilingual students. She has presented at numerous conferences including AAAL, TESOL, IWCA, and NCPTW.