

1-1-2012

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Recommended Citation

Brendel, Christian (2012) "Tutoring between Language with Comparative Multilingual Tutoring," *Writing Center Journal*: Vol. 32 : Iss. 1, Article 8.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1856>

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Tutoring between Language with Comparative Multilingual Tutoring

by Christian Brendel

About the Author

Christian Brendel is a sophomore Global Studies student at Penn State University in the Schreyer Honors College. He has tutored for one year and has presented other linguistics-related papers at Moravian College and Alvernia University. He plans to attend graduate school and create language teaching materials as a linguistics professor.

Writers who do not speak English as a native language perennially have presented unique challenges to the writing center, for these writers, who study English as a second language (ESL), or even as a third or fourth foreign language (EFL), may also be unacquainted with American academic discourse. Terese Thonus writes that “Surprisingly, many international students arrive at an American university never having done what we consider ‘research’ or having written anything reflective of their personal thoughts” (21). These students matriculate at institutions that value secondary research, citation, and development differently from those in their own cultures. In this way, non-native writers are similar to native writers: both are “outsiders to the academic discourse community” (Johns qtd. in Thonus 22). However, ESL/EFL writers may also face unfamiliarity with English idiom and a lack of grounding in the syntactic, lexical, and idiomatic knowledge that native speakers take for granted (Myers 52). They realize the English taught to them by ESL instructors is not “idiomatic enough” for college (Thonus 14). As compared to native writers, then, ESL/EFL writers are “outsiders” even more so: not only must they learn academic English discourse, but they must also learn idiomatic English itself.

As tutors, we can help non-native writers learn these discourses by drawing on the connection between writing tutoring and teaching discourse that writing scholars have established. Muriel Harris remarks that writers need “tutorial interaction” (27). This interaction, she says, can encourage independent thinking and help students learn to decipher “academic language” used to talk about writing (40). In serving these functions, tutors equip students to understand academic discourse for themselves. Regarding non-native writers in particular, Sharon Myers points out the role of writing instructors as “cultural informants” who not only teach politeness and other social conventions but also language (Powers qtd. in Myers 55). I would argue that tutors are just as much “language informant[s]” (56). We are particularly suitable for sponsoring a writer’s literacy, as we exist in a rhetorical context that allows us to remain student centered. More so than teachers, we exist to work individually with writers and devote personal attention to not only their writing but also to *them*. With ESL/EFL writers, these goals expand to include the role of language informant: as Thonus argues, sometimes ESL/EFL “problem students” with unidiomatic writing are simply sent to the writing center by instructors (14), and often the tutor must “be the person who introduces these concepts” of academic discourse (21). Harris points out that we aim to help students “overcome the hurdles set up by others” (29); regardless of how students arrive in our writing centers, we assist them. Therefore, while we may disagree on principle with instructors sending ESL/EFL “problem students” to us, we nonetheless accept it as part of the context of a session and proceed to help the writer.

Prior research on tutoring ESL/EFL students has focused on higher-level concerns such as research and organization (see, for example, Thonus). There are many strategies for tutors to use in addressing concerns such as paragraph development (see Connor and Farmer on topical structure analysis) and topic (e.g., the *topoi*). However, often we neglect the smaller issues that can derail the entire meaning of a paper written by an ESL/EFL writer. Through my experiences in the writing center as a peer tutor, I have seen that ESL/EFL students’ papers sometimes feature awkward phrasing, unidiomatic speech, and, at times, the loss of semantic

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meaning. These are all sentence-level issues that can impede the development—or the expression—of an idea or an entire paper. I think we can go a step further in assisting non-native writers with these concerns. As tutors, we should expand our methods for helping ESL/EFL students by taking a linguistic approach that considers the lower-level structural differences between English and the writer's native language; in this way, we can better educate ourselves about the writer's own language and needs.

Sentence-Level Issues and Comparative Multilingual Tutoring

Sentence-level issues are easy to overlook as minor grammatical problems. Sentence-level pedagogy has been “historic[ally] de-emphasi[zed]”; among writing pedagogues, consideration of the low-level mechanics of writing was “dethroned” and focus on meaning was “crowned,” perhaps for good reason (Myers 52, 54). Indeed, an emphasis on content, organization, and other high-level concerns is often more important for native English-speaking writers. However, for ESL students, these issues can transcend the concept of “grammatical” trifles; syntactic or lexical errors can obscure meaning on a linguistic level. In the case of the ESL/EFL writer, sentence-level issues are very much related to overall rhetorical concerns. A writer's failure to grasp English does not result just in odd phrasing or simple punctuation problems but can also distort the semantic value of a sentence, a paragraph, or a paper. Myers holds that “it is indeed the ‘linguistic’ component (vocabulary and syntax) as much or more than what is considered the ‘writing’ (rhetorical) component that ESL students need most” (52). The needs of native and non-native writers differ, and ESL/EFL writers could benefit from emphasis on this “linguistic component.”

We have been reluctant to fulfill this particular need of the ESL/EFL writer. Eleanor Kutz reminds us that “we fear that validating their present language will lead them to believe anything goes, when we know that in the university and the world beyond there are rigid conventions . . . for correct usage” and other concerns, like style (385). It seems that in order to more effectively help ESL/EFL writers, we need to overcome the stigma of dealing with sentence-level

issues. However, while we help them work on linguistic concerns, we may have to acknowledge the “rigid conventions” they face in university and in the business environment, as Kutz warns. Ideally, reinforcing these corporate expectations is not the writing center’s role. Practically, however, if a writer decides to take a session in this direction (for example, in writing a job application, where the importance of “correct usage” may decide if he or she is hired), as student-centered tutors we do our best to help the student accomplish his or her goals and prepare for these realities. For ESL/EFL writers in particular, these problems blend with high-order concerns, and without a solid knowledge of English structure, writers will not be able to express themselves to their full abilities.

Compounding these problems is that we as tutors often are unaware of the nature of non-native literacy, a deficit that is problematic for our ESL/EFL pedagogy. This literacy is more than the sum of its parts: bilingual competence consists of a gestalt knowledge of both languages, not just a monolingual competence (Canagarajah 591). Consequently, it seems that the mainstream approach that tutors use in helping linguistically diverse students may be ineffective. Canagarajah, talking more broadly about English instructors, contends that the “dominant approaches to studying multilingual writing have been hampered by monolingualist assumptions that conceive literacy as a unidirectional acquisition of competence” (589). Such strategies falsely treat writing as a one-way process, where any learning accomplished is never revisited, reaffirmed, or relearned. To the contrary, Canagarajah proposes that literacy acquisition for ESL/EFL writers is more of a continuous “shuttle” between the native language and the learned language, which he terms the “negotiation model” (590). Similarly, Pinker reminds us that adults may learn a second language by using their native language “as a crutch, learning the second in terms of how it differs from the first” (17). It seems logical to conclude that ESL/EFL pedagogies which make use of this crutch will be more effective than those that ignore the writer’s natural shuttling between languages.

Just as Canagarajah proposes that writers jump back and forth across languages in acquiring literacy, so too, I argue, should we adopt a similar pedagogical strategy. To help writers better grasp

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English structure, I used a method in the writing center that I call comparative multilingual tutoring, or CMT. At its essence, it follows the paradigm of shuttling laid out by Canagarajah, but from the perspective of the tutor. Since writers already possess a fully functional and fully developed native language, tutors with the proper training and background who also have an understanding of that language can use it as a springboard to compare and contrast analogous (or non-analogous) concepts in English. By highlighting how each language system expresses a certain idea and comparing the syntactical, lexical, or idiomatic reasons behind the expressions, perhaps the writer will gain a better intuitive understanding of how these aspects of English work.

Using CMT in the course of a session, a tutor can capitalize on the concepts a writer already knows from his or her native language and define how a concept is used in English. This method entirely avoids the translation trap—instead of directly translating words or sentences, it helps explain the “strategy” behind a particular concept: that is, it teaches *how* to build infinite meanings, rather than simply explaining how to say one or two particular phrases. Similarly, it avoids the “sentence-scrubbers-for-foreign-students” stigma that Thonus describes (13); just as writing centers seek to improve writers and not just papers, this method is used to improve non-native speakers’ ability to form syntactically and idiomatically valid phrases, not just fix individual instances. Furthermore, CMT does not diminish the value of a writer’s own language and so perhaps lessens the hegemonic concerns of Kutz discussed above. Instead, it uses the primary language collaboratively with English, simultaneously validating the native language while helping the student learn English. By establishing the relations between the native language and English, I’ve had success using this method and have seen writers retain what they learned and produce correctly formed English structures. The study that follows is anecdotal—it is based on the experiences I’ve had tutoring at the writing center—but it has worked for me. Further research is needed to see the effectiveness with multiple students, but I believe CMT to be a viable option.

A Study of a Particular ESL/EFL Student

Many of my thoughts on the subject of ESL/EFL tutoring have, not surprisingly, been informed by my own experiences as a peer tutor in the writing center of the Pennsylvania State University, Berks Campus. The Penn State Berks Writing Center follows a peer tutoring model: students tutor students. The Berks campus is rather small, having about 2,800 enrolled undergraduate students, two-thirds of whom are commuters and 1 percent of whom are international students. The small physical size of the campus allows for frequent personal interactions. Accordingly, I worked with some of the same students in our writing center through multiple sessions. About 28 percent of the students who have visited the writing center are ESL/EFL, and I've observed that the majority of writers I tutor come from an ESL/EFL background.

In this section, I focus on one writer whom I was fortunate to tutor for multiple sessions over several weeks: Djamila. Djamila is a native continental Portuguese speaker, an adult learner, and a commuter. Additionally, she served as a multicultural mentor for the campus, helping students adjust to both American and college life, until she graduated in December 2011. She has been living in the United States for ten years. In addition to Portuguese, she can speak Spanish, French, and English.

While I consider my experiences with Djamila formative to my role as a tutor and the concepts I argue in this paper, every ESL/EFL writer is different in terms of cultural background and fluency in English, as well as in respect to experience in academic discourse. In the same way, the Penn State Berks Writing Center cannot stand for every writing center. Every writing center has its own particular training methods and goals that include ESL/EFL pedagogy at varying levels of depth, as well as its own tutors and writers from different linguistic contexts. However, it is true that many writing centers feature a high proportion of ESL/EFL writers, both as undergraduates and graduates. Thonus points out that "As undergraduates, these students join remedial composition classes; as graduate students, they are expected to write impeccabl[y]" (1-2). The issue of ESL/EFL writers' academic discourse fluency, then, is one that starts before matriculation and continues past graduation; it is

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something that can follow a non-native writer for his or her academic career. It should be a prime concern of ours to expand our repertoire of methods to better help these students become better writers.

To better understand one non-native writer's experience, I interviewed Djamila before she graduated. Though Djamila is an advanced English speaker, she came to the writing center to help address what she calls her problems adjusting to the "directness of the American speech, [the] way of writing." She feels that the thought process she is accustomed to as a Portuguese speaker—which often jumps between ideas or circles around the topic—prevents her from communicating effectively in academic writing. However, in my judgment, many of these issues ultimately go back to Djamila's ability to construct sentences. Often, her meaning is clear in oral speech due to the advantage of body language and context, but in writing her meaning is sometimes lost due to inaccurate word choice or awkward syntactic construction. Indeed, Djamila herself told me, "a lot of my sentences get mixed up . . . I want to tell a story, I want to convey a message. [But it] doesn't work." In other words, Djamila's style of writing—or, as she says, her thought process itself—is held back by issues at the sentence level. This problem makes it difficult for her to tell the "stories" that she wants to express and prevents the reader from understanding her life experience and cultural perspective. In her final semester, Djamila and I primarily worked on a semester-long film review paper, and we spent the most time learning how to solve these lower-level concerns. These issues distorted the development of higher-level concepts, such as her thesis and structure. Essentially, without the proper foundation, the key high-level areas of her paper were shaky and unclear. This discrepancy has challenged her development as a writer in English.

Djamila continued to express her frustration with other writing center methods. "I've worked with other people before, but it's a little hard for me to try to describe things to people when I don't feel like they understand what I'm trying to say. They tried even writing the text in Portuguese [and translating to English]," and vice versa. Though Thonus mentions translation as a positive tool (19), Djamila recounted that the strategy just made her confused and more frustrated. She explained her frustration as stemming from the fact

that “you can’t translate a language just by the writing of it”: it comes from emotions, thought processes, and cultural background, she says. She pointed out that “we can’t just translate the sentence and hope magically it’ll be the same.” I find what Djamila says to be accurate: ESL/EFL writers need to understand idiomatic English, rather than just translating phrases. For Djamila, then, the one-way approach that Canagarajah identifies did not work. In her case, at least one of the traditional ESL/EFL tutoring methods is not enough.

Djamila found that CMT, however, worked “the best” for her. In fact, it was while working with Djamila that I first conceived of CMT. Due to prior interaction with Djamila, I was aware that she spoke Spanish. Furthermore, as a linguist, I was aware that Spanish and Portuguese were closely related, both being West Iberian languages, and were more similar to each other than to English which, though also an Indo-European language that has borrowed much Romantic vocabulary, inherits much of its structure (its thought process, so to speak, though the argument of whether or not language influences thought is a bit out of this paper’s scope) from Proto-Germanic. Often when I tutored her, I would see opportunities to draw comparisons between English and Spanish, knowing that much of what I would identify in Spanish would have close correlation in Portuguese. Sometimes, we discussed semantic issues: for instance, I explained the complex usage of English *for* by contrasting and comparing it with Spanish *por* and *para*, two words with very different semantic implications that can both be translated as *for*. Regarding tutors using CMT, Djamila said that “if you have a prior knowledge of language . . . you have a better sense of what the person is trying to tell you without actually directly telling you. . . . you can transfer that [knowledge] to another language better, versus just word-by-word translation.” CMT accounts for the “infinitely productive” (Carnie 13) nature of language in that it links English patterns to native language patterns, rather than simply teaching set phrases.

Djamila stated quite clearly her expectations for the writing center: “if the [tutor] understands my thought process, [he/she is] able to funnel my ideas into something that’s understandable.” Her sentiment here again places the onus on the tutor. In my experience, we—both as tutors and more broadly as a university—expect much

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adaptation of ESL/EFL students to our discourse: English as a common language in school and class, for example, plus other assumptions of American scholarship (use and citation of secondary sources, a personally developed thesis, etc.). Perhaps we must do our part to bridge the gap from our own position as discourse-fluent tutors.

It is in identifying these structural differences and similarities that CMT is particularly useful. When a tutor notices a syntactic error in a student's writing, he or she can then draw on linguistic knowledge to explain why the structure does not work in English and how the rules behind it differ between the two languages. For example, if a Spanish speaker wrote, "He fled the house because the flames," an aware tutor could compare English "because" with Spanish *a causa de* ("because of") and *porque* ("because"). Logically, *a causa de* would fulfill the role of "because of" in the correct sentence ("He fled the house because of the flames"). The tutor could highlight a point of reference for the writer—in this example, pulling from an already present distinction in Spanish that conveniently matches an analogous structure in English—that would help him or her use the structure properly in the future.

Implications for Tutors

Obviously, we as individual tutors can't each know every language, nor can our writing centers possibly hire enough fluent tutors for every non-English language spoken on campus. However, perhaps fluency is not required. Looking at my particular case, I would not consider myself fluent in either Spanish or Chinese, and yet I have an intense descriptive linguistic knowledge of these two languages and have used CMT with them effectively. I may not be able to communicate conversantly in these two languages, but I can certainly describe how they work. The ability to talk fluently must be acquired through long exposure, immersion, and conversation (see Carnie 12-13), but language structure can be studied from textbooks like any other subject. With this experience in mind, I think that a promising direction for ESL/EFL writing center pedagogy is first in a more developed pedagogy for the *tutors*. Some curricula for writing tutors (such as the one used in my tutor training course) already

cover, for example, the supposed differences in rhetorical structures of particular languages. Furthermore, Thonus proposes that even if tutors aren't ESL-educated, they can help non-native writers better by familiarizing themselves with ESL writing pedagogy (14). In knowing more about ESL/EFL instruction, the writing center can create an environment that better prepares tutors to better help non-native writers. Perhaps that education can be expanded further: we can be trained to possess knowledge of how different language families structure and represent thought.

This knowledge could be used to compare the differences on a low level. For instance, a tutor may be taught that Romantic languages often idiomatically use reflexive pronouns relatively devoid of semantic meaning (Spanish “me acuerdo,” literally, *myself I-remember* = “I remember [to do something]”; etymologically similar Italian “mi ricordo,” literally, *myself I-remember* = “I remember”). This knowledge could be used to illustrate that although English does use reflexive pronouns (“He made himself laugh”), it does not use them as idiomatically. Consequently, “I forgot myself” is an incorrect English translation of the original Spanish and Italian sentences. In this example, “myself” in Italian and Spanish merely strengthens the subject of the sentence, but in English it indicates a distinct meaning (the object of the action). “I forgot myself” is a syntactically correct and grammatical English sentence, but it is semantically different from the Spanish and Italian examples above (the phrase is acceptable in, for example, “When I first moved away from home, I forgot myself [my values]”) and thus is a contextually incorrect translation. By explaining language differences in this way, we are not necessarily teaching *grammar* rules but rather how English is *used* in relation to how the native language is used.

Sometimes, even the grammar rules taught to non-native speakers are not enough to enable them to speak or write well. Thonus notes that while ESL/EFL students are often grammar and vocabulary savvy (since they have likely taken English proficiency tests to matriculate), their textbook familiarity “do[es] not always translate into satisfactory academic writing” (13). In other words, knowing grammar is not enough to be proficient in a language for college writing (or any discourse). Indeed, Gee states that “a person

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can know perfectly the grammar of a language and not know how to use that language” (5); much of meaning comes from context (*where* something is said, paralinguistic factors like tone and facial expression, and what the listener expects, for example). Proscriptive grammar does not equal language, simply put, and some grammatical rules carry little meaning. Myers highlights the example of subject-verb agreement in third-person verb endings (such as “he goes” versus “he go”), saying that since the noun has already declared its number and identity, “Meaning has already been established, so there is no strong semantic demand for the information, only the abstract grammatical convention of repeating it” (63). Verb endings are almost non-semantic in modern English and are rather vestigial: they no longer contribute to the meaning of a verb, but are instead left over from a time when they mattered more. In this case, knowing the grammatical rules of subject-verb agreement doesn’t add much to a sentence’s meaning. Indeed, a sentence can be fully grammatical and yet have no meaning. Take the example “I sat the bus”: it is syntactically correct (compare the structurally similar “I sat the guest”), but almost certainly semantically incorrect (the correct sentence would be “I took the bus”). However, in Chinese, a similar structure is both grammatically and semantically correct: 我坐公车, literally “I sit bus.” This example illustrates the problematic nature of using direct translation from native language to English as a tool in writing centers and perhaps explains the reasons behind Djamila’s frustration with the translation method mentioned earlier: though sometimes translations will happen to match semantically, the method is not reliable.

These errors of syntax and vocabulary may occur when a student unknowingly applies an analogy from his/her own native language that is unacceptable in the target language. In some cases, these syntactic or idiomatic analogies work; in the cases above, they do not. As can be seen, these discrepancies are *not* grammatical trivialities: they are significant linguistic issues that can change the entire meaning of a phrase. As Myers says, “there is no getting away from the fact that students need control of a great deal of lexis and syntax in the first place” (55), and indeed helping ESL/EFL writers grasp these English concepts is not a preoccupation with low-level issues.

Additionally, innate knowledge of what is linguistically correct, but not necessarily grammatically correct is common to all speakers and can, therefore, be used for CMT. While Djamila is quite aware of correct Portuguese grammar and language families, even ESL/EFL writers who are less aware of the grammatical rules behind their languages could benefit from comparing structures in English to their native languages. Take, for example, this syntactically incorrect sentence: “He the stairs quick.” All English speakers know “he the stairs quick” is wrong and is meaningless: the action word is missing. No native speaker should ever utter such a sentence. Next, take the sentence “he went up the stairs quick.” Proscriptive grammar says this sentence is also wrong: “quick” should be “quickly.” However, this error does not destroy the meaning of the sentence: any English speaker could understand “he went up the stairs quick” and may not even know it is “grammatically” incorrect. This sentence has semantic meaning despite being “ungrammatical.” Similarly, all native speakers of a language know when a sentence is syntactically correct, even if they are not acquainted with the rules of prospective grammar. Speakers intuitively recognize the structure of their language, and we can build on a writer’s innate understanding of the native language to teach analogous English structures. With knowledge of the ESL/EFL writer’s language, we tutors could address the instances where a structural or idiomatic carryover from the native language obfuscates the intended meaning in English.

While helping students address these issues often falls on writing center tutors, we cannot practically have a purely denotative (non-fluent) knowledge of *every* language. Perhaps the best we can do is to, as Djamila astutely pointed out, “study our audience.” We should look at “the demographics of students [we] have” and see how to serve them better. Essentially, tutors could improve their ability to help ESL/EFL students by attempting to gain a descriptive linguistic understanding of the languages of the students they tutor, understanding *why* languages work the way they do (an important distinction from only being able to communicate in a language intuitively) in order to compare and contrast with the way English works. Even though a larger-scale study and more research would be necessary to confirm how effective this strategy is for other ESL/

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EFL writers, I believe comparative multilingual tutoring is a more inclusive strategy for use in the writing center and will encourage ESL/EFL students to become better writers, our ultimate goal for any student who comes to see us.

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