

Portrait of the L2 Writer as a Writing Center Visitor

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Slide 1:

Good afternoon, and thank you for coming to our presentation today. I am Vicki Kennell, an associate director for graduate and multilingual writing in the Purdue Writing Lab. I am Molly Rentscher. While collecting data and collaborating with Vicki to develop this presentation, I was a writing center coordinator at Arizona State University. However, I recently accepted a position at University of the Pacific, where I now oversee graduate writing support, including support for multilingual graduate writers.

At Purdue and at ASU, increasing numbers of international matriculations in recent years have led to increasing numbers of writing center visits by L2 writers. In the 2016-2017 academic year, at the Purdue Writing Lab, 69% of total visits (or 3,926 visits by 1,233 individuals) were with users who self-identified as non-native speakers of English. In that same time period, at the ASU Writing Centers, 29% of total visits (or 7,255 visits by 2,080 individuals) were with users categorized as “international” by the University’s management system. Note that, for ASU, the percentage of total visits from non-native speakers of English is much higher due to visits by domestic students who identify as non-native speakers of English, but this information was not available to us. When writing centers have high numbers of L2 visitors and tutors who are not trained as L2 writing experts, this can lead to difficulties, as you can probably imagine. What we have found is that tutor perception (“L2 writers want grammar help”) is often taken at face value and that writer perception is often missing when solutions to the difficulties are proposed. The research we want to present today was an attempt to overcome the assumptions on the one hand and the lack of input on the other.

Our data set includes demographic information about the appointments made by international students at our respective institutions during the 2016-2017 academic year. In addition, each of those students was invited to complete a survey that collected information about the individual as a writer--in any language. So questions asked about the writing process, confidence levels about writing in the primary language or in English, reasons for seeking help on writing, etc. The Purdue survey was completed by 109 of the 1,233 individuals who were invited to participate. The ASU survey was completed by 76 of the 2,080 individuals who were invited to participate. Because this was a pilot project, we ended up with way more data than we could possibly use in this talk, so if you are interested in the full question list of the survey, feel free to contact us later.

Before we move on to our talk, I wanted to say a few words about why we teamed up. Both writing centers work with large numbers of L2 writers, but what I tell our prospective undergrad tutors in their practicum about the primarily-international students at Purdue is relevant here as well: “international describes a mode of matriculation and tells almost nothing about the person as a writer.” So the implications of the sort of research we did here might be similar across institutions or might not be. Comparing data cross-institutionally thus has the potential both to facilitate the sharing of strategies that will be relevant when populations are similar and to broaden the understanding of what might-be when populations are different. There is no guarantee, for instance, that Purdue’s L2 population will remain primarily Chinese over the next decade.

Slide 2:

By now, it may be clear why this sort of research matters. As writing center administrative staff, we hear from tutors about their experiences working with L2 writers--their concerns, their fears, but also their interpretations of what L2 writers want from them as tutors. If the interpretation is based more on tutor assumption than on fact, such interpretations can lead to imperfect tutoring. For instance, a request for grammar HELP becomes a tutor trying to fix everything for the writer without probing further to find out whether there is an “and” in that request--help with grammar AND with flow, maybe. The quotes on this slide give you some idea of the wide range of ways in which new tutors approach L2 tutoring: assuming that writing processes will be the same; struggling to differentiate between writing and language concerns; addressing grammatical competence without overwriting the student’s voice. As the final bullet point sums up nicely, tutors can and do worry about pretty much everything to do with tutoring L2 writers, often because of what they do NOT know about those individuals as writers. This is part of what we were attempting to address with our research.

Slide 3:

The first data that we want to share deals generally with writer perception of themselves as writers. One of our respondents noted that, quote, “I have no idea how to write properly.” This was echoed to various degrees by other respondents, but some respondents were quite clear about their strategies and the fact that they had improved in their writing over time. In our survey, we wanted to get a sense of writer perceptions of themselves. We wondered, for instance, whether they were aware of their process as a process, or whether they were equally confident in their writing skills in English versus in their primary language. This first section of our talk will look more closely at these questions.

Slide 4:

In contrast to the writers’ perceptions that they have no idea how to write properly, answers to this question showed a remarkable degree of understanding of the writing process. We asked writers to explain their personal writing process and to tell whether it was the same or different in the primary language and in English. A majority of ASU respondents and almost half of Purdue respondents just listed a single process without specifying which language. We assumed that this likely means the writer has a single process regardless of language. A further 33% of Purdue respondents and 13% of ASU respondents specified they used the same process with no more than slight variation. A smaller number of writers indicated a different process for each language--13% of Purdue respondents and 19% of ASU respondents.

Before I talk about what the single writing process looked like across respondents, I wanted to offer one caveat. All respondents to this survey are writers who already used the writing center to some extent, so similarity of process could be due to what they have learned from tutors. One writer, after providing a very long explanation of the process, went on to say this: “I didn’t write like this before coming to the US, so this is something that I learned by being a PhD student and attending the writing lab at Purdue. I think I will do the same in my native language now, but before working on my PhD, I didn’t know how to write a paper at all.” Because the surveys were anonymous, we have no way of knowing whether respondents who indicated a single writing process regardless of language were our frequent flyers or not; hence, we have no way of knowing the extent of the tutors’ role in the writers’ understanding of process.

Slide 5:

Of the writers who simply listed a single writing process, 42% of Purdue respondents and 58% of ASU respondents indicated some variation of the SAME single process. This basic process included 3 steps: prewriting, writing, and editing or revising. In addition, a number of respondents indicated the same process minus either the prewriting OR the editing/revising--in other words a 2-step process that is very similar to the common single process. What was most interesting about this common single process was the extent to which writers marshaled their resources prior to writing, demonstrated by the quotes on the slide. Writers tended to do a whole lot of work prior to actually writing the draft: outlining, brainstorming, talking to people, researching the topic, writing keywords, etc. What we don't know from this data is the extent to which any of the stages of this single process are caused by writers lacking confidence versus writers who are fairly savvy about how writing works. For instance, does the prewriting occur because writers know that this sort of work will help them write the actual draft, or does it occur because the writers aren't confident of being able to express content knowledge in a second language?

Slide 6:

When we looked at the “different process” responses, we found that for both our data sets they fell into roughly three categories: added steps when writing in English, translanguaging or using a mix of the primary language and English when writing in English, and greater rigidity of method when writing in English.

Not too surprisingly, the added steps when writing in English tended to cluster around the end of the writing process and were often related to language. Writers noted that they used the same process for either language but added a further grammar check or a final language check when writing in English. A few writers also noted that in the primary language they might skip some steps, often, again, that final proofread, but sometimes also they might skip initial language-support steps such as starting with keywords rather than directly with writing paragraphs.

The translanguaging when writing in English tended to be related to language confidence. Writers commented on mixing the primary language with English in differing degrees, with some writers writing an entire draft in the primary language and then revising it into English, and other writers simply doing all of the thinking and prewriting in the primary language but writing the actual draft in English.

The greater rigidity of method when writing in English was contrasted with a more casual orientation to writing in the primary language. English writing might be seen as “more robotic”; writing in the primary language “is casual” and allows for more multitasking (e.g., listening to music, etc.). English writing requires following “a set of rules” while writing in the primary language allows writers to “use [their] own style.”

To wrap up the process question, we found that this single question about writing process yielded a number of potential implications for writing centers that tutor L2 writers.

1. We tend both to assume writers are working with our understanding of the writing process and, at the same time, to act as if they have no unified sense of process of their own. Our results here call both of those into question. Writers clearly have a sense of their own process, and, for many of them, it is a unified sense across languages. This means that tutors could ask struggling writers about their process in the L1 and then talk about how it transfers to writing in the L2. The flip side of that similar process is that writers with a very limited process in the L1 (e.g., draft, edit,

submit) may transfer that to writing in the L2. Writing centers may need to teach tutors to talk about different stages in the writing process in greater detail and to engage writers in conversations about, for instance, the usefulness of marshaling resources before starting but also while writing.

2. If it is true that writers see writing in English as more rule-bound and more rigid, it might be helpful to translate some of what we say about global aspects of writing into those terms. While we don't want to go so far as to mandate a return to the rigidity of the five-paragraph essay, perhaps it would be worthwhile to consider what rules for North American academic writing our L2 writers have not had the chance to subconsciously internalize in the same way that domestic writers may have done.
3. When tutors say that L2 writers just want help with grammar, it is important to contextualize these requests. If writers feel more confident about the steps of the writing process that are the same for both the primary language and English, perhaps they only use the writing center for the process steps where they lack confidence, for instance, the extra step of checking English grammar and language use. Asking for help with grammar thus reflects confidence level more than understanding of the writing process.

I'll note here the preponderance of "mays" and "mights" in those implications. As we started looking over our data, we realized that it was pointing to a need for further research if we were to avoid simply replacing previous assumptions with new ones. At the close of our presentation we'll have a slide that highlights directions for future research.

Slide 7:

As I said when we started talking about writer perceptions, and as you can see from the quotes on this slide, some writers stated their lack of confidence quite clearly--I am never confident about writing--but others varied in confidence depending on the language they were writing in. We asked writers specifically about their confidence in global skills such as audience awareness, connecting ideas, sustaining an argument, and constructing thesis statements. We also asked them specifically about their confidence in local skills such as forming grammatically-correct sentences and using a varied vocabulary.

Slide 8:

As you can see from the Purdue data on the left, we found that respondents were generally confident of their global skills in either language, but English was weighted more heavily toward "somewhat confident" and the primary language was weighted more heavily toward the "very confident". The ASU responses were similar.

In looking at local skills, we find a slightly different picture. As the ASU data shows, overall confidence in English local skills was much lower than confidence in the primary language, and a higher percentage of respondents were not confident in English. As with global skills, the Purdue data was very similar.

In primary language global skills, the Purdue data showed 41-52% of respondents very confident and 39-48% somewhat confident. In English global skills, 27-30% were very confident and 58-67% somewhat confident. "Not confident" for global skills in either language was less than 20%. Similarly, for primary global skills, the ASU data showed 38-56% of respondents confident and 36-51% somewhat confident. In English global skills, 34-47% were confident and 43-57% somewhat confident. "Not confident" for global skills in either language was less than 13%.

The Purdue data showed 58-65% very confident of primary local skills and only 17-33% very confident of English local skills. The “not confident” category was also quite different between the two languages, with primary local skills receiving 4-9% and English receiving 14-38%. The ASU data showed similar results: 57-76% confident of primary local skills and only 21-34% confident of English local skills. The “not confident” category was very different between the two languages, with primary local skills receiving 4-9% and English receiving 2-19%.

Slide 9:

When we look at the specific areas where writers indicated a lack of confidence, we see that between 20-40% of survey respondents at Purdue feel “not confident at all” when addressing local issues in English. Between 15-20% of survey respondents at ASU feel “not confident at all” when addressing local issues in English. This is much higher than lack of confidence with global skills in English (12-18% at Purdue and 10-13% at ASU), and this further legitimizes writers’ requests for tutors’ help with local skills. The request may not be due to lack of knowledge or skill but rather to lack of confidence in what knowledge or skill the writer possesses.

This sort of data on confidence has implications for tutor training. As previously mentioned, asking for help with grammar may reflect confidence level more than understanding of the writing process. Thus, writing center administrators should train tutors to develop an awareness of the dynamic between confidence, knowledge of writing process, and skill. For example, tutors might find that hesitance in a writing center session is due to lack of confidence as much as lack of knowledge or skill. Writing center administrators must train tutors to identify and navigate confidence issues in tutoring sessions and talk about confidence with L2 writers. Further, given the differences in confidence between primary language and English, tutors may or may not be able to draw on a writer’s L1-writing confidence for transfer to L2 writing.

Slide 10:

So, we’ve talked a bit about writers’ perceptions that they don’t know how to write. Interestingly, tutors’ perceptions of L2 writers tend to align with this somewhat, with tutors perceiving L2 writers as exclusively focused on the sentence level. “L2 writers just want proofreading help.” We have both heard a thousand variations of this at our respective institutions over the years, and I’d imagine that many of you have heard something similar. Because our research focused on the writers and not the tutors, we won’t be discussing the tutors themselves—how they come to this perception, nor what the results of the misperception are. Instead, we want to consider this from the writers’ perspectives. In particular, we asked writers about the reasons for their visits (first visit & most recent), about the style of feedback they prefer to receive, and about their understanding of the roles of tutor and writer. The results from all of these categories clarify how the tutor perception that L2 writers just want proofreading help is, in fact, a misperception.

Slide 11:

If, as tutors tend to think, L2 writers just want proofreading help, we might expect to find that first visits and recent visits both showed writers wanting help specifically and primarily with grammar. This was NOT what we found in our survey. The top two reasons for writers to make their initial visit were similar for both institutions: first, worry about writing skills, and second, worry about language skills. As you can see from the percents on the slide, just under half of respondents chose both of those options from a “check all that apply” style list. I should note that “wanting someone to proofread for me” WAS an

option in that list, but it was not the top choice for writers at either institution. Reasons for most recent visit showed similar preferences on the part of writers. If we just look at individual items on the list, then, yes, as tutors might predict, local options received the largest number of checks, with global options a very close second. If however, we look at individual responders, we find a very different story. For both Purdue and ASU respondents, around half of individuals selected BOTH local and global options. Another 27% of Purdue respondents and 10% of ASU respondents selected ONLY global options (in other words, NOT local at all). Only around a third of respondents from either institution selected ONLY local options. So, while, yes, there is a fair amount of interest in “grammar” help, tutors need to think in terms of “grammar plus”--people will request grammar help, but they likely also know about other types of help they need.

Slide 12:

If it is true that writers just want proofreading help, then we might expect them to prefer a style of tutoring where the tutor simply makes the correction or tells the writer exactly what to do. Again, we found quite the opposite. When reflecting on the style of feedback they prefer to receive, survey respondents used phrases like “teach me,” “ask me questions,” “and help me understand” to describe a collaborative and interactive style. As this sampling of quotes illustrates, many L2 writers appreciate some teaching and helping when it comes to local and global writing skills. These writers want to engage in collaborative tutoring sessions that are focused on learning and will help them improve their writing skills.

Slide 13:

The idea that many L2 writers want to engage in collaborative, learning-oriented tutoring sessions is also reflected in how they understand the roles of tutor and writer. The majority of survey respondents believe that the tutor’s role is to help the writer, and the writer’s role is to engage in the tutoring session and retain ownership of their writing. When asked to reflect on the role of the tutor, almost half of respondents used “helping” language, which we coded as the writer retaining agency. Conversely, only a third used “fixing” language that suggested that they give agency to the tutor. When asked to reflect on the role of the writer, over half of respondents used words and phrases that communicated their agency in the relationship.

The responses to questions about session goals, style of feedback, and the roles of writer and tutor yielded a number of potential implications for writing centers that tutor L2 writers:

1. Because writers are aware of their needs for both local AND global help, tutors need to learn to probe further when a writer asks for help with grammar. This will ensure that an opportunity to address global needs is not missed.
2. Tutors need to understand that a request for grammar doesn’t just mean “fix it for me,” and they need skills for passing along knowledge, strategies, and rules that are aligned with a more collaborative and learning-oriented style of feedback.
3. When tutors say that “L2 writers just want proofreading help,” they make a problematic assumption about how L2 writers see the tutor’s role, and how they expect to be engaged in conversations about grammar. The presence of “helping” and “teaching” language in the majority of the survey responses challenges tutors’ misperceptions that L2 writers expect tutors to be editors or fixers.

4. Writers who seem passive in a tutoring session might not actually be; in some cases, passivity is due to misunderstanding the role of the writer or tutor.

Slide 14:

To wrap up, I want to pause a moment on what our title promised you: a portrait of the local L2 writer as a writing center visitor. In looking at writer perception and tutor misperception, we've talked a lot about implications such as tutors needing to contextualize grammar requests by understanding the role of confidence in the request or by acknowledging that a grammar request is not simply a demand for the tutor to do all the work of proofreading but is rather a writer's request to be taught. Our survey data was remarkable in helping to tease out some of those aspects of what are seen as typical L2 writer concerns. But a survey is not the only way to learn something about your writing center and its work with L2 writers. Even if you don't do a survey, it can be useful to look at who your prototypical writer is using scheduling data. What you see on the slide is a comparison of the prototypical L2 writer from Purdue's Writing Lab and from ASU's Writing Centers as derived from scheduling data. The two institutions use different scheduling systems, so the easily available data was slightly different, hence the question marks in the ASU column.

Implications from the two **survey** data sets were similar. Since the surveys were anonymous, we have no way of knowing whether the respondents were exclusively our frequent fliers, or whether they were from among our large number of one-time visitors (Purdue had 514 individuals with a single visit during the time of data collection). If the majority of respondents were one-time visitors, their knowledge of their own writing process might be considered in a different light than if the majority of respondents were regular writing center visitors who might have learned about writing process from their tutors.

If we compare the two prototypical L2 writers, there are a number of similarities--both undergrad, 30 minute face-to-face appointments in the fall semester, and for a course assignment. But that last, different bullet point shows how differences in population can lead to different implications for writing centers. Purdue's prototypical writer was a one-time visitor; ASU's prototypical writer attended 3.7 appointments. What most immediately leaps to mind here is that Purdue tutors will feel like they ALWAYS have to talk about how the Writing Lab works (we'll help you learn to proofread your own work, but we won't just do the work for you) without it seeming like anyone learns from what they say. In other words, with many one-time visitors for Purdue tutors, it may be more true that L2 writers always ask for proofreading help. The differences between the prototypical writers raise questions, as well. Is the one-time visitor more product-focused, generally, or does he or she simply have less confidence with the particular genre of the current assignment? Did the one-time visitor not receive the help requested and thus didn't find the experience helpful and so never came back? Did the writer with 3 or 4 appointments have some prior educational experience with writing that provided the impetus to work on writing over time rather than as a one-time thing?

One caveat before we conclude: although looking at the prototypical writer can offer some insights that will help tutors, it is important to remember to look at the broader picture as well. For instance, while Purdue had 514 one-time visitors, there were also 16 visitors with more than 20 appointments (the highest had 43 appointments in one academic year). And although Mechanical Engineering supplied the greatest number of writers, all colleges were represented among writing center visitors during that year. So be careful not to exclude writers while focusing in closely on the prototypical.

Slide 15:

As I mentioned earlier, we found an awful lot of maybes and mights as we worked through the data and its implications. We've listed some of them here as ideas for future research, but these are not all the possibilities by any stretch of the imagination. If you have students looking for research projects, you might just find that a survey of this sort is a good starting point for identifying more-focused areas of research.