

“I had to discard initial assumptions”: Equipping writing center tutors with expertise in second language writing

Vicki R. Kennell, PhD

SSLW, Tempe, Arizona, October 2016

[Notes to accompany presentation slides.]

Slide 1:

I’m going to talk today about equipping writing center tutors with expertise in L2 writing. The information will be drawn from the ESL training program I developed at Purdue, including from survey data evaluating that program and from reflections that tutors wrote as part of the training itself. All material is covered under an IRB protocol.

Slide 2:

One note about terminology before I begin. As I’m sure you all know, there are a large number of terms used to describe second language writers. In the interests of simplicity, I will refer to “ESL training” simply because that is how our tutors know our training program, to “international students” because at Purdue we have more visa students than recent immigrants in attendance, and to “L2 writers” because that is one of the more accepted terms currently.

For this talk, I want to cover two basic areas: Why tutors need L2 expertise in the first place, and how to equip them with what they need. I will be using our writing center at Purdue as a case study for this.

Slide 3:

So: Why writing center tutors need L2 expertise in the first place.... The short answer is “sheer numbers.”

Over the last couple of decades, Purdue, like many other academic institutions, has increased its international enrollment. The top blue line on this graph shows the rate of this increase from 1995 to 2015.

At the same time, a relative lack of language resources on campus has resulted in the Writing Lab becoming the de facto language center. The bottom orange line shows international student usage of the writing center during the same time period. You can see that the two lines roughly parallel each other—as overall international enrollment increased, so too did Writing Lab use by international students. In recent years, around 73% of our visitors are L2 writers.

1995 had low enough L2 use overall that annual reports from the time mention it but provide no specific data. 2015 may be artificially low due to a change in data-collection methods that occurred mid-year.

Percent of overall writing center use that was international:

1995—unknown

2000—16%

2005—10%

2010—62%

2015—73%

Slide 4:

The longer answer to why tutors need L2 expertise requires a closer look at the writers and tutors themselves.

It is common for L2 writers to ask specifically for grammar help. I have personally heard writers ask for help with the following:

- Grammar mistakes
- Grammar issues
- Grammar things

The stated goal is often “to sound like a native speaker” and, sometimes, the reason for the goal is a professor with a zero tolerance policy for grammatical error. We have had writers tell us that their professor won’t grade anything with more than one or two errors in it.

Other needs are often **unstated**, but vitally important. L2 writers need:

- Cultural knowledge about assignment types, specific assignments, conferencing with instructors, etc.
- Vocabulary (both general and academic)
- Realistic expectations about how quickly their language will improve and about which errors are important at this time. In a 30- or 60-minute tutorial, a freshman cannot be taught to “sound like a native speaker.”
- And, like all inexperienced writers, L2 writers need help with organization, content, citation, focus, etc.

From the tutors’ perspective, this does not mean that L2 writers have DIFFERENT needs; instead, they have the SAME needs PLUS—a need for help with content and organization, **plus** help with grammar and cultural expectations, for instance.

Slide 5:

At the same time, the tutors are seldom L2 writing experts; often they know little about L2 writing and may even lack general tutoring experience.

On the screen you see details about the experience and knowledge base of our graduate and undergraduate tutors over the past 4 years. Keep in mind that, for any given year, up to 75% of the tutors could be brand-new to our writing center, so while individual tutors may improve from year to year, the overall numbers may not.

We can see from this data that, for our center, there tends to be wide variation in both tutoring experience generally (15% to 71% of tutors were in their first year of tutoring) and in years of experience working with international students in any capacity (20% to 40% were in their first year of experience). So, in any given year, some percentage of our tutors will lack EXPERIENCE.

In addition, tutors often lack KNOWLEDGE. You can see the wide variation in knowledge of cultural issues (from 33% up to 88% claimed this lack) and in L2 grammar and vocabulary problems (from 17% up to 56% claimed a lack). “Cultural issues” in this case included the role of culture in assessing L2 writing, in the global concerns of L2 writing such as organizational patterns, and in conferencing with L2 writers.

Slide 6:

In their own words, tutors tell us some of the difficulties they face:

- Overcoming their own initial assumptions
- Working with writing processes that are fundamentally different in some way
- Differentiating between writing concerns and language issues
- Explaining grammar rather than just correcting errors for the writers
- And overcoming language barriers.

As the final comment says—tutors can and do worry about pretty much everything.

So—the need is clear. Large numbers of L2 writers combined with tutors who lack experience with or knowledge about L2 writing is a recipe for difficulties. Tutors need knowledge and skills specific to working with L2 writers if they are to successfully tutor international students in the writing center. Our solution was to implement intensive ESL training for all of our tutors. With the remainder of my time, I want to talk about how to go about creating a homegrown training program to meet the needs of your staff.

Slide 7:

In order to create such a program, it helps to start with an understanding of both the context constraints and the goals.

The primary constraint will apply to every writing center. When I began work on this project, the single most problematic aspect of developing a curriculum was that it involved crossing disciplinary boundaries. I found a LOT of available research about training writing center tutors. I found a LOT of research about second language writing. I even found research on TUTORING second language writers. But I found very little specific, detailed, nitty-gritty, here’s-how-to-do-it material on how to TRAIN tutors to **work with L2 writers**, in other words to provide them with second-language writing expertise. As you think about creating material, remember to look widely across disciplines and then adjust things to fit the context—in our case, mainly L1 tutors with primarily L2 writers.

Other context constraints include funding, time, topics, methods, and goals.

Funding and time are fairly self-explanatory, and I'm sure we all face these issues with any number of programs we work with—if you want details about how we handled those constraints for our training program, feel free to talk with me later.

Before looking at topics and methods, let me say a few things about goals. On the surface, the goal of training is to improve tutors' abilities to help L2 writers, whatever that means. However, because there is seldom one agreed-upon understanding of L2 writing, it is important that the training do 2 things right up front:

1. Introduce tutors to the theoretical conversation and allow them to participate in it using their tutoring experiences
2. Provide strategies to immediately apply in tutorials

Note that these two goals point toward potential method: the inclusion of both theory (e.g., readings) and strategies or skills (e.g., practical materials).

In addition, because there isn't one "right way" to do things within either field (writing center or second language writing) and because cultural assumptions can be invisible yet pack a wallop in terms of effect, it is important that tutors learn to always be self-reflective when tutoring and to pay attention to **what** they are doing, **why** they are doing it, and what they are **assuming** as they do it. So one of the goals of ESL training becomes uncovering self-assumptions—which also points toward a potential method: the inclusion of self-reflective moments.

Slide 8:

Method & Topics:

Our current method is a Blackboard course for self-study. Tutors participate in this training every spring for one hour per week the entire semester, and this is paid time. The online method allows tutors to work at their own pace and also to work on material that is relevant to their needs at the time—remember the variation in both knowledge and experience between tutor classifications and from one year to the next. Setting up the training as independent study helps address that variation.

What you see on the screen now is a list of the topic choices that our GRADUATE tutors have AFTER they have completed an introductory module. The introductory module insures that everyone starts with the same basic information. The free choice thereafter insures that everyone works with information that seems relevant to them at that time. You can see the range here—assumptions, grammar, tutoring, cultural impacts, plagiarism, etc. In addition to these modules, there are some semester-long options only available to tutors who have completed one year already—these involve research into a specific topic (for instance, tracing the historical argument over the efficacy of error correction). The research modules meet the needs of tutors who have spent more years on training or who come into the job with more previous experience in L2 writing.

Our undergraduate tutors have a separate course with more focus on the practical and less on the theoretical, but they also have some choice after they've completed introductory material.

Because our goals dictate theoretical knowledge, practical skills, and self-awareness of assumptions, the lessons in the self-study modules are a mix of reading published material in the writing center and/or second language writing fields, of working with actual L2 writers' documents, of observations, and of written, guided reflections.

Slide 9:

For the next few slides I want to focus on interactive content. If we are talking about interaction in a tutorial setting, there are 3 basic options for interaction: tutor, writer, document. Any of these can cause problems in a tutorial with an L2 writer; thus, all of them are useful areas of focus for training. In a minute I'll show some examples of interactive content based around the tutor and the document, but first I want to explain briefly HOW these materials were developed.

My general path for developing a new module looks like this:

1. Perform lots of observation of tutorials and/or talk to tutors → identify an area of need (What are tutors struggling with, whether they realize it is a struggle or not?)
2. Research the topic by reading current research and/or talking to staff (at our own or other institutions) → identify important theoretical materials on which to base activities (What does the larger field say about this area of struggle? Remember that "larger field" includes both SLS and WC work, in addition, perhaps, to other areas—education?).
3. Give lots of thought to how to practically, in a hands-on activity-based manner, get tutors to see/understand/realize/etc. the problem → identify the type of interactive content to develop

Three important points to note:

1. Whatever you create should be based on a desired outcome; for instance, tutors are not simply observing; they are observing X in particular (who talks the most, the type of questions the tutor uses, the body language of both parties, etc.)
2. Be sure to test whatever you create prior to using it more widely. This allows you to check that the activity or process is actually do-able but also to see whether or not it leads to the desired outcome. Sometimes the results of a test run will be surprising. With one activity our tutors did, for instance, several tutors thought it was a case of plagiarism rather than what it was—I had "corrected" the grammar of an L2 paper to make it look like an L1 paper and asked tutors to compare the two, with a goal of having tutors learn to see their immediate bias toward grammar when they read a paper.
3. Even as you are seeking to increase tutor awareness of their own assumptions, this process requires that **you** see what people might be assuming and also how to make that assumption visible to them.
4. Put it all together—provide access to readings, create whatever materials are needed for the activity to be successful, organize the readings and activities in a way that makes sense, include opportunity for reflection (develop guiding questions, determine where in the course of the module to include this, etc.)

So, let's look at some sample observation activities. You'll find more detailed versions of these in the handouts.

Slide 10:

This long list of items asks the observer to notice the TYPES of interaction between tutor and client and to track how often each occurs. The items on the list are a combination of customary practices in tutorials (e.g., the client reads the paper aloud), practices which research has found lacking in L2 tutorials as compared to L1 tutorials (e.g., shared laughter), and practices that I have observed many times in tutorials with L2 writers (e.g., the writer comments on poor English ability).

The tutors are asked to observe and track one L1 tutorial and one L2 tutorial and then later to reflect on the experience. For some tutorial pairings, the disparity in types of interactions between tutor and client is startling; for others, there is less distinction between the two. In either case, the observer notices particular items on the list and considers his or her own experiences with those items.

A similar activity asks tutors to observe a tutorial and track non-verbal interaction—smiling, gesturing, leaning forward or backward, pointing, etc. Tutors track the type of interaction, the person using it, and whether or not the other person mirrors it back.

Slide 11:

This next observation form (also available in the handout) asks tutors to track the ORDER of events rather than the quantity of events. Each column on the form will be numbered individually. If the client asks for help with grammar first and then with thesis statements, the grammar row of the client-agenda-setting column would be labeled "1" and the thesis statement row would be labeled "2". If the tutor renegotiates the order during the agenda-setting, the tutor-agenda-setting column would have a "1" for thesis statements and a "2" for grammar.

An observation activity like this one can help tutors learn to see their own assumptions—first, that they are setting an agenda and sticking to it and second, that they are prioritizing global concerns over local, neither of which may actually be true. Activities like this can also be a way for you to gain a clear picture of how matters stand in your writing center, as well as a way for tutors to gain expertise. For instance, I used this chart for some research in our writing lab and found that no matter what tutors prioritized in the agenda-setting phase of the tutorial, when they started reading a document straight through (customary writing center practice) they defaulted to grammar first. The "problem" (L2 writers always ask for grammar help) actually had an additional facet (tutor complicity) that was invisible to the tutors.

Slide 12:

One of our newest observation activities asks tutors to perform a discourse analysis and track things like turn-taking and back channeling. The resulting tally provides a clear picture of who is

actually talking in a tutorial and indicates something about the nature of that talking. These forms are also in the handouts.

The chart on the left shows how to code a tutorial for turn lengths, types of questions, and back-channel commentary. The tutor then observes either an actual tutorial or a video-recorded actual tutorial and records times in each column. After observing, the tutor informally notes how effective or ineffective the tutorial appeared to be (not based on anything in particular—a gut feeling, if you will). The right-hand document shows how to tally the observation coding. What often comes to light is that the tutor might be speaking a LOT more than the writer in terms of both turns and length of time. This is often especially true in L2 tutorials. If the tutor has previously informally labeled a tutorial as effective or ineffective, comparing these results to that label can prove very interesting. For this particular module, tutors observe and code multiple video-recorded tutorials and then record a tutorial of their own and code it.

Slide 13:

Let's turn to working with sample papers for training activities. For some tutors, especially very new ones, the "worry about pretty much everything" is due purely to lack of experience. That is to say, they know just enough about international writers to see the potential problems—lots of grammar errors, and I'm not very good with grammar myself—and not enough to realize that something may not be a problem in actual fact with any particular writer or that it may not be the priority in any given tutorial. Exposing tutors to actual student writing of the sort they may see in a tutorial can prove extremely useful. In addition, sample papers in training can allow tutors to practice skills and strategies without the pressure of having a writer sitting at the table with them.

In our Writing Lab, we routinely collect sample documents along with permission forms allowing us to use those documents in a wide range of ways: training, conference presentations, journal articles, in OWL resources, etc., so documents are readily available whenever we need them.

As with other forms of activity, keep in mind the outcome you are hoping for as you create a sample paper activity. For instance, if you are hoping to help tutors overcome the tendency to immediately focus on surface errors in L2 writing, you might try this: Take an L2 paper with plenty of surface errors. Correct those errors so that the paper looks more like an L1 paper. Ask tutors to read the presumed-L1 paper, identify who the author is (NS vs. NNS, advanced vs. beginning writer, etc.—this helps to get at their assumptions), and list all of the things that could be worked on in the tutorial. Have them rank those in order of importance. Then (and preferably after a week has elapsed) ask them to do the same thing with a "new" paper (really the original L2 version of the document they already worked with). Then ask them to compare and reflect on the experience. Many tutors notice immediately their own tendency to get stuck on the language in the original L2 document even though it has all the same global concerns as the presumed-L1 version.

Additional uses for sample papers include using them to teach tutors various methods for marking errors—this allows them to practice identifying error types and patterns of error as well as make some judgement calls about how many errors make sense to focus on and which ones. There are a number of different objectives that can be achieved with multiple-method error marking activities—which one you focus on will depend on the error-marking method used and the type of reflection that accompanies the activity. One of our modules asks tutors to use 3 different error-marking methods on 3 different papers and then to reflect on the usefulness to writers but also to reflect on how one or more of the methods could be adapted for use in a tutorial where the writer wanted grammar help.

And, for a last example, tutors can be asked to mark a draft for things that could or should be focused on in a tutorial and then to view a video-recording of the tutorial for that particular draft, comparing what the paper needed in their opinion with what the writer asked for and what the tutor chose to focus on at the moment. This can allow tutors to consider who gets precedence in a tutorial when there is disparity between the document, the writer's wishes, and the tutor's opinions. With L2 writers, this disparity often occurs between global concerns in a document vs. grammar or sentence level concerns expressed by the writer.

Slide 14:

The final step in putting together a training program is organizing things in a way that makes sense. This means topic-based modules, if you have the funding and time for an ongoing program. Keep in mind the overall goals as you put everything together: theory, practical skills, and awareness of one's own assumptions. Any module should therefore include relevant background reading (the key word here is RELEVANT), along with activities, and **guided** reflection.

Slide 15:

From an administrative viewpoint, the FINAL final step is to evaluate the program and tweak it to make it better.

We do an end-of-semester Qualtrics evaluation survey each year to find out what tutors thought of the various modules, activities, etc.

This chart demonstrates what the graduate tutors in the various years thought about how the training affected their abilities, attitudes, and confidence levels. You can see the variety from year to year, but also that, in most years, anywhere from half to all of the tutors thought the training had had an effect.

Slide 16:

When tutors are allowed to express in their own words how the training has helped them, the responses cover a wide range. I've put a few quotes up for you—awareness of assumptions, understanding of common issues & the cultural nature of assignments, and increased writer

comfort with a tutor who is more familiar with L2 writing are just a few of the areas that tutors identified as having been affected by the training.

Granted, the data on the previous slide and all of these quotes are self-reported, so a next step down the road might be for us to figure out how to objectively demonstrate this improvement. But **that** is another paper.

Thank you.