2015

"I Don't Understand What You're Saying!": Lessons from Three ESL Writing Tutorials

Eun-Young Julia Kim
Andrews University

RW

"I Don't Understand What You're Saying!": Lessons from Three ESL Writing Tutorials

Eun-Young Julia Kim
Andrews University

This article presents three case studies that closely examine various types of interactions taking place in writing center tutorials involving newly arrived pre-matriculated ESL writers. By learning what strategies tutors commonly use and how successfully the ESL writers negotiate their goals for the visit and the form and meaning of their text through this sample, this study aims to help identify what characterizes successful tutorials and what unique challenges English language learners might face when interacting with tutors. Results from these case studies show that it is not how many corrections tutors make or suggest for the students' papers, but how much the tutors engage their tutees in a meaningful dialogue that brings satisfaction to the ESL students. Findings also suggest that deliberate efforts should be made to equip ESL writers with necessary metalanguage to communicate their goals for their visit.

Keywords: Writing center, scaffolding, ESL writers, second language writing

Kim, Eun-Young Julia (2015). "'I Don't Understand What You're Saying!': Lessons from Three ESL Writing Tutorials." *Journal of Response to Writing, 1*(1): 47–76.

The present study is a form of action research in that it stems from a "problem" that I have perceived as a writing teacher while working with pre-matriculated English as a Second Language (ESL) students in intensive English program settings over the years. Like most of my colleagues, I have always encouraged my ESL writers to visit the writing center, and my ESL students appreciated being given the information about the service and were excited about being able to receive additional help with their writing from tutors. To my bewilderment, what I often heard in return from many of my ESL students after their visits was that the sessions were not as helpful as they had expected. Students were always a little sheepish as they admitted their dissatisfaction, as if they were revealing a secret that their teacher was not supposed to know. However, when asked to share the reasons for their dissatisfaction, most of my ESL students were unable to clearly identify them. If my students were not able to clearly state what they perceived as problems, I wanted find out whether I as a writing teacher could find where the potential problems may lie by identifying common interactional patterns that may surface in the tutorials. To achieve this purpose, I conducted three case studies, centering on the following two questions:

1. What scaffolding strategies do tutors use when responding to pre-matriculated ESL students' texts?
2. How effectively do ESL students negotiate their goals for the visit and the form and meaning of their text with tutors?

Literature Review

Various scholars have addressed what characterizes successful second language (L2) writing center tutorials. Some general principles include letting tutees have autonomy (Brooks, 1991) by "maintaining a focus on student-centered, non-directive tutorials" and higher-order concerns (Raymond & Quinn, 2012, p. 76), and avoiding the "proofreading trap" (Cogie, Strain, & Lorinskas, 1999). Blau, Hall, and Strauss (1998) argued that tutors should be cultural informants and hone their skills in using Socratic questions, balancing global- and local-level concerns. Others have observed that advice typically given to tutors working with native language

(L1) writers may not be suitable for those who work with L2 tutees (Hall, 2001; Harris & Silva, 1993; Thonus, 1999) since L2 writers may need explicit and directive feedback as opposed to indirect or Socratic approaches (Williams, 2004, Williams & Severino, 2004), which could obscure the true intention of a suggestion (Thonus, 1999).

Scholars have also examined ESL students' perceptions and expectations of writing center tutorials, as well as tutors' perceptions toward ESL writers and their errors. In her study of L2 writers' perceptions of writing center service, Crowley (2001) reported that L2 tutees are often dissatisfied with the tutorials, and she urged teachers to provide students with a general orientation of what to expect at the tutoring sessions. In their analysis of self-assessments of tutoring sessions, Raymond and Quinn (2012) learned that writers tended to be concerned about grammar, clarity, and textual flow the most, whereas tutors tended to direct their focus on argument, and then on grammar, and finally textual flow.[1] More recently, Eckstein (2013) examined what type of feedback L2 writers preferred based on the L2 writers' English proficiency levels and found that low-proficiency writers tended to prefer feedback on local concerns, whereas high-proficiency students tended to appreciate feedback on global errors.

North (1984, p. 444) believed that in order to make advances in writing conference research, it is important to describe the conversations and examine "what characterizes it, what effects it has, how it can be enhanced." The last two decades have seen a steady growth of interest in using conversation analysis (CA) in the writing conference research, coupled with scaffolding as a theoretical construct. Although CA initially had no direct connection to writing in the early years of writing conference research, there has been an increase in the interest in the method in describing writing conference dialogues in order to identify patterns or diagnose problems (Bell & Youmans, 2006; Blau et al., 1998; Ewert, 2009; Koshik, 2002). For example, Weigle and Nelson (2004) analyzed twelve tutorials involving both native and nonnative English speakers in the writing center context. They found that tutors' prior training and experience as well as the ESL tutees' English proficiency made an impact on the perceived success of the

---

1. Since their data do not distinguish between L1 and L2 tutees, relatively little information can be gleaned from the study in terms of understanding unique challenges novice L2 writers face in the writing center.

writing center tutorials from the tutors' perspectives. Considering that the ESL students in their study were mainstreamed and they likely possessed relatively higher English proficiency, since they were enrolled in freshman composition or graduate-level ESL writing courses, findings from the study may not be directly applicable for understanding unique challenges that pre-matriculated, especially newly arrived, ESL students may face. In addition, all six tutors, although labeled as novice, were MA TESOL candidates enrolled in a graduate course entitled Issues in L2 Writing and were probably much better primed for the tutorials than most tutors in typical contexts, because they had pretutorial sessions with the tutees' writing teachers to familiarize themselves with the course goals and to ask any questions they may have had regarding the class. Considering that most tutors usually do not have this kind of opportunity prior to tutoring, data from less homogenized groups of tutors are still needed in order to understand what happens in settings in which tutors do not have much previous knowledge of the writing course or lack L2 tutoring experiences, if not the tutoring experiences in general, or both.

As one of the core concepts of sociocultural theory (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Vygotsky 1962, 1978), scaffolding has been found to be a useful concept in writing conference research because its dialogic nature lies at the center of writing conferences. The theory posits that a learner can reach the next level of knowledge or skills within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) through graduated help (scaffolding) provided by a more capable peer or a teacher, and "conferencing presents a classic example of a teacher-led Zone of Proximal Development" (Patthey-Chavez & Ferris, 1997, p. 51). Although scaffolding has been used by various writing conference researchers as a theoretical framework, what actually constitutes scaffolding in writing conferences has varied among researchers. For example, in their study of the relationship between writing conference discourse and student revisions, Patthey-Chavez and Ferris (1997) focused on two "tracers," which included (1) teacher requests for elaborations and clarifications and (2) teacher comments and instruction on argumentative strategy. As these tracers were identified based on ESL students' conferencing with teachers on a specific assignment (argumentation), they may not necessarily represent various strategies used in peer tutoring sessions. Ewert (2009) examined writing conference discourse between pre-matriculated

L2 writers and two writing teachers based on negotiation and scaffolding, using the six features identified by Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976) as coding schemes: recruitment, direction maintenance, reduction in degrees of the goal, marking critical features, frustration control, and demonstration. As the six coding schemes were originally developed for describing the tutoring of L1 children in problem-solving situations, they may be somewhat limited for describing writing conference dialogues, especially those that involve adult L2 writers. For example, confirmation checks and questions for clarifications as well as various types of negotiations which frequently occur in the tutoring sessions are not included in the schemes, and most of the strategies, except marking critical features, relate to the aspect of managing peripheral aspects conducive to learning, but not directly involved in the facilitation of knowledge or skills.

The present study uses a case study approach in order to closely examine various types of interactions taking place during tutoring sessions involving pre-matriculated, newly arrived ESL writers by analyzing the conversations based on the scaffolding strategies commonly used by tutors. Scaffolding strategies in this study are operationalized as directives (somewhat similar to Ewert's [2009] marking critical features), negotiation for lower- or higher-order concerns, which combines and adds to Patthey-Chavez and Ferris's (1997) two tracers, as well as strategizing, echoing; and using non-negotiating questions and short confirmatory remarks, all of which were identified as recurring patterns in the analysis. The study also aims to examine how successfully the ESL writers negotiate their goals for the visit and the form and meaning of their text, and what contributes to their satisfaction, thereby identifying what characterizes successful tutorials and what unique challenges pre-matriculated English language learners might face when working with tutors.

Method

Participants

I recruited a purposive sample, consisting of three ESL students and three native English speaking tutors. The three ESL students were enrolled in the intensive English program at the institution where I currently teach and

were taking an advanced-level writing class taught by a colleague. The institution is a midsized private university in southwest Michigan and enrolls a large number of international students each year. These three students were placed into the third level in the three-level intensive English program. Their language proficiency levels were similar; both the first and the third students scored 550 on paper-based TOEFL (PBT), and the second student scored 80 on MELAB, which is comparable to 550 PBT. Based on Aljaafreh and Lantolf's (1994) five-level regulatory scale, the proficiency of these students would be best described to be between Level 3 (able to notice and correct an error but only with scaffolded help) and Level 4 (able to notice the error and correct it after confirming the correct form with the expert). These students were recommended by the course instructor because they were some of the better writers in the class and they would be responsible and cooperative.

To select tutors, I consulted a graduate teaching assistant (TA) in the English Department who was well-acquainted and worked closely with the tutors in the writing center. I asked her to suggest names of those who she thought might be willing to participate and would be good candidates for the study, considering previous experiences with working with ESL students. I was given three names of tutors, who happened to all be senior English majors with one or more years of experience tutoring. (See Table 1 for profiles of the participants.) All writing center tutors at the institution were trained through a course, Teaching and Tutoring Writing, in which students spend the first six weeks learning general principles of tutoring and the next six weeks learning general principles of writing. Tutoring is part of the course requirements and students spend the first two weeks observing other tutors before beginning tutoring. Typically about half of the writing center tutees consist of various types of L2 students, and recently the tutoring course has begun incorporating materials on L2 writers into its content, but this content had not been part of the course curriculum when these three tutors were enrolled. Although the tutors had no formal training in working with L2 tutees in the course, they reported that many of their tutees were L2 writers and they had "learned on the job." Their previous training focused on general principles such as diagnosing problems with students' writing, designing appropriate responses to these problems and creating a conducive, affirming environment.

The writing course the ESL students were taking was a semester-long course designed for advanced-level ESL students, focusing on source-based academic writing. The students were working on a position paper at the time of the study, stating whether they agreed or disagreed with the arguments presented in an article about the US education system. The teacher said she usually required each student to visit the writing center once or twice for each writing assignment, and all of her students, including these three, were required to visit the writing center with their initial drafts for this assignment.

Data Collection

Data were obtained in three different meetings for each of the tutor and tutee pairs which spread out over the course of the month. The

Table 1. Participant Profiles

Tutors	Gender	Yrs experience as a tutor	Major	Related experiences	Foreign language
T1	F	1½ yrs	English lit (senior)	TA for remedial composition	3 yrs of Italian
T2	M	3 yrs	Political science/ English lit (senior)	Working with at least a few ESL tutees at the lab weekly	3 yrs of Spanish
T3	F	3 yrs	English lit (senior)	Tutored ESL students in high school. Many of her tutees are ESL students.	3 yrs of Spanish

first meeting was an oral interview in which general information about the subjects' educational/tutoring background was obtained through short questionnaire surveys. The second was a tutoring session, which was tape-recorded and transcribed. The third meeting was a follow-up interview, in which questions were asked to clarify unclear segments of the tape and for participants to share their feelings about the sessions so that the researcher could triangulate the overall results by measuring the participants' satisfaction of the sessions. Each subject received a gift card for participating in the study.

Table 2. Tutee Profiles

Tutees	Gender	Time in United States / Status	Major	Experience with English composition	Native language
S1	F	Less than 6 months; full-time ESL	Biology	Learned academic writing at a private English school in Brazil	Portuguese
S2	M	Less than 6 months; ESL/ academic	Engineering	Wrote in English for business in Peru	Spanish
S3	M	Less than 6 months; full-time ESL	Japanese	Wrote a few papers in college in Korea	Korean

Data Analysis

The analysis involved a reiterative process of coding, categorizing, and recoding data that characterizes a grounded theory approach. After the initial coding process, bigger categories were identified centering on feedback-response types, which led to the final coding categories listed in Table 3. In order to identify scaffolding strategies, I separated the tutors' discourse into peripheral remarks which were not directly related to facilitating learning and those that were, which included directives, negotiations, strategizing, echoing, non-negotiating questions, and short confirmatory remarks. Students' responses were categorized into self-correction, questioning, explaining, negotiating, echoing, and short answers. These categories are not an exhaustive list of all the speech samples. For example, single turns in which tutors simply read the students' texts, extended the previous phrases or added fillers were not taken into consideration in the analysis, although included in the final count of the total turns. In order to ensure inter-rater reliability, 20% of the total segments (25 turns from each session, excluding peripheral discourse) was analyzed by an outside reader, and there was an 88% agreement on the category assignments. In the following sections, key findings of each case are presented, followed by a general discussion, in which common patterns are identified and discussed in the context of existing research.

Case 1

This 30 minute-session between a twenty-two-year-old female tutor and a twenty-four-year-old Brazilian female tutee had a total of 130 turns. The session began with a few exchanges of peripheral discourse about the assignment. Upon being asked, "What do you want to work on today?" the tutee responded with a vague statement, "This is my draft . . . . So I need to check." Then the tutor began reading the paper out loud from the beginning with a strategizing statement, "Alright, well I'm going to read it and we can go over things that need to be changed, okay?"

Table 3. Coding for speech segments

Speech acts	Subcategories	Examples
Peripheral discourse (PD)	• Greeting, social talk, exchanges during filling out the form (G/F)	"Alright, what's your name?"
	• Information about the assignment (ASSNMT)	"What teacher is this for?"
Tutor scaffolding strategies (TS)	• Directives on lower-order concerns followed by explanations (D-LOCs)	"It's singular, so the verb needs to agree with it."
	• Negotiation for lower-order concerns (N-LOC)	"In one university? What do you mean by 'in one'? Like a specific one?"
	• Negotiation for higher-order concerns (N-HOC)	"So, then, after this, one of the important things you should do is talk about what he means by substitutes for 'brain, bravery and hearts.'"
	• Strategizing (STR)	"Let's come back to this." "I'm going to read it and we can go over things that need to be changed, okay?"
	• Echoing (ECH)	"Uh-hmm," "Okay," "Yeah."
	• No-negotiating questions and short confirmatory remarks (Q/C)	"You're paraphrasing?" "Make sense?"
Student response (SR)	• Self-correction (SC)	T1: "I was a very difficult…" S1: "It was a very difficult…"
	• Questioning (QUE)	"For example, here . . . this is a comma or is colon?" "Is it logically correct?"
	• Explaining or negotiating (EXP/NGT)	"Okay but the teacher said that we need to put quotation marks."
	• Echoing (ECH)	"Uh-huh," "Okay."
	• Short answers (SA)	"Yes, like that kind of thing."

Overall, meaningful interaction was scarce as the student's turns were predominantly back-channels, such as "okay," "yeah," and "uh hmm," as the tutor pointed out mostly grammatical and mechanical errors followed by explanations (See Table 4 for a summary of detailed analysis of the discourse.). Despite the fact that tutee's written English was proficient enough to produce a two-page argumentative paper and state her position quite clearly, the tutee mainly responded with one- or two-word answers that merely echoed the tutor's remarks.

This session included 57 directives and 18 negotiations. The tutor pointed out 16 formal errors, such as the use of quotation marks, in-text citations, prepositions, subject-verb agreement, article usage, capitalization, spelling, and indentations. Although most of the error corrections were followed by a sufficient amount of explanation, the tutor often failed to provide correct explanations. Two of these instances involved the failure to use –ing forms as in phrases, "This test is very hard and for enter [italics added] in the best universities" and "For me

Table 4. Analysis of Interaction

Discourse type	Examples	Number of turns (Total # of turns)		
		Case 1 (130)	Case 2 (192)	Case 3 (64)
PD	G/F	11	9	1
	ASSINMT	11	5	9
TS	D-LOC	57	74	15
	N-LOC	12	12	23
	N-HOC	6	3	12
	STR	1	6	1
	ECH	10	38	4
	Q/C	10	11	10
SR	SC	1	0	1
	QUE	7	7	9
	EXP	16	47	21
	ECH	63	94	12
	SA	6	3	10

resolve that education of develop skills and teach relevant knowledge is the biggest challenge." The following exchanges show how the tutor came up with her own answer when she was not sure how to explain:

> T1: I am trying to figure out how to explain what that is. It's um. For enter. For means um. It it means there's something there's a reason for something.
> S1: um-hmm
> T1: Um. Like. The reason for entering would make sense. For enter but um if you if this is action. To enter. Is the um.
> S1: okay
> T1: is the form that you would use.

Explaining the errors in failing to use a gerund in the second sentence, the tutor once again gave a confusing explanation that the *–ing* forms were needed because they were ongoing things.

> T1: Um. You forgot to put in umm you're talking about something that is ongoing developing
> S1: Uh hmm
> T1: Right. So you'll um add the *–ing* to the verbs
> S1: Um hmm
> T1: Developing and teaching um because it's an ongoing thing.

Later, when pointing out the use of contractions, the tutor once again used a confusing explanation "The apostrophe . . . you don't want to put that mark . . . when you're writing academic you just don't want to use it. You want to spell it out. Did not or can't, cannot."

There were about six comments that produced 12 turns of negotiation for lower-order concerns, and these comments were given for rephrasing for clarity and adding more details to clarify meaning.

In the follow-up interview, the tutee said, "The tutor talked very fast. Sometimes it's hard to understand. She talked, talked, and talked. . . . I couldn't understand." Then she expressed a wish that she had worked with a different tutor. "[Tutor 3] is really interested in my paper and helps me with ideas and expressions," she said indicating that she had wished to sign

up for Tutor 3 but the tutor had no available slots. Her tutor, on the other hand, assessed the session mostly in a positive way: "I think the session went well, although I felt a little awkward knowing I was being recorded. I consciously tried to stay on task."

Case 2

This session, which also lasted about 30 minutes, involved a twenty-two-year-old male tutor and a fifty-one-year-old Peruvian male tutee. Although this session had the greatest number of turns (see Table 4), this was an extremely challenging one, as both the tutor and tutee remarked in the post-session interview. The tutee brought a draft in which he mainly listed what he agreed and disagreed with based on his opinion of an article he read from the textbook. Although the global-level concerns were rather serious and pressing, the tutee' poor communication skills, further hindered by his heavy foreign accent, failed to deliver his intended purpose of visiting the writing center to the tutor.After just a few initial turns of peripheral comments related to filling out the form, the tutee made a somewhat abrupt remark, "This is my topic sentence," and repeated the same message. The tutor apparently did not understand why the tutee kept pointing to what he called a "topic sentence." The following excerpt illustrates tutee's arduous efforts to express his needs and the tutor's confusion:

> S2: This one I have this is my topic sentence.
> T2: Yep
> S2: This is my topic sentence and I also plan that he [the author] was unfair.
> T2: Alright um . . . just stylistically . . . it has a bit of a choppy flow.
> S2: Yeah
> T2: It's a little rough.
> S2: Is that because of . . . Because this this is my topic sentence.
> T2: Um . . .
> S2: Today at 6 p.m. I have appointment with another tutor to improve the sentence.
> T2: So do you want me to read through this part and kinda help you smooth it out?

S2: Yeah. Something I think that maybe . . .

T2: [reading] Here the faculty take no pride in your educational achievements . . .

S2: Um-humm

T2: Umm.

S2: For example this is . . . I connect with another idea and another idea and . . . this is only one.

T2: I understand what you're trying to say there that even though he did have a good argument, was unfair . . . I think that the wording here . . . instead of saying that he wasn't fair, I think it would flow a little bit better if you said he unfairly considered . . . Do you like that better?

S2: Yeah yeah you . . . because this is my topic sentence this is the main point . . . if I have this correct.

T2: Okay

S2: For example, this is my conclusion.

T2: Yep

S2: This is my body.

T2: Yep

S2: And this is my topic sentence.

T2: Eh

S2: You . . . I have good topic sentence? . . .

T2: [reading] so you can have a good foundation for the rest of the . . .

S2: One, two, three, three topic

T2: Yep

S2: three points

T2: Yeah for sure

S2: the conclusion and topic sentence

T2: Alright, 'k um let's see. [reading under breath] Um. I don't think you need a comma here.

Baffled by the seemingly unnecessary repetitions of the phrase "this is my topic sentence," the tutor set his own goal by choosing to focus on smoothing out sentences and correcting grammatical errors.

Later in the follow-up interview, the researcher discovered that what the tutee meant by topic sentence was actually a thesis statement, and what

he tried to communicate was that he wanted the tutor to check his thesis statement, and see if his organization of ideas (introduction, body, and conclusion) was effective. The tutee was aware that his thesis and general supporting points might not be adequate. In fact, most of his explanations seen in Table 4 were his attempts to point out his thesis sentence and the structure. He tried to tell the tutor that he had another appointment at the writing center later in the evening, so he just wanted the tutor to check his thesis and to tell him if his ideas were "correct or not correct." He added, "I need[ed] ideas for supporting the ideas." This was a rather important message, as he clearly had a specific goal (and an important one) in mind in coming to the session, but it failed to be understood due to his poor ability to speak in English. Both the tutee and the tutor expressed extreme frustration, the tutor saying, "I really had no idea what he was trying to say," and the tutee echoing the same level of frustration: "I didn't understand what he say!"

Interestingly, as we can see in Table 4, this session included the highest number of directives and echoing words for both the tutor and the tutee, although they were having serious communication problems. Furthermore, this tutee attempted questions and explanation, but most of them were not understood by the tutor. The tutee's spoken English was fairly limited, in that the majority of his speech included grammatical errors, and when he asked questions, he mainly used phrases rather than sentences.

Despite the fact that the global-level concerns were most pressing, confronted with his tutee's lack of communication skills, the tutor resorted to an easier tactic of going line by line, "fixing" the paper. Several times, the tutor used "it flows better" as an explanation whenever he rephrased some words or pointed out punctuation errors. When correcting the usage of a semicolon to introduce a quotation, the tutor mentioned another reason, "So if it flows in the sentence you use a comma, if it does not then you if it's kind like it's separate a little bit then use the colon." Later the tutee remarked, "The tutor say my sentence have choppy flow but I don't understand."

About 15 minutes into the session, the tutor's attention is given to finding out whether the tutee had to use APA or MLA. The tutee apparently neither understood the distinctions between the two styles nor knew what they were.

> T2: When you abbreviate page you would put a period after it but be
> cause it's MLA. You don't need to say page so it would just be like
> that
> S2: Only?
> T2: Yes
> S2: Only? No more?
> T2: That's all you would put um
> S2: Because . . . in my book say different
> (another person: It might not be MLA!)
> T2: What class is it?
> S2: Example . . . here see
> T2: Oh yeah they have in here they put a p dot
> S2: Yeah
> T2: Yea I mean I I guess then that I'd do it like
> S2: Then another

The tutee pointed to a few more examples of APA-style in-text cita-
tions in his textbook before the tutor acknowledged, "There's also uh the
American Psychological Association, uh American Medical Association,
uh Chicago Style, Turabian st—so there's a whole bunch." And the quest
ended with a simple directive, "Just be consistent."

Case 3

The third tutoring session was between a twenty-one-year-old female
tutor and a nineteen-year-old male Korean exchange student who was
also taking some business courses along with advanced ESL composition.
Although the session was scheduled for 30 minutes, it ended up lasting
over 50 minutes but had the fewest number of the turns compared to the
other sessions. This session was markedly different from the other two.
First of all, although the tutor did correct some grammatical errors, she
left more uncorrected because she focused on negotiating meaning, rather
than form. As Table 4 shows, there were far more negotiations than direc-
tives, and the pair engaged in collaborative dialogue about higher-order
concerns such as logic, development, and organization more than in the
other two cases. The tutee used some echoing phrases like the other two

tutees, but most of his efforts were made to explain his meaning, reasons for choosing certain non-idiomatic expressions, as well as the reasoning of his arguments, rather than passively accepting the tutor's comments and directives. The tutor challenged the tutee's conclusion, which she felt was contradictory to what he had been saying throughout the paper. The main problem that the tutor perceived at the end of the session was that the tutee's last statement diluted the argument he had maintained throughout the paper. Interestingly, it was the tutee, not the tutor, who came up with the desirable solution to rectify the problem after the tutor's lengthy, rambling remarks:

> T3: So what you need to do then next time . . . next time we need to figure out a way to make your second paragraph say specifically that the problem is that too much praise makes less meaningful and that's the point you're trying to make in your second para graph . . . the reason I was a little confused about that is because . . . I felt that the more important part was . . . your friend didn't feel like he got good enough grades and he was upset as opposed to you know, everybody was getting the same grades as him, so what was the point. So if you wanna try and make them more the focus is what you're trying to say. Like, everybody can get the same grades so it's not even worth it to try harder, is what you're saying, because if everyone's getting As, why do better work if you can get an A for less work?
>
> S3: Yes, oh, but that is the side effect, and I think, but I think praising someone is important. Even though there is, there are some kinds of side effect, so I, do I have to make a conclusion, like, but even though that there are side effect, but praising is still good.
>
> T3: So you wanna definitely like say that like yeah this is a problem and it happens and it's unfortunate, but it's still important to praise people.
>
> S3: Yes, yes, yes, then I have to change the conclusion. I think.

As you can see, the tutee decided that it was not further development of ideas that his paper needed, as the tutor had suggested, but changing the last sentence of his conclusion.

Another pattern that was markedly different in this session was that the tutor frequently asked Socratic questions (Paul & Elder, 2007), becoming a sounding board to the tutee. Here are a few examples:

T: Okay, so, the society, maybe the different social differences that they have to go through? Is that what you're trying to say?" (a question for clarification)

T: hmm . . . so what you're saying is you don't think that . . . no, how does that then combine with praising students, as you do in this sentence? (a question that probes evidence)

T: So what you're saying, hm, so do you think that no matter what if you praise someone who is not good they will get better? For everybody? (a question about perspectives)

T: So here you're saying, if you praise them too much, then they might be poisoned, so it's kind of the opposite, so then I want you to explain to me how does it poison them? (a question that probes assumption)

The tutor was helping the tutee to shape the written discourse by probing the thinking—clarifying meaning, examining evidence and assumptions, and questioning perspectives.

The session was not without challenges, however. For example, after spending a few minutes trying to figure out the meaning of the word "off-education" in the anomalous sentence, "However, I don't think the off-education, praise students regardless of doing well and bad, isn't unnecessary," the tutor finally suggested, "So, how about let's do this. We'll highlight the sentence, and then I'll read the rest of the paper and then we'll come back to this and see how we want to change it, okay?" This sentence was, however, not revisited.

Another communication breakdown occurred when the tutor asked the tutee whether he was supposed to use MLA or APA style.

T3: Um, are you supposed to be doing this in MLA form? Your quotes?
S3: Pardon?
T3: Um, when you, when you do the citations for the pages that you're quoting from, does she want you to do it in MLA, did she tell you?

S3: Hmm, what is MLA?
T3: It's the kind of quotation style that we usually use in, in papers in English.
S3: Oh, oh but she said it is okay.
T3: It's fine if you do it that way? Okay.

The instructor required the APA style, but the tutee apparently did not understand what it was as his non-answer indicates.

Despite these apparent challenges, both the tutee and the tutor responded positively to their session in the follow-up interviews. The tutee remarked, "[Tutor 3] is my favorite tutor. She is very patient and always friendly and helpful." The tutor, on the other hand, acknowledged having common challenges that come with working with L2 writers, especially understanding the tutee's intended meaning of written phrases, but did not seem to be bothered by the fact that she did not "fix" as many errors as the other two tutors.

Discussion

Q1: What scaffolding strategies do native-English-speaking tutors use when responding to pre- university level ESL students' texts?

Scaffolding entails structuring interactions to provide tailored assistance to help the learner recognize the current knowledge level and reach the next level of development. All three tutors made such attempts, but the strategies the tutors utilized exhibited both strengths and weaknesses. For scaffolding to be within the ZPD, it is necessary to first define the learner's immediate needs and properly organize the instruction in small steps (Vygotsky, 1978). However, a pattern that emerged in all three sessions was that the tutors preferred to read the papers aloud line by line, rather than first trying to identify the purpose of the visit or collaboratively setting a reasonable goal. Here's how the first tutor began:

T1: . . . and what do you want to work on today?
S1: This is my draft . . . so I need to check.
T1: so this is a finished draft?
S1: No, it is not finished it.
T1: . . . how long it's going to be?

S1: It says two pages.

T1: Okay. Alright well I'm going to read it and we can go over things that need to be changed. Okay?

The second tutor also set his own goal by saying, "So do you want me to read through this part and kinda help you smooth it out?" The third tutor asked how the previous assignment went, what the current assignment was for, and started reading the paper aloud. All three tutors started the tutorials by reading from the beginning, stopping whenever they saw grammatical errors or content gaps. When they offered metalinguistic feedback on the tutees' erroneous grammatical usage, the explanations were often confusing (e.g., the first tutor giving the wrong explanation about the required –ing form in a prepositional phrase and gerund) or vague (e.g., the second tutor using, "It flows better," to explain punctuation choices).

All three tutors addressed the style sheet questions when they came to an example, rather than initially, and apparently the tutees were clueless as to what they were. During the debriefing session, the course teacher expressed enormous shock that the students were not able to clearly indicate that they were expected to follow the APA style because the class had already discussed the concept of style sheets and differences between MLA and APA at the beginning of the course. Formatting choices such as MLA or APA may be novel to many ESL students, and just like these three tutees, they may not necessarily grasp the concepts even after they are introduced to them in class.

It is interesting to note that the level of tutees' satisfaction seems to negatively correlate with the number of directives given by the tutors. As shown in Table 4, Case 2, in which both the tutor and tutee expressed extreme frustration, contained the highest number of directives (74). Case 1, in which the tutee assessed the session as somewhat unsatisfactory, had the next highest number of directives (57), whereas Case 3, in which the tutee mainly gave positive responses, included the fewest directives (15). Although there were a high number of directives in Case 2, global errors were not addressed at all, and the session ended, both the tutor and the tutee feeling quite frustrated. The Peruvian student, in the final interview, reflected that "this [session] is about punctuation, period, and commas and the idea and the topic sentence are the same."

Conversely, Case 3 included the highest numbers of negotiations for local-level (12/12/23) as well as higher-order (6/3/12) concerns. An effective scaffolding strategy that the third tutor used was to become a sounding board to her tutee by guiding him through the thought process so that the tutee could seek his own solution. She left many grammatical errors uncorrected but focused mainly on negotiating meaning and attending to higher-order concerns such as logic and the writer's intention.

We frequently hear writing center staff expressing their frustrations of falling into the trap of doing what they least desire: editing papers rather than engaging in a collaborative dialogue when working with ESL tutees, and this was the case in the first two sessions. One reason may be, as Myers (2003) speculated, that various syntactic and lexical errors are not only easier to deal with, but also stand out more as they are the local-level concerns that demand immediate attention. This seemed to be the case with the first tutor in this study, whereas the second tutor was led to attend to formal concerns when faced with communication problems. Indeed, the second tutee hoped to work on his thesis statement and the organization of his ideas, but the challenges in communication turned the goal of the session into an entirely different one.

In retrospect, I feel that the use of the writer's L1 could have proven helpful for the second tutee. The tutor reported having intermediate level proficiency in Spanish, and despite the serious communication breakdown, the tutor did not consider using Spanish to understand the tutee's confusing message. In terms of identifying the tutee's purpose of the visit and setting the goal, the use of Spanish could have provided more effective scaffolding and mediated the serious communication breakdown that eventually led to extreme dissatisfaction that the tutee reported. As Weigle and Nelson (2004) observed, face-to-face tutoring will not facilitate learning in the ZPD if tutees have difficulty understanding the tutors. Unless "we understand what they bring to the writing center conference and allow that perspective to determine our conferencing strategies," it would not be possible to provide tailored help that the students need (Powers, 1993, p. 46).

Q2: How effectively do ESL students negotiate their goals for the visit and the form and meaning of their text with the tutors?

ESL writing teachers tend to assume that their students will know how to communicate with their tutors and they will ask for necessary help when they visit the writing center. However, these sessions revealed that novice L2 writers may not have been adequately equipped with essential linguistic tools and communication strategies to communicate their goals to the tutors. The first tutee began with a vague statement, "This is my draft. . . . So I need to check," and the second student repeated a confusing statement, "This is my topic sentence," as he tried to communicate his goal. The third tutee made an arduous effort to explain the assignment: "That is the article I took to write about. And I quote about something that, um, related and the motivation, praise, and motivation? And I quote some parts which is the praise someone can be motivate him and it could . . . bring some better conclusion? Or result?" All three tutees failed to communicate their goals to their tutors.

Blau, Hall, and Strauss (1998, p. 28), in their linguistic analysis of a native-speaking tutor-client pair, suggested that numerous echoing words used in their study were signs that "the client and the tutor worked together harmoniously." However, the current study involving second language writers has shown that the ESL students' repeated confirmations through various echoing phrases can actually be warning sings. The first two tutees in this study said that they didn't really understand the tutors' explanations, and there were signs of communication barriers. However, the sessions went on, because the tutees continued to respond with positive back-channels, keeping the conversations going. Once again, the same negative correlational pattern was observed in the use of back-channels, as the second tutee's data included the highest number of echoing phrases (94), and the first tutee's data contained the next highest (63), whereas the third tutee's tutorial had the fewest (12). These patterns can probably be attributed to the number of directives given by the tutors. Patthey-Chavez and Ferris's (1997) study showed that conferences with weaker writers tended to include frequent back-channels whereas those involving stronger writers tended to be both longer and more interactive. However, a parallel may not be drawn between their study and the current one, because none of the three tutees were considered to be at-risk writers; they were

recommended by the course instructor for being relatively better writers in the group. Although only the third tutee exhibited behaviors of a stronger writer as described by Patthey-Chavez and Ferris, it seems that the collaborative strategy and the Socratic method that the tutor used, coupled with the tutee's interactional style, rather than his English proficiency or writing skills, helped him to actively seek his own solutions.[2]

All three tutees tried to respond to the tutors' comments, and the second tutee actually made the most attempts (47, compared to 16 times for the first tutee, and 21 times for the third tutee). However, most of his attempts to explain were not understood, which prompted the tutor to set his own goal by attending to grammatical and mechanical errors.

The first and the third tutees each made a self-correction once, whereas the second tutee made none. The first tutee remained mostly passive, and most of her turns were very short and used no more than one or two back-channeling words, which apparently signaled to the tutor her understanding of the tutor's comments. Later in the follow-up interview, however, the tutee said that "if I am more confident in speaking in English, I would say more." Her lack of confidence in speaking kept her from more actively negotiating, and instead she remained a passive recipient of the incomprehensible, sometimes, confusing explanations. I suspect that her failure to express her confusion and lack of understanding could be based on her fear that she should be able to engage in rapid "online" communication when working with tutors. ESL writing teachers may need to make conscious efforts to free their students from the pressure that they should speak in complete, well-formed sentences to be understood. The tutors' speech samples in these analyses clearly showcase the fact that people speak in bits of unconnected phrases punctuated by fillers in informal conversations. In the same way, tutors should be freed from the fear of communicating with the ESL tutees by learning how to identify various causes of communication stumbling blocks through the guidance of ESL teachers and input from ESL tutees.

The severe communication breakdown in Case 2 stemmed from the

2. Both the first and the second tutees earned final course grades of A-, whereas the third tutee earned a B, which suggests that passivity and low oral proficiency are not accurate indicators of writing skills.

fact that the tutee used mostly declarative sentences when he actually wanted to ask questions. What he meant by, "My topic sentence is good" was supposed to mean, "Could you tell me if my thesis statement is good?" What he tried to communicate by repeatedly pointing out his introduction, body, and conclusion paragraphs was, "Could you check the organization of my ideas?" Not understanding the tutee's intended message, the tutor once again chose to focus on the obvious problem he could more easily address: "Um let's see. I don't think you need a comma here."

The relative success of Case 3 reveals that the tutee's willingness and confidence in expressing his or her thoughts is a key to a successful tutorial. The fact that the first two tutees, who complained about not understanding the tutor, were able to open up to the researcher and express their thoughts when they were invited to share their feelings freely offers hope that even those students with relatively low oral competency may be able to communicate their thoughts with proper guidance and time.

Conclusion

This study has shown that it is not how many grammatical corrections tutors made or suggested to the students' papers, but how much the tutors engaged their tutees in meaningful dialogue on higher-order concerns that brought satisfaction to the ESL tutees. The results of this study also add support to Henning's (2001) observations that success depends on whether or not the tutees receive the information they need and how well the tutor established rapport with the tutee. The studies have also highlighted the importance of strategizing the session by collaboratively setting the goal of the session before engaging in tutor-led conversations. Among the three tutees in the current study, the tutee who responded the most positively to the tutorial was the one who received the fewest directives and suggestions for changes but was engaged mostly in reevaluating higher-order concerns through the scaffolding provided by the tutor. I realize that these observations, based on a small number of cases, cannot be used to generalize how most tutors approach ESL tutees' texts or to predict how ESL writers would respond to differing tutoring strategies. However, these studies tell compelling stories providing warning signs that should not be ignored.

Making cross-comparisons across related studies is not easy when

criteria in defining proficiency levels are not streamlined. If we assume that the proficiency levels of the tutees in this study were comparable to Eckstein's (2013) low-advanced-level students, who preferred feedback on global issues, then this research would add further support to his findings. On the other hand, these tutees could also be considered as low-proficiency English-language users in that both their oral and independent writing abilities exhibited significant challenges. This seems to indicate that care should be taken when drawing general conclusions about L2 tutees. Efforts should be made in future research to identify and define various scaffolding strategies used in writing conferences to increase comparability of studies. In interpreting the results, it is also important to remember that regardless of the L2 writers' proficiency levels, L2 writers' needs are likely to differ depending on where they are in the process of the writing, since students may visit the writing center multiple times, each time with different needs.

This study has shown that a writing teacher's hope that his or her students will walk out of their tutoring sessions with better ideas of how to improve their papers, if not better written products, is simply a wish if these students are not capable of engaging in a meaningful dialogue and thus identifying their own challenges that come with writing in a second language. Findings indicate that deliberate efforts should be made to help ESL students gain confidence in communicating with tutors by equipping the students with necessary linguistic and pragmatic tools and by providing a nurturing atmosphere where they can freely, not hurriedly, voice their problems and challenges. For tutorials to be successful, it is imperative that students learn metalanguage such as, "This is my rough draft. Could you tell me if my arguments are logically sound?" Or, "Could you check my thesis statement and see if it is clear and accurate?" Unlike Generation 1.5 students or mainstreamed ESL students, who possess relatively high oral skills (Harklau, Losey, & Siegal, 1999; Ritter & Sandvik, 2009), many newly arrived ESL students may face serious challenges not only in writing but also in expressing their needs.

Also, ESL writing teachers and writing center staff can involve their students in a dialogue to find out what can be done to make the tutoring sessions more successful, what challenges the second language writers often face when they work with tutors, and what strategies the students

might suggest. The students will appreciate the initiative and guidance in this novel journey as they learn how to be in control of their conversations with tutors.

References

Aljaafreh, A., & Lantolf, J. P. (1994). Negative feedback as regulation and second language learning in the Zone of Proximal Development. *Modern Language Journal, 78,* 465–483. doi: 10.1111/j.1540-4781.1994.tb02064.x

Blau, S., Hall, R., & Strauss, T. (1998). Exploring the tutor/client conversation: A linguistic analysis. *The Writing Center Journal, 19*(1), 19–48.

Bell, D. C., & Youmans, M. (2006). Politeness and praise: Rhetorical issues in ESL (L2) writing center conferences. *The Writing Center Journal, 26*(2), 31–47.

Brooks, J. (1991). Minimalist tutoring: Making the student do all the work. *Writing Lab Newsletter, 15*(6), 1–4.

Cogie, J., Strain, K., & Lorinskas, S. (1999). Avoiding the proofreading trap: The value of error correction strategies. *The Writing Center Journal, 19*(2), 7–33.

Crowley, C. (2001). Are we on the same page? ESL students' perceptions of the writing center. *The Writing Lab Newsletter, 25*(9), 1–5.

Eckstein, G. (2013). Implementing and evaluating a writing conference program for international L2 writers across language proficiency levels. *Journal of Second Language Writing, 22,* 231–239. doi:10.1016/j.jslw.2013.03.001

Ewert, D. E. (2009). L2 writing conferences: Investigating teacher talk. J*ournal of Second Language Writing, 18,* 251–269. doi:10.1016/j.jslw.2009.06.002

Hall, H. (2001, March). *When background matters: Three writing centter employees' views on ESL students.* Paper session presented at the annual meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Denver, CO. Available from ERIC Document Reproduction Service. (No. ED451569)

Harklau, L., Losey, K., & Siegal, M., Eds. (1999). *Generation 1.5 meets college composition: Issues in teaching of writing to U.S.-educated learners of ESL.* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Harris, M., & Silva, T. (1993). Tutoring ESL students: Issues and options. *College Composition and Communication, 44,* 525–537.

Henning, T. (2001, March). Theoretical models of tutor talk: How practical are they? Paper session presented at the annual meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Denver, CO. Available from ERIC Document Reproduction Service. (No. ED451569)

Koshik, I. (2002). Designedly incomplete utterances: A pedagogical practice for eliciting knowledge displays in error correction sequences. *Research on Language and Social Interaction, 35,* 277–309. doi:10.1207/S15327973RLSI3503_2

Lantolf, J. P., & Thorne, S. L. (2006). *Sociocultural theory and the genesis of second language development.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.Myers, S. A. (2003). Reassessing the "proofreading trap": ESL tutoring and writing instruction. *The Writing Center Journal, 24*(1), 51–70.

North, S. M. (1984). The idea of a writing center. *College English, 46,* 433–446.

Patthey-Chavez, G. G., & Ferris, D. R. (1997). Writing conferences and the weaving of multi-voiced texts in college composition. *Research in the Teaching of English, 31,* 51–90.

Paul, R., & Elder, L. (2007). *The thinker's guide to the art of Socratic questioning.* Tomales, CA: The Foundation for Critical Thinking Press.

Powers, J. K. (1993). Rethinking writing center conferencing strategies for the ESL writer. *The Writing Center Journal, 13*(2), 39–47.

Raymond, L. & Quinn, Z. (2012). What a writer wants: Assessing fulfillment of student goals in writing center tutoring sessions. *The Writing Center Journal, 32*(1), 64–77.

Ritter, J., & Sandvik, T. (2009). Meeting in the middle: Bridging the construction of meaning with Generation 1.5 writers. In S. Bruce & B. Rafoth (Eds.), *ESL writers: A guide for writing center tutors* (2nd ed., pp. 91–104). Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers.

Thonus, T. (1999). Dominance in academic writing tutorials: Gender, language proficiency and the offering of suggestions. *Discourse and Society, 10,* 225–248.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1962). *Thought and language.* Cambridge, MA: MIT. Press.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Weigle, S. C., & Nelson, G. L. (2004). Novice tutors and their ESL tutees: Three case studies of tutor roles and perceptions of tutorial success. *Journal of Second Language Writing, 13,* 203–225.

Williams, J. (2004). Tutoring and revision: Second language writers in the writing center. *Journal of Second Language Writing, 13,* 173–201.

Williams, J., & Severino, C. (2004). The writing center and second language writers. *Journal of Second Language Writing, 13,* 165–172.

Wood, D., Bruner, J. S., & Ross, G. (1976). The role of tutoring in problem solving. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry and Applied Disciplines, 17,* 89–100.