

## ESL Writers and Writing Center Tutoring Dynamics<sup>3</sup>

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### Abstract

This study investigated writing center tutoring dynamics with ESL students at a large, Midwestern institution of higher education in the United States of America. More specifically, it described the ESL writing center conferencing approaches and strategies as well as the ESL writers' expectations about the tutoring process. Sources and methods of data collection included interviews, document analysis, and participant observation along with note-taking. Data analysis consisted of coding, thematic organization, and thick description. Findings indicated that the participating tutors used a combination of approaches or variety of tutoring strategies during the conferencing sessions. However, such approaches or strategies turned out to be inefficient to engage in ESL writing center conferencing activities. Therefore, this study proposes a culturally-based alternative to tutoring.

### Introduction

A post-positivist view of knowledge based on the notion of learning as a social constructionist act has challenged traditional directive-interventionist approaches to literacy instruction. In this perspective, knowledge is socially constructed through a subjective and interactive process that requires cooperation and/or collaboration.

One of the proponents of learning as a social act is Vygotsky (1978) who strongly believes that individuals may overcome any so called developmental stages by means of the help of others, including the teacher. Freire and Macedo (1987) also advocate a collaborative approach to education in which the teacher should be the coordinator of a literacy circle. They firmly believe in democracy in the classroom as an alternative to "banking education." They propose an education for independence in which individuals, rather than being passive, appeal to their backgrounds to construct knowledge from a reflective/critical point of view.

The social-constructionist theory of learning that gives rise to collaboration techniques in classrooms has been influential in composition pedagogy (Moore, 2001). Composition instructors who teach their classes based on social constructionist approaches to collaboration engage students with written texts by

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means of conversation. Unlike those instructors who base their classes on current-traditional approaches to composition, these instructors do not see the type of help they offer to students in their writing courses as that of a technician who takes a damaged electronic device, fixes it, and returns it to the owner. Instead, they view writing as a process in which the owner of a piece of writing interacts with a teacher and, as a result, improves his or her writing skills. The learner strengthens his/her voice and skills by getting collaborative feedback that aims at helping him/her become a better writer rather than a person accustomed to receiving an improved and returned piece of writing from the teacher.

Collaborative instruction has been prominent in writing centers peer tutoring sessions. Hobson (2001) says, for instance, that peer tutoring, as a form of collaborative learning, creates a system of education based on a community of learners rather than on "single authority figures." He further specifies that peer tutoring based on social-like interaction "replaces the metaphor of the generation and transmission of knowledge with that of a conversation. The conversational focus underlying most discussions of collaborative learning assumes knowledge is socially constructed, culturally and historically located, dependent on individuals reaching consensus" (p. 171). This suggests that the production of knowledge emerges from the shared efforts of tutors and tutees as individuals affected by a social context. The knowledge-building process cannot be unilateral or centered on the tutor because knowledge is not "packaged into discrete segments and dispensed to passive recipients, fast-food style" (Lunsford, 1990, P. 4). Bowden (1995) puts it, this way: "In most writing centers today, for example, the line between teacher and student is often blurred; writers help writers and everybody learns" (p.163). Therefore, it is important to consider the tutee as another writer who needs the help (collaboration) of co-writers. Thus, the role of the tutor is to provide help without confiscating the voice of the tutee.

Although there has been a shift in writing philosophy that also affected writing center practices, there are concerns when it comes to tutoring ESL students by using the new pedagogical trend, collaboration. This does not necessarily imply a movement against the collaborative approach, which is - by the way - the most widely used today (Burns & Shamon, 1995), but an alert in regard to a generalized tendency among writing centers toward using the same approach for both L1 and L2 one-on-one tutoring (Carson & Nelson, 1994). This tendency has ignored evidence that approaches that have successfully been developed with mainstream native speakers of English in the U.S. context do not properly serve nonnative speaking writers and, therefore, should not be directly extrapolated to ESL one-on-one tutoring (Goldstein & Conrad, 1990; Ramanathan & Atkinson, 1999). ESL students come to the writing center with particular language and cultural characteristics that make them different from native speakers of English (Bruce & Rafoth, 2004). Consequently, they require particular tutoring strategies to most adequately serve them and to facilitate comprehension during the interactive process (Powers & Nelson, 1995; Harris, 1997; McAndrew & Reigstad, 2001; Ritter, 2002). Not only are ESL students

different, but they should also be taught differently throughout the writing center sessions.

In light of the previous statement, I decided to develop a qualitative research study in the writing center at a large, Midwestern institution of higher education in the United States of America in order to provide answers to the following questions:

1. What tutoring strategies/approaches are reflected in writing center tutoring dynamics with ESL students?
2. To what extent do the writing center tutoring strategies/approaches correspond with ESL students' expectations?

## **Methodology**

### **Participants and Site**

Six (6) nonnative speakers of English from different nationalities participated in this qualitative research study on ESL writing center tutoring dynamics for a whole semester. All were international students enrolled in an ESL composition course at a large, Midwestern institution of higher education in the United States of America. In order to guarantee full confidentiality, each participating student was provided with a pseudonym; therefore, throughout the report of this study, the tutees are referred to as Sarath, Chang-Su, Yoshiko, Malaika, Amanda, and Tania respectively.

### **Biographical Sketch of Participating Tutees**

Sarath is a Communications Media undergraduate student. His native language is Sinhalese, which is the language of the major Sri Lankan ethnic group, the Sinhala.

Chang-Su is from Korea and is majoring in Hotel, Restaurant, and Institutional Management.

Yoshiko is a Japanese undergraduate student pursuing a degree in the field of International Studies.

Malaika is pursuing an undergraduate degree in Biology. She is from The Democratic Republic of Congo and is a native speaker of French, Swahili, and Lingana.

Amanda, from Mexico, speaks Spanish as her native language. She is an exchange undergraduate student pursuing a degree in Business Administration with a concentration in Management.

Tania is also a Mexican exchange student who is pursuing an undergraduate education in Mathematics.

### **The Site**

The site for this research was the writing center at a large, Midwestern university in the United States of America. The writing center was staffed with nineteen (19) tutors: sixteen (16) undergraduate and three (3) graduate students. The majority of the undergraduate students were English majors. The three graduate tutors were enrolled in Composition and TESOL programs. Nine of these tutors volunteered to let me study the tutoring sessions they conducted with my selected tutees.

The writing center opens every week during the spring and fall semesters, Monday to Thursday from 8:00 am to 4:00 pm and from 6:00 pm to 9:00 pm, and Friday from 8:00 am to 3:00 pm. Tutees are not allowed to schedule appointments with tutors; instead, they are encouraged to walk in and sign up on a waiting list.

The writing center staff explains that they organize workshops to help tutors accomplish their main mission, i.e., to help writers throughout the different stages of the writing process. It is important to point out, however, that this research study did not examine the particular training tutors receive at the writing center.

### **Data Collection Methods**

Data collection emphasized the search for credible information by using multiple methods/sources of data collection. Thus, the data were contiguously provided by methods such as participation, observation, documents, and interviews.

*Participation-Observation:* Research participation was characterized by prolonged engagement in the setting where the conferencing sessions took place. This methodological stance allowed me to engage in the setting long enough to avoid getting distorted information that could come from an overemphasis of isolated occurrences of particular events or from the lack of an adequate acquaintance of researcher and participants (Erlandson, Harries, Skipper, & Allen, 1993). This stance also provided me, the researcher, with the opportunity to "learn directly from his own experience" (Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

*Field Notes:* As shown in the example below, for each conferencing session, I used a double-entry observational protocol sheet in order to enter descriptive and reflective notes that not only facilitated data collection and analysis but also the development of further interviewing.

Observational protocol

<p><i>Tutee:</i> Essay topic:</p>	<p><i>Tutor:</i> Duration of session:</p>
<p>DESCRIPTIVE NOTES</p>	<p>REFLECTIVE NOTES</p>
<p>Te= Tutee                      Tr= Tutor</p> <p>Te: "This is the paper I brought before." Te is asking for the why of certain changes. Tr explains. The session has been so far on form, local level. Te asks about the organization of his paragraphs. Tr: "You're talking about 3 different things here, so it is good to break it up like this."</p>	<p>During this tutoring, Tr is assuming a very reactive position – just responding to Te's concerns. I wonder if being reactive does not let tutees stranded in a strange world – a culture with a totally different system of writing or with a particular rhetoric. Do they (Tutors) assume that tutees know where they are going and all they need is to be provided with responses to support their transit toward writing in a new culture in which tutees are supposedly informed already about what it takes to write in English? [Tutees may only ask about the conventions that they think they need]</p>

*Documents:* I collected a copy of each draft every tutee wrote throughout the whole conferencing process. Since drafts constituted the basis for further interviewing, I collected them shortly after the tutees produced new revisions. On most occasions, tutees brought me copies of their drafts every time they went to the writing center, or when we met for an interview.

*Interviews:* Throughout this study, I carried out a series of formal and informal interviews. I conducted formal interviews after checking or reading students' drafts. Formal interviews, other than shedding light on how the students used the tutoring feedback in their pieces of writing, provided me with insights for planning the ongoing interviewing process.

I conducted informal interviews after observing each conferencing session. These interviews aimed at freshly capturing unfolding events. Lincoln and Guba (1985) pointed out, for instance, how crucial time is for recalling events, which means that it is not recommended that a considerable amount of time elapse between conferences and interviews. Therefore, in order to avoid the time-consuming situation of scheduling or looking for an adequate place, interviews held after the conferencing sessions were not tape-recorded.

*Tape-Recording:* I tape-recorded the tutoring sessions and the formal interviews I conducted with the tutees. Tape-recording allowed me to "get the material down in an accurate and retrievable form" (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 126) for precise data analysis and report.

### **Reporting and Analyzing the Data**

*Data Analysis Strategy:* In order to analyze the data, I used a categorizing strategy based on coding and thematic organization. Specifically, I sorted out the data into broader themes (Maxwell, 1996, p. 76) attuned with my research purpose. These broader themes or thematic units (e.g. Writing Center Tutoring Approach, and Conferencing Approach and ESL Writers' Expectations) created an umbrella for a series of coded patterns/materials that contributed to the naming of narrower, emergent themes (e.g., Grammar-Checking Discourse, A Collaborative Dialogue, etc.) that together describe the broader themes.

*Thick Description:* I narrated the situation considering significant details and the authenticity of the information that derived from the different sources of data collection. That is, I allocated considerable space – throughout my descriptive analysis – to the genuine views or acts of all the participants. I did this by bringing a great deal of quoted material to my final report. For instance, I incorporated textual portions of the tutees' essays, transcriptions, and field notes containing information that gravitated around the various research themes throughout my descriptive and interpretive analysis/narrative.

### **Results**

The presentation of the data is divided into two major thematic components: "Writing Center Tutoring Approach," and "Conferencing Approach and ESL Writers' Expectations." The first broad thematic unit, "Writing Center Tutoring Approach," includes detailed description of the approaches used throughout the whole conferencing process. The second thematic unit, "Conferencing Approach and ESL Writers' Expectations," provides a descriptive account of what ESL students expect when they go to the writing center to seek assistance with their writing assignments.

#### **Writing Center Tutoring Approach**

The tutoring sessions that I present below took place in the writing center at different times throughout a whole semester. The sessions usually started with a clear purpose. Every session was followed either by tutors' questions about tutees' main writing concerns or by tutees' voluntary statements about the writing issues they wanted to work on. "What do you want me to look at?" was a common tutor question. "Check my grammar" was the students' most frequent statement. Although less frequently, the students also said that they wanted help with organization, references, thesis statements, content, and other global-related writing conventions.

Initial/opening interactions, other than setting the goal for each session – what to work on – contributed a great deal to shape subsequent tutoring

dynamics or to frame the deployment of particular tutoring strategies. Thus, the tutorial work on different writing skills or issues was usually related to particular tutoring strategies. This means that different tutoring strategies or approaches were used throughout the various tutoring sessions. For instance, when working on the most frequent issue or tutees' concern, grammatical accuracy, the directive approach was the most obvious throughout the tutoring sessions. When the tutoring sessions shifted to global issues of writing, a nondirective tutoring stance was then used.

### **A Directive Stance**

*A Grammar-Checking Discourse:* When Sarath, Chang-Su, Yoshiko, Malaika, Amanda, and Tania went to the writing center, they usually indicated that their main writing concern, and reason to go to the writing center, was English grammar. The tutors frequently dealt with these tutees' concerns or interests in local issues of writing by assuming a directive tutoring stance. For instance, on one occasion, Sarath went to the writing center and told the tutor, "My issue is grammar." The tutor reacted, "I'm going to read through this out loud. As I notice something that, maybe, needs to be fixed, I'll point it out as we go." Right after this brief interaction, the tutor, with a pen in hand and Sarath's essay in front of him, initiated a conferencing session characterized by unilateral and explicit work on Sarath's essay.

Tutor: Right here, it's just a little thing. You just need to, instead of saying, "for few weeks," ... put, "a (higher pitch) few weeks."

Sarath: A few weeks.

Tutor: Here, when you use, "a" this will be an "an" simply because this is "an" . .

Tutor: The adjective here, which instead of being "elder" is "elderly."

It has an "ly" on the end instead of just "elder lady." It would say, "elderly lady." Get rid of that period. "All of the other tenants," so this here would be plural.

Sarath: Plural.

In the previous transcript, the tutor started fixing most of the errors he came across in the essay by asserting a lecture-based tutoring strategy, a grammar-checking discourse that exemplified the realization of the directive tutoring approach. There was almost no interaction. Sarath's participation was limited to a few statements, e.g., "a few weeks," "plural." Directive tutoring situations like this occurred in multiple situations, with various tutors and tutees.

The example above portrays a directive tutoring stance characterized by a grammar-checking discourse in which the roles of the tutees are similar to that of

disengaged bystanders. Whether the tutees said or did not say a word actually did not matter; the tutors were focused on a unilateral cleansing process.

*A Grammar-Checking Dialogue:* The tutors also conducted the grammar-checking process by explicitly telling the tutees how to fix their errors rather than fixing the errors for them. That is, although the tutors did have a pen in their hands and occasionally wrote on the tutees' essays, it was mostly the tutees who did the actual writing after getting the direct corrective feedback from the tutors. Thus, this tutoring stance, although still very directive, involved a considerable degree of participation from the tutees. The tutors questioned the tutees and, at the same time, the tutees asked questions and/or demanded clarification related to the directions they received from the tutors. This means that the tutoring sessions took on more the form of a one-on-one dialogue. The following conferencing excerpt when Chang-Su and the tutor worked on the "Family Stories" essay provides evidence:

Tutor: Okay, I think that what you want to say here is the word "hospitality."

Is that what you mean?

Chang-Su: Yeah.

Tutor: Okay, so write after the . . . write "the word" because that specifies what exactly you mean.

Notice how the tutor explicitly said, "write 'the word' because. . . ." The tutor preferred to tell Chang-Su to make the correction through explicit/direct feedback rather than through doing the correction himself.

Throughout the themes I have presented so far (Grammar-Checking Discourse, and Grammar-Checking Dialogue: all part of the thematic unit, "A Directive Tutoring Approach"), it is evident that local issues of writing were the focus of the tutoring sessions. At the same time, it is evident that local issues of writing were dealt with by using a directive tutoring approach. The tutees' participation, therefore, was limited to repetition, brief responses to the tutors' questions regarding intended meanings in the essays, and eventually some clarifying questions they asked the tutors. In contrast, the tutors' participation was characterized by a monopolization of the interactions. The tutors' role can be depicted as that of a repairperson working for a body shop where flawed papers are taken for proper fixing. Further, what we have seen is a tutoring function characterized by an investment of action aimed at amending each piece of writing the tutees take to the writing center.

*A Directive Stance in Transition:* The tutors did not appear so authoritative when dealing with some writing issues associated with the form of sentences, paragraphs, quotations/citations, and reference lists or bibliographies. What they mostly did, in these cases, was to provide occasional direction (or, in other

words, they used the directive approach occasionally) while trying to get the students to come up with some answers to their own writing concerns/problems. In other words, the tutors still used a directive stance but, at the same time, they allowed the tutees to be more in charge or sometimes put the tutees in a position of some degree of independence. I would say that this can be seen as a decentralization phase of the tutoring sessions or a transition to a less directive way of tutoring. During this phase, there was direction, but there was also reluctance to continuously stick to it:

Tutor: Okay, this is the part where I was confused. All these commas, I mean question mark and then commas, are they . . .? I know you are asking a bunch of questions here.

Amanda: (Reads text). Ah, maybe this shouldn't be here . . . and this one here.

Tutor: Yeah. Okay, and then you want to . . . Okay, because the way that it is, it's really long.

So, we might . . . it might be a good idea to try and break it up a little bit more, just so . . .

because otherwise, it is going to be run on. But I think what you just did there . . . getting rid of that was a good idea. And this can be, maybe this can be the end of the first sentence. You can end with this paragraph and you can turn these into a new sentence.

Amanda: Okay.

Tutor: Right, because you are saying . . . well, here you are saying, "What will happen?" Here is a question, "What will happen?" And here, you are kind of saying, this is the answer. When you do this, that's "segmentation." Okay, you just . . . this is just a little thing but you want to say, "a way of life," "l-i-f-e."

Amanda: Alright.

Tutor: You say, "When you close your mind . . . That sentence is really confusing. I'm not exactly sure what you are trying to say.

Amanda: I can . . . (reading) . . . I think I can remember. . . . I am trying to say .

Tutor: Why don't you say it just like that? That's the perfect way to say it.

Amanda: Okay, thanks.

Notice that in the above interaction, the tutor gave explicit feedback. She said that there was a problem with the sentence, i.e., it was a confusing run-on sentence with misplaced punctuation marks. Although the tutor indicated what the problem was, she did not solve it for the tutee. Nor did she tell Amanda right away how to solve it. Instead, she engaged Amanda in a discussion that gave her a chance to come up with her own solution. Nevertheless, when Amanda stated what she was going to do to solve the problem, the tutor reacted authoritatively by saying, "That's the perfect way to say it;" a stance that is

consistent with the directive approach. This suggests that the tutorial dynamic depicted, so far, can be described as methodological swinging. That is, the tutoring stance showed features of a directive approach, but, at the same time, it appeared to have aspects characteristic of the collaborative/nondirective approach.

I consider that the tutoring stance displayed throughout the theme - "A Directive Stance in Transition" - in this section reveals a transition towards a nondirective tutoring approach. It is a process characterized by a continuum, i.e., a process in which the tutors move back and forth from one extreme to the other, from being directive to nondirective. However, due to this seesaw pattern, it is hard to notice any absolutely or permanently defined manifestation of either a directive or nondirective stance. Instead, it is often a combination of both strategies.

### **A Nondirective Stance**

*A Collaborative Dialogue:* In the directive approach, as shown above, the tutoring process is tutor-centered. The tutor is in control of the sessions. He or she assumes an authoritative or knowledgeable stance and, therefore, imparts explicit, corrective input. In addition, he or she takes on the role of an editor or proofreader. Based on this approach, the tutee is viewed as passive and dependent. While the tutee is the owner of the paper/essay, he or she does not have ownership of the tutoring or conferencing process.

My research data suggests that, unlike the directive approach, there was a stance throughout the sessions that was quite nondirective and hence consistent with the collaborative approach. For instance, in the featured sessions below, the tutors did not fix errors on the students' papers/essays. Nor did they specifically tell the tutees how to correct their errors. Instead, in these instances, they engaged in one-on-one dialogue in which they made suggestions about writing concerns. Tutors intended for these suggestions to be independently considered by the tutees.

In one instance, for example, Yoshiko came to the writing center and told the tutor, right at the beginning of the session, "I wanted to know if I could connect my first example and thesis statement." The tutor, then, did not read or analyze the paper in order to provide an authoritative response, as is the case when using the directive approach. Instead, s/he reacted, "Is this your thesis statement?" After the tutee said "yes," the tutor, as shown in the following transcript, challenged her to find answers to her own question by saying, "How do you want to connect it further?" This, of course, was a way of encouraging the tutee to actively participate in the knowledge-making process and, at the same time, a way of providing an opportunity to get the tutee more involved in the session and to speak more:

Tutor: How do you want to connect it further?

Yoshiko: The basic opinion of this essay is that Japanese people have some racial prejudices . . . the relations between Japanese people and foreigners . . . I don't think it's good (the essay), so . . .

Tutor: Do you think it's especially harsh against Chinese or just any ethnic group, any foreigner?

Yoshiko: I don't think it's so hard for English speaking people . . . Do you think my thesis statement should be more complex?

Tutor: (mumbles).

It was after Yoshiko tried to come up with her own response that the tutor gave her what is more of a lead than a direct response. The tutor said, "Well, if you think you know why, you could always work that into the thesis statement." Then, the tutee, Yoshiko, asked another question:

Yoshiko: Ah! So I can put some reasons.

Tutor: Yeah, if this is . . . if you want to argue that something happened, you know this is a problem because of this . . . you know, it's like a historical problem because there's a long history of racial tensions between certain countries and Japan. Or, whatever, you know, whatever you . . . here, you'd have the inequality of the job opportunities and crime, things like that (mumbles) . . . as well in the thesis statement or you can just, you know, let that go and back it up.

Yoshiko: Do you think my thesis statement is too simple?

Tutor: No, I don't think it's too simple. I think you're picking a really tough topic. It's very general but it's okay to be very general as long as your argument is clear.

Yoshiko: The next question is, as an example of racial problems that Japanese people have; I raised that nationality . . . foreign . . . in Japan. Do you think I should put some . . . like statistics?

The tutor again avoided any direct response to the tutee's questions. Instead, in a clear collaborative-nondirective stance, the tutor provided statements loaded with hints but avoiding a direct response. Notice, that the tutor stated ideas that, although valuable, were actually optional. S/he said, "If you want to argue . . .," "Or, whatever you know . . ." (to introduce another possibility), "Or you can just . . . let that go." It was up to the tutee whether to

take any of these ideas or to come up with an elaborated statement of her own for her thesis.

So far, Yoshiko still seemed to have doubts about her own point and, as shown above, asked, "Do you think my thesis statement is too simple?" This question reveals that, at this point it was still her thesis statement that concerned her; no one had provided her with a thesis statement for her paper. One important aspect of the collaborative approach is that the tutor does not do the job for the tutee.

A tutoring situation similar to the one explained above is illustrated when the tutor engaged in a collaborative-based dialogue with Malaika. During the dialogue, the tutor asked questions to get Malaika to think about her writing concerns. S/he also made suggestions or provided leads but did not do the work for Malaika. Nor did the tutor provide explicit feedback about how to conduct any corrections.

The tutor and Malaika engaged in an interactive-learning dialogue around an issue. The conversation about the writing issue extended considerably, and the tutor never said things like, "Just do that," "It is like this," which would have ended the conversation once the tutee received easy "ready-to-incorporate-in-essay" feedback.

Unlike in the directive approach, in which a writing concern is tackled and the tutee comes out with a corrected paper, during the development of the collaborative approach, it is not clear when a conversation about a specific writing issue is going to be over. The collaborative tutor does not show a willingness to arrange or fix any particular aspect of the student's paper. His or her attention, instead, is on the learner and the learning process and, therefore, his or her purpose is to help the tutee grow as a writer. Since attention is directed toward the learner and the learning process, tutoring is viewed as an ongoing activity rather than as an act of fixing the student's piece of writing. That's why a conversation based on the collaborative approach is usually long; it lasts as long as it takes to get learners oriented in their writing tasks. The conversation is not ended by the tutors' provision of corrective feedback; rather, it is paced and aimed at empowering tutees with the tools they need to solve their own writing problems.

## **Conferencing Approach and ESL Writers' Expectations**

### **Directive Feedback Preference**

Throughout the various tutoring sessions in this study, I noticed that Sarath, Chang-Su, Yoshiko, Malaika, Amanda, and Tania favored directive feedback strategies for their major writing concern, grammar. I asked these tutees about their main expectation when they met with the tutors to work on their papers.

Sarath responded, "I told them I wanted it [the paper] to be corrected . . . my main problem is grammar." Tania added, "Almost all the time I want them to check my grammar, the prepositions and, perhaps, some vocabulary because sometimes the words that I find in the dictionary are not the correct words that I have to use."

Directive feedback was very common throughout the tutorial work in the writing center. However, Chang-Su even suggested that it was not enough. He indicated that the tutors should check his paper one time and, before he leaves the writing center, they should go over his paper again in order to make sure there are no errors left.

Although the previous statements provided me with a picture of the tutees' expectations during the one-on-one tutoring process, I was still intrigued by the tutees' preference for a directive tutoring stance. Therefore, I considered it necessary to explore how serious they were about their preference or to what extent they would have preferred a less directive or nondirective stance. Consequently, I asked Sarath, Chang-Su, Yoshiko, Malaika, Amanda, and Tania about the option of getting suggestions from the tutors that would orient them to do some research or find sources to solve the writing problems by themselves.

Sarath responded to this question by indicating that the tutors should correct or indicate if it was "correct or incorrect" or "appropriate or inappropriate," but he did not like, for instance, the idea of being sent to the library to investigate his own writing problems. In other words, he liked it when the tutor conducted the correction or s/he provided explicit guidance to conduct the correction, but he did not consider being encouraged to do his own research to be an alternative way to solve his writing problems.

The following interview excerpt with Malaika provides a similar response to that of Sarath, expressing a preference for a directive tutoring stance:

Jose: What about if they say you should change this, but you should go to the library and investigate how to do it? What about if they say, go to the library and check out a grammar book.

Malaika: They can't say that because they're supposed to help you. They are the ones to tell you that (incomprehensible). They can tell me how, for example, I go to see the tutor and she tells me okay go to the library and check the grammar and stuff like that. I can change the grammar but, you know, it's different when you read it and when someone explains it to you.

According to Malaika, if the tutors sent her to the library, they would be evading their responsibility or not doing their job because they were supposed to be in the writing center to "help." She understood "help" as direct instruction.

Therefore, the type of help she expected was not the one advocated by the collaborative/nondirective approach (i.e., help that promotes independence), but one that was characterized by explicit feedback on the spot or during writing center sessions.

### **Tutors as Authorities**

The directive approach to tutoring was not only prevalent but also the favorite one in the writing center with ESL students. Sarath, Chang-Su, Yoshiko, Malaika, Amanda, and Tania indicated that they preferred tutors to provide explicit, directive feedback during the tutoring sessions. Amazingly, although the tutors largely complied with the tutees' requests for direction, as evidenced by their almost total control of sessions characterized by proofreading and explicit corrective feedback, the tutees still implied that tutors should have been more authoritative. This means that when these tutees went to the writing center, they expected to meet knowledgeable individuals who would provide directive feedback right on the spot.

As I have already indicated, the tutees preferred tutors to check their essays for errors, and they did not like tutors to give up their "tutoring responsibilities" by sending them to check other sources. At the same time, they did not want to have doubts about the correctness of the feedback they get from tutors. Therefore, these tutees did not see tutors as equal peers, as advocated by the collaborative approach, but as authorities.

For instance, when Yoshiko went to the writing center, she expected to meet a knowledgeable person; that is, someone with the authority to impart knowledge. She believed that the tutors should be as knowledgeable as the professor and that "they should study more" to be able to carry out the type of feedback she preferred, i.e., an instructional-directive feedback. Sarath expressed feelings similar to those of Yoshiko in the following interview excerpt:

Jose: When you went to the writing center, what were you expecting?

Sarath: Actually, I expected someone of education [academic training].

Jose: Someone?

Sarath: With education. That means teaching.

When Sarath talked about someone with an education, he meant a person able or trained to teach. Thus, he felt, as Yoshiko did, that the tutor should be knowledgeable enough to provide the type of help he was interested in. The tutees had their own agenda concerning the tutors' role, then, regardless of what the tutors thought was the right thing to do during tutoring sessions. For

instance, while the tutors thought that they should not teach or provide explicative feedback, the tutees' perspectives on tutoring implied that the job of a tutor was equal to that of a traditional teacher: an authority in the field of writing whose role was to impart knowledge.

### **Correction plus Explicative Feedback**

The tutees' main expectation of a tutoring session was to get explicit corrective feedback on local issues of writing. Further, local issues of writing, other than being the students' main concerns, were the main targets throughout the tutoring sessions; the tutoring sessions mostly concentrated on grammar or mechanical issues of writing. In addition, as previously indicated, the tutors dealt with grammar issues by direct intervention or a directive tutoring style. One could quite possibly believe, then, that the students were totally satisfied with the tutoring approach.

However, the tutees' expectations were not totally satisfied. The tutees felt that the correction was not accompanied by an explicative statement concerning why a particular element in the paper was wrong. For instance, Malaika commented, *I've noticed that they always say, "You should change this to this." They should also try to explain, you know. Not only tell you that change this to this, but they should tell you why you are changing this, this exactly, so you understand what, so you keep it in your mind.*

Tania remarked:

*Sometimes, when they told me, this is a great preposition here . . . I was like, "Why?"*

*Most of the times they didn't know how to answer and they were like, "Umm, I don't*

*know it's just like that, English is weird, we know, but it's just like that."*

The tutees were not just interested in getting a corrected paper; they also wanted to improve their understanding about grammatical issues. This suggests that the tutees really valued the importance of learning the intricacies of the writing issues targeted during the tutoring sessions.

There was not only a lack of detailed/explicit explanation on targeted errors, but the participating students stated that they needed explicative feedback as a complement to the error-checking on their main writing concern, grammar.

## **Discussion and Implications**

### **Discussion of findings**

Statements about the extension of the collaborative approach to ESL tutoring may quite possibly be exaggerated because, throughout this study, I realized that the tutors did not favor the reportedly most popular approach to tutoring, collaboration. Nor did the tutors stick to a particular tutoring approach. Instead, the tutors used a variety of tutoring stances in ESL one-on-one conferencing that included, to a lesser extent, the collaborative approach.

Moreover, throughout this research study, the directive approach proved to be problematic. For instance, the tutees were not totally satisfied with this approach because they were interested in more than the proofreading process; they also wanted learning-enhancing directive feedback that would show them why certain grammatical components were erroneous. The tutees wanted explicative feedback along with the grammar-checking tutoring stance. The lack of complementary explicative feedback led Yoshiko to say, "I don't know, they [tutors] should study more."

Pratt-Johnson (2006) says that culturally diverse students usually come to the classroom with different ways of knowing, learning, solving problems, communicating nonverbally, dealing with conflicts, and using symbols that affect the ways in which these students behave. Studies have also shown that people's view of language learning and instruction is influenced by social values. For example, in a study of Chinese and American contexts of literacy, Bell (1995) described the frustration she went through during the process of learning to read and write in China. One of the main problems was that she wanted to focus on meaning while her Chinese tutor wanted to concentrate on the beauty of each character.

I also found this type of mismatch during my research with culturally diverse students and tutors. For example, the tutees preferred correction plus explicative feedback whereas the tutors preferred to provide just correction. Interestingly, nothing suggests that the conferencing dynamics or materialization of different tutoring approaches and/or strategies contributed significantly to making the tutees' conferencing preferences converge with those of the tutors.

Implications: An Integrationist Approach to ESL Writing Center Conferencing  
Sarath, Malaika, Yoshiko, Tania, Amanda, and Chang-Su showed that their views on tutoring were different from those of the tutors they interacted with in the English-speaking culture. These tutees favored a directive feedback, an explicative feedback that was never given to them. Attuned with Hall (2000), this suggests that tutors "often need to 'refocus their lens' when looking at and working with culturally and linguistically diverse students" in order to be successful.

We need to appeal to a tutoring approach that - besides respecting or recognizing the tutees' values and learning behaviors they bring from their home cultures (Johnson, 2005) - creates the conditions for integrating the ESL tutees with the new culture and hence with new modes of learning and writing. We need, then, an integrationist approach to ESL writing center tutoring.

An integrationist approach will function as a cultural-enlightening mechanism aimed at creating conditions for learning adjustment. Getting ESL tutees to adjust to a new learning environment is one of the goals of an integrationist approach to tutoring. I believe getting ESL tutees to adjust is feasible. ESL students choose to study in the United States of America because they have great expectations about its educational system; they trust the U.S. educational system as a channel to professional success. Therefore, "If those students seek to prosper in an individualistically oriented culture like that of the U.S., they will need to learn to engage in the academic practices of individualism to some considerable degree" (Elbow, 1999, p. 11). Carrington and Mu (2007) add that ESL students need to adapt themselves to a learning environment that is different from the one they are familiar with. They also indicate that the members of the target discourse community need to be open-minded to other communicative styles and ways of learning.

It is important to keep in mind, however, that ESL "students in our class continue to demonstrate through their work that . . . they are trapped in their home discourses" (Zamel, 1997, p. 347). Therefore, the process of integrating ESL students into the American learning system may not be so easy. Nevertheless, with a little patience and tolerance, and "with ongoing and sustained instruction that is responsible to their attempts, they [ESL students] can try on and become conversant in a variety of discourses, writing movingly, adopting critically and authoritative stances, taking individual positions" (Zamel, 1997, p. 347).

The integrationist approach might provide tutees with the tools to fully appreciate, understand, and connect to the English discourse community. In other words, it will create the conditions for ESL tutees to experience current, sound, educational customs in the U.S. context or, specifically, in the writing center. How does the integrationist tutor achieve this purpose?

We know that process pedagogy is most frequently put to practice by using the collaborative/nondirective approach, whose goal is to promote better, independent writers. Integrationist tutors should engage ESL learners in a dialogue about these learning/instructional behaviors. Also, they might want to consider engaging ESL students in dialogue about the learning behaviors they are used to or bring from their societies. In so doing, they will lay foundations for cultural awareness, which is a fundamental aspect for cross-cultural communication.

The integrationist approach I am proposing should develop into an ESL learner friendly and culturally based alternative to one-on-one conferencing in the writing center. Its main goal is to promote adjustment to current models of writing instruction in the U.S. through cultural awareness. It is a culturally based approach to tutoring because it would aim at promoting current ways of writing and learning in the target culture while being respectful and conscious of ESL tutees' own ways of writing and learning.

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