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Ten techniques for successful writing tutorials

Sarah J. Shin

Although student-teacher conferences and writing tutorials are documented to be beneficial for students in many ways (Goldstein & Conrad, 1990; Patthey-Chavez & Ferris, 1997; Paulus, 1999; Powers & Nelson, 1995), only a few studies have presented a set of effective, practical strategies for teachers and tutors who seek to help ESOL students improve their writing on an individual basis (e.g. Bates, Lane & Lange, 1993; Harris & Silva, 1993; Leki, 1992). How should one provide feedback on ESOL writing? What should one do when faced with an essay replete with unfamiliar grammatical errors and rhetorical patterns often found in non-native speaker writing? When and what types of errors should we correct? Is there a need to prioritize among errors? How do we distinguish culturally conditioned rhetorical patterns from lack of language proficiency in English? These are just some of the many issues that writing instructors wrestle with when trying to provide feedback on ESOL student writing. This article reports on strategies for conducting writing tutorials that have been used and found to be effective by 43 ESOL teacher candidates in an MATESOL program, each of whom has tutored an

English language learner in writing over a semester. By tutoring and reflecting on that process, the prospective ESOL teachers of this study have gained some important insights into the teaching of writing, which are presented here.

With the introduction of the process approach to ESOL composition, a wide array of research-based classroom activities have been created and implemented by writing instructors to assist students in developing greater control over the writing process (see Johns, 1990; Silva, 1990). These include explicit instruction in pre-writing, drafting, revising, and editing strategies, analysis of different kinds of writing models, use of developmentally appropriate rubrics, and focused formative feedback from peers. In this approach, the provision of individualized assistance has garnered much attention, as it is a hallmark of a process orientation to composition. Students receive many benefits from meeting individually with their writing instructors or tutors, among them increased feedback and encouragement through personal attention and better mastery of writing skills (Reid, 1993). Research investigating teacher feedback on student writing has shown that students generally expect and value their teachers' feedback on their writing and that various types of teacher comments lead to substantive student revision (e.g. Ferris, 1995 & 1997; Goldstein & Conrad, 1990; Hyland, 1998). Other studies that have specifically investigated student-teacher conferences and tutorials have shown that students respond positively to teacher comments provided during these meetings and feel that these sessions are helpful in improving their writing (e.g. Powers & Nelson, 1995; Reid & Powers, 1993).

Despite the apparent benefits for students from conferencing however, ESOL teachers, tutors, and paraprofessionals may feel unqualified to provide feedback on

individual student writing if they have not received adequate specific training in this area. The task of helping ESOL students with their writing may be equally daunting for those who do not normally consider themselves as ESOL professionals – graduate assistants and undergraduate students who work as peer tutors in writing centers in various universities. Although these latter individuals may be trained to attend to the individual concerns of native English-speaking writers, they are often inadequately equipped to deal with some additional concerns of non-native speakers of English who often have writing tutorials as their only productive recourse to navigating poorly guided assignments in college-level content area coursework. These tutors may be interested in learning about tutoring strategies that best address the specific needs of L2 writers. Furthermore, many secondary and higher education English faculty, who often see large numbers of students each day and therefore find it difficult to conduct lengthy individual conferences, may be interested in learning about how to conduct a more focused, brief (e.g. 10-minute) writing conference or how to manage a small-group tutorial. This article presents a set of practical strategies that these writing professionals may find useful.

Participants

Forty-three prospective ESOL teachers (26 native and 17 non-native speakers of English) in an MATESOL program participated in this study. All 43 teachers had little or no experience in teaching writing; all were enrolled in an ESOL writing methods course as part of their M.A. program. The data for this study originated from journals and class discussion notes collected over three semesters during which the course was offered. As part of the requirements of the semester-long methods course, each teacher was assigned

to tutor an adult English language learner in writing and maintain a reflective journal about the tutoring experience. The adult English language learners (i.e. the tutees), who enrolled in college ESL writing courses at the same university, engaged in either reflective or academic writing on a wide range of topics.

Training the tutors

The prospective ESOL teachers were trained to provide feedback on student writing in the following way. In addition to the material formally covered in the methods course (e.g. a review of the history and theories of writing instruction, discussions on writing as either a product or a process, integrating oral and reading skills in writing, and writing assessment), the course covered techniques for providing feedback on student writing. These techniques included reviewing student writing for content and organization, determining which grammatical errors to address based on the communicative importance of the errors, and training students to self-correct and think critically about writing. The teachers were instructed not to discuss every error but to focus on two or three major issues with their student's writing during each session (Leki, 1992). In class, the teacher candidates practiced these techniques with sample student essays in groups of three or four, collaboratively identifying what writing issues to focus on and deciding how to best address the problems (for a detailed description of the training procedures and materials, see Shin, forthcoming).

Starting about the fourth week of the semester, each teacher candidate held bi-weekly individual writing tutorials with an assigned student. Shortly after each meeting, the teacher candidates wrote about the session in their journals. They were asked to report

how they identified and addressed the writing problems and to describe difficulties and/or successes. The prospective teachers were also asked to reflect upon how the session went in general, what they learned from the process, and whether they would do anything differently the next time. The journals, along with copies of the students' drafts, were submitted for instructor comments. This exchange effectively served as a form of a dialogue journal, the content of which provided the basis for some subsequent class discussions and activities. In addition, the student teachers had an opportunity during each class to discuss tutoring and share techniques that worked well.

The following is a list of tips for successfully implementing writing tutorials as generated by the prospective ESOL teachers of this study, based on the points that were commented on most in their journals and class discussions. Note that tips 1 through 7 are applicable to both classroom instructors and tutors, while tips 8 through 10 have specific relevance to part-time tutors. Each tip is accompanied with relevant excerpts from the tutors' reflective journals and/or summaries of discussions during class.

Techniques for successfully conducting writing tutorials

Tips applicable to both instructors and tutors:

1. Explain clearly to students the expected outcomes of the writing tutorial.

This is probably one of the most important prerequisites for any tutorial arrangement. Specifically, students need to know that tutors will not simply correct their papers for grammar mistakes. Two of the tutors in this study had to be assigned to other students because their original students failed to show up for meetings after their first tutorial sessions:

My former tutee, Song Kyu ¹, did not work out, as he apparently was only interested in having someone correct his papers for grammar and spelling. (Tom)

In addition, students need to understand that the feedback they receive from their tutors will not necessarily be the same as that given by their classroom instructors. They need to understand that different readers respond differently to a given piece of writing and that feedback from different readers, when carefully considered, can help to further improve the quality of their writing. Expectations should be communicated to students both orally and in writing.

2. Engage students in a conversation about the writing process and encourage their input and negotiation of meaning.

Research evidence shows that writing conferences do not necessarily result in student input, and that students who generally provide more input during conferences are more likely to produce substantive revisions (Goldstein & Conrad, 1990). Thus, tutors need to resist the temptation to simply do all the talking, and instead encourage students to provide their input. Some of the tutors of this study found that sharing their own problems and strategies with writing motivated their students to examine themselves as writers:

During our first session, we mostly talked about writing. We discussed the difficulties that we both experience, the difficulties that we don't experience that others do, and the topics we like to write about. I wrote down a few things that Alice thinks she needs help on... We spent the rest

of the time talking about how she organized her thoughts for a new writing assignment. (Eva)

By engaging students in a conversation about their own writing habits, strengths, and weaknesses, tutors can help students become more independent writers. Furthermore, students can develop a vocabulary for discussing writing and improve their oral skills in English.

3. Address two or three major issues with student's writing rather than trying to fix every error.

Since ESOL students usually make large numbers of errors, there is great temptation to try to help them by commenting on all aspects of their writing. Many ESOL writers themselves, especially graduate students, are eager to get every error corrected in their writing (Leki, 1992). However, evidence from L2 writing research suggests that even the most intensive, systematic attention to grammatical errors produces insignificant improvement in subsequent writing tasks (Robb, Ross, & Shortreed, 1986). Several researchers suggest that students benefit more substantially from a restricted approach to feedback in which teachers address only some aspects of content and form in each paper, starting with content and organization, then grammar (Harris & Silva, 1993; Leki, 1992). Alternatively, teachers and tutors with limited time may conduct brief 10-minute conferences in which they focus on one grammar and/or one content issue. Once the content more or less expresses what the student is trying to say, feedback on grammar can refine revisions. However, if students are misusing structures that will clearly recur in a particular piece of writing, it makes sense to make limited grammar corrections earlier so

that these can be incorporated in subsequent revisions (see tip #4 for more on how to conduct mini-grammar lessons). The tutors of this study found that limiting their feedback to two or three major issues with student writing during each tutorial session was a useful technique despite their initial anxiety about leaving so many errors untouched:

I've found it's best to choose one thing to focus on and stick to it rather than trying to correct an entire paper. At times I wasn't sure what to focus on or I felt like I didn't know how to help, or that my efforts wouldn't aid her writing; but looking back, I think I might have helped a bit if only by providing moral support; Alice seemed unsure of herself throughout the assignment; however, she appeared to be proud of her final draft. (Eva)

4. Use mini grammar lessons to address persistent grammatical problems.

One of the techniques often used by native speakers to edit their writing, namely reading their paper aloud to see if every sentence “sounds right,” is not a very useful technique for non-native writers because they lack native speaker intuitions for knowing what “sounds right” in English. Instead, many non-native English-speaking writers, particularly EFL learners, benefit more from formal explanations of grammar since many of them learned English through grammar-based methods (Harris & Silva, 1993). When addressing grammatical errors, it is best to concentrate on errors that most interfere with reader's understanding and devise a mini grammar lesson that allows students to compare correct and incorrect usages. After the student successfully describes the differences, the tutor may point out other sentences in the draft with similar problems and ask the student

to try to correct them. This strategy was found to be largely successful as one tutor describes in the following:

I first showed her the two versions of the sentences – hers and mine, with nothing else written on the paper. I asked her to read them and see if she could see any difference in their meanings.... To my delight, she did! Then we looked at the second sheet I had prepared and she immediately understood what I had done and completely saw the difference in the meaning of the two sentences. (Linda)

In general, tutors should give top priority to the most serious errors, those that affect comprehension of the text, and those that occur most frequently in a student paper (Bates, Lane, & Lange, 1993). The following list, adapted from Bates et al. (1993), distinguishes more serious errors from less serious errors in ESOL writing.

More serious errors:

- Incorrect verb tense
- Verb incorrectly formed
- Incorrect use or formation of a modal
- Incorrect use or formation of a conditional sentence
- Incorrect sentence structure
- Incorrect or awkward word order
- Incorrect or missing connector
- Incorrect formation or use of passive voice
- Unclear message

Less serious errors:

- Incorrect subject-verb agreement
- Incorrect or missing article
- Problem with the singular or plural of a noun
- Wrong word choice, including prepositions
- Wrong word form
- Nonidiomatic expressions

Harris & Silva (1993) also note that while problems concerning articles and prepositions can be important to address, they are learned only gradually through increased exposure to English and therefore should not be a high priority for tutors. In general, tutors may wish to consult a number of reference books on English grammar, which provide examples and exercises on specific grammar points for students who need further practice (see box insert for a list of selected references on English grammar). In addition, tutors may consider assisting students to compile user-friendly personal references for their persistent high-priority errors. For example, tutors may help students craft convenient error reference cards written in their own words, kept on a binder ring, with clear explanations of the error type, source of the error, and ways to fix it. In this way, the tutor's mini grammar lesson won't simply be entrusted to the tutee's L2 auditory memory or end up buried in the tutee's notebook.

5. Praise students often for their efforts and explain that they can become good writers in English.

Writing in English can be an enormously difficult task, as many L2 writers are fearful of making errors. During one class discussion, a Korean-speaking tutor said that as a writer in English, she limits herself to producing simple, unsophisticated sentences because she is afraid to make grammatical mistakes. Another Korean-speaking tutor spoke of a frustrating experience of spending many hours trying to write a personal statement for a graduate school application and not going beyond the first sentence. Writing an essay about herself in English was enormously stressful, as she was uncomfortable not only with her lack of fluency in English, but also with having to argue that she was a worthy candidate for the graduate program. Indeed, ESOL writers face a number of linguistic and cultural hurdles, many of which can discourage them from becoming productive writers. Thus, while it is important to address problems with student writing, tutors should also remember to encourage students by praising them for their genuine efforts.

6. Use e-mail for giving and receiving feedback on writing.

Some tutors found e-mail to be an excellent tool for giving and receiving feedback. In this arrangement, students first e-mailed to tutors drafts of their essays, to which tutors responded also through e-mail. Specific tutor comments were provided in caps in student text and summaries of responses were also provided. Some tutors commented that reading e-mail drafts enabled them to formulate their responses more carefully and to use their face-to-face meetings for addressing issues that required more explanation. For the students, e-mail commentary reinforced their tutors' oral feedback and provided them with more opportunity to revise their drafts and prepare questions before their face-to-

face meetings. Telephone conferences may be used as an alternative to face-to-face meetings if scheduling conflicts arise.

7. Consider small-group tutorials when time constraints prevent meeting individually with students.

Small-group tutorials have some definite advantages over individual tutorials – they can help save time for tutors and allow students to experience multiple audiences, test working drafts on potential readers, and find workable solutions to writing problems (Reid & Powers, 1993). However, because ESOL writers bring different understanding of rhetorical structures, cultural experiences, as well as limited experience and vocabulary in English writing, many of the collaborative techniques that work with native English speakers may not be successful (Reid & Powers, 1993). In addition, ESOL writers themselves may be opposed to peer feedback because they are often uncertain about the accuracy of their peers' comments. Because many ESOL writers rely heavily on instructor comments and take their advice without questioning, they often end up making the same mistakes in subsequent writing tasks. To reduce ESOL students' insecurity about the accuracy of peer feedback and sole dependence on their instructors, tutors may try 'teacher-mediated peer response groups' (Liu, 1998). In this arrangement, the instructor participates in the discussion as a peer by offering his/her own feedback and evaluating other peers' comments so that the writer would feel confident about the accuracy of the feedback offered by group members. Furthermore, the instructor's presence requires group members to prepare well and participate actively in the discussion.

Even with group participation however, tutors usually need to intervene more directly and more frequently in small group tutorials with ESL writers, offering cultural information about audiences and rhetorical formats. As with one-on-one tutorials, tutors should clearly explain the roles and responsibilities of group members and tutors. A group of three students is ideal for small-group tutorials (Liu, 1998) and students should bring to the meeting enough copies of their drafts for members of their tutorial group. Some useful questions that students can ask of other members in the group might be: “Have I used enough support here?” “Are there any places in my paper where you do not understand my language?” “Is the focus of my paper clear?” Tutors should encourage students’ discussion while offering immediate feedback on issues that cannot be resolved through discussions with peers. At the end of each session, the tutor and group members should fill out a peer response form to be given to the writer to revise the discussed piece.

Tips specifically applicable to part-time tutors:

8. Have students do some writing during tutorial sessions, both so you can observe the writing process and students can see how you resolve issues with writing.

Some tutors reported that their students sometimes showed up in meetings without having done any writing. One of the discoveries made by these tutors was that their students were under a lot of time pressure. Many of the graduate students in particular had young families and had part-time jobs in addition to being full-time students. To cope with this problem, one tutor had her student do some writing during their tutorial sessions. Specifically, she helped him brainstorm and organize ideas for a new essay that he was having trouble getting started. Another tutor found that once an

organizational outline was in place, it was helpful to let the student write a draft while she wrote her own based on the same outline. This not only allowed the tutor to observe the steps her student took to write his first draft but also helped the student see ways in which his tutor approached writing a first draft from the same outline. The tutor and the student subsequently discussed their thinking processes in arriving at their individual drafts from the same outline. By comparing the two drafts, the student came to the conclusion that he needed more detailed supporting sentences. The tutor then helped her student generate and phrase his own supporting ideas for revision.

9. Correspond regularly with your students' classroom instructors and encourage students to clarify assignment requirements with their teachers.

Leki (1992, p.129) notes that processing purely oral feedback is cognitively demanding for many English language learners because of the mental energy it requires. Non-native speakers are not able to remember as much in English as they would in their native languages or as native speakers can. Some tutors found that students' lack of adequate understanding of requirements for assignments seriously hindered their writing:

Next to her [thesis] statement her instructor had inquired (written),
“...good thesis, what's the issue?” Up until then, Alice didn't know she
had to include a controversial issue within her thesis.... I encouraged her
to speak to her teacher about her topic before going any further. I also
suggested asking her instructor to explain assignments in more detail after
class if she doesn't understand in class. (Eva)

If classroom instructors do not provide clear written instructions, tutors should encourage students to approach their instructors to explain assignments.

Similarly, tutors should maintain regular contact with their students' classroom instructors so as to make their feedback most effective. Without communicating with the writing course teachers, some tutors felt they could not provide substantive comments on their students' writing:

In many ways the pre-writing, which determines organization, logic, clarity and approach is extremely important, and our brief contact was often enough to set things on the right track. But there was a weakness in the post writing sessions. I never knew what her teacher was emphasizing in class and there often did not seem to be enough time to effectively change this phase of the writing. (Joshua)

In order to facilitate communication between classroom instructors and tutors, one may establish a procedure in which instructors regularly fill out a pre-designed feedback form that allows them to highlight materials covered in class and assignments. After each tutorial session, tutors may in turn send a brief feedback form to instructors on what was worked on, how the student is progressing, and any issues of concern. If tutors are being paid an hourly wage, some of the money may be used for administrative time, such as in corresponding with classroom instructors about student progress.

10. Maintain reflective journals about the experience of responding to ESOL writing.

All of the tutors reported that although maintaining journals about providing feedback on student writing was time consuming, it was an especially valuable

experience. Specifically, writing journal entries has enabled tutors to confront themselves with what they know; to evaluate themselves as writers, teachers, and learners; and to reflect on the practice of teaching writing in English to speakers of other languages. The tutors have used their journals to record their impression of how effective their strategies were and to plan future courses of action. One of the major advantages of prospective teachers' maintenance of a journal is the increased awareness of their own writing style and habits. Furthermore, teachers can establish, evaluate and modify their goals for helping students improve their writing (for a detailed account of the use of journals by the participants of this study, see Shin, forthcoming).

Conclusion

Responding to ESL writing can be an exceedingly difficult task, as the unfamiliar grammatical errors and extraordinarily different rhetorical patterns that are characteristic of many ESL compositions can stump even the best-trained writing teachers. Teachers are often at a loss when they have to explain to English language learners why we say “*on Monday*” but “*in April*,” or why “I think that best important in life is happy” is wrong. In view of the special difficulties that ESL students face, this article presented a set of practical strategies for responding to ESL writing in a tutorial setting. Although the list presented above by no means represents a comprehensive list of strategies for tutors, it nonetheless provides a good place to start for those who seek to help ESOL students improve their writing. Likewise, it has been a goal of this article to encourage other teachers and tutors to share techniques that work well and to reflect on the practice of teaching writing.

Note

¹ All teacher and student names are pseudonyms. All journal excerpts are used with permission.

Box Insert:

Selected List of English Grammar References for Writing Tutors

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