

Issues In Tutoring ESL Writers

Allyson Cubr

University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

As a writing tutor, working with ESL writers was always a cause of concern for me. I often worried that I was not really helping them, and I was uncertain what would help them. If working with ESL students caused anxiety for me, then I was sure that this issue troubled other tutors as well. Uncertainty in tutoring ESL writers seemed to be a pressing concern due to the increasing number of ESL students at the University of Illinois and the fact that a large portion of the writers who visit the Writer's Workshop are ESL writers. It occurred to me that if tutors are unsure of how best to help ESL writers, then many appointments may not be as successful as they can be. As such, possibly the majority of appointments could be more effective since the majority of writers in the Writer's Workshop are ESL. I felt that it was necessary to have an understanding of students who make up such a large percentage the writing center. In an attempt to learn more about how to tutor ESL writers, I consulted scholarship and guidebooks on how to tutor them. However, the literature I read on how ESL writers should be tutored did not provide me with the concrete answers that I hoped for because experts' opinions on the matter differed. I began to consider where I could find the information that would put my mind at ease, provide tutors with valuable knowledge, and allow for productive sessions with ESL writers.

I decided that a good way to discover what ESL writers find helpful would be to ask them myself. So, I conducted interviews with three ESL writers who had experienced individual appointments at the Writer's Workshop and had participated in an ESL Writing Group at the Writer's Workshop. As such, the results of my study are most applicable to the Writer's Workshop and to ESL writers who visit the Writer's Workshop relatively frequently. However, the information yielded by my study has broader value because many ESL writers may share similar experiences and concerns that tutors can learn from.

Literature Review

Blau and Hall (2002), Harris and Silva (2008), and Powers (1995) all acknowledge that tutoring ESL writers can come with uncertainty and difficulties. They and other experts have a variety of ideas about how ESL writers should be tutored. Blau and Hall (2002) assert that the Socratic method is ineffective with ESL writers because their knowledge of grammar and syntax is underdeveloped, making this method a guessing game unless it is used to address content. They believe that it is most effective to work on both local and global concerns at once rather than sequentially because these issues are often intertwined. Blau and Hall assert that tutors should be cultural informants, use directive tutoring techniques, and work line-by-line. Powers (1995), like Blau and Hall, finds the Socratic method to be ineffective with ESL writers and establishes that tutors need to serve as an audience for ESL writers and take on the role of cultural informant to educate them on American academic expectations. Gillespie and Lerner (2008) also stress the importance of tutors as cultural informants, however unlike Blau and Hall and Powers, they claim that directive tutoring is not necessary with ESL writers. They say that it is not important to address grammar issues before moving on to higher order concerns and that tutors do not necessarily need to know grammar terminology. In concurrence with Gillespie and Lerner, Harris and Silva (2008) claim that tutors should first address “global errors” that effect comprehension of ideas, and leave “local errors” that do not interfere with meaning for later. They also assert that tutors should not edit grammar for ESL writers, but they should be familiar with grammar terminology.

While examining the differences between how native speakers and ESL writers are tutored, Thonus (2004) found that tutors dominate the conversation significantly more when they work with ESL writers, and that their style of tutoring is more directive with ESL writers than

with native speakers. According to Thonus, tutors working with ESL writers often interrupt and dictate conversation in sessions that involve native speaker topics, and that they tend to nominate the direction of the appointment despite tutees' concerns. Thus, Thonus adds to the discussion of how to tutor ESL writers with information on how tutors actually work with ESL writers. She suggests that conventional tutoring methods used with native speakers are ineffective for ESL writers, and frustrate tutors because these writers simply require tutors to move away from the Socratic method and avoidance of directive tutoring in order to find tutoring strategies that work for ESL writers. Thonus's view on the Socratic method aligns with that of Blau and Hall and Powers, but her avocation of directive tutoring diverges from Gillespie and Lerner's views on the matter.

Methodology

I decided to interview ESL writers because I wanted in depth information directly from writers themselves. I felt that interviews would be the best way to obtain that kind of data, as they allow for focused, one-on-one conversation. I began by making a list of interview questions that would be both conversational and elicit information about ESL writers' evaluations and opinions of tutoring practices they experienced while learning English and at the Writer's Workshop. Next, I considered which ESL writers would generate the most pertinent information for my research. I wanted to make my results as applicable to the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign Writer's Workshop as possible, so I decided to interview ESL writers receiving a degree from UIUC rather than those studying abroad at UIUC. I also wanted to shed light on the tutoring techniques used in both individual appointments and the ESL writing groups at the Writer's Workshop because a large portion of individual appointments are with ESL writers and the writing groups are exclusively for ESL writers. I determined that my interviewees needed to

have experiences with both aspects of the writing center, so that they would have exposure to all tutoring experiences available for ESL writers at the Writer's Workshop. In order to select my interviewees I contacted the director of the ESL writing groups and asked for the information sheets that writers fill out when they enter an ESL writing group. I researched each writer for whom I had an information sheet using TutorTrac and contacted those who had experienced individual appointments in addition to the group. I made appointments with three of these ESL Writers who agreed to be interviewed. I conducted the interviews in small group rooms in the Undergraduate Library. Each interviewee was asked the same set of questions and each interview was recorded with the consent of each interviewee.

Discussion

My three interviewees, Jenny, Chad, and Kate, were all ESL writers from China. Jenny is a sophomore studying chemistry who enjoys writing essays and joined the ESL writing group to meet friends and improve her English (personal communication, January 29, 2015). Chad is a junior majoring in economics that wanted to study philosophy but felt that it was necessary to improve his English in order to do so (personal communication, February 2, 2015). Kate, a freshman sociology major, wanted to improve her grammar and came to the Writer's Workshop often for individual appointments (personal communication, February 2, 2015).

How did you learn English?

Chad and Kate had similar experiences learning English. They were both taught English in primary school and only received English tutoring for the TOEFL exam, a test taken by non-native English learners who want to enroll in U.S. universities; their experience was not really English tutoring at all, but rather entirely geared toward passing the exam. Like Chad and Kate, Jenny learned English in primary school. She described how she was taught in primary school

saying, “She [the teacher] would teach us some fixed sentences. We would usually use them in our daily life, like ‘how are you?’ or ‘nice to meet you.’ She would have us learn a lot of new words like apple or water.” However, unlike Chad and Kate, Jenny had additional instruction in English. She explained,

When I was 11 years old there were a lot of English learning institutions in China, so my parents just paid tuition and sent me to one of those institutions. I would go there every week and there were some native speakers there. They would just make you sit in a very small classroom, maybe like 10 students, and they would just make some conversation with you and at the same time help you to learn some new words.

This way of learning English seemed like an artificial immersion technique for ESL students.

Jenny did not like this method of learning English and commented that it was a waste of money to go to the English learning institution because the tuition was very expensive. Jenny’s preferred method of learning English was outside of the classroom. She described the most effective way she learned English saying,

When I was starting high school, we all wanted to learn English. At that time English TV series became popular in China and we all watched a lot of TV series. My favorite is the Big Bang Theory and my friend liked How I Met Your Mother. Sometimes we would watch them together and discuss them in class. At that time there were a lot of English learning magazines. That is very helpful actually. You know you just read those magazines and they will give you a lot of new conversations and real conversations. The Editor [of the magazine] would write really useful tips for learning English.

Jenny mentioned that the method she described was how ESL students became good at English and she emphasized that students' English training in school alone was not enough to make them proficient in English.

Successful Individual Writing Appointments

Reading aloud.

Jenny, Chad, and Kate all described different preferences and experiences when it came to reading aloud during appointments. Jenny said “[the tutor] asked me to read my essay sentence by sentence and she stop me and tell me ‘ok, you need to correct this here’ and ‘this word is not proper; you have to choose another.’ I think that is very useful.” She explained, “I prefer to read aloud rather than the tutor because it is kind of like a way that I find some of my mistakes by myself. So, when I was reading my essay sentence by sentence I don’t have to wait for my tutor to say you have to correct this. I really like reading myself.” Jenny found reading aloud helpful, but Kate said that “Most of them [tutors] will ask me to read out loud and some read out loud themselves. I think both is ok. Sometimes I feel a little embarrassed by speaking English and reading my own paragraph.” Kate and Jenny both had experiences reading aloud during appointments; this technique seemed to be effective for Jenny, but sometimes problematic for Kate because it made her feel uncomfortable. However, Chad had a totally different experience; he said, “I asked some questions and they [tutors] answered me. They did not ask me to read aloud. They did not read the paper to me.” Chad did not have an opinion on whether reading aloud was helpful or not as he had never done so during an appointment before. Based on Jenny and Kate’s feedback, it stands to reason that reading aloud can help or hinder the success of an appointment depending on each tutee’s preference and comfort with reading aloud. This means that tutors need to ask ESL writers how they feel about having their work read aloud

by either the tutor or themselves, and they need to be sure that the writer is truly comfortable with the choice of reader if reading aloud is agreed upon. Who reads aloud during an appointment is an issue that concerns ESL writers because their preferences can affect their comfort and the productivity of the appointment.

The importance of listening.

When asked whether they or the tutor should speak more during appointments, Jenny and Chad were adamant that they should do more of the talking. Kate did not seem to mind that tutors usually spoke more commenting that, “Some tutors really like to talk.” Jenny said that she talks more during appointments and elaborated, “I really ask a lot of questions.” Although, Chad said, “They [tutors] talk more. I don’t think it’s a good thing, they should let me talk more then I can change. If they tell you so much you don’t really learn a lot. If they don’t listen to you, you don’t learn a lot.” My interviewees’ responses suggest that a key aspect of successful appointments is that tutors really make an effort to listen to ESL writers and give them the opportunity to ask questions that allow their concerns to be known and addressed throughout the appointment. Chad explained a key reason why listening to ESL writers is important when he said,

They [tutors] should know more about international students’ concerns. You should know why they are taking the class, why they are writing the paper, so you can better solve their problem. It’s not only writing, if you know their situation you can really teach them right based on their condition. In the beginning they should really know more about their problems. If they have any hiding concerns you should ask them. Like, I don’t know how to ask questions. Like the questions you are asking does not really reflect your problem.

Chad's explanation sheds light on a fundamental issue that can hinder successful appointments with ESL writers. ESL writers may not know how to articulate what their concerns truly are, and their attempts at communicating their concerns to tutors may not accurately represent the issues they actually wish to address. Thus, Chad's idea of what tutors should do highlights the importance of listening in appointments with ESL writers, so that tutors can discover what ESL writers really want to work on and provide them with the most relevant guidance possible.

Knowledge of grammar terminology.

My interviewees' preferences of whether or not tutors should be familiar with grammar terminology seemed to reflect the way that they learned English. For instance, Chad only learned English in primary school and he said that tutors should know grammar terminology because "this is the Chinese way of learning English." Similarly, Kate said that she too had learned English the "Chinese way", and she found the usage of grammar terms helpful. Chad and Kate found grammatical terms to be helpful references because they were familiar with those terms from their English education. However, Jenny said, "As long as they point out my mistakes. I don't really mind if they don't know those terms." This opinion reflects her background learning English through immersion techniques like learning the language by speaking, watching shows in English, and reading English learning magazines. Thus, it may not be entirely necessary for tutors to know grammar terms, but for the sake of those ESL writers who learned English using those terms it would be beneficial for tutors to be familiar with grammar terminology. As such, neither Gillespie and Lerner (2008), who believe that it is not necessary for tutors to know grammar terminology, nor Harris and Silva (2008), who think that it is helpful for tutors to know grammar terminology, are correct on this matter because knowledge of grammar terminology is more or less useful on a case by case basis.

Idiomatic language.

Jenny, Chad, and Kate all felt that it was helpful when tutors provided them with idiomatic expressions that they were unfamiliar with. However, they did not emphasize the importance of gaining knowledge of idiomatic language as much as the literature on tutoring ESL writers had. Jenny described how she needed tutors to help her with idiomatic expressions when she stated, “There were a lot of phrases that I don’t know where those words are correct but maybe the way that I express it is very weird. So, she just told me ‘we normally express this in this way’, and there were a lot of article words like a, an, and the. I mix them up because we don’t really use them in our language so it’s really hard to tell.” Kate expressed a similar issue explaining, “I know what I want to write but I can’t express these ideas clearly and the langue I use may seem strange.” Chad’s outlook on idiomatic language was that if he got nothing else out of an appointment, then at least he hoped to gain information on how to express certain ideas. Knowledge of idiomatic language may not be a primary concern for ESL writers, but they do find it useful and recognize that tutors are a good resource for that information.

Directive vs. non-directive tutoring.

My interviewees’ preferences for instances of directive and non-directive tutoring depended on what issues were being addressed, the amount of time before the due date, and the number of issues that needed to be addressed. Their responses are in oppositions to the ideas of experts like Blau and Hall (2002), Powers (1995), and Thonus (2004) who tended to generalize that directive tutoring was more effective in any circumstance when tutoring ESL writers. Similarly, Gillespie and Lerner (2008) asserted that non-directive tutoring was a better method to use with ESL writers in general. When asked about directive and non-directive tutoring, Kate said, “Some [tutors] discuss how I think about it and try to lead me to find the way. I kind of like

just tell me. Because when they try to lead me in that direction, I cannot figure out, I just get confused about that. I feel very tired when writing an essay, and sometimes I go several days before the deadline and I just want some direction, some help, and make some modify.” Kate experienced the Socratic Method, a non-directive tutoring technique, and did not find it helpful when she had a fast approaching deadline; when she had a close due date she favored directive tutoring. However, in situations when she had more time to make changes, she said, “If it is about language I prefer them to just tell me the answer because it is very hard to look up online. If it is about missing topic or idea, I hope they just point it out.” Kate reveals that some ESL writers may seek more directive tutoring on grammar topics, but less directive tutoring in terms of content.

Jenny explained, “sometimes I get confused how to organize sentences, so I ask the tutor and she tells me you just put this and this, this way.” When it came to sentence structure, Jenny wanted more directive tutoring. However, at the same time she said that she liked to hear options for how she could structure sentences, which is less directive tutoring. She also specified, “If there is only a little time [left in the appointment] I would like the tutor to point to those mistakes and tell me how to correct them directly,” revealing that when time is an issue she favors directive tutoring techniques. Chad said that tutors “don’t really understand what I am thinking about, they just tell you, ‘you have to do this’ or ‘you have to do that.’ They didn’t really solve the thing [the problem] essentially, only the surface.” He referred to his experiences with directive tutoring, and he thought that tutoring in that way did not really address his concerns. Each of my interviewees had different opinions about when directive tutoring was a good strategy. However, overall they seemed to prefer directive tutoring when they had little time to make corrections or many issues to address in only one appointment. The use of directive

tutoring in the case of grammar and word choice seemed to be favored, but may be variable between ESL writers.

ESL Group Sessions

ESL group sessions were groups for ESL students who had difficulty with English and needed additional help writing essays. The groups were meant to give ESL writers basic instruction on how to write American essays and assist them with issues they encountered while writing essays for class. The groups met once a week. Each week there was a small portion of instruction at the beginning of the meeting where the instructor addressed grammar and writing concepts that ESL students commonly struggle with. Following the instruction, the writers were given time to sit in the group and work individually on their essays, at which point they could call over the instructor and ask questions about their writing throughout the duration of the meeting.

ESL writers' expectations and goals.

Each of the writers that I interviewed had different goals and expectations for the ESL writing group. Jenny divulged, "My main purpose was not to receive some help because when I first came to this university I felt very isolated, so when I see this group we can talk about writing, I really like writing, although my major is not a lot of writing. I really like writing essays and revising them." Jenny saw the group as an opportunity to socialize and practice writing. Kate had particular expectations for the group, she explained, "I thought the group would teach us how to write like grammar things. Most of the time they just let us write our own essays and ask questions. If I wanted to ask questions about my essay I could just go to an appointment. There was some instruction, but not what I imagined." Kate expected grammar instruction to have a larger role in the group. She was disappointed that there was not as much grammar

instruction as she hoped for, especially because she joined the group to improve her grammar. Chad did not really have expectations for the group sessions; he was just wanted to improve his English and thought that the group would help him. The differences in expectations for the group suggest that advertisement for it was not as clear as it could have been. It did not seem like any of the writers that I interviewed knew exactly what the group would entail before they attended it. ESL writers want to be informed about the structure and activities of the group in as clear and detailed a way as possible before deciding to participate in order to determine whether or not they will benefit from the experience.

What was helpful about the group?

All of my interviewees agreed that the ESL writing group would be most helpful to students who have a lot of writing assignments throughout the semester that they could bring to the group. Jenny thought, “It would have been more helpful if I had more papers to write at the time.” Kate said that she did not have many papers to write that semester. Chad did not find that he got much out of the group, rationalizing that, “maybe it’s because I didn’t prepare well. I didn’t get too much from the class. I didn’t bring my paper there.” Based on this feedback, it is important to ask perspective participants how many writing assignments they will have during the course of the session. Also, in order to make the group as beneficial to all participants as possible and to make it more applicable to a range of expectations and goals, some meetings could have longer or shorter amounts of grammar instruction depending on how many people have essays to write. Another option would be to make the group open to any ESL writers with written assignments to come and work on their essays whenever they feel that it would benefit them most, instead of having a small number of participants attending regularly regardless of having assignments to work on.

ESL writers prefer individual appointments.

When asked about the differences between the ESL writing group and individual appointments at the Writer's Workshop, each interviewee said that they preferred individual appointments to group sessions. Chad remarked, "I ask questions and he [the instructor] answer me, but the problem is if he could ask more about my situation he could give me more suggestions. Then it would be better. My individual sessions were better. You get more deeper solutions, not superficial ways." Jenny responded, "I prefer individual appointment, because in the individual appointment I feel very relaxed." Kate also asserted that individual appointments were more beneficial to her because they are more focused on her specific concerns. I did not specifically ask which experience they liked better, however each of my interviewees told me which they preferred. Their answers reveal strong feelings on the matter, and show that comparing the ESL group to individual appointments is not a fair comparison. The groups are not meant to give the same experience as individual appointments; they fill different needs. Individual appointments are meant to meet the specific needs of individual writers, whereas the ESL groups are meant to supply simple solutions to common problems. The issue is not whether ESL groups are better or worse than individual appointments; the issue is that the purpose of ESL groups needs to be made clear to ESL writers so that they can decide if it is something that they believe will benefit them or if their time would be better spent in individual appointments.

The differences between ESL groups and individual appointments.

The main difference between individual appointments and ESL groups that Jenny, Chad, and Kate emphasized were the level of individualized attention and their ability to focus. Kate described the differences between the two experiences saying, "It's kind of like eight people to one. In the group sometimes I just stay there and if I went to appointment I would have all my

problems solved.” Kate felt that individual appointments were more efficient for addressing all of her issues because then she would not have to contend with others to have her needs addressed. Chad specified that, “In individual session you can ask questions whenever you want and directly talk about your opinions. Its like going to office hour of your professor, you can ask more, but in a big class you don’t really have the chance to ask. I think that is probably the reason a lot of students don’t pay attention.” Chad’s comparison highlighted the differences in the two experiences, and showed how the group can be impersonal in comparison to individual appointments. Jenny illustrated the distinctions between individual appointments and ESL groups when she stated,

[In an individual appointment] there is a room that is only you and the tutor and you can discuss everything that you think might make you confused, but when it is a group meeting there is a lot of other people. They are all focusing on their own problems, but sometimes they would just do something that distracts you like talk or play their mobile phones secretly. When you are discussing your problems with [the instructor] you think other people are waiting there, so I might have to make my questions as short as possible and won’t keep him too long. In individual appointments there were no limitations and a fixed time, an hour, and in this time you can discuss what you want to discuss and the tutor will be very patient, especially as a non-native speaker people may find that your speaking is very slow and your accent they cannot understand. But in individual appointment those problems won’t appear. The tutor would totally understand and be patient waiting for you to express your feelings. It was easier to focus in an individual appointment.

Jenny, Kate, and Chad's responses suggest that individual instruction is very important to ESL writers not only because they have a lot of concerns that require individual attention, but also because writing in a second language takes focus and other writers can be a distraction.

However, my interviewees did find some of the instruction helpful in a group setting. Maybe the group's time would be better used entirely on grammar and writing instruction, and individual writing left for one-on-one appointments where writers' concerns can be addressed in a focused environment.

Conclusion

The needs of ESL writers are complex and cannot be generalized, just as the needs of native speakers cannot be put into a specific set of guidelines. However, using the literature on how ESL writers should be tutored and testimonies from ESL writers themselves, tutors can gain a better understanding of the types of concerns that ESL writers have. ESL writers may have specific preferences for reading aloud or having the tutor read aloud during individual appointments. Some ESL writers may feel uncomfortable reading aloud, while others may prefer it. Many of the concerns that ESL writers have in appointments stem from getting tutors to listen to them and ask questions that will make their goals for the appointment clear; ESL writers may struggle to articulate their objectives to their tutor. Depending on the way they learned English, some ESL writers find the use of grammar terminology by tutors to be helpful. Usually, ESL writers appreciate help with idiomatic language even though that issue may not be their main concern. Like native speakers, ESL writers often prioritize directive and non-directive tutoring based on the due date of the assignment and the number of issues they wish to address. In regards to ESL writing groups, ESL writers want to be aware of what the groups entail because some may find one-on-one instruction to be a better fit for their needs. ESL writers' biggest issue

with the groups, other than wanting more individual attention, was that they felt distracted while working on their essays in the group.

The information provided by my interviewees challenges the current literature on tutoring ESL writers, as it reveals variation between ESL writers that many experts fail to acknowledge. They make broad claims that ESL writers should be tutored using directive or non-directive tutoring techniques or that tutors working with ESL writers should know grammar terminology. However, these are not hard and fast rules, shown through my interviewees' responses that often differed depending on the circumstances. Also, much of the literature on ESL writers emphasizes how ESL writers differ from native speakers; native speakers and ESL writers share similar concerns, the only difference being that ESL writers may not always communicate them. As such, tutors do not need to wonder what tutoring techniques help ESL writers because they can take ESL writers' advice and ask.

References

- Blau, S. & Hall, J. (2002). Guilt-Free Tutoring: Rethinking How We Tutor Non-Native-English-Speaking Students. *The Writing Center Journal*, 23(1), 23-44.
- Gillespie, P., & Lerner, N. (2008). Working With ESL Writers. In *The Longman Guide to Peer Tutoring* (pp. 117-126). New York, NY: Pearson Longman.
- Harris, M., & Silva, T. (2008). Tutoring ESL Students: Issues and Options. In T. R. Johnson (Ed.), *Teaching Composition* (pp. 504-515). Boston, MA: Bedford St. Martins.
- Powers, J. K. (1995). Rethinking Writing Center Conferencing Strategies for the ESL Writer. *Writing Lab Newsletter*, 20(2), 13-16.
- Thonus, T. (2004). What Are the Differences? Tutor Interactions with First- and Second-Language Writers. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 13, 227-242.