Theory in/to practice: a tale of two multilingual writers: a case-study approach to tutor education

Full Text:
Introduction

Writing centers are places not only of practices and policies but also of inquiry. Increasingly, research conducted in writing centers is informing the theoretical bases as well as the day-to-day goings-on in our various local contexts. In turn, the situated daily activity of each writing center as well as the theory or principles behind it generate new research questions and insights for the greater community of people whose work it is to work with writers. Perhaps it is this dynamic and fluid relationship between inquiry and practice that made the writing center at Baruch College in New York City such an exciting place for me to work during my years as a doctoral student in TESOL (teaching English to speakers of other languages). Many teachers and researchers in this field are keenly interested in examining the ways students of English as a second language (ESL) negotiate an education system designed for monolingual English speakers, including how they make use of resources like writing centers. One of my most satisfying experiences at the writing center came in the opportunity to conduct my own research and immediately translate it into practice in the form of tutor education. This essay describes how I used data, findings, and methodological aspects of that research to create a new approach and new materials for preparing our tutors to work with multilingual writers of English.

The primary purpose of this article is to show how locally conducted research served as inspiration and materials for a new approach to tutor education. After briefly describing the research, I will explain how the methodology inspired a new approach to preparing tutors to work with multilingual writers. Finally, I will present excerpts from an in-house tutor handbook that I created using data and findings from the study. I frame these excerpts of a local publication as an example of how research can be presented in multiple ways to different audiences.

The main focus of the present article is not the original study itself but rather the ways the study allowed us to re-vision and reorient how we conducted one particular aspect of writing center practice: tutor education. I argue that, in addition to focusing on what tutors should or shouldn't do and asking them to reflect on their own and their colleagues' practices, we need to establish an inquiry-based approach that puts the student writer at the center of the process. That is, we need to make time for tutors to consider the multiplicity of educational and background experiences that students will bring with them to the writing center. In re-creating our tutor education processes and materials, we were not simply "applying research" or even "using findings," but rather reconceptualizing what it means to prepare a tutor to work with students based on a research stance that privileges understanding a situation from the perspective of its various participants.

The secondary purpose of this article is to make visible one aspect of the hidden work of the writing center: the ways writing center professionals are producing and sharing new knowledge in the local contexts in which they work. The written products are often not seen by people outside these local contexts and thus are not "making a step forward in terms of constructing or amassing knowledge" for us as a field (Fitzgerald 31). Yet these local publications are frequently based on significant primary and secondary research and are grounded in a solid understanding of theory.

The present article is a hybrid text, one in which writing I produced for a local audience (tutors at my writing center) shares space with writing I later produced for a wider scholarly audience (readers of WCJ). By shuttling between these two forms of writing within these pages, I hope to highlight the hybrid and dynamic nature of the work of writing center professionals, who constantly shuttle among multiple communities and identities. (1) I humbly offer the local writing as an example of how writing center professionals are quietly producing new knowledge and presenting it in multiple and alternative formats. Sharing what we know and do (locally) with a wider community is essential to maintaining viability as a "community."

Background: The Study

For my doctoral dissertation, I conducted a qualitative study of how sessions with international (ESL) students differed from sessions with US-educated multilingual writers. This work grew out of the local context in which we were situated, an urban college whose student body at large was called the "most diverse" by US News and World Report eight years in a row. Eighty-five percent of students visiting the writing center spoke a language other than English; roughly half of these had graduated from US high schools. In the field of second language (L2) writing at the time (data were collected in 2006), the notion had begun to take hold that multilingual students who had been raised and educated in the United States were very different from what everyone had traditionally thought

about "ESL students" (see Friedrich; Harklau et al.; Levi; Matsuda and Silva; Preto-Bay and Hansen; Roberge; Sadler; Shuck).

Most of the research available at that time about ESL students in the writing center had been conducted with students from foreign countries, individuals who were in the United States for a short time only to complete a (usually graduate) degree (see Bell and Youmans; Blau and Hall; Bruce and Rafoth; Cogie; Kennedy; Powers; Powers and Nelson; Robertson; Severino; Thonus). Implications and suggestions based on this research, then, simply didn't apply to at least half of the "ESL" students we saw at our writing center, some of whom had been born in the US and had grown up with one or more languages in addition to English. Some of these students spoke a language other than English as their primary language yet had literacy experiences only in English. Some had had formal English instruction in a classroom, but most had learned English mainly through oral interaction with other speakers of English.

Our writing center was the perfect place to look at whether and how sessions with these US-educated multilingual writers differed from sessions with students who fit the more traditional profile of an ESL student (i.e., in a US college after graduating from high school and/or college in a foreign country). The research involved case studies of seven multilingual student writers, with session observation data, interviews, and writing samples for each. Among the findings were differences in the aspects of writing and language that tutors and students jointly attended to during sessions, the ways that oral English and a student's first language affected a session, and a number of effective and ineffective tutoring practices (Nakamaru, "A Lot of Talk"). These findings would form the basis for our new tutor education materials and approach to professional development. The written product, a new section of our in-house tutor handbook, presented data and findings from the study in a way that was meaningful and relevant in our local context.

The Context: Our Writing Center

The writing center at Baruch College (part of the City University of New York) is open to all students, but those who use it are primarily multilingual students from the required first-year English composition sequence. (2) According to data from the fall 2006 semester, 85% of our clients spoke a language other than English at home (representing eighteen languages). Of those, 48% graduated from a high school in the US, and 52% from a high school in another country.

There is much diversity within these groups as well. Besides those who are coming directly from overseas or US high schools, there are also linguistically diverse nontraditional students who are returning to college after a long break in their education. These may be people who completed high school in their home countries but who immigrated to the US as adults many years ago. It is difficult to say whether such students would have more in common with traditional international ESL students or with US-educated multilingual students. This is only one example of the kind of diversity in students we see at the writing center, an illustration of the impossibility of reducing people to neat sets of stereotypical characteristics. Another such element of diversity, for example, was manifested in the tutoring staff, for tutors at this writing center are not peer tutors; all hold masters degrees and teach (or have taught) writing at the college level. Many are pursuing doctorates in literature, TESOL, or a related field. At the time of data collection (fall 2006), there were 17 tutors--seven men and ten women. Some of those tutors were multilingual writers themselves.

When I was the assistant director, tutor education was conducted in the form of a pre-semester day-long orientation. The director and I worked with a small group of tutors each semester to write and revise an in-house tutor handbook for use at the orientation and as a reference throughout the semester. In addition to the orientation, we held regular professional development meetings throughout each semester. Tutors also made contributions to a writing center blog and conducted observations of each other, after which they wrote reflective journal entries about the session they observed. Each tutor compiled a portfolio at the end of the semester with blog entries, observation reports, representative session records (written at the end of each session with a student), and a short piece of writing synthesizing his/her experience at the writing center.

Our Previous Approach

In the past, the "ESL writing" segment of the pre-semester orientation involved going over and discussing a list of suggestions (below) that I had compiled based on my experience and on various written sources, including commercially published tutor training manuals. As part of the larger orientation, tutors read student papers and then discussed how they would handle a session with the writer of the paper, sometimes incorporating role play. We made sure that some of these papers had been written by multilingual writers. Usually, the discussion would revolve around whether to address grammar immediately or to defer talking about grammar until after content and organization had been discussed.

The following list of suggestions appeared in the previous version of our tutor handbook (i.e., the version produced just before we changed our approach and I revised the section for the last time as assistant director).

Suggestions for tutoring multilingual students

1. It's OK to talk about grammar--think of it as language instruction rather than editing. Attention to language doesn't have to mean simply correcting errors. When a multilingual student is concerned about her grammar, it doesn't necessarily mean she wants you to proofread and correct her paper. Problems with grammar or English may in fact be a legitimate higher-order concern for someone who simply does not have enough language to accomplish the purpose of the writing assignment.

2. Explain directly if necessary, rather than engaging in a lengthy and frustrating guessing game of questions to the tutee. She really may not know the answer you're trying to lead her to.

3. Understand that there are cultural differences in writing and rhetorical conventions, including notions of intellectual ownership (i.e., plagiarism) that may affect the writing of a multilingual student.

4. If you don't know them, get to know the rules of English grammar that come up during your sessions so you are better prepared to answer questions or provide explanations next time. Monolingual speakers know grammatical rules intuitively and usually can't articulate why something is "correct" or "incorrect."

5. Many problems with "grammar" are actually problems with vocabulary. Not knowing an appropriate word can lead to convoluted circumlocutions with strange grammatical patterns. Knowing the meaning of a word, but not the other words that typically appear with it, can make a sentence sound strained or awkward. This is ESPECIALLY true with prepositions. If a student doesn't know a word in English, it doesn't matter how many times you ask, "Can you think of another way to say this? What's another word that means--?" [Resource: ESL or learners' dictionary]

Many of these suggestions are very similar to, or follow from, discussions presented more fully in various chapters devoted to sessions with ESL students in commercial tutor training texts. For example, both The Longman Guide to Peer Tutoring (Gillespie and Lerner) and Ben Rafoth's A Tutor's Guide: Helping Writers One to One (among others) explicitly validate discussing language-level concerns with ESL writers, within an overall approach that still prioritizes higher-order concerns. The basic idea of language/ cultural informing (or what I informally call "It's OK to tell them") that underpins suggestions 2 and 5 (above) appears in most guides, including The Longman Guide, A Tutor's Guide, and the St. Martin's Sourcebook (Murphy and Sherwood). In dispelling myths about tutoring ESL students, The Longman Guide too suggests becoming familiar with grammatical terminology and "spend[ing] time with your favorite grammar handbook" (Gillespie and Lerner 123). Finally, cultural and rhetorical differences and how these affect a tutoring sessions are perhaps the most widely emphasized issues related to ESL students (see, especially, Harris, "Cultural Conflicts").

I still think the suggestions above are generally valid, but the bulleted list as presented felt too decontextualized or disconnected to me; the suggestions lacked a unifying thread to hold them together. In their similarity to advice published in widely available training guides, they did not add much to our in-house discussion beyond condensing and compiling them into a single document. Mostly, though, I came to feel that the suggestions focused too much on the tutor and not enough on considering the student writer.

The Case Study Approach

Data and findings from my study informed a revision of the handbook section and orientation practices related to sessions with multilingual writers. The intent was to make the handbook and orientation more meaningful to the tutors and students at the writing center and, hopefully, foster a more inquiry-based approach to our practice. The revised handbook and orientation sections aimed to:

* Raise awareness about diversity among multilingual writers

* Raise awareness about the ways that students' backgrounds in education and English language acquisition affect the areas of difficulty they face as well as the strengths they bring with them

* Encourage tutors to think about the writer, not only the writing (i.e., to be able to see the sources of difficulty for the students rather than simply errors that need to be corrected)

* Avoid reducing the training to a list of "dos and don'ts" and "common grammar trouble spots"; i.e., focus on a thinking process rather than a form or template for how a session should go

I went through the findings of my study and generated a list of suggestions for tutors (presented in the handbook excerpt below). However, simply switching in the new set of suggestions for the old was not enough, even if these new suggestions were grounded in local research; what was intended as helpful advice might be read as "lockstep models for starting, running, and ending a session" (Geller et al. 64). Moreover, it became clear that even more important than the findings from the study were the methodological stance and process themselves. That is, more valuable than yet another list of "tips for tutors" would be a new approach that de-centered the tutors and engaged them in a process of inquiry to raise awareness about the relationship of prior educational and language experiences and the strengths and needs of a student writer. Tutor education typically focuses on analyzing tutor behavior through observations of others or thoughtful self-reflection (Mattison). As useful and important as these activities are, a new approach would help us live the mission we profess: focus on the writer, not the writing (North). More precisely, it would help us focus on the writer, not the tutor.

The revised handbook, then, presented two very different student "cases," each of which included a profile of information about the student and a sample of that student's writing. The goal in doing this was to start from a focus on the student rather than on the tutor or even on the student's writing. This also provided a context in which to discuss some basic theoretical ideas from TESOL (e.g., the ways literacy in a first language might be important when writing in a second language (3)). In a sense, it led tutors through a very abbreviated version of the study I had conducted.

During the orientation, tutors read brief profiles of Aki and Li (pseudonyms), two students who had participated in the study (their profiles appear in the handbook excerpt below). We talked at some length about who these students were as individual people and what their particular sets of experiences might mean in terms of the strengths and needs they brought with them to the writing center. After this discussion, we looked at their writing samples and made connections between the student and the writing; i.e., how the students' education and language acquisition backgrounds may have affected the texts they produced. The central idea we focused on was the distinction between "eye learners," who have learned English as a foreign language in their country of origin, and "ear learners," who have learned English as a second language in the United States through oral interaction with other speakers of English (Reid).

The orientation culminated with the conclusions that could be (albeit tentatively) drawn about students from these diverse backgrounds and the implications for writing center practice. In several ways, this tutor education process mimicked qualitative case

study research methodology. It started from a very general exploration of a specific context, made use of contextual information to interpret data, drew initial conclusions and generated implications that would inform practice and constitute the next cycle of inquiry. It is a model that could be adapted to the specific conditions and participants of different sites as well, as one way to integrate research and practice--in this case, both research as practice and practice as research.

The New Handbook Section: Presenting Local Research to a Local Audience

The new handbook section on working with multilingual writers is presented below, albeit slightly updated for this essay. Like the previous version, it includes a list of suggestions for tutors. But the updated suggestions are based on observations and data collected at our site, rather than on general advice. Furthermore, like our new professional development approach, the handbook section highlights the process of thinking about a student's strengths or needs (based on the way s/he learned English) rather than on simply what the tutor should or shouldn't do. That is, it moves the student--rather than the tutor or even the student's paper--to the center of the process. This approach is more consistent with our stated commitment to improve writers, not writing (North).

Primary Document

A Tale of Two Students: Working with Multilingual Writers

The following two multilingual student writers visited our writing center in fall 2006: (4)

Aki

Aki is a thirty-nine-year-old Japanese woman who graduated from high school and junior college in Japan. She has lived in the United States for a total of nine years, though there was a two-year break during that time when she was living in Japan. Aki decided to come to the United States to "find herself' and study art as she was getting out of a bad marriage. She has been pursuing a degree at Baruch off and on for a number of years, and is enrolled in upper-level courses in art, management, and environmental studies.

Aki has a relatively low level of oral proficiency in English. Her syntax and pronunciation impede her ability to communicate, sometimes to a large degree. She says, though, that her friends here are both Japanese and non-Japanese, so she uses both languages in social situations. She uses Japanese exclusively to talk to her family, and is more comfortable in all aspects--speaking, listening, reading, and writing-- in Japanese than in English.

Aki, like all Japanese students, studied English as a foreign language in middle and high school. And, like most, she reports that the classes focused on grammar rule memorization to the exclusion of communicative practice--so much so that she grew to "hate" these classes.

Not surprisingly, Aki has a high level of literacy in her L1, Japanese. Though academic writing was not emphasized in her high school, she was part of a literature club that wrote, published, and read student work for pleasure. Aki says that it was very difficult at first to write in an American rhetorical style. She continues to feel frustration that she cannot express herself (in writing, in this case) or her ideas in English in the way that she knows she could easily do in Japanese.

Aki says that functioning in English is getting harder, not easier, as time goes on. She attributes this to the increasing (linguistic) demands of the environment and her struggle to keep up with these increasing demands. In the following excerpt from an interview with Aki, she expresses her commitment to keep trying. You can also see from this quotation that it is difficult for Aki to clearly express herself orally in English:

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Um, it's getting harder. Because the new, you know, (laughs) there is no limitation for learning, you know, second
language or third language and especially now, so, I should ... be, on, business level ... or, yeah, college level? But
I'm not native, and then but the, .. So, oh OK, got it. But ... you know I don't want to, give up, learning ... English.
So, I try to catch up or improve myself.
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Aki's profile summary

* Japanese, female

* Thirty-nine years old

* High school and junior college in Japan

* Nine years in US (arrived age thirty)

* More comfortable speaking, listening, reading, and writing in Japanese

An excerpt from Aki's paper

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Tag Heuer's website is easy to look at the contents, but the Kleenex website is not friendly its users (visitors). Their
most web pages has the product animation and I am not easy to concentrate to look the texts.
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Aki's writing and background suggest that she needs help with language. She has a hard time expressing her intended meaning in English. Though there are errors in her writing, what she needs is help saying what she wants to say in English--not an explanation of a grammar rule. In fact, it would be time consuming and exhausting to try to figure out which rules are being violated here and then attempt to correct and explain each one.

Li

Li is a quiet, serious student who was born in China and moved to New York with his family at the age of twelve. Now eighteen years old, he is attending his first semester of college. He attended elementary school and one year of middle school in China before immigrating, then finished middle school and high school in New York. This means that his pre-college education was exactly evenly split between the two countries (six years in each). Upon entering the New York City school system at age twelve, Li was first enrolled in a bilingual Chinese-English program, where he had the chance to make many Chinese-speaking friends. In high school, he took ESL classes for two years, then mainstream classes for his final two years.

Li uses English more than Chinese these days for most activities besides talking to family who don't live in his home. He is orally fluent, though he still retains a distinctive Chinese accent. One noticeable feature of Li's oral production is that he tends to omit word-final consonants. These features of Li's oral proficiency in English do not seem, to him, to cause a problem in communication. He is equally comfortable speaking in Chinese or English, though it is still more comfortable for him to listen to someone speaking Chinese.

Li finds it more difficult to write in English than to speak (which is true for many people), but all of his writing these days is in English. In fact, the way he speaks about writing in Chinese makes it sound as if it is very far removed from him:

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I'm like forget about Chinese now ... I remember how my parents told me about Chinese there's like different forms of
Chinese. You know, when a Chinese word combines, like different words combine to form another Chinese words. So it's
kinda like confusing.
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Although Li's English is far from native-like, he feels that his greatest challenge in studying at college is not related to language per se. Rather, he struggles to understand the more sophisticated concepts of his college courses and also feels there is more pressure, since grades are determined by a fewer number of factors.

Li's profile summary

* Chinese, male

* Eighteen years old

* Six years of school in China, six years in US

* Six years in US (arrived age twelve)

* Reads and writes only in English

* Equally comfortable speaking in English and Chinese

An excerpt from Li's paper

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The manager offered to fix the computer for extra $50, but the women refused to spend anymore money on the computer and
said this was just a scam. Therefore, the argument kept going and I did not have enough patients to wait for the end, so
I left after getting what I wanted ... The manager was responded for providing functional computers as promised when he
got paid.
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Li's writing and background are very different from Aki's. His writing makes sense and flows naturally. He might need help understanding some spelling and grammar rules. Since he can express what he wants to say well already, time can profitably be spent working on discussing the differences between speaking and writing or specific strategies that he can use to edit his writing.

What do you make of the error in the last line of the writing excerpt? Do you immediately think of this as a passive voice error? It's not. Li intended to write "The manager was responsible for providing ..." The word he wrote, responded, sounds and looks a lot like the one he needed. This error is one of vocabulary and is a result of ear learning, not lack of understanding of a grammar rule. Don't assume everything is about grammar!

So, what next?

Tailor your help to target your student's (observed or likely) needs and capitalize on his/her (observed or likely) strengths.

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Students like Aki ... Students like Li ... May need help * Expressing themselves * Making what they've with: in English
written correct * Words, vocabulary, * Learning words for idioms in English parts of speech and parts of a sentence *
Learning basic rules of written grammar * Distinguishing between written and spoken registers May have these * Knowledge
of grammar * Fluent, relatively strengths: terms and rules natural English * Writing experience in * Good ear for what
another language "sounds right" in English Strategies for * Help students say what * Make connections sessions: they want
to say between oral and written * Give them choices and English alternatives for how to * Point out where they say
something are similar ("write it * Give them appropriate just like you said vocabulary and phrases it") and * Give them
sentence * Where they are different frames and formulaic ("we say that, but we chunks don't write it in an * Model how to
use a academic paper" or "those learner's dictionary sound the same but they look different in writing")
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Multilingual Writers at Baruch: Their Strengths, Their Needs Eighty-five percent of students who visit the writing center speak a language other than English. These students come from different backgrounds and have diverse strengths and needs. One size never fits all when working with student writers, and this is certainly true when it comes to multilingual writers of English. Although

errors in their written English may be the most immediate thing you notice about these students, that doesn't mean (necessarily) that you need to jump to explaining grammar or correcting errors.

What is "grammar"?

What do we mean when we say "grammar"? Do we mean comma splices? Do we mean sentence structure? Do we mean idiomatic usage, like saying "I need to lose weight" instead of "I need to lose my weight"? Note that "I need to lose my weight" is perfectly grammatical--it does not violate any rules of English grammar. But when we encounter sentences like this our first instinct is to toss it into the grammar bin with everything else that can't be classified as content or organization.

In fact, the challenges with writing in academic English that multilingual writers face vary widely. These challenges are rooted in different sources and therefore require different interventions. They often show up in different ways on the page, though you might have to look carefully at first to recognize the differences. Think of the problem areas as falling along a continuum:

Language.... Correctness

Language issues

* Writing doesn't make sense

* Bizarre or non-English-like sentence structure

* Non-idiomatic or wrong words used often

* Repetitive sentence structure or wording (shows lack of alternatives)

* Many errors or problems resulting from transfer or translation from the student's first language

Correctness issues

* Writing makes sense and flows, despite errors

* Grammatical errors are localized and don't interfere seriously with meaning: verb endings, articles, subject/verb agreement, etc.

* Many errors or problems result from "ear" learning (picking up English by talking with other speakers of English) or from the differences between writing and speaking

Where do your student's needs fall on this continuum?

General Strategies for Working with All Multilingual Writers*

	Students like Aki . . .	Students like Li . . .
May need help with:	• Expressing themselves in English • Words, vocabulary, idioms in English	• Making what they've written correct • Learning words for parts of speech and parts of a sentence • Learning basic rules of written grammar • Distinguishing between written and spoken registers
May have these strengths:	• Knowledge of grammar terms and rules • Writing experience in another language	• Fluent, relatively natural English • Good ear for what "sounds right" in English
Strategies for sessions:	• Help students say what they want to say • Give them choices and alternatives for how to say something • Give them appropriate vocabulary and phrases • Give them sentence frames and formulaic chunks • Model how to use a learner's dictionary	• Make connections between oral and written English • Point out where they are similar ("write it just like you said it") and • Where they are different ("we say that, but we don't write it in an academic paper" or "those sound the same but they look different in writing")

* Have students read sections of their texts aloud. Not only can students sometimes hear where they need to change something, they are also more likely to ask questions or solicit specific feedback when they have the floor.

* If students don't want to (or can't) read aloud, read their papers aloud for them. Reading the student text aloud keeps the focus on the text. It also lets you embed signals into the reading that alert students to where and/or why something is problematic.

* Re-read sentences after you or the student has made a revision or correction.

* Describe explicitly what is good about a section of the paper. Don't just say, "This is really good." Rather, say, "It's really good how

you narrow your focus down in the introduction so the reader knows exactly what you're going to write about."

* Even when addressing sentence-level issues, keep the focus on the specific student text and what s/he needs to do to accomplish his/her goals, NOT on general rules. Consider the following two examples from actual session observations.

In excerpt A, the tutor teaches a rule about colon use by connecting it with the specific writing purpose at hand in a particular line of the student's paper. The colon is presented as a tool that writers use for particular purposes, in this case, making lists. Notice how the student is involved in formulating how the new line will look, demonstrating both understanding of how to use a colon in this way and how it is applied to his own writing:

A. Um, and then here also, you talk about, you're going to use these theories. So maybe you can list them. And that will sort of provide a more, sort of, straightforward or ... uh ... obvious, um, organization that's going to come. So ... the way you can set this up (circles 'theories' in line twelve and adds colon). When you're about when you're going to elaborate on a list, you start with a colon. And then you can make it [Student: Like, list of ... list the five [Mm hmm].

In excerpt B, the tutor is teaching the student about semicolons, in general, by reading aloud from a writing handbook. Notice how the talk is less interactive, with less opportunity for the student to participate, and that there is no mention of the student's text or how a semicolon might help her to accomplish something specific:

B. OK. Well, (looking in Raimes' Keys for Writers) the semicolon is different. The semicolon--we'll just, turn to her section on that--all right, so--you know what they look like, right? [yeah, yeah] OK, we'll skip that, then. Um, basically, ahhhhhh, where do they have it. "A semicolon, such as you've just seen, provides a less distinct separation, and indicates that an additional related thought or item will follow immediately...." [OK, so, it ...] OK, so here. "You want to use a semicolon when you are connecting two closely connected independent clauses, or sentences" [So ...] "when no coordinating conjunction is used."

* Use, don't abuse, reference books. It is good to model the use of references. But time spent reading long passages from a writing handbook (silently or aloud) is time not spent talking about the student's actual paper or needs as a writer. The student is likely either not listening or can't follow.

* Don't assume the problem is with understanding of grammar. It might be something else. Try asking the student what s/he meant. Actually listen to the answer.

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Discussion

With this inquiry-based, case-study approach to the orientation, we progressed beyond simply looking for language errors and thinking about whether, when, and how to correct them. Rather, tutors began to develop the professional judgment necessary to make educated guesses about a writer based on what we see in the writing (in addition to interacting with the writer during the session). The new handbook section, rather than simply summarizing ideas or suggestions found in many other sources, complements what is widely available. For example, it includes quotations and perspectives from student writers in a way similar to how The Longman Guide (Gillespie and Lerner) includes quotations and perspectives from experienced tutors. Both of these perspectives are useful in tutor education.

One of my main conceptual objectives was to raise awareness about the diversity among multilingual writers. Among the commercially published tutor training guides widely available at the time of my study (2006), there was almost no mention of multilingual writers who are long-term US residents. (5) They explicitly or implicitly referred to international students who are unfamiliar with US culture, usually presented as sophisticated students or writers in their first language. Some seem to present the population of "ESL students" as a more or less monolithic group who share certain assumptions and expectations--assumptions which are at odds with those of mainstream native English speakers (NES). In other words, ESL students are discussed in relation to or in comparison with NES, as a special minority group. This may be an accurate representation of the population of ESL writers at many schools in the US, but it did not reflect the reality in our writing center, where the vast majority of clients were ESL or multilingual student writers from a wide variety of backgrounds. Indeed, the primary advantage of using an in-house handbook based on locally conducted research is that we were able to showcase the diversity among our multilingual clients and discuss Aki in comparison to Li, rather than the two of them in comparison to some imagined NES norm that simply didn't exist at our writing center. In this sense as well, the handbook section offered an alternative, complementary perspective to other available resources.

Another goal of the new handbook section was to highlight the strengths that students bring with them to the writing center. Most literature on tutoring ESL writers does mention strengths, for example, the fact that these students have explicit knowledge of grammar and grammatical terminology. (In reality this is true only of those students who have studied English as a foreign language as an academic subject--many have not.) More often, though, discussions of ESL student strengths relate to the non-linguistic aspects of writing, like the novel cultural perspectives they can bring to their writing, or their diligence in putting forth the incredible effort required to do college-level work in a second language. These discussions sometimes read, to me, like pleas for respect.

With our handbook section I tried to build upon these typical descriptions of strengths and acknowledge, in addition, the wide range of ESL students' real linguistic strengths, based on the wide range of educational and language acquisition experiences they have had. For example, one student might have sophisticated literacy skills in her first language or familiarity with analyzing language as a formal system. Another student might have good oral communication skills in English and might be able to explain in a session exactly what it was she intended to write in her paper. These linguistic strengths may be less obvious to tutors, especially if they think of ESL students only in comparison with NES. The purpose of highlighting strengths is not so that tutors will admire their clients; rather, it is to encourage tutors to view students' strengths as a resource that they can draw upon during sessions.

Finally, I included a discussion of "grammar" (in quotes in the original) in the handbook section because of the salience of errors in multilingual students' writing and because of the anxiety I have perceived in tutors about what to do with these errors. For example, some tutors seem to be afraid that ESL students are only interested in reviewing grammar and will somehow try to trick tutors into proofreading their papers. In my experience, this fear causes tutors to try desperately to steer the session away from language or grammar and back to more global issues of content or organization, even if it is clear that the students genuinely need help with language. Or tutors feel that they should talk about grammar with ESL students, and therefore that they should learn grammar rules. While some tutors enjoy talking about the way language works, others are uneasy about their explicit knowledge or ability to articulate the rules of English grammar.

A recent issue of The Writing Lab Newsletter lists the most pressing "grammatical worries of writing lab consultants" as a) who vs. whom, b) uses of commas, c) beginning sentences with "and" or "but" or ending a sentence with a preposition, d) subject-verb agreement, e) subjunctive mood, and f) punctuation (Devet 8-9). This list points to wide differences in what "grammar" means to different people. The ESL learner, the applied linguist, and the monolingual English composition teacher or writing center tutor likely do not conceptualize grammar the same way. I would argue that Devet's list contains items that concern L1 or basic writers much more than they do multilingual writers, an important reminder that what one audience judges to be an urgent concern might not be urgent to another. This is true not only of multilingual writers vs. monolingual writers but also of multilingual writers whose English language acquisition experiences vary widely, leading to different sets of strengths and weaknesses. For example, many ESL students have learned English primarily through memorizing grammar rules and don't really need more of the same.

So a discussion of error or grammar or language is inevitable when talking about working with multilingual or ESL writers. Without getting too much into the "do grammar" or "don't do grammar" debate, I tried to raise awareness of the fact that language affects texts in different ways and that with multilingual writers, we have to take a more nuanced look before we decide what the appropriate course of action is. I've argued elsewhere for expanding writing center discourse to include greater attention to multilingual writers'

lexical issues and how to respond to them (Nakamaru, "Lexical Issues"). Multilingual writers of English do need help with language but that is NOT always the same as proofreading or even grammar.

Conclusion

The work described in this paper is only one example of the multiple alternative forms that research in the writing center field takes and in which it is presented. Knowledge is produced not only through traditional modes of scholarly exchange like publication in academic journals like this one but also enacted through tutor practice every day and in relatively more-quickly evolving forms of publication like in-house or online writing produced by, for, and about writing center practitioners. Research methodology can inform our work when we apply established tools of inquiry to various aspects of our own practice, like tutor education. It is important to make visible the ways this occurs, so that the wealth of locally generated knowledge, as well as theoretical and practical insights, can inform others in their work and, in turn, uncover new questions to ask.

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NOTES

(1.) For a discussion of the notion of "shuttling" in academic discourse, see Canagarajah.

(2.) I use the present tense when describing the writing center at Baruch, because the center still exists. However, I have not worked there since 2008, when I left for my current position at a different school. All statements about Baruch should be taken to refer to the time of the research study (begun in 2006) and the creation of the new handbook section. The handbook project described in this essay was completed shortly before I left Baruch.

(3.) The role of L1 literacy in L2 writing development constitutes a broad research area and there is no definitive consensus. For the theoretical foundation of facilitative transfer of academic language and literacy skills from L1 to L2 in bilingual children, see Cummins. For contrastive rhetoric, see Connor; Kubota; Severino. See Genesee et al. for a relatively recent synthesis of research that includes the role of L1 literacy in English L2 development for bilingual children in the US. For a discussion of the relationship between literacy and college composition for L2 writers, see Blanton.

(4.) Similar versions of these student profiles also appear in Nakamaru, "Lexical Issues."

(5.) Bruce and Rafoth has since been revised and the new (2009) edition devotes significant discussion to this group.

Sarah Nakamaru is Assistant Professor of ESL at the Borough of Manhattan Community College (CUNY) and Adjunct Assistant Professor of TESOL at NYU. She has worked as a tutor and as Assistant Director of the Writing Center at Baruch College (CUNY).

Nakamaru, Sarah

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