

A Comparison of Online Feedback Requests by Non-Native English-Speaking and Native English-Speaking Writers

by Carol Severino, Jeffrey Swenson, and Jia Zhu

About the Authors

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Face to Face vs. Online Tutoring with Native vs. Non-Native Speakers of English

Writing center tutors have traditionally been trained to use indirect, dialogic methods of tutoring and to attend to global concerns such as argumentation and organization – practices based more on experience tutoring native rather than non-native speakers of English (Cogie; Williams and Severino). Lately, however, tutors have also been encouraged to respond to non-native English speakers' expressed concerns about language by more directly explaining nuances of word choice and grammar (Ritter; Cogie, Strain, and Lorinkas; Blau and Hall; Rafoth). But what happens then to the focus of tutoring sessions when the format shifts from face-to-face to online? How does the online environment affect tutoring dynamics, specifically how feedback is requested by and given to both native English speaking (NES) and non-native English speaking (NNES) writers? And what happens if that online system requires students to specify the feedback they wish to receive when they send their drafts to the online tutors? To address these questions, we examined the feedback requests from the University of Iowa Writing Center's data bank.

Every academic year, more and more writing centers develop online tutoring services to supplement their face-to-face programs. Half of the four-year institutions whose sites appear on the International Writing Centers Association site at www.writingcenters.org now have some form of online tutoring. Writing centers are encountering a growing student clientele that prefers the convenience and permanence of written online feedback, which privileges and exercises literacy over the orality of face-to-face interactions (Breuch; Remington). Online rather than face-to-face feedback is preferred by some writers because they can read and refer to it repeatedly to understand it fully. With online written feedback, NNES writers do not have to depend on their possibly less-developed listening comprehension skills (Rafoth; Williams and Severino).

With the growing popularity of online tutoring, writing center researchers have been examining both the similarities and differences in dynamics between online and face-to-face tutoring for all writers (Coogan; Cooper, Bui, and Riker; Remington; Harris), although few

empirical studies, except for Thonus's "What are the Differences?," differentiate between the experiences of NNEs and NES writers in either the face-to-face or online settings. For all writers, whether the feedback loop in an online tutoring system requiring an explicit feedback request is similar to or different from that of face-to-face tutoring depends on face-to-face tutors' choice of opening moves. That is, some face-to-face tutors typically ask writers what discourse concerns they would like the tutors to attend and respond to before they read or have students read the draft. In response to such an invitation, a face-to-face student might ask the tutor, "Can you read my draft to see if my thesis is clear and if my argument makes sense?" However, especially if time is short, other tutors simply ask the writer about the writing assignment and due date and then simply begin to read the draft, and respond, based only on the strengths and weaknesses they perceive while reading.

Perhaps a key factor in whether students are receptive to tutors' advice, either face-to-face or online, and then use the advice to revise is whether tutors ask or discuss with writers the kind of feedback they want, that is, whether there is a consensus about the concerns that are addressed in the session. In Thonus's study of 12 tutorials, 6 NNEs and 6 NES, she found that a feature of successful sessions was the agreement between tutor and student on the diagnoses of the problem early in the tutorial session ("Tutor and Student"). Williams' study of tutoring sessions with NNEs writers, which showed that the face-to-face tutors initiated discussion on more problems in drafts than did their NES students, found that if tutors' raising of a problem was not followed by the NES students' engaged participation in the exchange, students were less likely to revise that section of the paper in which the problem appeared. From the findings of these studies, we can surmise that writers might revise more if given the chance to identify possible problems and ask for feedback on them, which they do when they seek feedback online. Indeed, the self-reflexive processes of 1) analyzing and assessing their drafts in relation to assignment goals and personal goals and 2) articulating their drafts' weaknesses and the areas that they believe still need work enable writers to assume more responsibility for their own writing and thinking when they submit their drafts online. It is possible that even

when some writers use a pull-down menu of already articulated concerns available on an online submission form, the self-assessment processes key to textual ownership and revision is short circuited.

Another issue is whether tutoring modality – face to face, online synchronous, or online asynchronous – affects the kinds of feedback that writers in general request. A study by Jones, Garralda, Li, and Lock suggested that asynchronous online tutoring, the mode that the majority of writing centers use, might lend itself better to feedback on lower order concerns, whereas synchronous or chat tutoring might be more suitable for discussing global issues, as outside of academic settings, the chat format has been associated with more balanced, non-hierarchical, dialogic, informal relationships.

Without a doubt, online tutoring, especially in the asynchronous mode, lends itself well to writing center research. Online tutoring provides written records of back and forth writer-tutor transactions and hence makes it easier to quantify and classify feedback requests, in direct contrast to face-to-face tutoring, which has no built-in recording mechanism and whose feedback requests can be either inexplicit or absent. Research that counts and classifies feedback requests is important because it can help to decide priorities in training online tutors. Should online tutors continue to prioritize giving feedback on argument and organization even if more writers are asking more for help with expression, sentence structure, vocabulary, grammar, and punctuation? Should tutors learn how to better address these middle and lower level concerns, or should they try to steer writers in the direction of the higher order concerns of argumentation and organization that they have been traditionally trained to address?

Specifically regarding writers' language backgrounds, do some concerns preoccupy NNES writers more than NES writers and vice versa? If so, an NES tutor may need different strategies and examples to explain lexical nuances to NNES writers from what they would use with NES writers, who in general share NES tutors' cultural background. Even if NNES and NES writers are equally concerned with grammar, the nature of these concerns might differ; NNES may be more interested in preposition or article use, whereas NES writers, who have usually mastered these systems early in life, may be more interested in usage, for example, when to use "who" and "whom" or

“its” and “it’s.” Does a significant percentage of either group of writers have difficulty articulating its perceived weaknesses and feedback needs, to the extent that these writers might benefit from a pull-down menu of already articulated concerns?

It is important to note that in an age of migration and globalization, the NNES and NES distinction can be simplistic, as bilingual children of immigrants may be NNES but literate only in English. Or perhaps as a result of US schooling and assimilation, their English so dominates their first language that they can comprehend their mother tongue but can no longer speak it.

To explore NNES and NES online feedback requests to find out how they compare and contrast, we decided to analyze a portion of our online tutoring data bank, asking the following research questions:

- When given the opportunity to ask for any and all types of feedback of online tutors (no pulldown menu exists, and students can write freely in the space provided on the submission form), do NNES and NES writers differ in the types of feedback they request?
- If so, how?

Review of the Literature

A review of the existing literature shows no studies to our knowledge that compare and contrast feedback requests by NNES and NES writers, either face-to-face or online. Most studies focus on the written feedback given by teachers off line rather than on students’ requests for such feedback online. (See, for example, studies by Donald Daiker and Summer Smith in first language composition and studies by Dana Ferris and Lynn Goldstein in second language composition.) A few second language composition studies compare the impact on revision of peer feedback face-to-face, peer feedback online, and feedback at the writing center (Schultz; Tuzi), or they compare the interactional dynamics and discourse concerns in face-to-face vs. online synchronous tutoring sessions (Jones, Garralda, Li, and Lock), or in synchronous vs. asynchronous peer response (Honeycutt).

The study closest in its focus to ours, done by Judith Powers and Jane Nelson and published in 1995, compared writing center staff members’ perceptions of face-to-face feedback requests from NNES

and NES graduate students. Based on 48 writing centers' returned surveys with items on a scale from 1 (almost never requested) to 4 (almost always requested), NNES writers were perceived most frequently to ask for feedback on correctness (3.70), whereas NES were perceived to ask most frequently for feedback on organization (3.27). However, these results were writing center staff members' perceptions of feedback requests based on their impressions and memory, rather than accounts of actual feedback requests made by NNES and NES writers. Also, the staff members' perceptions were of face-to-face rather than online feedback requests, since few writing centers at that time had online services. Finally, their study concerned graduate students, whereas we had a number of reasons for focusing on undergraduates, which we explain below.

The literature on tutoring NNES writers online is certainly growing (Cooper, Bui, and Riker; Rafoth; Rilling), but it consists more of "how-to" studies for tutor training and online program initiation and development rather than empirically based studies serving the same pedagogical purposes. For example, Rafoth looked informally at the feedback requested online by NNES writers and found it too vague to be helpful to tutors. He gives examples of their feedback requests, but does not supply percentages or numbers of vague, unhelpful requests in relation to total NNES feedback requests or to the total of NNES and NES feedback requests because quantifying and classifying requests was not the purpose of his study. In our study, whose main purpose is to quantify and classify, we were also interested, although secondarily, in observing whether or not our NNES students' feedback requests were vague and unhelpful.

In sum, to further explore the growing delivery system of online tutoring, to fill gaps in the writing center literature, and to answer the need for a reality-based rather than perception-based study of NES and NNES feedback concerns, we did a quantitative study of our own online tutoring data bank to compare and contrast the feedback requests of our writing center's NNES and NES undergraduate writers.

The Current Online Tutoring System

Before moving to the study itself, it is necessary to understand the online tutoring environment in which the study was conducted.

When students enter the online tutoring portal at the writing center website, they first see the following orientation information describing our services, what we ask for from students, and services they shouldn't ask of us. That is, we don't expect polished drafts, and they shouldn't expect us to proofread their work. The statement also urges them to make their feedback request and "most pressing concerns" as specific as possible:

You can e-mail us to ask a quick question, and we will respond as soon as possible, or you can submit a draft of your paper as well as a description of your assignment and a summary of your most pressing concerns, and we will get back to you with some advice. The more you tell us about what you're looking for, the more specific our help can be. Don't worry if your draft is rough. In fact, we're happy to help you brainstorm ideas before you sit down to write. No matter what, please allow **two business days** for our reply. Although we cannot proofread or "correct" papers for grammar or spelling mistakes, we can offer suggestions that will help you brainstorm, write, and revise with purpose, meaning, and clarity.

When students click the "Submit Your Work" button, they are required to respond to a series of questions. They fill in their name and e-mail address and select answers from a drop-box for each of the following questions:

- "Classification" (1st year, 2nd year, 3rd year, 4th year, graduate student, faculty, other);
- "Your college" (Liberal Arts, Education, Engineering, Graduate College, Business, Law, Medicine, Nursing, Pharmacy, Public Health, Other);
- "Are you a Rhetoric student?" (Yes, No)¹; and "Is English your native language?" (Yes, No)

If students are writing their paper for a specific class, they are asked to provide the course name, department, course number, and due date for the assignment. They are asked to respond to all fields, but as the data were based only on their responses and there was no collaboration with university databases, the information they supplied was deemed reliable but not definitive.

Finally, students are asked to fill in three open-ended text fields regarding the assignment and their specific needs:

- “Explain your assignment. If you have an assignment sheet, quote it directly. Be sure to include the requirements for length, citation format, and focus. We love details. If you skimp on information, we may need to ask for more.”
- “What would you like us to pay particular attention to as we read your paper?”
- “Is there something we haven’t asked yet that is important to you? Elaborate here.”

Responses to all three of these questions were used for analysis in this study.

Tutors are trained to use this information as a basis for their response. In this writing center, the head online tutor trains the other 30+ tutors on the staff to respond to online draft submissions. Tutors are trained to comment on the students’ areas of concern identified on the feedback form as well as other areas tutors identify that students may not have mentioned, for example, neglecting a key aspect of the writing assignment. They also praise what the writer has done well. Online tutors insert their comments into the student’s draft in the form of a short “commenting letter” that they write above the actual text of the student’s work. To illustrate the specific examples of the areas of concern identified in the commenting letter as well as to address other matters, many tutors use Microsoft Word’s commenting feature, inserting approximately two to six comments per page. Other tutors simply insert comments within the student’s text in a different font or highlight portions of the student’s text in different, coded colors, for example, pink for supporting details that should be placed elsewhere in a draft, and blue for material that seems extraneous. The draft with comments is e-mailed back to the student with a brief accompanying e-mail message that might say, for example, “Dear_____, I enjoyed reading and learned a lot from your paper on_____. Please see my attached comments. Feel free to submit another draft if you have time. Thanks for using online tutoring.” (Note: In Spring, 2009, we are converting to an all-internet-based system that will no longer involve e-mail.)

Methods

The data set studied consists of the recorded data from the online tutoring program at our writing center from September 2003 to August 2006. We followed the following steps to arrive at a set of 85 NES and 85 NNES requests:

1. we removed data that contained obvious errors or contradictions;
2. we prepared two sets of undergraduate data, NES and NNES, comparable in terms of set size and student demographics; and
3. we categorized 85 NNES and 85 NES students' requests for feedback.

Student feedback request data were compiled in FileMakerPro and converted to a MS Excel spreadsheet for ease of manipulation and analysis. First, students who classified themselves as graduate students, faculty, or other were removed from the set. We decided to focus on undergraduates and to eliminate graduate students from this study because the latter are often submitting work to a dissertation committee or for publication, and we did not want specific language needs related to committee scrutiny or manuscript preparation to skew the sample. In addition, we wanted our results to apply to a wide range of writing centers, many of which do not serve graduate students or are located in institutions without graduate programs. However, it goes without saying that a comparison of the feedback requests of undergraduate vs. graduate students, both NES and NNES, would be a worthy study.

The resulting data set consisted of 2,378 draft submissions from the three-year period. This reflects not the total number of undergraduate students served by online tutoring but rather the total number of tutoring sessions over the period. Data were then sorted according to NES/NNES status, e-mail address, and name. Of the 2,378 undergraduate drafts submitted by students, 266 writers categorized themselves as NNES. As there were far fewer NNES than NES undergraduate tutoring sessions, we first determined the NNES sample size, and then selected an equal group of NES tutoring sessions for the study, as reported below. We selected a group of equal size for ease and accuracy of categorization. We feared that if we categorized

hundreds of responses or enlisted more researchers to categorize responses, our categories might begin to “creep,” that is, to change or drop in consistency.

To arrive at the first sample size of 85 NNES, we examined the 266 NNES tutoring sessions to find inconsistencies or inaccuracies in responses, attempting to delete respondents who may have categorized themselves as NNES in error. Students who had categorized themselves as NNES on one occasion and NES on another, for example, were removed from the NNES data set. Some of these cases could have been bilingual students who were unsure which category to choose, but others were mistakes which researchers confirmed because they were familiar with those students and their language backgrounds. Both types of respondents were deleted. In addition, students who categorized themselves as graduate students but whose coursework (first-year Rhetoric, for example) clearly identified them as undergraduates, or vice versa, were eliminated.

After eliminating from the study students with inconsistent responses, 227 draft submissions remained. Because many students submitted multiple drafts (40 NNES and 32 NES), sometimes of the same paper, we feared that including all the submissions from students who asked for help many times might skew our results. We decided that we would obtain more representative results if we categorized only one draft submission from each student. We chose the most recent submission from each student who had submitted multiple times, unless that last submission did not include a feedback request. In that case, we chose the next-to-most recent submission. Thus, we were left with a set of 85 draft submissions from 85 different NNES students. Next, working from the larger NES data set and performing the same data sorting procedures, we selected a similar set of 85 draft submissions (the first 85 students, alphabetically) from 85 different NES writers. In terms of large genre categories, 11 drafts in each group turned out to be examples of real-world writing such as personal statements and admissions essays, as opposed to 74 drafts of academic papers for classes.

In order to categorize feedback requests in response to the prompts on the submission form – “What would you like us to pay particular attention to as we read your paper?” and “Is there something

we haven't asked yet that is important to you?" – we looked at common hierarchies of higher order to lower order concerns, including Caposela's "Priorities in Reading a Draft" and McAndrew and Reigstad's and John Bean's hierarchies of discourse concerns. We came up with twelve "Feedback Request Categories" of student requests:

- Satisfy Assignment or Task
- Effective Influence on Audience
- Argument and Ideas
- Thesis and Central Idea
- Development
- Organization
- Expression and Vocabulary
- Cohesion
- Style and Syntax
- Grammar and Punctuation
- Formatting and Documentation
- General Help

We also added a final category of "No Response" to cover students who left the feedback area blank. (Note: Since September 2006, we have made it impossible for students to submit without filling out all the necessary fields.) After establishing the conceptual levels, we performed a trial run to construct a list of keywords and questions for each level (see Table 1).

These key words were chosen to assist us in making our classifications consistent. For each student's set of feedback requests, all three researchers came to a consensus before categorizing it. Although it may seem that some of our key words were vague or ambiguous enough to belong to other categories, our categorization scheme was appropriate for a team of three researchers working together at the same time. The scheme would have to be refined, however, if a larger number of researchers, working individually, were to classify feedback requests. Having established a working key, we categorized and tallied the requests from the 85 NES and 85 NNEs draft submissions according to the following procedure.

Because students often asked more than one question or asked for help with more than one concern, a single draft submission could

Table 1

Feedback Request Categories and Keywords/Questions from Feedback Requests Used to Classify Them

Feedback Request Categories	Keywords/Questions
Satisfy Assignment/Task	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assignment summary is attached, reworded, or aspects of assignment stressed in question. • Analysis vs. summary • Hit the points in assignment • Follows conventions of genre (personal statement, etc.) • Respond to teachers' comments/feedback
Effective Influence on Audience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impact • Strategies for influencing audience • Effectiveness of strategies
Argument/Ideas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thoughtfulness • Ideas • Coherence • Formulation • Does the quote fit? • What do you think of my ideas? • Clarity of Ideas • Unity • Approach • Content • Focus/narrowness of the topic • Creativity/originality
Thesis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thesis • Cohesive argument • Clarity of thesis • Placement of Thesis
Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Length • Elaboration • Adding Details • Vague • Clear • Support • Developed • Cutting unnecessary material • Examples • On the right track • What to cite?

Organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structure • Introduction • Conclusion • Title • Format of the paper • Balance • Paragraph length
Expression/Vocabulary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vague • Word choice • Wordiness/concise • Variation in wording • Natural or idiomatic English • Fluency • Formal vs. informal • Editing • Awkward
Cohesion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fluidity • Transition/ transitions good • Flow • Choppy
Style/Syntax	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Style • Variation in sentence pattern • Sentence structure/construction
Grammar/Punctuation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grammatical errors, grammar • Punctuation
Documentation/Formatting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Documentation (quoting) • Formatting (MLA Style, etc.)
General Help	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help • You decide • All the help I can get
No Response	

conceivably ask for all twelve categories of help. For example, one student's requests were: "Overall flow of ideas in the essay, is it convincing, general suggestions for improvement." To classify these requests, "Overall flow of ideas" received one tally under "Argument/Ideas." "Is it convincing?" received another tally for "Effective influence on audience," and "General suggestions for improvement" received a third tally under "General Help." While draft submissions could be tallied for more than one category, they were not tallied more than once for multiple requests for the same type of help. For example, a student who asked if she or he were "on the right track" and if he or she "needed to expand" was tallied only once in the

“Development” category. We made every effort to correctly categorize the questions of each draft submission, but because the questions and requests for help were student-generated rather than selected from a drop-down menu, we had to interpret the meaning behind some questions and requests. Some students’ requests were straightforward and easy to classify. “Is my thesis clear?” would be classified under Thesis. But “Do my ideas flow?” is more ambiguous. Because the request mentions ideas, we decided to classify it as Argument/Ideas. However, “Does my paper flow?” or “Does it flow?” we decided to classify under Cohesion, to represent the concern of whether a subsequent part of a paper is connected to a previous one.

After the initial collation of data, several steps of analysis were necessary to arrive at valid results. Approximately one in five requests involved negotiation and debate among the three researchers on the team to arrive at a consensus and agreement. Thus, using the intra-group reliability measure recommended by applied linguists such as David Nunan, the three-person team reclassified 10% of the data (comprising feedback requests from 9 NNES and 9 NES writers) three months after the initial assessment and reached an acceptable level of 82% agreement with their original classifications. Once we had thus calibrated the data, we used Fischer’s exact test¹ to discern categories of statistical significance.

Results

Table 2 shows that the research question of whether NNES writers ask more for feedback on some types of concerns than NES students can be answered affirmatively, but only for Grammar/Punctuation. NNES writers asked much more frequently for feedback on Grammar/Punctuation than NES students: 58.82% versus 21.18% respectively, $p < 0.05$, Fisher’s Exact Test. Of the 85 NNES students, 50 or almost 60% of them asked for help with Grammar/Punctuation. (Only one of these 50 NNES requests was for punctuation only.) In contrast, of the 85 NES students, 18 or 21% asked about Grammar/Punctuation. (No NES requests were for punctuation only.) However, results also show that there are no significant differences in frequency and proportion between NNES and NES groups in asking

for feedback on Expression/Vocabulary, Style/Syntax, or Documentation/Formatting. NNES students made more requests for help with Expression/Vocabulary (22 vs. 12) and Style/Syntax (13 vs. 7) than native English speakers, but not significantly more.

In addition, Table 2 shows that the other side of the research question of whether NES would ask for more feedback on some con-

Table 2

Feedback Request Types Made by NNES and NES Writers

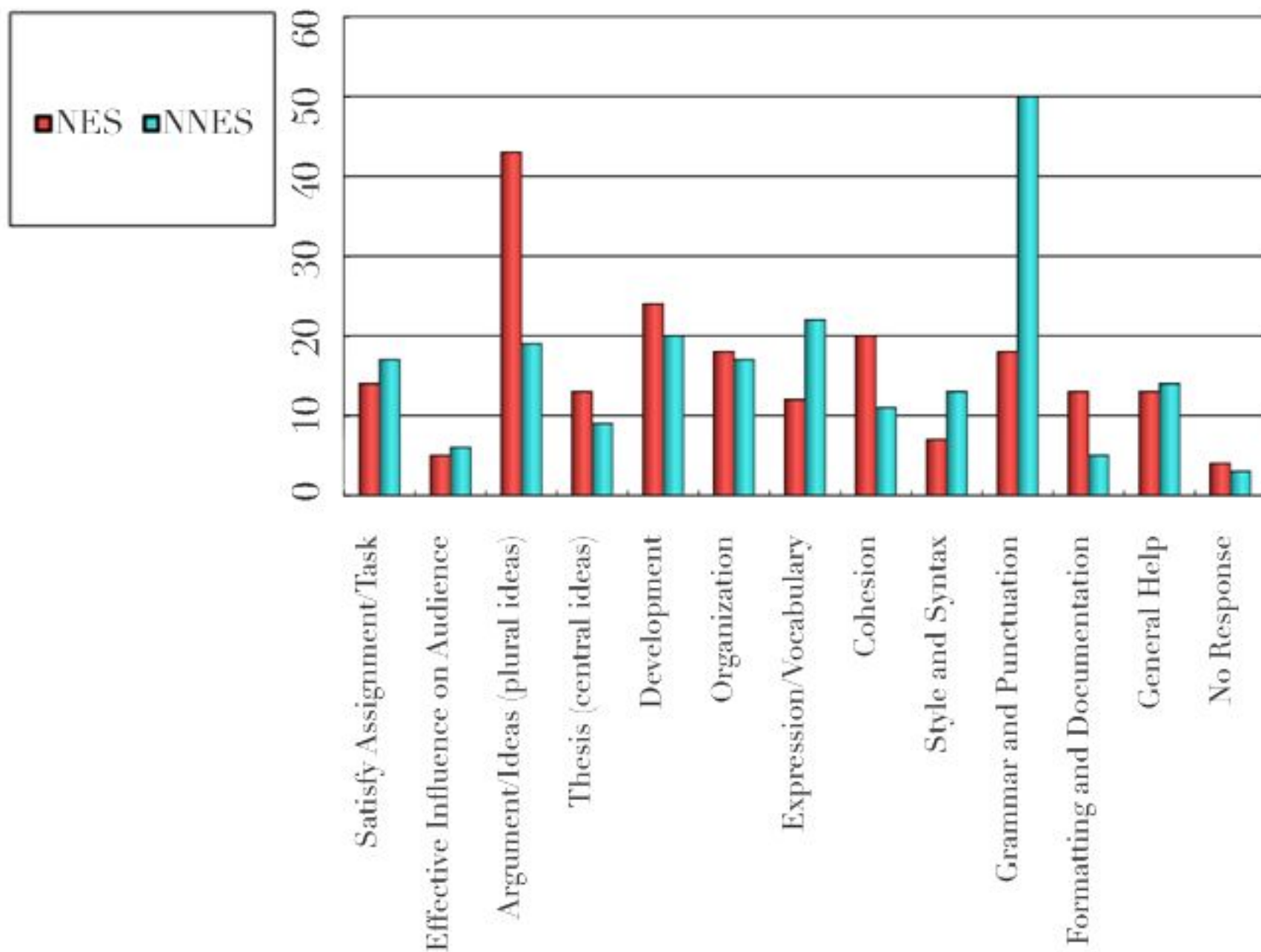
Request group	NES writer		NNES writer		p-value (PET)
Request category	N	%(out of 85 Subjects)	N	%(out of 85 subjects)	
Satisfy Assignment/Task	14	16.47%	17	20%	0.6917
Effective Influence on Audience	5	5.88%	6	7.06%	1
Argument/Ideas(plural ideas)	43	50.59%	19	22.35%	0.0002
Thesis(central ideas)	13	15.29%	9	10.59%	0.4938
Development	24	28.23%	20	23.53%	0.5997
Organization	18	21.18%	17	20%	1
Expression/Vocabulary	12	14.12%	22	25.88%	0.0834
Cohesion	20	23.53%	11	12.94%	0.1111
Style and Syntax	7	8.24%	13	15.29%	0.2334
Grammar and Punctuation	18	21.18%	50	58.82%	0.00000086
Formatting and Documentation	13	15.29%	5	5.88%	0.0787
General Help	13	15.29%	14	16.47%	1
No Response	4	4.70%	3	3.53%	1

cerns than NNES can be answered affirmatively, but only for the area of Argument/Ideas. NES writers are significantly more likely to ask about Argument/Ideas than NNES students: 50.59% versus 22.35% respectively, $p < 0.05$, Fisher's Exact Test.² Forty-three NES as opposed to 19 NNES writers asked about their Argument/Ideas. However, on the other higher order concerns, NNES and NES differences were insignificant. In fact, NNES writers asked more often than native speakers for feedback on the higher order concerns of Satisfy Assignment Task (17 NNES vs. 14 NES) and on Effective Influence on Audience (6 NNES vs. 5 NES), but these differences were not statistically significant. Also, there were no statistically significant differences between NNES and NES groups on the concerns of Thesis, Development, Organization, or Cohesion.

According to our classifications, NNES writers made a total of 203 feedback requests of all types for an average of 2.38 requests per

Table 3

Feedback Requests by NNES Writers and NES Writers in Proportion to one Another



student. NES writers made a total of a very similar number of 200 feedback requests, for a very slightly lower average of 2.35 requests per student.

Table 3 graphically depicts the lack of significant differences between NNES and NES groups on 10 of the 12 concerns, demonstrating that both groups asked for feedback on all of these concerns and desired a full range of feedback on their drafts.

Discussion

The results show a complex profile of both groups of writers, but especially NNES. Indeed, these 85 NNES writers, without prompting from a pull-down menu on the online tutoring form, asked for the full range of feedback in all eleven areas, with 20% or more NNES writers in the sample asking for feedback on satisfaction of assignment task, argument/ideas, development, and expression/vocabulary. Unlike Rafoth who found many NNES requests to be vague and unhelpful, we found many NNES feedback requests to be perceptive, articulate, and helpful, demonstrating rhetorical awareness and sensitivity. For example:

- What info could I provide to get the reader a better sense of my goals?
- Do you get a sense of who I am as a person? Did I answer each question fully?
- [Please pay particular attention to] overall flow of ideas in the essay, validity of arguments, is it convincing, general suggestions for improvement.
- Is my essay on the right track?
- Does this paper help to make me stand out from the other students who will be applying?
- I want to know if I have covered my requirements. I was also looking for ways to improve my paper and to make the transitions smoother. I would also appreciate any other ways to improve the paper in general. Along with things I could add that would be important.
- I'd like to know that my supporting details are sufficient to my thesis statement, and well-organized.

- [Pay particular attention to] conclusion, introduction, transition, and application of basic statics principle.
- My biggest concern is with structure. Clear, logical arguments is something I have had trouble with in past papers, and any advice on how to give this paper shape would be very helpful.

Note that none of the above requests mentions grammar. Seven NNES writers in our sample did ask for help only with grammar (as opposed to only one NES writer), but 43 of the NNES included grammar as one of two or more areas of concern, as in the following:

- [Pay particular attention to] thesis statement, grammar, sentence structure and organization of the paper.
- Would you check all my grammar mistakes and also check whether I include everything the instructor wants from this assignment or not? Do you think I need to expand a little more? Is there anything you think I need to add?
- [Pay particular attention to] the flow of the paragraphs, grammar, verb tense, creativity.

Some requests to check the grammar were accompanied by the clause “if it’s OK,” a smiley face, or the justification “I am not a native speaker of English,” possibly indicating that these students had read the information on the web site about what online tutors do not do (proofreading, correcting). However, other requests for a grammar check were accompanied by a single or double exclamation point, for example, “Just grammar!” This request could indicate the importance of grammar to the writer, or it could also indicate a desire not to receive feedback on other areas.

The range of feedback requests made by NNES writers, as well as the balance of request types by both groups, suggest that there is probably not much need for online tutors to make special efforts to steer students away from language issues and toward larger concerns of fulfilling the assignment or developing and organizing their ideas. Nor is there an obvious need to supply them with a pull-down menu to facilitate their making such requests. As do a number of online writing centers, our writing center might instead suggest ways students could ask for feedback on the open-ended submission form (e.g. “How can I make my argument more clear?” “How can I make my phrasing less wordy and more precise?”).

However, one implication of the fact that almost 60% of the NNES sample asked for help with their grammar suggests a need for online tutors to know more about how to give such feedback effectively. How does one give grammar feedback online without making corrections or editing, thus violating one's own writing center policy against editing, proofreading, and correcting stated on the website?

Best practices suggest that instead of correcting every error, online tutors should point out error patterns (Bean; Ferris), but sometimes the rules for using features such as articles and prepositions are too complicated to explain online. In those cases, online tutors should use links to online sources for rule-based explanations. When errors in expression or word choice are not rule-based, errors that Ferris calls "untreatable" (6), a best practice would be to point out places where the student's language interferes with the communication of meaning. In those cases tutors could then provide reader-based responses about their inability to understand the writer's message or about the message's perceived ambiguity.

Limitations of the Study

One limitation of the study was that despite the relatively large sample size, the numbers of requests in certain areas such as Effective Influence on Audience (5 NES vs. 6 NNES) were small and close together, indicating the need for a larger sample size than 85 in each group to see whether more differences in type of feedback requests would be brought out. However, to classify requests from a larger sample size, a pull-down menu of specific concerns would be helpful so that researchers would not have to spend so much time discussing how to classify the often multiple requests of each student for each draft. Indeed, our results suggest neither NES nor NNES students require a pull-down menu to request a wide range of feedback on higher order concerns (satisfy assignment, effect on audience, argument/ideas, organization), on what we might call middle order concerns (e.g. cohesion, syntax/style, expression/vocabulary), and lower order concerns (grammar and mechanics). Nonetheless, such a menu would most assuredly facilitate researchers' classification, by simplifying and standardizing choices.

Another limitation, which we anticipated, is the over-general, catch-all NNES label. Because the online form does not request more fine-grained demographic information, it was beyond the scope of the study to further classify the NNES group into international students, who perhaps had lived in the US for a few years or less, and residents who perhaps had lived in the US most of their lives and were possibly more familiar with feedback request practices. Our estimation, based on impression and memory of face-to-face tutoring experience with NNES students, is that these 85 NNES students were divided more or less evenly between both international and resident groups.

Future Studies

Future researchers could interview selected students about their reasons for asking for the type of feedback they request. For example, were these areas of concern primarily their own, or primarily their instructors'? Were they taken directly from an instructors' assignment sheet? Another type of study involving face-to-face interviews could ask NNES students exactly what they mean by the term "grammar." Do they have in mind subject-verb agreement? Verb tense? Word choice? Idiomatic usage? Prepositions and Articles? Smoother sentence structure? All (or some) of the above? What are the differences in the ways NNES and NES conceive of "grammar"? If a pull-down menu that offered "word choice" and "phrasing and expression" were available, what percentages of both groups of writers would choose those categories rather than "grammar"?

Another study could investigate the effects of various feedback request formats such as 1) a submission form with no pull-down menu, only a space to write in feedback requests—our current format; 2) a pull-down menu requiring students to rank-order their priorities (most important, next most important, etc); 3) a pull-down menu with no requirement to rank order priorities; 4) a pull-down menu, with or without rank-ordering, with the option to write in more detailed and specific feedback requests.

Other studies could make use of the brief survey that online students fill out after they receive their feedback. (At the time of the study, such a survey was not part of our online tutoring process, but

has since been added.) This survey asks students if the feedback they received was helpful and how much of this feedback they used to revise. Did they use feedback on bigger issues, smaller issues or both? Consenting students who give their e-mail addresses could be asked to submit their revised papers so that researchers can analyze if and how they used the requested feedback and also if and how they used feedback they did not request. Because so many students are multiple submitters to e-mail tutoring, researchers could conduct longitudinal case studies, examining how feedback requests and subsequent drafts and revisions evolve over time. Or studies could examine students' feedback requests, that is, the concerns they themselves identify, and compare them to the concerns identified by tutors to see how much overlap or difference there is in the perceptions of both parties.

Conclusion

Our tendencies as tutors might be to characterize NNES and even NES students as seeking writing center services mainly to address lower order concerns, but empirical studies can contradict generalizations based solely on impressions, perceptions, and memory, for example, the staff members' perceptions of face-to-face feedback requests recorded in Powers and Nelson's 1995 survey. Certainly, NNES students care about grammar, since it is one of the main preoccupations of any second or foreign language learner, but their concerns and consequent feedback requests, like those of NES writers, range widely, covering all discourse levels and feedback categories. The feedback requests of both NNES and NES writers were generally clear and ranged widely across feedback types, indicating that a pull-down menu, while helpful for research, is not necessary for students. Tutors should continue to be trained and encouraged to give constructive feedback online to both NNES and NES students on all feedback categories – from Satisfy Assignment Task to Grammar.

NOTES

¹ Though the Writing Center tutors students from across the university, as the center is housed in the Rhetoric Department, part of its recognized mandate is to serve students taking their required rhetoric courses.

² In this research, we used Fisher's Exact Test, a test of significance commonly used in scientific research in which a relatively small sample approximation is appropriate. This test provides only a p-value. Fisher's Exact Test has no formal test statistic and no critical value. Also, Fisher's Exact Test does not produce a confidence interval. Fisher's Exact Test is based on exact probabilities from a specific distribution (the hypergeometric distribution). It was developed by British geneticist and biostatistician R.A. Fisher (1890-1962).

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