

**ESL Students & College Writing Centers:  
A Mutually Beneficial Relationship**

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Like many teachers, I am asked to wear several hats at my college. When I was hired five years ago, it was to assist non-native English speakers in acquiring the necessary linguistic tools for academic discourse. That job soon evolved and I was asked to advise this populace also. Two years later my position changed yet again and I became the Director of the college's Writing Studio. Now I am an administrator as well as a full-time teacher. At first I was inundated with work and struggled to balance my two worlds. However, once I hired and trained a resourceful staff of tutors, I soon realized how my work with ESL students could actually benefit my hybrid position: the knowledge I have regarding working with non-native speakers could directly enhance the tutor's training and preparedness to work with ESL students in the Studio, and by being in the classroom with ESL students, I could encourage them to utilize the beneficial services offered at our center. My position as ESL Specialist and Director of the Writing Studio has been a win-win situation, and I have come to advocate that a campus' writing center can truly contribute to and enhance an ESL student's overall academic experience.

I propose that on any given day many college writing centers see a host of non-native speakers, perhaps even outnumbering the "mainstream" clients. As the international population continues to grow on college campuses throughout the United States, the need for these students to be able to write clearly and effectively for their college classes will continue to grow, too. Writing center tutors need to be trained with

how to work with this growing body of students so that the tutee can glean as much from a session as possible. Many tutors in today's college writing centers are also students and took the position in the writing center because they, themselves, have always been good writers. But being a good writer does not necessitate that he or she will be able to council a tutee whose linguistic and cultural background is different. Tutors need assistance in this area and who better to help them grow as tutors than an ESL teacher?

If it at all feasible, I propose that the school's ESL instructor(s) work closely with members of the writing center in order to prepare the tutors for these "international" encounters as much as possible. Workshops and training seminars lead by an ESL instructor can be very helpful to a writing center's staff and can cover a range of pertinent topics: cultural differences, cultural writing styles and/or rhetorical discourse, linguistic/syntactical construction, holistic approaches to looking at writing, directive versus non-directive kinds of tutoring, trouble-shooting common ESL grammar points, and responding effectively to the writing produced by L2s. It can be a daunting and sometimes frustrating task for a tutor to work with the writing produced by an L2 if he or she has had no prior experience or training.

Where does one begin when looking at a paper? How does one help an L2 writer revise her work when there are many grammatical mistakes that impede the reader's understanding? How can a tutor be sure her advice is being understood by the tutee? By working with the school's writing center staff, an ESL instructor can help address some of these issues and can begin to alleviate some of the fears held by many tutors. One of the most beneficial training seminars I lead is to have tutors look at and respond to papers generated by my ESL students in one of my classes. By looking at authentic work

together and discussing the different ways in which we might approach the papers within a tutorial, tutors are gaining valuable, hands-on experience they can draw upon in a “real” tutorial. It is also important that tutors be somewhat aware of the cultural norms and expectations of the nationalities that exist at the college and frequent the writing center. Basically, most tutors simply want to feel assured that what they are doing is beneficial to the L2 speaker and writer. By helping to train tutors to work with this populace, the ESL teacher is creating a better tutor who will in turn help to create a more effective L2 *student*.

I also contend that ESL students who utilize the services of a writing center learn far more than just how to be better writers. Yes, becoming more versatile with English, both oral and written, is the first by-product of one-to-one tutorials. I have personally seen students who work with tutors on a weekly basis flourish as more confident and capable manipulators of English. Yet besides learning how to be more proficient with language, these students are also learning how to be more proficient as *students*. By working closely with tutors in a college’s writing center, ESL students learn what it means to be a serious learner, someone who is devoted to academic inquiry. Tutors who work in a writing center are often the college’s brightest and best. They are excellent models of academic preparedness and intellectual curiosity for our international populace. Writing tutors facilitate a tutee’s growth far beyond just writing for they also help L2s with acculturation (both on a national and local level and within the smaller community of academia) and acquiring the rules or standards of academic discourse. The L2 students who work closely with a writing tutor become better students in general and disseminate into the larger academic community taking their newfound skills with them.

My goal as an ESL instructor at the post-secondary level is always to assist L2s as much as possible for the transition from ESL sheltered classes to mainstream. But in order for that transition to be fruitful, the non-native speaker must feel confident in her abilities and prepared to address the myriad of challenges she will face within that diverse classroom. ESL students who study with writing center tutors are better prepared to meet those challenges because they have been indoctrinated into the culture of the college, and they have learned first-hand how to be a better student--or to put it more accurately--a better critical thinker, speaker and writer.

Lastly, non-native speakers who frequent the writing center are not the only people who benefit. Perhaps we tend to notice these students' growth and development more readily because we often see a product: a more conversant, confident student and a more coherent, well-written paper. However, the tutor who is lucky enough to work with an L2 also benefits from this relationship. The tutor is in a unique and enviable position to increase his or her own knowledge base. He can learn about another person and another culture first hand, and through his relationship with an L2 tutee, the tutor can experience a world far beyond the campus of his college. Through conversations and paper topics, many L2s are eager and anxious to share cultural customs and norms, to tell their stories. They want to talk about their lives and their homelands, and through this tutorial exchange both participants' lives are enriched. Perhaps this exchange of information is something we've always known as teachers – and especially teachers of ESL – but the kind of intimate magic that occurs within a tutorial is a special dialogue, one that is established because of the unique and limited nature of the format.

I find it sad when teachers use the writing center as a kind of punitive “dumping ground” for students who are having trouble expressing themselves on the page. Yet it is especially disheartening when a non-native speaker shows up at our Writing Studio door with a paper flooded in red ink and a cryptic message scrawled across it: *See the Writing Center for Help!* These students are often confused and embarrassed by their teacher’s comments and frequently don’t feel comfortable speaking to the professor for clarification. They find their way to the writing center to seek help, perhaps uncertain as to what to expect from their meetings. It is in this crucial time that we, as directors of and tutors in these centers, begin our relationships with these students. These students need to be addressed with compassion and respect, and they need to be given the assurance that we can, indeed, help them to become better speaker and writers of English. We need to be able to explain to the ESL tutee what a tutorial is and what he or she brings to that meeting. Working one-on-one with a person (who is frequently a peer) may be an unusual and uncomfortable experience for some ESL students; it is imperative that we are clear in our expectations of what should transpire within a tutorial and that we try to understand the expectations that a tutee brings to the meeting. By striving for clear, meaning dialogue between the tutor and the tutee we can begin to establish the kind of fruitful and advantageous relationship that thrives in writing center tutorials.

Moreover, it is only by having a trained and competent staff within the center that we can offer L2s a real place to seek help. By having the college’s ESL specialist(s) work closely with the writing center, the center’s staff can truly be effective in assisting non-native English speakers and writers. The better prepared a tutor is the better he or she is able to address the myriad and complex needs of the ESL student with competence and

grace. The relationship that develops between an L2 tutee and a tutor is often a powerful and organic one. It is fraught with challenges and great rewards. I believe that the connection between college writing centers and a college's ESL populace is a special one that creates unique learning experiences and opens a dialogue that will enhance the personal and academic experiences of both participants, thus improving the entire college experience for tutor and tutee.

*Helpful texts to use in tutor training:*

Bates, L., Lane, J., & Lange E. (1993). *Writing Clearly: Responding to ESL Compositions*. Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle.

Murphy, C. & Sherwood, S. (1995). *The St. Martin's Sourcebook for Writing Tutors*. Boston, MA: Bedford / St. Martin's.

Rafoth, B., ed. (2000). *A Tutor's Guide: Helping Writers One to One*. Portsmouth, NH: Boyton/Cook.

Ryan, L. (1998). *The Bedford Guide For Writing Tutors, 2e*. Boston, MA: Bedford Books.