

Guilt-Free Tutoring: Rethinking How We Tutor Non-Native-English-Speaking Students

by Susan Blau and John Hall, assisted by Sarah Sparks

The frustration level at a recent writing center staff meeting rose with the first mention of tutoring non-native-English-speaking (NNES) students.

"I try so hard to stick to the guidelines we learned, but it's so frustrating," said Blaise, one of the writing fellows.

Neil, another tutor, agreed. "It's like being caught in a drain. I circle it and circle it, trying to avoid it, but by the end of the session I always get sucked down into line editing."

And it's not just our tutors who are feeling frustration and guilt about violating the received notions about writing center practice. At the March 2001 Northeast Writing Center Conference, the subject of correcting errors for NNES students came up during a presentation on campus NNES literacy. One presenter lowered her voice and said she occasionally corrected specific grammar mistakes with students. "I screw it up every now and then," she said. "I feel guilty about it sometimes."

An audience member countered, "But if we were with peers, we would have no problem editing."

She shrugged. "For me, at least, part of the guilt comes from getting these students to believe in this process and then doing something else."

Going against practice—especially in tutorials with NNES students—seems to be the cause of guilt and frustration in our center and in others. The literature that we turn to for

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guidance—handbooks and journal articles—address the issues around tutoring NNES students in practical and theoretical ways, but the practical advice seems consistent: NNES students should be tutored in much the same way as native-English-speaking (NES) students.

Although most of the leading tutor-training handbooks discuss linguistic and cultural differences between NNES and NES writers, they all stop short of challenging the conventional notions of tutoring protocol. Tutors are consistently advised to be collaborative and non-directive, to avoid proofreading and deal with higher-order concerns (HOCs) of focus, organization, and development before lower-order concerns (LOCs) of grammar and mechanics, no matter whom they are tutoring.¹

In *The Harcourt Brace Guide to Peer Tutoring*, for example, Toni-Lee Capossela begins her section on “Working with ESL Writers” by briefly discussing cultural differences (92). But then she counsels the tutor to follow Chapter 2’s “Priorities in Reading a Draft” up to Step # 8. Step # 8 is to “check SURFACE FEATURES” (12).

The previous seven steps, which she advises tutors to practice with NNES and NES speakers alike, are essentially setting the agenda, clarifying the assignment, and dealing with the higher-order concerns of focus, organization, and development. In other words, despite the recognition of cultural and linguistic differences, tutors are advised to treat their NNES and NES students pretty much the same until they get to the lower-order concerns of grammar and mechanics.

In *The Allyn and Bacon Guide to Peer Tutoring* Gillespie and Lerner say outright, “In many ways it’s odd to dedicate a single chapter to NNS [non-native speaking] writers—a student population whom you’ll generally tutor just as you do native speakers!” (119). In the subsequent list of “myths” about tutoring NNES writers that the authors present in this chapter are “Myth #5—I need to ‘clean up’ the grammar in NNS writers’ papers before we can get to higher-order concerns” (123). In this section they “urge” the tutor “not to give in to the easy inclination to tackle LOCs before HOCs” (123).

Myth #8 is “I’ll need to be a much more directive tutor with NNS Writers” (126). However, within the discussion of this myth, the authors advise tutors how to analyze errors and how to help the writer identify and correct these errors. They encourage tutors in this “slow (and some feel tedious) work” to remember that “...what you are doing is *teaching* the writer, not correcting texts or claiming ownership” (emphasis added 127). This advice, despite the disclaimer in the myth’s title, quite clearly tells tutors to be as directive, as teacherly, as one could be. No good writing teacher would correct students’

errors for them or appropriate their texts. Perhaps the true distinction here is between editing and teaching, rather than between directive and non-directive tutoring.

Cultural Differences Affecting Writing

We don't need the scholarly literature to tell us that NNES students are different from native speakers. Common sense prevails. If you're writing in a language that is not your native language, you will never write like a native speaker. A colleague at the University, an accomplished scholar in her field, hails from Spain. She speaks with a "foreign accent" and she writes with one as well. She says that if she has to produce letter-perfect, idiomatic English, she hires an editor. Obviously, we don't want our student writers to hire editors; it subverts the very process of learning to write. However, it does become problematic when professors, as a few do in our college, take off points for each mistake in grammar—and they include preposition use and idiomatic expressions in that category—effectively doubling or tripling the stakes for non-native speakers and penalizing them for their "written accents."

When professors penalize non-native speakers for their written accents and when tutors admit to feelings of inadequacy and guilt when changing their practice with NNES students, it is clear that tutoring NNES students requires different strategies from tutoring NES students. Cultural differences do affect writing, and it is important that we understand as well as value these differences.

The implications for tutor training are that we have to spend time—perhaps more than we already do—educating ourselves and our tutors about cultural differences which affect writing and accept that an understanding of cultural differences is essential knowledge for a tutor working with NNES students. The literature on cultural differences is an important resource, both to understand how NNES students' needs have been perceived historically and to understand how this perception has changed over time.

Brief Historical Overview

Scholars have debated for decades how cultural differences affect writing. In 1966, Robert Kaplan published "Cultural Thought Patterns in Intercultural Education," an article which has become known as the "doodles" article and which, in effect, brought the ideas of contrastive rhetoric into both the English as a Second Language (ESL) teaching field and, some years later, into the fledgling writing center community. Kaplan's article popularized the notion that different cultures have different thought patterns and different rhetorical structures. By diagramming English writing as a linear process, Kaplan could contrast what he termed "Semitic," "Oriental," "Romance" and "Russian" rhetorical structures, showing, for example, that the "Oriental" model was circular and suggesting that these writers

circumnavigate the topic, approaching it indirectly but never coming to an explicit point. In Kaplan's schema the "Romance" language writers zigzag (but not as much as the "Semitic" writers do) into digressions as they move from Point A to Point B (Kaplan).

Twenty years later Muriel Harris included Kaplan's diagrams and analyses in one of the earliest and most influential tutoring handbooks, *Teaching One-to-One: The Writing Conference*. Harris notes that Kaplan backed off his sweeping cultural generalizations—generalizations stated in language which seems outdated today—but she also recognizes the important, practical implications of his work (and the work of others in the field of contrastive rhetoric) to writing center practice. She writes,

His work can serve as an important reminder in our evaluation and diagnostic work that we cannot merely label as errors or problems those characteristics in the discourse of non-native speakers of English which they bring with them from the rhetorical traditions of their own languages. Instead, we must realize the difficulty these students will have in trying to learn—and to accept as appropriate—cultural perspectives that may overturn or upset many of their unconscious assumptions about the world. (90-91)

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of discussing differences between NNES and NES students is the excessive generalization implicit in dividing students into these two groups. Within the group of NNES speakers are more dissimilarities than similarities, not just in the language or dialect of the language spoken (certainly we can't assume that within a group labeled "Asian" all writers would have learned to write using a singular rhetorical structure), but also in the socioeconomic status, gender, educational background, psychological makeup, and personal quirks that differentiate all individuals from each other.

That rhetorical structure is socially constructed and not a result of different thought patterns applies equally well to native English speakers. Despite the fact that English is the native (and only) language of this article's authors, we don't always write linearly. We certainly don't always think linearly. The parameters of the format in which we're writing dictate structure more than the rhetorical patterns of our native language. A poem is different from a news article in any language.

In 1993, seven years after Harris' book came out, Carol Severino contributed greatly to this conversation about how cultural differences affect writing. In "The 'Doodles' in Context: Qualifying Claims about Contrastive Rhetoric," she challenges many of Kaplan's original assumptions and adds a much-needed level of complexity to the "reductive notions about the rhetorics of different languages and cultures [. . . which] can lead to skewed, simplistic expectations and interpretations of ESL students and their writing and an ethnocentric, assimilationist pedagogical stance" (45). Severino cites a number of

studies in contrastive rhetoric, based on a discourse analysis of individual ESL students, that take into account the literacy instruction in students' native countries (Indudrasutra).

In her own study, Severino asks Chinese students in her writing center to comment about the differences they see between writing in their native languages and writing in English—in effect, to become rhetoricians. Interestingly, it is not in the structure of the writing that students see differences as much as in the attitudes that inform the culture, which, in turn, inform writing. For example, Severino finds that “personal writing is a culturally relative preference related to the U.S. valuing of individuality” (56). In China, the valuing of the collective over the individual makes personal writing seem “less rigorous and respectable and possibly politically risky as well” (56).

Certainly, cultural attitudes affect our writing styles. One Chinese student in Severino's study said that the cultural attitude of “saving face” caused him to avoid “bragging” and defending one's own opinions” (53). The oft-cited practice of indirection in Japanese writing can also be attributed, in part, to the culturally instilled respect for others. By being indirect, the writer doesn't insult the reader by assuming that s/he needs a point spelled out.

A Towering Language Barrier

Korean grammar is so complex and so different from English that even an extremely simple sentence becomes almost indecipherable when translated word for word.

ENGLISH:
Last night, I ate rice instead of bread.

KOREAN:
Yesterday evening in rice instead of bread ate.

어제 저녁에 밥 대신 빵을 먹었습니다

No pronoun is shown in the translation because in Korean, pronouns are deduced from the context of the sentence.

Prepositions come after nouns.

This symbol denotes that “bread” is the object, not the subject of the sentence.

The last letter indicates the tense of the verb. Korean verbs also change depending on the status of the person to whom you are speaking. This indicates the most polite form.

Perhaps more compelling than Kaplan's “doodles” to demonstrate the cognitive difference—not to mention the cognitive dissonance—an Asian student encounters when

writing in English is this simple diagram showing the difference between an English sentence and the word-for-word translation of it into Korean. This diagram was originally printed in *The Washington Post* and reprinted in Leigh Ryan's *The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors* (43). It demonstrates clearly the syntactical differences between English and Korean and offers a glimpse into some of the challenges our NNES students face writing in a non-native language.

This example also puts into perspective and lends support to the advice we often read in writing center guidelines: to distinguish between errors that interfere with communication and those that don't. For example, "Yesterday evening in rice instead of bread ate" would create considerable static for a reader and certainly should not be acceptable writing in an English classroom. However, "Last night, I ate a rice instead of the bread," does not create the same kind of problem between the writer and the reader. If a tutor has already addressed more significant communication problems, he or she may then, with the understanding that the Korean language does not use articles, explain the mistakes in article use in that sentence, and without too much fuss help the student edit for "perfect English."

From the literature and from our own experiences we can cite numerous examples of linguistic differences in different cultures. In her valuable book *Understanding ESL Writers: A Guide For Teachers*, Ilona Leki illustrates not just the indirectness associated with Japanese writers but also Chinese writers' tendencies to sprinkle unattributed but culturally well-known sayings or proverbs into the text, a practice that can cause writing to be marked as stale or clichéd. She discusses the Spanish writer's florid style, filled with metaphor and lyrical descriptions, and the Arabic writer's use of coordination and lack of familiarity with subordination, a practice which echoes the style of Classical Arabic and the Koran but is often seen as unduly emphatic and aggressive to NES readers (94-102).

Cultural mores dictate behavior as well as affect writing style. Those of us who have worked with international students know well the difficulty of bridging cultural notions of the student/teacher relationship. For example, teachers in Asian countries are traditionally treated with a respectful distance, and it's often difficult for students from those countries to view the tutor as a peer rather than a teacher. Achieving the desired peer collaborative relationship becomes a complex, and often impossible, task of undoing culturally taught behavior.

Many of our Asian NNES students mention wanting to improve their writing, not just for themselves or to improve their grades, but to please their teachers. One Chinese student said he came to our writing center because "I still have some grammar mistakes; I have someone help me out...and to showing my respect to my professor because I want the

assignment that I hand in for the best...I just don't want to let my professor think I was fooling around."

Once we become knowledgeable about the differences in language use, cultural backgrounds, and rhetorical styles among the variety of NNES speakers who come to our writing center, it doesn't seem much of a leap to suggest that *how* we tutor these students should take these differences into account. To explore the question of how we tutor NNES students and how our practice differs from the theories and guidelines offered in writing center literature and handbooks, we turned to our own writing center to do our field research.

Field Research and Methodology

In the academic year 2000-2001, NNES students made up 16 percent of our total client population and 25 percent of the total visits. The most common first languages for these students are Japanese, Chinese, Spanish, and Turkish, with a sprinkling of other Asian and European languages. Over half (57 percent) are graduate students. All of our tutors are graduate students, pursuing master's degrees.

During the two years in which we conducted our research (1999-2000 and 2000-2001), we audio-taped and transcribed 18 ESL sessions. In the five most recent sessions, an observer noted the tutor's and client's body language, tone of voice, and energy level, as well as the pace and overall atmosphere of the session. Afterward, the observer interviewed both the tutor and the client.²

As we read through the transcripts, we saw that tutoring sessions with NNES students differed from tutoring sessions with native speakers in a number of ways. (We have previously studied transcripts with native-speaking students, the results of which are published in Blau, Hall, Davis, and Gravitz). In the NNES transcripts, four issues surfaced that we believe suggest a rethinking of conventional tutoring strategies for the NNES student:

1. The role of cultural informing
2. The technique of Socratic questioning
3. The sequencing of global concerns and local concerns
4. The strategy of working through a portion of a paper line by line

The Tutor as a Cultural Informant

Our transcripts reveal that one of the most common tutoring activities is the exchange of cultural information between tutors and their NNES clients. In 9 of the 18 sessions we studied, tutors spent some time acting as "cultural informants," a term used by Judith Powers to identify the tutor's role in this exchange (98). In our research (Blau et al.) we have also used

the term to identify the mutual exchange of information between tutor and client, including details about their respective political systems, national customs, and audience expectations. This exchange is an important piece of the discussion with NNES clients, possibly building rapport and increasing the collaboration between tutor and client. When we asked one client why he comes to the writing center, he replied, "I think the main reason is that the thinking process between Asian people and American are extremely different and sometimes I need some help to clarify what my assignment to make more sense." Of course, the client may also act as an informant, when the content includes cultural facts or mores that the tutor doesn't know.

In a few of the sessions we examined, the tutor addressed global problems related to the American audience's expectations. In the following example, the tutor drives home the need for a thesis early on in a documentary script the client was writing. They had read over the client's first page and discussed some of the unclear language. While trying to clarify the client's commentary, the tutor addresses the central problem (note that ellipses at the beginning of an excerpt indicate words omitted; ellipses within an excerpt indicate a brief pause):

T: ... This phrase right here, as it's written down, doesn't tell me anything really. It's like it's the first part of the phrase, but if you end it there it's not telling me what you're going to write about. It's not telling me what your main topic is, what your point is.

C: So its basis is to just say what I want to say?

T: Exactly, exactly. Especially for an American audience, you want to be as ... specific, and get out and say your point as quickly and succinctly as possible. And I know that culturally it's difficult sometimes. But you have to sort of assume that Americans are dumb (laughs).

In this example, the tutor pokes fun at the American dictum that the writer must state his or her point early on. But some NNES writers may have been taught in their own culture that bluntly stating the point could offend the reader's intelligence. We sometimes have to remind NNES writers, whether in a jovial or serious manner, that being direct is admired in most American writing.

NNES students who are new to the U.S. are often confused about many aspects of American life, not just about the English language and its rhetorical patterns. They may be confounded by the quirks of the American political system (such as the role of the Supreme Court) or the heated debates over separation of church and state, or even the casualness of the teacher/student dynamic in American colleges and universities.

Our tutors have found themselves explaining the arcane procedures of the U.S. legislative system, or less weighty matters such as the consumption of tofu in the U.S., as in the following excerpt. Here a Japanese female graduate student has brought in a feature article about a tofu shop:

C: Kay. This is another (paper).

T: A tofu shop??? (laughs)

C: You know?

T: No, but I love the idea.

C: You know tofu?

T: I love tofu.

C: You do? Is it, like, well known in the States?

T: I think so ... Maybe it's just the people I hang out with, because we all eat a lot of tofu and vegetables and rice, but ... it is well known. It's not necessarily well loved by everyone. Some people say, "Tofu? Uuugh! It has no taste." But I love it.

This conversation may seem like rapport-building, which is important in its own right, but the student's question, "Is it well known in the States?" shows her desire for cultural information. A tutor responding to a question like this helps sharpen the student's approach to her topic and to her audience.

Of course, this form of cultural informing is a two-way street. NNES students' papers sometimes examine issues in their home countries that they know more about than the tutors do. In seven out of the 18 sessions, the clients picked subjects related to their home countries and had to explain some cultural details to the tutor, which led to additions for an American reader. For instance, one of our tutors, Emily, helped a Japanese student to revise a persuasive paper in which the student argued against the continuing U.S. military presence in Japan. While Emily knew why the U.S. had military bases in Japan, the client informed Emily about Japan's post-World War II constitutional prohibition against having its own army. The conversation showed the client that she needed to provide American readers with more details about her country's political and military system to clarify her point.

In an interview following the session, the client said that she came to the writing center to "ask American opinion about my article" because her piece was about the relationship between Japan and America. When asked if she often comes to the center for the cultural information, she said, "Yeah. Because sometimes [the American reaction is] different from what I imagine." Emily, the tutor, said afterward, "We were equal cultural informants today. She informed me of things I wasn't aware of."

Sessions like this one show how tutoring NNES students can broaden tutors' knowledge of other cultures. The richness of the cultural exchange between tutors and NNES clients is one of the most rewarding aspects of NNES sessions. It can remind us that we must not condescend to students who, while they may be challenged by the language barrier, come to us with a worldliness and wealth of knowledge that often surpass that of our NES clients. Tutors who are curious about other cultures and build a rapport with their NNES clients usually find these sessions enlightening and invigorating. One of our tutors, reflecting on his work in our center, said NNES students have been "some of the most rewarding [clients]. They have taught me volumes about my language and about other languages. They have also taught me a great deal of respect for any person trying to learn English."

In some NNES sessions, tutors may find that they have to act not just as cultural informants, but also as "cultural counselors" for students unaccustomed to approaching their professors for additional help. Our tutors sometimes have to advise NNES clients to speak with their professors when a problem arises that only the professor can address. A professor who grades NNES writers harshly for their writing errors may also make the students afraid to approach the professor for help. In these cases, the tutor occupies a "safe" middle ground for the NNES client to express his or her concerns without condemnation or evaluation.

NNES students should feel comfortable approaching their professors when they need further clarification on an assignment or guidance on their ideas, and faculty members should learn how to lessen the fear some NNES students feel when they are confused. Writing centers may be able to help address this issue. At many colleges and universities, writing centers have become the *de facto* centers of hands-on education with NNES students. Perhaps writing centers are best positioned at this point to be advocates for NNES students and educators about NNES issues in our institutions.

Socratic Questioning

A second difference that we noted in the transcripts between tutoring NNES and NES students is in the role Socratic questioning plays in the tutorial session. We often guide tutors toward asking skillful Socratic questions, open-ended questions, to help their clients find their own answers to writing problems.

This questioning technique is grounded in collaborative learning theory, assuming that in an ideal collaborative session, the tutor and client build knowledge together, sharing power and insight. Clearly, however, in a session between a NES tutor and a NNES client,

the relationship (not the individuals) is unequal: the tutor has information that the client doesn't about the discourse conventions in the tutor's native language.

In sessions with NNES students, we sometimes found that tutors, in attempting to be collaborative by asking Socratic questions, instead fell into the trap of asking "closed" questions, questions that had only one correct answer, not questions that opened up thinking or discussion.

In three transcripts we noted tutors trolling for the "right" answer, an answer that the tutor already knew. This kind of questioning may work with NNES students who know the rules well but have made a mistake. However, with NNES students who lack a solid grasp of English idioms, word order, and grammar, the process can become less of an exploration of ideas and more of a guessing game. This problem is most obvious when a client is not aware of an idiomatic expression or grammatical rule, as in this example:

T: (reading the client's paper aloud) "... I will create one class that will focus on daily conversation, such as grocery shopping, having haircut and how to ask directions."

C: Having a haircut.

T: How do you say you're having a haircut?

C: Getting haircut?

T: Getting a haircut.

C: Getting a ...? Oh, okay. Getting a haircut ... and how to ask directions.

T: You're missing a word. How to ask ...

C: The?

T: How to ask ...

C: A?

T: Nope.

C: How to ask directions.

T: For directions.

C: How to ask? (laughs)

T: For directions.

C: For directions.

It is clear that the client is not sharing ideas or defending arguments but simply hoping to give the right answer. In a similar study to ours, the University of New Hampshire Writing Center analyzed transcripts of its own NNES sessions and found that many of the questions took the form of "Such and such, right?" or "XYZ, don't you think?" (Moore et al.) These leading questions, rather than equalizing the power, merely draw the client toward the answer the tutor thinks is correct.

Any kind of questioning—leading, open-ended, or closed—can be fruitless if the client’s comprehension of syntactical and grammatical conventions is too limited. The following exchange shows the awkward conversation that may result, especially at the end of a session in which the tutor has struggled to get the passive client to participate in the discussion. Here, after the tutor reads a sentence to himself, he points out a grammatical error and tries to pull the correction out of the client through question-like prompts:

T: “Has happened” is in past, “wants” is in future, so you have future and past together in one sentence ...

C: (pause)

T: I think you are talking about future so ...

C: “Would be”?

T: No.

C: “Will be”?

T: No.

C: “Is”?

T: “Is to initiate.”

Eventually the client may guess the right answer, as in this case, but this approach may not be ideal. The tutor might have been more effective explaining why “is” is correct, and being directive rather than trying to be collaborative on grammatical rules. One discouraged tutor in our writing center, after a particularly difficult session in which she repeatedly used questions to deal with syntactical and grammatical problems, said, “I just felt I wasn’t connecting [with the client].... I kept trying to figure out ‘Am I not asking questions in the right way?’”

The problem is not just *what way* to ask questions but under what circumstances. Socratic questioning can be useful with NNES clients when a portion of a paper is unclear, whether it’s because the writer has not provided enough information or has made a grammatical error that causes confusion. But there’s nothing wrong with being directive and to the point when explaining a local error related to idioms, mechanics, or grammar. This approach allows the tutor to provide necessary information, rather than wasting time attempting to create a false sense of collaboration.

Balancing Global and Local Concerns—Using the Line-By-Line Process

A third difference revealed in the transcripts involves the tutorial’s structure. Two interconnected questions are at the heart of the debate about how to focus a tutorial session with NNES students:

- At what point in the tutoring process should we address the local issues?
- Is it ever advisable to go over a paper line by line?

As we've noted earlier, most tutoring handbooks advise tutors to use the same tutoring practice with NNES students as they do with native speakers, prioritizing higher-order concerns (HOCs), which we are calling "global concerns," and then addressing later-order concerns (LOCs), which we are calling "local concerns." Paula Gillespie and Neal Lerner, in *The Allyn and Bacon Guide to Peer Tutoring*, write that it's a myth that tutors often need to start with LOCs before addressing HOCs with NNES students (123-4). And most guidelines discourage tutors from going through a paper line by line since this process is tiring and can easily cross the line from tutoring into proofreading and copyediting.

But tutoring NNES students who have little experience writing in English is a different proposition from tutoring NNES students who are relatively fluent in English. Tutoring strategies that work for native speakers seem to be equally useful with the more fluent students. However, students who are struggling with English may require more flexibility and often require more direction and instruction. These students often need sentence-level language instruction before they can work on global issues like focus, organization, and development of ideas. If each sentence has significant sentence-level problems, local issues such as incorrect grammar, syntax, vocabulary usage, idiomatic expression, or mechanics, it becomes difficult for a tutor to find the writer's focus, no less discuss it immediately.

Tutors who read in the tutoring handbooks that they should begin with HOCs, and then are confronted with an NNES writer's paper that is impenetrable due to both global and local problems, are caught in a bind. They may, for instance, want to deal first with some of the problems with clarity caused by poor grammar and improper word order, but feel guilty about deviating from accepted practice. Tutors may be further tempted to begin with the grammatical and other local issues because NNES writers commonly request them to "check my grammar." Struggling NNES writers know they need help with their grammar, and stress that issue for good reason. Of course, as Gillespie and Lerner note, the "check my grammar" request may also mean more than that, including issues with clarity, focus, and organization (121).

One way to resolve this bind over how to organize a session with NNES writers is to interweave the discussion of global and local concerns. This strategy still allows the tutor to address global issues like focus or organization, but may involve delaying them until the tutor and client have clarified some fundamental language issues. In some cases, sentence-

level errors can create global concerns, such as errors in a student's thesis statement that make his or her central point confusing. Attending to these errors, along with some local problems, early in the session may help the tutor to show an NNES student how to immediately improve his or her paper.

In our writing center, over half of our NNES clients are graduate students who have recently come to the U.S. for their studies. They often have learned English in their home countries but have great difficulty expressing their ideas in English with the clarity needed to succeed in a graduate program. The tutors have used this approach of interweaving global and local concerns with many of their graduate NNES clients. To see how this works in a specific session, here is an extended portion of a session with a graduate NNES client who was having difficulty writing in English. In an interview after the session, the client said she comes to the writing center often "because I know my terrible English grammar. ... I want to correct my grammar, and just translate—I'm Japanese—just translate from Japanese to English. Sometimes I don't make sense. I want people to point out, 'Does this make sense?'"

The session began as follows, after the client said she wanted to work on her grammar:

T: Okay, alright, so what was your assignment about?

C: I'm a social work student.

T: Oh, okay.

C: And I'm planning program development in some, um, social work area. This is a sample.

T: Oh, okay.

C: I plan to create an ESL, um, class in, um (garbled)

T: In what?

C: Shelter, shelter.

T: I'm sorry.

C: Okay.

T: Let me see.

C: Yeah. (slides paper to tutor)

T: In, in what? You're planning an ESL class in ... oh, in a shelter! Oh, okay. Okay, great. So how long is this paper supposed to be?

C: It is half and half ... this half, all of this, five pages.

T: Okay, so this part's five pages.

C: Yes, five pages.

T: Oh, okay. So you've already had someone look at this first part already?

C: First part?

T: Yeah, who, who made these corrections?

C: Yeah, this is a past assignment, November 1st.

T: Oh, okay. So your teacher already corrected these.

C: Yes, yes.

T: Okay, so you wrote the second part.

C: Yes.

T: Okay, great.

C: But, but ... I ... last night ... (motions with paper)

T: You didn't finish? That's okay, that's okay because we'll probably take it paragraph by paragraph and see what we have.

C: Okay.

T: Um, okay so your second part has to do with, um ...

C: Needs? From here ...

T: Right ... with um, okay. Okay, so you divided it up according to needs, according to each part that you're supposed to have.

C: But I forgot this ...

T: That's okay, you'll go back and work on this later. Let me just see ... okay, so these are, like, outlining things.

C: Yes, yes, yes.

T: So you've only written about the first two.

C: Yeah, yeah.

T: Okay, so we'll just take a look at these, and then we'll see if we can ... we probably won't have time.

C: Okay.

T: Okay, so why don't you read to me your needs statement.

(The client then reads her first paragraph.)

This example shows the awkward and confusing (and frustrating) conversations that sometimes occur with NNES clients, even during the agenda-setting portion of the session. The client struggles to articulate the focus of her paper, and to explain where the portion that she brought in for the session fits into the larger assignment. The halting conversation is full of stops and starts as the client tries to explain her plan for an ESL class in a shelter. Clarifying how long the paper is, what her professor has corrected already, how much the client has written, and how much they will be able to review in this session together take several minutes, instead of the minute it might take to establish these things with a native speaker or a more experienced NNES writer. This process of "negotiating the agenda," as

some call it (Ritter 105), is where tutors and NNES clients often begin to shape the session around the grammatical, syntactical, and other sentence-level issues that dominate many NNES sessions.

In this same session, perhaps due to the client's struggles with English, the tutor decided to discuss the client's writing "paragraph by paragraph," essentially interweaving global and local concerns. The client reads her first paragraph to the tutor, and they begin their discussion:

T: Okay, um ... I guess the best thing to do is to go through this sentence by sentence. One of the things that you tend to do is you leave out like articles, like "a" or "the," right?

C: (laughs) I have no idea.

T: (laughs) That's okay. Um, okay. You, you state your purpose, in some sense, but it just, um, I think there's things you could do to make it flow a little bit better. So, first of all, let's start with the first part. (reads first sentence) This sentence is actually fine. Okay, now, "As a result, I found that ESL class presents the great need for all residents." Let's look at this sentence. (repeats sentence) The sentence is really confusing because I'm not sure what "the great need" means. What is their need? And also, you have that the ESL class is presenting a need for other residents. So it's very unclear. What are you trying to say?

C: Um, there are only five women in shelter, and I interviewed five women.

T: Right.

C: Then, they want to interview. Then, they, five women, want to create ESL class.

T: Right, okay, so, just for themselves? Are they all ESL? Are they all from another country? The women?

C: Yeah.

T: Well, yeah, since it's the Asian Task Force. (both laugh) They want ... so, basically (sighs) ... but you see what I mean; this sentence is not grammatically correct. You found that the ESL class has a need. Or actually, what you found is that it's not the ESL class that has a need; it's the women that have a need for an ESL class. You see, you have these things reversed.

C: Okay.

T: Okay. The ESL class is, is the end result, okay; that's what the women want. The women are the residents. So the residents have a need for an ESL class.

C: Um-hmm, um-hmm, um-hmm. I have that ... this is first, right?

T: Right. As a result, you found that ...

C: These are their ... needs, right?

T: Um, okay. Read it to me if you change this. How will it sound?

C: Okay, "I found that all residents need ... need the ESL class."

T: Okay ... but it's more that they want an ESL class, right? That they would like to have an ESL class? Um, or "as a result I found that the residents ..." Well, yeah, you could say need, that the residents ... but I think it's more, it's better, it would be better if you said they want to have an ESL class.

C: Uh-huh.

T: Right. "As a result, I found that ..."

C: "I found that all residents want to have ..."

T: "All of the residents ..."

C: All of the residents.

T: Or you could say, "All five women want to have an ESL class." Now, you can combine that with your next sentence ... because ... why do they want to have an ESL class?

C: Ohhh. Why?

T: Why?

C: Um, maybe it's free?

T: What?

C: It's free.

T: (laughs) No, but I mean, why do they have a need? Because they, they need help with their language, right?

C: Oh, okay. (starts to write what tutor has said)

T: Well, don't ... I mean, don't ... Okay, so read me the sentence again.

C: "I found that the residents want to have ESL class" ... classes?

T: An ESL class.

C: "... the residents want to have an ESL class because they want to learn English."

T: Better. "... they want to learn English better."

C: Okay. Um, they can't speak English at all.

T: Oh! Oh, okay, then I think you should say—did you say that in the first part? Okay, then just say they want to learn English. "They want to learn the English language" would actually be more specific. (Client writes.)

The tutor who worked with this client has said that she would handle this client differently, now that she has more experience. Looking back at her session, the tutor sees how she could have gotten to the point quicker and been less redundant. She also spends time on some local errors (missing articles, expression) that might be spent more profitably moving ahead on other global issues. This kind of painfully drawn-out discussion of one sentence, or paragraph, is obviously not ideal. But if we look at the general approach used, we can see why tutors sometimes talk about local concerns early on in an ESL session.

The tutor begins by picking out sentences with errors that make the writer's purpose unclear—a global concern because of the errors' impact. The entire preceding discussion focuses on revising one or two sentences to clarify the writer's point about the women's desire for an ESL class in their shelter. Addressing these sentences' problems—such as passive voice and unclear logic—is key to unraveling the whole point of the paragraph: why the women want an ESL class. This example demonstrates how clarifying individual sentences will often lead to conversations about global issues, such as focus and logic. Along the way, the tutor also notes other local errors, such as missing articles and prepositions, and simply directs the client to put them where they are needed. While these types of errors are a local concern, it sometimes may be easiest to mention this kind of error in passing rather than waiting until later in the session. (Although it's possible that some sentences may be cut, the effort to improve them isn't wasted. Discussions about grammar and idioms still help an inexperienced NNES writer to gain proficiency in English.)

Going over portions of a draft line by line is obviously not warranted when the writer is still trying to find a focus or is concerned about organization more than fine-tuning grammar. In our writing center, tutors try to look for these global concerns first, or at least early on in a session as the tutor gets a handle on the issues in the client's writing. But often with NNES writers, distinguishing between global and local concerns is difficult because, as we've just seen, the problems may be intertwined.

One advantage of dealing with global and local concerns simultaneously is that tutors can show NNES writers the larger issues that arise while addressing the language concerns that bring many of them to the writing center. Many inexperienced NNES writers may not see these global issues, or be able to articulate them, when discussing their agenda. For example, one NNES client, when asked after the session what she wanted to work on, said, "Grammar. And to clarify." Her tutor, however, said, "Well, when I asked her what she wanted, she wanted to work on grammar, but it [the problem] always turns out to be more than grammar. It turns out to be logic or idea development. I felt like we worked on idea development a lot; I had her explain more. And also restructuring: the logical flow of her paper needed to be fixed by moving some things around."

Another advantage of interweaving discussion of global and local concerns is that tutors may be able to put clients at ease when they are especially concerned about the correctness of their sentences. Often, NNES students are so anxious about fixing surface-level errors—since those are the errors their professors may have sent them to the center to "fix"—that they can't focus on the larger issues until at least some of the surface-level problems are

addressed. By interweaving global and local concerns, the clients feel that their agendas are being met and the tutor can still bring up larger issues that may lie underneath the surface.

The transcript analyzed here and others in our study suggest that going line by line through portions of a paper—time-consuming as it may be—in NNES sessions can be a rewarding approach. Our transcripts are filled with examples of the painstaking process of helping NNES students reshape their sentences. Through the line-by-line process, NNES clients can see numerous ways their syntax can be improved and tightened. The tutors can show NNES clients instances of different kinds of errors that interfere with their expressions, either globally or locally. At the same time, tutors can show the clients how to clarify their ideas and address any global concerns.

Since “line editing” is such a hot-button issue, we want to make sure our position is clear. Writing center theorists and practitioners have long told tutors to avoid “line editing,” for fear of the tutor taking ownership of the client’s paper, and the attendant exhaustion such close editing can bring. We are *not* saying that tutors should “line edit” NNES students’ work (in fact, in our writing center’s publicity we state that we don’t line edit or proofread); tutors should not be marking up clients’ papers the way an editor would, with red pen in hand. Instead, we are suggesting that tutors should willingly go through a portion of an NNES client’s paper line by line, discussing as many problems with clarity and sentence construction as possible.

This process can be challenging, especially when the NNES client’s grasp of English precludes working collaboratively to improve the language. One of our tutors commented after an NNES session that she was frustrated and worn out because “I had a hard time figuring out a way that I could say something to her that she would be able to put into her own words and that she would be able to understand.” Although the tricky problem of ownership is never going to go away, perhaps we will feel less conflicted and battle-weary if we accept that the line-by-line process is a fundamental part of teaching NNES students how to write English more clearly, concisely, and correctly.

Guidelines for Guilt-free Tutoring With NNES Students

Based on the findings of our NNES study, we have developed some different guidelines for NNES tutoring. These guidelines break many of the long-accepted tenets for NNES tutoring. They address the central questions that our study has focused on—how NNES students differ from NES students, and how those differences change our tutoring methods. We have seen that conventional tutoring methods do not always work as well with NNES students, and that we sometimes have to adjust our methods to fit their needs.

Our guidelines to better and “guilt-free” tutoring with NNES students are as follows:

1. Tutors should have a practical grounding in contrastive rhetoric.
2. Tutors should be prepared to be cultural informants as well as writing consultants.
3. Tutors should be comfortable using a directive approach, especially with local concerns such as grammar, punctuation, idioms, and word usage.
4. Tutors should be comfortable working line-by-line through a paper, or a portion of a paper.
5. Tutors can interweave global and local concerns rather than prioritizing them. If the paper’s clarity is compromised by many local errors, addressing those local errors before global ones can be useful and productive.

Because most of our suggestions require more time on task and sessions with NNES students usually require more intensive work with the text, we have two other procedural suggestions to make:

- Tutors should assess the level of revision required and make a realistic plan with the client how to improve the client’s writing—over multiple sessions, if necessary.

Given the intense nature of examining a client’s paper line by line, we must of course make NNES sessions manageable. Before looking at an NNES client’s paper, the tutor and client should discuss the deadline and the client’s agenda, and what is realistically possible in that day’s session. If the paper is too long to be dealt with in one session, or the problems are too complicated, the tutor and client should develop a plan of how to improve the client’s writing (and that particular paper) over more than one session. These discussions are crucial so that the client doesn’t have unrealistic expectations. This will also lessen the pressure some tutors feel when clients expect them to identify and “fix” all of the problems in just one session.

- Tutors should discuss long papers in short sections to narrow the focus of the discussion and make the reading-aloud technique more effective.

Another way to make the session more manageable is to have the NNES client read his or her piece aloud in short sections. The NNES clients we interviewed said that they found reading aloud helpful, as do native speakers. One client said she found it “kind of uncomfortable, but I think it is good to read it. When I read it, I can also find some errors by myself.” Of course, not every NNES client can hear these errors; many struggle with articles, in particular.

In our writing center, NNES clients almost always read their papers from beginning to end; that was true for only six of the 18 NNES clients included in this study. Our tutors find

it easier to deal with some NNES clients' papers in brief sections. Many NNES sessions follow a one-paragraph-at-a-time approach, which allows a tutor to hone in on multiple problems in each particular paragraph. The problems in an NNES client's entire paper can be overwhelming if tackled all at once and can add to the burden that some tutors feel in trying to address every problem they see.

Conclusion

Guilt-free tutoring can occur when we accept that there are differences between NNES and NES students and recognize that guidelines and practices that work for NES students don't necessarily transfer to the NNES students. In fact, a more directive approach, as well as an initial focus on sentence-level errors that affect the clarity and meaning of an entire paper can be effective tutoring practice in a session with NNES students, particularly those who are inexperienced at writing in English. This approach may include going line by line through portions of a paper.

Flexibility has always been the hallmark of writing center work, yet it seems that certain "guidelines" have become "rules," especially as we venture into ESL instruction, a field in which most writing center professionals have little training. We hope that our "guidelines" are seen not as rules, but helpful and flexible suggestions to aid tutors as they work with NNES students. If it

is true, as we suggested earlier in this paper, that writing centers have indeed become *de facto* centers for NNES education, then it behooves us to continue to educate ourselves, our tutors, and by extension the faculty with whom we work, about second language acquisition and contrastive rhetoric. We must also focus our writing center research even more closely on the tutoring and teaching practices that best serve our NNES students.

NOTES

- 1 In our discussion of how to prioritize the various issues in a student's writing, we have chosen to divide the issues into "global" and "local" concerns rather than the somewhat troublesome HOC/LOC designation. It's easier to agree on when a problem affects a paper's meaning globally or locally, than to debate what kinds of problems fit into the "higher-order concern" category or the "later (or lower)-order concern" category. In our article we define a global concern as a problem with focus, organization, development, or logic that weakens the paper as a whole. We define a local concern as a sentence-level problem, such as unclear expression, poor syntax, or incorrect grammar and mechanics, that interferes with the meaning or clarity of an individual sentence. For this section on the handbook review, however, for clarity and consistency, we will use the HOC/LOC designations as used in the books.
- 2 The 18 sessions involved different tutors and clients in each case. In the five sessions that included an observer, Sarah, a tutor, observed three sessions, and Rose, another tutor, observed two.

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