ESL Tutoring Protocols: Cross Disciplinary Perspectives on Writing, Power and Error

Glenn Newman (Daniel Emery)  
University Writing Program  
University of Utah

Writing center tutors face a number of challenges when responding to an unfamiliar piece of student writing. These challenges are multiplied when the tutor and student come from different cultures; patterns of organization, strategies of composition, and linguistic structures that are appropriate to one language or culture can seem alien, confusing, or erroneous in another. In many cases, the advice of ESL tutors is to avoid providing specific grammatical feedback, as this can be perceived as diminishing the student's autonomy. At the same time, however, scholarship in English for Academic Purposes and Second Language acquisition have reassessed the significance of grammatical and lexical components of academic writing for ESL students' success. Furthermore, since writing center tutors are limited by the time restraints of half hour appointments, and by student expectations for the text at hand, tutors' recommendations for L2 learners writing often fail to extend itself outside of the immediate writing center environment. In this respect, the instructors of the tutor fall short of helping L2 learners develop strategies for writing on their own in future assignments, as illustrated by the same students returning to the writing center with the same error issues.

With the help and support of my advisor, Dr. Daniel Emery, we are expanding the role of the writing center tutor for ESL students. By drawing on the research of several notable scholars in 2nd language acquisition, we are developing strategies that can be applied in the writing center environment, using components of a 16 week classroom curriculum. These strategies include creating lessons geared towards preparing L2 learners for the writing expectations of the Western university such as increased academic vocabularies, grammar and punctuation instruction, and introduction to multi-disciplinary writing genres. We believe that by rethinking the role of the traditional university writing center as a last resort for L2 learners to make their text better and therefore more competitive, there might be the potential to enhance both NNS and L2 learners to succeed in the Western university and come closer to realizing their future career goals.